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# **Recasting Respectability: Habitus, Call Centres and the Modern Indian Woman**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of**

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**in**

**Sociology**

**Massey University, Palmerston North,**

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## **Abstract**

The unprecedented growth of transnational call centres in metropolitan India has produced a young work force who is subjected to the experiences of a western world, in a global work milieu in both real and virtual ways. The media characterizes this modern career path and life in an urban world as catalysts for westernisation among the call centre employees. The fact that transnational call centres welcome more young women into their fold due to their specific labour requirement, also poses challenges to the gendered norms and values of a patriarchal Indian society, where it is improper for young women to step outside of their family homes during the night. Moreover, women from middle class families form a significant part of this new work force because of the English speaking requirements of the call centre industry.

Against such a backdrop, this thesis explores the influences of call centre work and life in the metropolitan city of Bangalore on the emerging gendered subjectivities of young, middle class women. This sociological study has been based on the methods of participant observation and narrative interviews among migrant young women in the age group of 18-25, over a period of 18 months in Bangalore. These women had worked in transnational call centres for a minimum of four years. I explored three ways in which the women identified themselves: in terms of their positioning as daughters in middle class families; in terms of their ambitions to enhance their professional careers and as consumers in a metropolitan city with the financial independence to adopt new consumption practices.

The study shows that the aspirations of these young women to acquire a modern persona based on their job in a global industry and to satisfy their sexual desires in the anonymous living conditions prevalent in an urban environment, do not digress completely from the influences of middle class families. It remained embedded within the wider expectations of the middle class families that their daughters should always remain 'respectable'. The women in my study carried forward this sense of respectability as an integral part of their gendered identities in their work as well as city life. As the women engaged with varying discourses of 'being respectable' in a global work place and city, they also reflected on the earlier practices of their families. As creative and reflexive social agents, these women devised new gendered practices which remade some of the familial boundaries of respectability.

## **Dedication**

*I dedicate this work to Prakash, my husband who in spite of many odds always encouraged me to bring this thesis to fruition.*

## **Acknowledgements**

The past few years have been challenging as I travelled to New Zealand with my five year old daughter to join the doctoral research program at Massey University. However, to my delight I enjoyed every moment as a student at the university. It's heart-warming and fulfilling to express my gratitude to all those people who made *Palmy, the Wind city* a home for me and helped me to experience research as a wonderful academic and human endeavour.

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Many thanks go to all my participants, who so generously invited me into their homes and their world for two years. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to get to know these vibrant and determined young women, to share their moments of joy and delight, to witness their dilemmas and conflicts as they dealt with their night shift work in the call centres. I would love to name them all and thank them for directly contributing to this project, but due to issues of confidentiality I am unable to name them.

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## **Prologue:**

# **‘Linking the personal with the academic’**

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## **Introduction**

Indian cities are in the midst of a socio-cultural transformation that is affecting gender roles, consumption patterns and sexual behaviour. This juncture of change has been mostly the outcome of a momentum of globalisation and an information technology revolution, ushered into these cities with the initiation of new economic liberalization policies. The growth of transnational call centres in India has been phenomenal from USD 6.3 billion in 2005-06 to USD 9.5 billion in 2007-08 and with the growing employee base from 415,000 in 2006 to 700,000 in 2008 (NASSCOM 2009). These are part of the Information technology enabled services (ITES) industry, where jobs are outsourced by the parent companies located somewhere else in the world to India, due to the availability of a large pool of English speaking population, low wages and infrastructural costs compared to those in the United states or other western countries.

Employment in global work sectors such as the transnational call centres where services and jobs are outsourced from North America, Europe and other Asia-Pacific countries to India, by definition, entails exposure to, and familiarity with western cultural elements of behaviour and life style. Moreover, the work norms and timings of such an industry initiate pervasive changes in the gendered values of a so-called traditional Indian society (D'Mello, 2005; Gurumurthy, 2004; Patel, 2008; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Upadhaya & Vasavi, 2008). Due to increasing opportunities of employment available in transnational call centres, there is widespread migration of young women from rural areas and towns to

metropolitan cities such as Bangalore. The outsourcing of jobs to Bangalore, both high-tech professional jobs such as computer programming and software development and low-end back office services such as telemarketing, booking tickets, insurance related functions etc. in large scale from the US has often been referred to as jobs being Bangalored to India (Upadhaya and Vasavi, 2008: 12). The migration to cities and employment in transnational call centres also creates opportunity for changes, as many young women move away from families to a modernising milieu and so experience sexual and social freedom not available to them earlier.

The focus of the current study on 'migration and socio-cultural ramifications of employment in the transnational call centres' also emanated from my own experiences of being a migrant in Bangalore. In 2001, I migrated to Bangalore with my husband who worked for a trans-national software company. Today, when I reflect on my experiences in Bangalore, between 2001 and 2004, I realise that this period has significantly conditioned my current research efforts. I experienced numerous cultural divergences during the course of my migration to Bangalore, as I stood at the cross roads of a relatively traditional upbringing in my middle class family and images of a modern city life which was changing rapidly because of the flourishing information technology sector. My interest in researching the lives of the young women in transnational call centre in particular was generated as I found that such work places present a confluence of many traditional and modern forces at the same time.

I met Deepti, a young call centre executive in 2001 during a train journey between Berhampur<sup>3</sup> and Bangalore. Although, I had a short interaction with her during this voyage, it provided me with initial insights into the ambivalences in her life as she

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<sup>3</sup> *Berhampur* is a town located in Odisha. It takes a three hours travel by train from Bhubaneswar to reach the place en route Bangalore. Amongst the 30 districts in Odisha, the east-Indian state, where I come from, Berhampur is situated in the *Ganjam* district (southern part of Odisha) and is considered as a relatively conservative place in terms of its culture.

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fluctuated between her role as a daughter in a traditional middle class family and a call centre executive in one of the transnational call centres in Bangalore. Similar discords were subsequently found to be momentous in the lives of the young women in my study, who were subjected to conflicting cultural discourses and standards of behaviour in their daily lives. I recreate my dialogue with Deepti in the subsequent sections based on the *extracts from my personal diary* written several years prior to my doctoral research.

## **Leaving Orissa: 2001 March**

*I would not be writing this, if it were not for the job that my husband has got in one of the transnational software companies in Bangalore. This is my first trip to the city. The anticipation of settling down in a new city and getting along with new neighbours and their language and culture — all these thoughts seem to overwhelm me at this time.*

### **5.30 a.m. 9th March, 2001: Bhubaneswar railway station**

*I board the train at my home town in Bhubaneswar: The second-class air-conditioned compartment is nearly empty as the train begins its journey from the station. My elder brother stuffs my huge travel bags under the seats, while he wonders and mutters about how much luggage I need to carry every time I travel. I ask him to hurry up and get down from the train, since it is already time for the train to leave.*

### **9 a.m. Berhampur**

*“Excuse me, is this seat number nine?” A soft feminine voice wakes me up. I push myself up into a sitting position while still sleepy, and I nod at the slim, young woman who is standing between the seats carrying a green back pack. She is wearing a pair of dark blue jeans and a white shirt; she appears slim and almost 5’6” in height. I try to return her smile and at the same time make some space for her luggage.*

### **9.30 a.m. Introducing Deepti**

*“Are you working?” the woman asks, as she stretches herself on the seat and hugs the white pillow to her chest. I say “No” hesitantly. “Chaii... Chaii... ... Chaii?” shouts the tea-vendor at the top of his voice as he passes through the compartment. She sits up and calls*

*the vendor, who has just walked into our side of the compartment. I am happy to say “Yes” and I take the medium sized thin paper cup from the railway vendor, while the woman offers to pay. She tells me that I may pay the next time, if that suits me. She takes charge of the situation and tells me her name: “I am Deepti”. I smile and introduce myself... a few moments later I ask her if she is travelling to meet someone in Bangalore. “No, I work there. It was just a brief holiday I had — to catch up with my family. You get few holidays when you work in a call centre. My parents and sisters live in Berhampur. I start working from tomorrow”, Deepti tells me, as she gulps down her tea and looks at me apologetically. “I feel sleepy”, she adds softly, before disappearing into the grey woollen blanket supplied by the railways. There is a long silence around me, with my only co-passenger sleeping through the day.*

### **5.30 p.m**

*It is past 5.15 p.m. in the evening and I wake up after an hour’s nap feeling a little bit lonely. I call after the tea seller, who is shouting on the other side of the compartment. Deepti wakes up (perhaps disturbed by the loud noise I have made) and rushes to the washroom. Later, she tells me that she sleeps through the day, as her work keeps her awake during the nights. I look at her with surprise. She laughs, (perhaps she understands what is in my mind)<sup>4</sup> and tells me that she works in a call centre. It is her job to provide solutions for American clients, if they have problems using their Dell computers. “It was tough”, she says, “in the beginning — to be awake the whole night— but then it’s ok”. We talk on... over another two cups of dip-tea. Deepti tells me about her family: Two of her elder sisters are unmarried and one of them stays with their parents to take care of them, while the other one works. “My father is retired. Maa did not want me to come to Bangalore; she wants all the daughters to get married and be nearby somewhere; but I am*

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<sup>4</sup> I may be reflecting what Patel (2008) describes as the stigma associated with the movement of women outside, during the night, or women with jobs which involve night shifts. Such women often have to confront the stereotypes of sexual impropriety, questionable moral values and bad character (Patel 2008: 17).

*happy with my job; I can save for my family. I send money to my parents every month”... “It’s important, to be independent... though”. She adds quietly a moment later.*

*I wonder what she means by that. I remember my desire to be independent: To travel on my own, to do well in my studies and stand on my own feet, to be independent and get a job, to marry well and to make my father happy. In short, I wanted to be independent, for the sake of my family. However, I do not ask Deepti what she means, because it might sound rude or even inquisitive since I hardly know her.*

### ***12.30 p.m. Deepti talks about the ‘graveyard shift’ in a call centre***

*I am sleepy already. Deepti is chatting away with one of the young men, who has boarded the train near Vijaywada. She tells him excitedly that this would be the beginning of her day as a customer service executive in the voice process and that she works during the night, in order to help her clients in the USA, for whom the day would just be beginning<sup>5</sup>. “The work is fun actually”... she goes on... “we get free shopping coupons, vouchers, free passes for movies, restaurants. It’s fun in spite of the hard work. I like the freedom I have...” she continues as she fishes through her backpack to retrieve a Sydney Sheldon bestseller.*

*She half lies on the seat with her pillow propped behind her back and her legs covered with the blanket. “I have trouble sleeping during the night. Do you mind if I keep my side lights on?” she adds.*

*“Not at all” I tell her, as I spread the white bed sheet on the sleeping berth, but I know I will not sleep with the lights on. “Is it hard working through the night?” I ask her. “Yes” replies Deepti. “But of course, you do not realise that when you are working. It’s like daytime*

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the time difference between India and the United States, one of the primary requirements for employment, in a transnational call centre, is working the night shift. Typical night shift hours range from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. or 8 p.m. to 4a.m. Barbara Adam (2002) in her work “Gendered Time Politics of Globalization” uses the term “Colonization with time” whereby western clock time is exported across the globe and used as the standard time.

*with everyone working around you, and everything being so bright and alive. Sometimes it is nice to travel at night, when the roads are empty and you just steer through silence”.*

*“But is it safe to travel late at night?” I ask her, as I move to a complete stretching position and turn on one side to look at Deepti.*

*“Yes” she answers in a matter of fact way. “There is a group of us who travel together, and you have men travelling with you — I mean the other workers in a cab provided by the company”, she adds self consciously.*

*Hmmm... I remember something which was strikingly in contrast to the independence that Deepti has in her working life... This morning, as I was leaving home for the station, my mother was worried about my safety in a big city such as Bangalore. For the past two days, she has been telling me not to open the door to strangers in my husband’s absence and to strictly finish all my outside work before it becomes dark. “It’s never safe for a woman to stay outside of her home after the evening, especially if she is alone”. Bou has said this ever since I started going to school. My maternal grandmother would also add, “The current times are bad for women — you cannot trust anyone”, and then she would tell some sad story about what happened to someone she knew, in order to substantiate her claims. The fear of something dangerous happening, if I stepped outside my home in the dark, always stays with me. I am cautious not to overstep these boundaries, while travelling or staying in a hostel, or going to the markets or a movie. Hmmm ... I am falling asleep.*

## **Stepping into an ‘in-between’ space**

In the brief encounter with Deepti in the train, she gives an account of her work life in Bangalore, where she performs night shift work in a transnational call centre. Central to her narrative is the moral obligations of a daughter who saves for the family, visits them during holidays – “I save for my family. I send money to my parents every month” – This statement grounds Deepti’s story in the affective world of her family. At the same time,

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she provides a vision of an alternative life in Bangalore, where she is an 'independent' call centre agent who travels during the nights with her male colleagues. She also takes pride in being provided with the facilities to shop and go to expensive restaurants for free by her employer, a transnational call centre.

Her story thus places a family based morality alongside desires of consumption and autonomy in work life away from the expectations of her mother that she should get married early. These two spheres of home and a modern work sector are characterized by different norms and convention and moreover "...involve a range of imaginations and emotions"<sup>6</sup> (Lauser, 2008: 89). As Arjun Appadurai notes, 'People who relocate carry with them not only their physical belongings but also their memories' (1996: 3). However, there were spaces between the silences during the brief encounter with Deepti, which raised several questions about her 'in-between' life in my mind. I wanted to know why she had to work a night shift. Why do her parents allow her to work in a call centre and let her live independently at a relatively young age in a city? How does she perceive her independent life in the city? More importantly, is it respectable for a young woman like her to perform night shifts? To a large extent, these after thoughts about working the night shift were also influenced by my own life trajectory as a daughter in a traditional middle class family. I reflexively recover some of the memories, which (I think) framed my initial perception of call centres as odd places within which to work, particularly for young women from 'good'/respectable families. These flash backs provide an insight into how my personal experiences have entangled with my research questions, in a significant way. Laurel Richardson shares similar views as she emphasizes the importance of personal experiences in the creation of a text.

With the post-structuralist understanding that the social context affects what we write, we have an opportunity – perhaps even an ethical duty - to extend our reflexivity to study of our writing practices. We can reflect on and share... how we

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<sup>6</sup> In her study among Philippine migrants, Andrea Lauser (2008), argues that as people migrate, they not only experience a new location and cultural framework but also their old memories, values and social network.

came to construct the particular texts we did. These might be of the verification kind, or they might be more subjective - accounts of how social contexts, social interactions, critiques, review processes, friendships, academic settings, departmental politics, embodiedness and so on have affected the construction of the text. Rather than hiding the struggle, concealing the very human labor that creates the text, writing stories would reveal emotional, social, physical and political bases of the labor (Richardson, 1995: 191).

## **My story**

I grew up in an Oriya family, travelling across the state with my parents (who were state government employees) attending schools at various places and settling down at the college in the capital city of the state. Reflecting back about myself and some of my female friends, I am struck by how (alongside our religious, caste and class differences) our experiences of femininity marked by the expectations of desirable behaviour, were linked with the stereotypes of tradition and modernity. At home, caste feelings were strong, and my own identification came under the categories of *Brahmin* (upper and pure caste), middle class (my parents' income placed us there) and being part of a reputable and 'good' family. The family reputation further depended on how we (the children and especially the daughters) behaved at home, and also how we conducted our personal affairs outside our home, which also included our level of performances in studies. Being a 'good woman' was always equated with being a traditional woman (who was also Indian) although the meaning was not very clear to me. Whilst it was expected that good women went outside their homes to study, they should not look upon or talk to their male classmates at the colleges or anywhere else, except if these men were male relatives (who, in reality, were sometimes more dangerous than anyone outside) and so on. That which was desirable in the family was further conditioned by the interplay of many other factors, such as: what will the neighbours and other relatives think if I do not study well? What if someone sees me talking to boys? What if I come home late at night? Leaving

8.....*Prologue*

home alone after the evening was considered very inappropriate and off limits<sup>7</sup>. These governing gendered norms still stay with me, as a comfortable shadow, and they express themselves in the way in which I think and act.

Some of these early experiences of being a daughter in a middle class family also made me curious and I was intrigued by Deepti's (my co-passenger in the train) choice of a career, as an employee in a call centre. What I am attempting to capture is, what I believe are the interconnections between her identity as a woman from an Indian middle class family, and her identity as an employee in a modern work sector such as a transnational call centre. These questions stayed with me for a long time, fuelled by my experiences of childhood socialization and many years later they found expression in my research question, which was framed in a sociological way. The question that I raised at the initial stage of my doctoral research was: *How do the young women negotiate their gendered identities as they traverse different socio-cultural contexts, such as home and call centres?* The question evolved further, as a result of my exposure to the varied literature relating to this area and also during the pilot study in Bangalore, where I spoke to a number of young women, who worked in transnational call centres<sup>8</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Women like Deepti, who make their way from the smaller towns of India to cities to prosper in their career and earn a better living for themselves and their own families, are part of a process where many of the traditional gendered notions of propriety are negotiated. In recent times such processes are initiated under the impact of urbanisation and globalisation and give rise to changes in familial relationships, expectations, demands and the dilution of the authority of the patrilineal families (Derks 2008; Mills 1997;

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<sup>7</sup> In my family the female members would be expected to be back before its dark in the evening. During narrative interviews with female participants 6 p.m. seemed to form the temporal boundary, beyond which it was not considered appropriate for unmarried females to move outside.

<sup>8</sup> The majority of transnational call centres serve clients in the USA. Due to the time difference between the USA and India, night shifts become inevitable for the customer service executives, who work in such places. The most common shift times are 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. to 4 a.m.

Morrison 2004; Spronk 2009). In India, the cities have been reported to be undergoing a rapid transformation in life style and culture due to the influences of a globalised media, consumerist culture and the presence of transnational software corporations (Fernandes 2000; Kelkar *et al.*, 2002; Oza 2006; Parameswari 2004; Patel 2008; Ganguly-Scrase 2003; Thapan 2001). In such a context, there are huge challenges to study emergent forms of identities at the cross road of what may be considered as a traditional past, transitioning present and emergent modern future. By exploring such forms, this dissertation studies the socio-cultural shifts that occur in the lives of young women employed in transnational call centres and exposed to modern life styles in a cosmopolitan city such as Bangalore. In the next chapter, I trace the evolution of transnational call centres in cosmopolitan cities of India in general, (and Bangalore in particular) and describe how they create a juncture of new cultural experiences in the lives of the young female employees.



# Chapter One

## Young Indian women on the move: Bangalore, transnational call centres and the context of modernity

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### Introduction

This chapter sets the background of my research against the development of a booming call centre industry in Bangalore and migration of young females from smaller towns in India to the city in search of employment. These women undergo varying cultural experiences as a result of their migration and employment in transnational call centres and life in a cosmopolitan city. Many of the news reports and films<sup>9</sup> on call centres tend to focus on the splendour and glamour of this industry which symbolizes the onset of westernization with specific reference to changing Indian tradition, gendered values and emergence of a consumer culture creating ground for new forms of socio-cultural identities (Upadhaya & Vasavi, 2006). On closer examination, such a work setting, which forms an integral part of the transnational economic and cultural framework, presents a context replete with conditions where past-present, tradition-modernity, familial values-cultural expectations interact incessantly and create occasion for social change (Patel 2008; Pradhan 2005; Radhakrishnan 2009; Singh and Pandey 2005). The English speaking educated youth from various parts of India migrate to metropolitan cities like Bangalore where they find numerous opportunities to earn higher salaries in transnational call centres, compared to their family earnings or jobs in the government sectors (see Upadhaya and Vasavi 2006; Patel 2006). At one level, this exodus represents yet another example

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<sup>9</sup> There have been several films made on call centres. These films such as *"Jhon and Jane"* by Ashim Ahluwalia highlight the cultural impact of call centres in the lives of the young India employees. Other films include *'Mumbai Calling'*, *'Hello'* etc.

of how an expanding informational economy in the wake of globalisation has targeted young, English speaking, inexpensive workers in third world countries.

While young men in India also participate in such migration circuits, I focus my attention here on experiences of women for several reasons. Women's geographic mobility has been conventionally much more restricted than that of men, especially before marriage. The significance of values such as virginity, chastity and purity associated with the honour and marriageability of unmarried women and the concern about their physical safety have been the factors that have prohibited their mobility. Yet in a sector like the call centre, where night shifts are compulsory and unconventional, young women migrate for employment at a considerably higher rate. Deepti<sup>10</sup> cites factors such as independence and good salary as part of her motivation to migrate to Bangalore for employment. However, the economic returns from such migration to middle class families are not always clear. As most of the women in the present study migrate from middle class families, where economic necessity is not the only reason for migration, the complex motivations of the women and their middle class families for migration and employment in call centres also remains a central focus of the present study.

## **Structure of the chapter**

There are three sections in this chapter that outline the research context and specify the research questions central to the thesis. The first section traces *the growth of Bangalore as an information technology hub*, which links it with other parts of the world and thus creates an active site of cultural globalisation. The migrating young females who come from smaller towns and participate in the global work sector are simultaneously exposed to the so called modern life styles in the city that differ from that of their place of origin or values of their traditional middle class families rooted in those places. Bangalore is an interesting case given its position at the nexus of a globalised economy, negotiating trans-cultural influences. In this context, I narrate my personal experiences of living in Bangalore during the period 2001-2003, followed by

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<sup>10</sup> Deepti is the young woman whom I met in the train during my travel to Bangalore. I have narrated my encounter with her in the prologue.

discussions on the emergence of Bangalore as the 'Silicon Valley of India', where experiences of local and global coexist. With its cosmopolitan atmosphere, the city provides opportunities to the young migrants who come there in search of employment to lead an independent, anonymous life and be subject to cultural influences that vary starkly from that of smaller towns.

I shift my focus to the body of literature on transnational call centres in the second section, which present opportunities for the infusion of alternative gendered values and norms in the lives of the women who are employed by these organisations. The new expectations and demands at the global work place create challenges to the so called traditional gendered identities of the women who have been brought up in traditional middle class families. The fact that female employees can perform emotional labour, an important requirement of call centre work, more efficiently than men (Mirchandani 2004; Ng and Mittar 2005), tells us little about why women themselves take up such jobs which are treated as unconventional in popular perception due to the demand for night shift. Nor does it tell us how the women construct their experiences of such a novel form of work. Finally in the third section, I state my research question, followed by a brief description of the structure of the thesis and each of its chapters.

I begin with my own experiences of the city which highlights how the expanding Information technology sector has a significant influence on the landscape, and the changing life style that is observed in the city Opportunities for changing lives

My encounter with Bangalore goes back to 2001, when I migrated to the city with my spouse, who was employed in the expanding software sector. We had rented a newly built, immaculate two bed roomed apartment in Sanjay Nagar, a suburb located approximately fifteen kilometres from the central city. I come from Orissa, a state located in the eastern part of India, where heat waves and their related death tolls make headlines during the months of April and May. In contrast, the cool and soothing climate (Sudhira *et al.*, 2007),<sup>11</sup> the colourful gardens, the occasional

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<sup>11</sup> Sudhira *et al.*, (2007) links the moderate climate of Bangalore with that of its geographical location. Bangalore is equidistant from both the eastern and western coasts of the South

showers, the stone carved temples and fragrances of a variety of flowers created an enigmatic charm within my Bangalore life. Apart from the beautiful surroundings of the city, Bangalore had a special charm for us, in terms of our rising living standards. I loved to explore the bustling city, its glamorous restaurants, the busy shopping centres and public parks in our newly bought luxury car.

In the initial days, I stayed in an apartment complex, where the majority of the individual flats were either rented, or owned, by young couples who worked in the software sector. Many of the disparities between the lifestyle of the software professionals and the government employees were associated with the salary differences and personally experienced by me in the small neighbourhood of the apartment complex<sup>12</sup>. The distinction of the young software professionals' lifestyles was easily discernible by their possession of luxury cars, newly-built apartments in 'plush' areas and frequent overseas travel. In two of the neighbouring flats, the husbands were employed in the Indian Institute of Sciences<sup>13</sup> and they had older children. The income disparity between the younger families (where the husband was employed by a software business) and older families (where the husband worked in the government sector) was also reflected in their respective leisure activities. Whilst our weekend activities involved trips to the central part of the city for dining, or watching a movie in the plush expensive theatres<sup>14</sup>, for my neighbour the weekends

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Indian Peninsula and is situated at an altitude of 920 m above mean sea level. The mean annual rainfall is about 880mm with approximately 60 rainy days a year, over the last ten years. The summer temperature ranges from 18 degrees C to 38 degrees C, whilst the winter temperature ranges from 12 degrees C to 25 degrees C. and thus Bangalore enjoys a salubrious climate all year round.

<sup>12</sup> These differences have also been discussed in several research studies (Spivak 2008; Upadhaya and Vasavi 2006). For example, Spivak (2008) captures this division, as she foresees the emergence of a new secessionist class such as the software professionals, who are more in touch with the outside world through their extensive travelling in the job and shows parity with the life style of middle and upper middle class sections in other parts of the world.

<sup>13</sup> This is one of the many government funded academic institutes for higher studies and research activities in Bangalore.

<sup>14</sup> In 2001, watching a movie in the suburbs of Sanjay Nagar used to cost Rs 30 (NZ\$1), whilst the cost at a theatre in MG road was Rs 150 (NZ \$5). In 2007, when I was in the city for my field research, the prices were Rs 100 (NZ \$3) and Rs 450 (NZ \$15) for a balcony ticket in the respective areas.

brought the pleasure of a shopping trip to the local market, or the nearby temple. In the reverse direction, sharp distinctions could also be observed in the different families' way of life. Whilst my neighbour, a friendly, forty year old woman, would get ready for evening walks with her husband and son, following a family dinner (at around 7.30 p.m.), this would be too early for me to even start making dinner. There were lavish parties organised by the software companies for the families (or sometimes they were only for the employees) at the best venues in the city. In addition, they were given free cruises and free passes to country clubs, theatres, pubs and restaurants which encouraged a life style based on consumption. Together with this material prosperity came the cost of losing family time with my husband, who often worked for 14-16 hours a day and also travelled across the globe. I heard comments such as, "Everything comes with a price", "We got used to the money: cannot do with a lesser paying job" from the wives of other professionals in the industry. I came across female employees, who were travelling extensively and leaving their family behind, and parents (whose unmarried daughters worked in the industry) worrying about their marriage prospects or worrying about their married daughters, who were yet to become mothers. These personal experiences in Bangalore provided me with first hand glimpses of the visible changes in the lifestyle, consumption patterns and leisure activities of the people who were part of the expanding software industry in Bangalore. On the other hand, there were also socio-cultural implications in terms of delayed marriages, motherhood and disintegrated family lives, that I observed in my own life as well as in the neighbourhood.

## **Evolution of Bangalore as 'The Silicon valley' of India**

These changes, which I experienced at a personal level during my stay in Bangalore, have also been the focus of discussions amongst academics. Bangalore<sup>15</sup> can be described as "a world of flows" (Appadurai 1997) which has evolved as the "Silicon valley of India" (Heitzman, 1999: 2) consequent upon the expansion of a system of sophisticated technology, such as the internet and software programming in addition to a highly mobile global capital, which integrates the local and global together. The

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<sup>15</sup> The city was named Bangalore, during the colonial period. Recently (from November, 1st 2006), it was changed to 'Bengaluru', a local *kannada* version of the English name Bangalore.

city has gained recognition as being a leading centre of high-tech industry and high level services. Located in the Indian state of Karnataka, it is the 5th largest city in India. In 1956, the city became the capital of a unified state of Karnataka. In recent times, Bangalore has been linked to the global economy, mostly through its software firms which provide relatively cheaper services to various parts of the world. The transition of this garden city into a 'Silicon Valley' has been an evolutionary process, based on Bangalore's past as a major base of the public sector and the telematic industry (Heitzman 1999; Madon 1997; Nair 2001). Janaki Nair provides an historical account of Bangalore as a city and she argues that the dominance of global capital is visible in allocation of space to the global industries, such as software companies in central locations of Bangalore and provision of infrastructural facilities to these sectors. While the visibility of numerous software companies and transnational call centres have increased, it has also challenged the older cultural formations represented through temples and traditional middle class neighbourhoods, which have been pushed mostly to the peripheral parts of the city (Nair 2005).

To an ordinary eye the global dimensions of the city are more visible in the changing urban landscape that has given rise to futuristic high-tech buildings and numerous air-conditioned glamorous shopping malls which create the disembodied sensory experiences of being in a western type country, with its pubs and trans-national fast food restaurants, such as Subway, Pizza Hut, Pizza Corner and MacDonald's. Several ATM machines are sited within these malls and they provide global currencies. In addition, it has been argued that the development of several software parks in the peripheral parts of the city to provide exclusive space for software companies, international call centres and software research laboratories has changed the physical landscape of the city and contributed to its cosmopolitan atmosphere (McMillan 2006; Nair 2001; Upadhaya and Vasavi 2008). Shirin Madon captures the development of the software industry in the city as follows:

To capitalize on its emergence as a popular location for software research, Bangalore has established a software technology park at Electronics City, just three-quarters of a mile out of the city. Hundreds of acres of research laboratories are occupied in the park by the likes of IBM, 3M, Motorola, Sanyo,

and Texas Instruments. Companies that locate within the park are insulated from the world outside by power generators, by the leasing of special telephone lines, and by an international-style work environment. Bangalore is also in the throes of constructing a new upmarket international information technology park in the suburb of the city... The project aims to integrate advanced work facilities with recreational and residential activities in a single location. The 56-acre complex has already attracted international attention, and thousands of enquiries regarding investment opportunities in the park have flooded in from the United Kingdom, North America, Europe, and Hong Kong (Madon, 1997: 237).

Thus the city of Bangalore which has emerged as a hub for many of the transnational call centres as a result of several economic, political and historical factors, offers the scope of a new life style to the work force, who migrate to the city and are employed in the global work sectors<sup>16</sup>. The city also effects the movement between the modern and traditional images, values and life styles in addition to locational changes for the migrants, who come from several smaller towns or rural places characterised by traditional way of life. The prospect of working in Bangalore also conveys a level of independence, as Deepti implies in her statement during the train journey, which is largely unavailable to the women in smaller towns in the presence of other elderly family members and a closely knit neighbourhood.

In addition to the city which presents a context of modernity in the lives of the migrating women, transnational call centres with a new form of work culture also pose challenges to the traditional gendred norms. I describe why I have chosen call centres as the site of my research in the following section.

## **Feminisation of call centres and challenges to traditional gendered identities**

In addition to the city of Bangalore, that displays the potential to facilitate new life styles for its inhabitants, call centres seem important sites of exploration, as they

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<sup>16</sup> India has also served as a prime destination for outsourcing, due to the availability of vast reserves of an English speaking and computer literate population.

employ more young women compared to other sectors of the economy<sup>17</sup> (Kelkar 2004; Upadhaya and Vasavi 2006) and are based on sophisticated communication technologies bringing in multiple cultural influences into the work setting through real and virtual ways. The sector has been perceived as offering challenges to the patriarchal principles of the Indian families in varying ways (Kelkar 2004; Patel 2006; Singh and Pandey 2005). Saskia Sassen (2000, 2007) in her sociological analysis of the globalising processes describes these developments of global work sectors within cities, as important arenas where the local cultural elements interact with that of the global. The local is exemplified by the process of employee recruitment from the local context, whilst the global emphasises the transnational, in the physical form of the organisation and its mode of operation. The international call centres in Bangalore represent such places, as they recruit large number of young employees from various regions of India. These employees come into contact with a global work culture at the work place which is different than that of their own regional or local culture.

... a range of monetary incentives and creating a 'fun' social atmosphere in the work place have resulted in what can be called as a 'call centre subculture'... This subculture extends beyond the work place and shapes the life styles and subjectivities of the workers to an extent not seen among IT professionals... (Upadhaya & Vasavi, 2006: 121).

Preeti Singh and Anu Pandey (2005), in their study of 100 female employees in call centres, emphasise that night shift work in transnational call centres challenges the 'so called taboos related to the movement of girls outside of their homes after dark on their own' (P: 684). These changes, they noted "further may have a profound influence upon different dimensions of the family system" (*ibid*, 684). The salaries offered in these industries, might be low by global standards, but they are considered high in an Indian context<sup>18</sup> and they provide these women with an opportunity to participate in a global work environment.

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<sup>17</sup> According to NASSCOM (2001), women constitute approximately 21% of the total information technology work force, compared to their participation of 13% in the national economy as a whole.

<sup>18</sup> Workers usually start in one of the various international call centres, with a salary of Rs 10,000 at entry level, which is a high salary, when compared to any other job in the

The fact that the industry attracts young women in larger numbers than men, in spite of its unconventional form of work, has incited the interest of many researchers' studies (McMillan 2006; Mittar 2000; Singh and Pandey 2005; Upadhaya and Vasavi 2008; Patel 2008). According to the NASSCOM (2001; 2006), young women are the preferred employees for call centre jobs, since they are seen to be hard working, patient, attentive, loyal and less aggressive than men and they possess better interpersonal and analytical skills<sup>19</sup>. Whilst this data put the figure at around 31 men to 69 women, other studies argue that this figure is misleading and they report 60 men to 40 women ratio (Upadhaya 2006; Babu 2004). There is a broad agreement, however, on the higher entry of women into the call centre industry, which has given rise to a feminisation of the industry,<sup>20</sup> with more women working in the bottom ranks of organisations and fewer women at higher levels. The emphasis on the feminisation of labour (Gurumurthy 2004; Kelkar 2004; Patel 2008; Upadhaya and 2006) and the performance of 'emotional labour' (Mirchandani 2004; Mirchandani 2005a; Mirchandani 2005b) by the employees is underscored in several research studies in the area.

Whilst call centre jobs have been described as exploitative, giving rise to physical and mental stress (Mirchandani 2005a; Singh and Pandey 2005), there has been less attention focused towards understanding how call centres, as borderlands of local and global forces, affect the values, norms and behaviour of women, who have been socialised in traditional middle class families<sup>21</sup> and who now work at sites which possess the inherent dynamics of cultural globalisation, through a world class

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government sector or other sectors, which require higher qualifications and involve more competition for positions.

<sup>19</sup> These features of call centre work are classified under the rubric of "emotional labour", a term coined by Hochschild (1983).

<sup>20</sup> Patel (2008) presents a detailed discussion of the term, at two levels. Feminisation of work or feminisation of services, in the context of call centres, implies a part time and flexible work hours, which enable the women to be able to work outside of their home and earn money, in addition to their household duties. Based on literature in the area, she argues that, at another level, it implies how status and value accorded to the industry transforms, when women get a foothold. In this context, Pradhan for example describes that the infusion of women into call centres in India has transformed the perception of this work, from professional to just entry level (Pradhan 2005).

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion on the social background and characteristics of workforce in the call centre industry see (Upadhaya & Vasavi 2006).

infrastructure (McMillan 2006; Nair 2005), of work norms, training and the timing of this work (Mirchandani 2004; Shome 2006; Singh and Pandey 2005). For example, it is possible to see call centres as representing an active site of globalisation, where in young women (from Indian families) come into direct and close contact with western cultural values and influences, during their daily work lives (McMillan 2006; Mirchandani 2004; Shome 2006). Call centres provide a flat work structure, free interaction between male and female colleagues, a very attractive and glamorous work setting and training of the employees in the values, culture and accent of their customers, who are generally American<sup>22</sup> (Babu 2004; Upadhaya and Vasavi 2008). The high salaries offered in this sector have resulted in a rapid upward economic mobility, compared to other sectors of employment in the city and this has created avenues for a new and completely different life style for these young women (Dossani and Kenney 2003; Friedman 2005; Ng and Mittar 2005; Radhakrishnan 2009).

## **Situating the thesis**

Against such a backdrop, the current research attempts to think through (and against) some of the dominant trends within the cultural processes, which arise out of employment in transnational call centres- active sites of cultural globalisation. My interaction with Deepti on my train journey to Bangalore, represents the story of thousands of her contemporaries, who have entered the call centre industry in recent times, earning high salaries and living in a city which displays a cosmopolitan and consumer based culture (Nair 2005; Upadhaya and Vasavi 2006). It is these women's experiences that are the focus of my thesis. I frame the research question that explores the *specific experiences of these middle class women and their identity changes* in the following way:

How do young, migrating women in India negotiate their gendered identities, as they traverse different socio-cultural contexts identity? These socio-cultural contexts are

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<sup>22</sup> The US accounts for 59% of the total global investments in Indian call centre industry in the area of legal, logistics and customer care. Europe is the second largest market at 22%, investing in the area of human resources, purchasing finance, and accounting. Finally the Asia Pacific region follows at 15% in the sectors of human resource, engineering, finance and accounting.

represented by their specific class and familial location in small towns; Bangalore, a cosmopolitan city and the transnational call centres

An exploration of three important aspects of the lives of the women follows from my research question.

1. *Construction of gendered identities of women in families:* The women, as daughters in their families, face familial expectations to be 'good' daughters. It is important to explore the patriarchal forces which influence female embodiment and women's internalisation of these constructions, in addition to the extent to which these forces inform their practices and behaviour, as daughters.
2. *Secondly, the role of women, as call centre workers, exposes them to American discourses of modernity, progress and gendered norms.* The work place is governed by gendered behaviour and practices, which may come into conflict with those prevalent in their families.
3. *Thirdly, the lives of these women in the cities are exposed to new norms of consumption and leisure, where women, as young professionals experience independence and mobility tied with the urban society.*

*Thus, the main aim of the thesis is to examine* how these women inhabit each of these identities and how they manage and negotiate the contradictions and conflicts between the three aspects of their identities as daughters, as workers and as consumers.

## **Thesis overview**

As this chapter suggests, the thesis has emerged from my own experiences of a changing Bangalore and its work sectors, which poses challenges to conventional gendered norms. In the prologue, I presented those details which motivated me to undertake this project, followed by an introductory chapter. I discuss the significance of a global information technology sector that has turned Bangalore into an active site of cultural globalisation in the introduction. I narrate the increasing consumerism, rising affordability of the professionals in the sector to participate in the evolving

consumption life style and integration of the city into a global economy as various facets of the ongoing rapid cultural changes in the city.

In the second chapter, I discuss a range of literature, which sets the theoretical context and informs the reader about the perspective of my research. This chapter begins with a review of academic discussions on class and gender, as being central to the identities of middle class women. The second section involves a critical analysis of the literature that presents studies relating to the influence of modern work sectors on gendered relationships within the family — and on the identities of women. For example, night shifts in call centres challenge the familial norms of restricted female mobility and its link with the respectable femininity of middle class women. Thus, the literature provides a framework to understand how organisational culture and demands shape gendered bodies. Finally, the chapter critically discusses the research studies that relate to the migration of young women from rural to urban areas and the way it influences gendered identities of women.

Chapter three outlines the research perspective, which situates the research methods that I have adopted for the study as well as my experiences in the field. Chapter four provides a snapshot of the background of the participating women. In this chapter, the narratives reconstructed from the interviews and participant observation provide details about the ways the women understand their own class positions. The young women used constructs, such as financial independence, stability and free choices to make reference to a class that implies participation in a new discursive construct of middle class in a changing socio-cultural context. Finally, discussions relating to caste, region and gender, further question the assumption of a stable middle class identity and reveal the multifaceted nature of the gendered class identities of these women.

In Chapters five, six and seven, the focus shifts to my participants' experiences of being daughters, workers and independent citizens respectively in the city. These three chapters involve the shorter narratives of the women and they are arranged with reference to three main episodes of their lives.

Chapter five discusses the narratives of early experiences of the young female participants in my study as daughters. The analysis in this chapter crucially shows that

these young middle class women articulate respectability as an important aspect of their class and gendered identities. The notion of respectability is most commonly discussed in the form of a middle class morality that is formed with reference to their movement outside of home, interaction with boys, dating, ways of dressing etc.

Imagination and reflexivity emerge as two powerful forces in the lives of the young women in my study, as they migrate and start their jobs in transnational call centres. Chapter six and seven describe how these women remake the boundaries of their class respectability in the light of the new consumption practices and images of a modern Indian woman that they come across through various mediated experiences. These chapters also demonstrate that as agents, my participants creatively fuse the familial, local and moral definition of being daughters and future wives with that of the new opportunities available to them in the city.

This thesis involves a narration of the lived experiences of these women, together with an understanding of the complex nature of gendered identity and the agency of women being offered, in the final conclusive chapter. The eighth chapter presents the gendered identities of the women as being differentiated in nature and subjected to the processes of change varyingly. The city life and the American cultural elements at work place give rise to a world of imagination which forms the basis of their identities along with the familial influences. The chapter also discusses the contributions the thesis makes to the sociological field of knowledge. I refer to the thesis's strength and limitations and provide a discussion on the directions of future research.

## Chapter Two

### Framing gendered identity: globalisation, migration and respectability

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#### Introduction

Bangalore as a site of economic and cultural globalisation in the wake of the IT (Information Technology) and ITES (Information Technology Enabled Services) revolutions has been perceived as a land of opportunities. The prospects to work in an American firm both in the software and bpo (business process outsourcing) sectors in Bangalore have effected large scale migration to the city. The irony is while the software sector attracted a more skilled and highly qualified population, the bpo sector has formed a pool for low skilled and less qualified labour power (Babu 2004; Radhakrishnan 2009). Accordingly, this has resulted in associations of more respectability with a professional software worker, while the popular image of a call centre worker is that of a young brat, having loose morality<sup>24</sup> and a westernized life style (Upadhaya and Vasavi, 2006: 151). This conversion of higher education into higher morality, conforms to the norms of according primacy to a certain form of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984) like higher education, in a class based Indian society. While the growth of the software sector has been perceived to contribute towards the rise of India as a future economic super power, bpos and call centres are discussed widely as harbingers of "corrupting" western influences into a conservative Indian society. Several studies indicate that females who work in call centres are not perceived as respectable (Patel, 2008; Radhakrishnan, 2009). The reasons cited are the night shifts which sometimes equate the women with call girls (Patel 2008), lower educational qualifications of the employees compared to the other sectors of

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<sup>24</sup> For example, newspapers report that call centre employees are highly promiscuous, they carry condoms in their bags to work and engage in pre-marital sex and casual sex (Dhillon 2006; Huggler 2006).

employment (Radhakrishnan 2009; Singh and Pandey 2005) and the reputation that the sector has received through the media reports. There is an expression of disapproval about the behaviour of the young employees in the call centres (Dhillon 2006; Huggler 2006) and concern about the safety of the women, especially after the murder of young women in Bangalore<sup>25</sup> and Pune by cab drivers after the night shifts.

Against such a background my research explores the aspects of patriarchal influences and other power relationships within the lives of these young women through their lived experiences in different socio-cultural contexts. They are independent young women who live away from their family in the city; yet they have many occasions for interactions and negotiations (outside the family environment), when they would be expected to act in a manner that would satisfy the expectations of the family. The independent lives of these women who work in transnational call centres in the city also facilitate experiences of spatial and financial mobility and create opportunities for behaviour that is beyond their familial values. By placing these two aspects in the foremost of my project I focus on how these women experience the notions of freedom, work, marriage, love and sex and how they perceive their roles as daughter, lover, future wife, or being a professional, within their lives. An examination of these aspects, in turn, can help to uncover some of the explicit and implicit ways in which the women actively engage within their socio-cultural contexts and thereby construct their identities along the continuum of tradition and modernity. I draw on three broad analytical frameworks in this chapter to illuminate my research findings and explain the emergence of new gendered identities amongst young Indian women who move to Bangalore to work in call-centres. These frames<sup>27</sup> that are proposed here emerge out of reviewing the key literature in the area and delineate my approach to the study.

- The lived gendered body Frame;
- The globalisation Frame;
- The reflexivity Frame

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<sup>25</sup> On December 13, 2005, Pratibha Srikanth Murthy, a 24-year-old employee of Hewlett Packard, was raped and murdered en route to her night shift call centre position in Bangalore.

<sup>28</sup> Frames: I use the term to refer to the theoretical frameworks which the study demands.

In the first section of this chapter, I provide an overview of all the frames followed by elaboration of each one in the subsequent sections.

### **An overview of the three theoretical frames**

- ❖ Framing gendered identities through a *lived body* provides an overall conceptual basis on which to understand in general how gendered identities are constituted in families and within call-centres. The women in the current study enter the modern and hi-tech call centre industry and they work for clients located in western countries — and yet their families and a sense of respectability remains crucial in their lives. In contrast to many academic studies which define the honour/respectability of middle class women as pivotal to the formation of their gendered identities and is *inscribed upon their passive bodies* in patriarchal families, the frame of my research is based on the conceptualisation of a “lived female body” (McNay 1999; Moore 1994; Thapan 1995). This frame explains how gendered identities are constructed in everyday life, both socially and through the perception, desires and aspirations of the women. In this sense, gender identity can be seen as “both constructed and lived” (Moore, 1994: 49). It is also the site for agency and it creates possibilities for negotiation, intervention and contestation of various cultural choices, within the changing lives of these women.
  
- ❖ The globalisation frame provides a theoretical elaboration of the stark differences between the socio-cultural context of the family and that of a metropolitan city, in addition to international call centre. I argue that the process of globalisation in the current era marks a historical juncture, where the role of the nation state (and that of families) is relatively diffused, in the presence of other global forces. The rapid means of communication and transportation system characteristic of the recent global order reduces the time, distance and cultural gap between different regions of the world and enhance the process of cultural diffusion. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse puts it: “... globalisation [thus becomes] the framework for the diversification and amplification of sources of self” (Pieterse, 1994: 168). For example, as inhabitants in Bangalore, a site of cultural globalisation, the young women in

my study simultaneously dwell in various spatial, cultural and temporal dimensions. The shift duties they perform, require them to be active and awake during the Indian nights for the American customers in the other side of the time zone. As off-shore agents, they respond to the American clients by adopting western names and mastering American dictions. The use of new technologies such as the internet, ACD, VOIP etc in the transnational call centres makes it possible that locals in India and America are instantly connected to each other and through such connections, Giddens believe that everyday life is disembodied and travels from local to append itself directly to the global (Giddens 2008). The relationship between local (i.e. family and small town and a caste-based society) and global (i.e. transnational call centre and cosmopolitan city and its consumer culture), in the lives of these women brings in opportunities, where gender identity is reconstituted based on new fashions, progressive attitudes and liberated (yet normalised) discourses of sexual behaviour, which then become the key aspects of their sexual identification. In this frame I draw on the “placial perspective”, formulated by Massey (1994) and Appadurai (1996), in order to emphasise migratory places (in the current phase of globalisation) as a confluence of social networks, ideas, values and symbols, which result in the migrants being a part of several places and cultures at the same time.

- ❖ The third frame discusses the emergence of *reflexivity* among the women from their experiences of conflicting female roles and gendered practices in a global space of flows. While certain theories have suggested that identity is increasingly reflexive, I have problematised such arguments based on the application of the concept of habitus. The concept refers to the embeddedness of our dispositions and tastes in the cultural framework of class and family and suggests that identity may be less susceptible to reflexive intervention than implied by theorists such as Giddens.

In the remainder of the chapter, I elaborate upon each frame and I provide grounds for my argument, based on a review of relevant academic work in the area.

## I. Framing identity construction: docile vs 'lived gendered body'

There is a vast corpus of writing about Indian women and the construction of gender and femininity<sup>28</sup>. In this section, however, I shall explore the body of literature that has most relevance for the current research on lives of young women in India in the 21st century. In general most studies have dwelt on Indian women's gender construction in the language of 'docility, submission, passivity' and construction of a respectable middle class femininity centred on certain predefined ideal typical categories of domesticity, purity, chastity, hetero-normativity and constrained sexual behaviour. These literatures are based on the notion of a passive female body, which is treated as a blank surface and normative prescriptions are inscribed on it. This is in contrast to the conceptualisation of a lived female body, where lived experiences are crucial to interpret and incorporate various gendered norms and values. However, both these views on gendered identity share a socio-historical conception of the body. Both the philosophical systems negate the conception of body as a closed, object like system and focus upon body as the bearer of socio-historical conducts and behaviour. In short, both these perspective of docile body and lived body emphasize on the process of embodiment as crucial for formation of gendered identities. Embodiment as defines Judith Butler refers to the "... process by which the body comes to bear cultural meanings" (Butler, 1988: 520). My research supports this conception of incorporation / rendering of cultural meaning to a female body in a given socio-cultural context through the process of embodiment and the important role it plays in the formation of gendered identities.

In the following sections, I focus on two broad categories of literature that theorise construction of gendered identities through the processes of embodiment.

Firstly, I identify discourses that are linked through an orientation to the *body as 'docile'*, where gendered identities are conceived to be the outcome of the processes

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<sup>28</sup> See Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari (1992); Oza, Rupal (2001); Das, Veena (1988); Thapan, Meenakshi (2004); Daya, Shari (2009); Dube, Leela (1988); Grewal, Indrapal (2005); Jhon, Mary (1998); Shahida, Lateef (1990); Munshi, Shoma (2001); Ram, Kalpana (2007); Sangari, Kumkum and Vaid, Suresh eds. (1993) for further discussions.

of socialization through various social agents such as family, caste, community, religion and the Indian nationalist discourses during the 19th century, which has a deep imprint on socialisation of women in middle class families.

In the second section, I present a critical discussion on the body of literature that conceives formation of gendered identities through a lived female body *and* unpacks the experiences of the women of their own body, rather than emphasise body as an object, image or construction.

### **Docile bodies -I: Family and religion**

A number of competing theoretical arguments substantiate the interrelationship between a gendered body and identity. The influence of writings of Michel Foucault (1977) on the construction of a feminine subject<sup>29</sup> has enormous impact on theories of gendered identities. Contrary to the view of essentialist arguments, Foucault conceives of gendered identity as socially constructed through social discourses. The exercise of disciplinary power on a female body produces a gendered subjectivity or a “docile body” (Foucault 1977) where the scope of exercising free will, individual choices or agency is undermined. Such a perspective informs many of the academic studies conducted in the area of *familial patriarchy and exploration of gendered power relationships which operate within a broader context of caste, class and community*.

Many scholars argue that the influence of a patriarchal family structure and other social institutions such as caste, religion etc. which uphold patriarchy, are crucial in the production of female subordination and docility in the Indian society (Desai 1977; Dhruvaranjan 1988; Dube 1986; Dube 1988; Dyson 2008; Ram 2007). It is argued that the family is the ground, where ideals of femininity are nurtured and reinforced, in order to perpetuate stereotypical gendered identities and a subordinated economic and social status for the women (Dube 2001; Dutta 2005; Kelkar 1992; Kumari *et al.*,

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<sup>29</sup> Feminine subject- I address the young women in my study *as subjects* to indicate that the construction of their self identities are in a continuous processes of becoming. They submit to familial and other discursive influences as well as contest and shape their identities as embodied selves.

1990). Such a position for the women has been maintained by inheritance, property and divorce laws that favour men, who continue to govern the economic, social and sexual domains, within and outside their households (Jejeebhoy 1998). Susan Wadley in her analysis argues that:

Hindu religious texts [are] the source of understanding the female body as impure which is connected with several intertwined ideas of blood, sex, libidinous nature and dangers these pose to men. The need to control female sexuality also flows from these ideas where the belief is that if a woman is in control of her own sexuality, she can be both malevolent and benevolent. It is only after transferring her sexuality to a man, that is she is portrayed as fertile and benevolent (Wadley, 1988: 28).

This portrayal of a female nature in Hindu religious texts thus empowers men to subjugate women. Whilst these constructions of gender are rooted in an upper caste Brahmin ideology, they continue to have a great impact on most class and caste groups. Various other research works explore the influences of the norms of marriage and performance of domestic roles on construction of female identities. Whilst boys are valued for their economic and spiritual contribution to the family, girls are typically viewed as economic burdens, because they move to their husband's household following marriage and they require some form of dowry (Dube 1986; Kumari 1995; Seymour 1999). This emphasis on eventual marriage makes it important in families that the skills required for a woman to be a good wife, daughter-in-law and mother be imparted to female children (Kumari 1995). Girls are reared to be obedient, self sacrificing, modest, submissive, nurturing, hardworking and home loving (Dube 1988; Seymour 1999). Kakar (1988) and Seymour (1999) stress the importance of specific gender roles, based on the interpersonal relationships and assigned duties in the domestic sphere, as major factors that perpetuate female passivity and restricts women's mobility and sexual relationships.

## **Docile Bodies-II: Caste, class, community and gendered identity**

The dominant construction of an agency-less, docile gendered body also features in other kinds of analysis, where caste, class and communal honour define the rigid boundaries of gendered roles, behaviour and identities. As an example, Tanika Sarkar (Sarkar 1997) explores the power relationship that sternly defined the identities of women within marital relationship in nineteenth century Bengali middle class society. The understanding of a 'good woman' in this context was synonymous with a:

...chaste wife, who remains faithful to her husband even if the marriage, is not consummated, even if the husband dies – for marriage is not a contract but a sacrament (Sarkar, 1997: 57).

In addition, several other writers highlight the role of communities in conditioning the identities of women, through exercising control over their bodies and sexuality.

Women are allowed little or no space for an independent, self perceived articulation, definition or expression of her sexuality. Her body [thus] becomes an instrument and a symbol for the community's expression of caste, class and communal honour (Thapan, 1997: 6).

Jasodhara Bagchi (1995; 1997), in her analysis of the story of a young woman<sup>30</sup> depicts how female bodies become the medium of communal honour and cultural inscriptions of chastity and purity are used to safeguard the caste and class identity by disciplining the female body. In case of deviations, the errant body is punished. For example, her story narrates the extreme outcomes that follows if such communal codes of honour, written through the bodies of women, are violated — willingly or unwillingly.

Sutara, a Hindu girl from East Bengal, has to face the wrath of communal violence during the partitioning of India. This young woman was raped by Muslim perpetrators and subsequently marginalised by family members and her community. The story

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<sup>30</sup> The story of Sutara is written by Jyotrimayee Devi, a contemporary Bengali writer. The novel named *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga* describes how the body of a woman becomes a site to define caste and communal honour. The deep internalisation, or embodiment, of these values acts from within and it shapes gendered identities.

relates the notion of the purity of the female body and sexuality as manipulative devices, through which patriarchal regulations are played out. It thus becomes the symbol of caste, class and communal honour: Sutara loses this symbolic identity<sup>i</sup>, as the purity of her body was violated and subsequently she takes shelter in a Muslim family, which is presented as, apparently an incorrect cultural space for a Hindu woman. The story demonstrates how feminine identities are constituted by the legitimacy provided by caste, community and the class of a woman. Sutara became part of a group of an unknown and 'identity-less' female body, as she had lost her purity, which was the supreme value attached to being a Hindu woman.

These analyses provide a strong account of the social construction of female bodies, which are also "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1977: 136). The conceptualisation of a docile female body is based on the idea of the total subjection of women to socio-cultural forces. In this view, the "female body is molded, shaped, constructed according to changing and different forms of power. This notion of a socially constructed body provides a weaker conceptualization of female agency and resistance" (Thapan 1997: 5). The women, in such a conceptualisation, are projected to be unable to evolve any subversive strategy in order to ensure their own safety or respectable survival (Bhuthalia 1997; Sarkar 1997). Rehana Ghadijally provides a critique of such a construction of female identity within a patriarchal society as being "rooted in a masculinist definition of ideals and images of women which are not their own creations, or even rooted in their own experiences of lives" (Ghadijally, 1988: 21). Therefore a more complete account of gendered identity in my view should also take into account the lived experiences of women or their ways of being in the world.

### **Docile Bodies-III: Nationalist discourses**

The significance of female bodies as sites where class and national identities are constructed is revealed from the ethno-historical study of nationalist discourse in 19th century India, by Partha Chatterji (1989). He underscores how the ideological dichotomies of inner/outer and spiritual/material had a profound influence on the social organisation of gender. The 19th century nationalist discourse differentiated the outer world/material domain, from an inner, spiritual world, in which the true identity

of a woman was thought to reside. The reconstruction of Indian traditions, based on reconciliation between the project of modernisation and nationalist practice, with its nostalgic view of 'Indianness', was played out in the gendered sites of home. In contrast to the outer world, the inner sanctum of home was considered to be free from colonial domination and (within it) women were viewed as preserving the spiritual (feminine virtues) of a reconstructed Indian tradition. This construction of a new patriarchy, based on the hybridised construction of Indian women, further undermined middle class women's freedom in India (Chatterji 1989). Whilst modern education elevated her position in the modern world, she was defined as distinct in terms of her moral superiority, and her difference from western women, who were understood to be vulgar, coarse and sexually promiscuous. Generally speaking, the construction of a new Indian woman, along the thread of purity, chastity and moral virtues, still spoke of women based on an objective value and it did not assign them a real voice to speak<sup>31</sup> (Chatterji, 1989: 32). These accounts however are devoid of the explanations in which the women actually negotiated within the official accounts of patriarchy in their lives. The questions regarding whether women embraced these strictures placed upon them have been left open. *Questions, such as, did the women resist the imposition of ideology, or were they active collaborators in the production of a patriarchal system, are not answered within this framework.*

The construction of this new Indian woman in the nationalist discourse thus draws attention to a 'socially constructed docile female body' where identity seems to be imposed from the above. While theorists such as Susan Bordo argue that a gendered body is a product of 'the cultural grip on the body as a constant and intimate fact of everyday life' (Bordo, 1993: 16), the lived aspects of the female body is largely ignored;

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<sup>31</sup> The construction of an 'ideal womanhood' was the product of a nationalist discourse and it built upon an exclusive system of dichotomies (inner/outer, home/world, feminine/masculine). This further spelt out the respectability of women, which was to be achieved through their place inside the home and by them being morally chaste and virtuous. Bourdieu (1992) theorised such gendered attributes as being used by a particular class (in this case, the Indian middle class) to emphasise its distinction and position in the society. Thus, the socialisation of women into being chaste wives and virtuous daughters, which may seem to be the essence of middle class womanhood, is in fact a socio-cultural construction, which helps to (re)establish class boundaries.

thus gendered identity in this theoretical scheme is viewed as a product of cultural influences without any active participation of the women in it. Neither does it visualize the construction of gendered identities as an ongoing process or gendered bodies as sites of interpretation and contestation.

In contrast to the theorisation of a docile body, conceptualizations of “performativity” by Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and that of “habitus” (1977, 1998) by Pierre Bourdieu, signal towards this ongoing process of female embodiment through a lived body and as the basis of emergence of gendered identities. For example, Butler frames the construction of a gendered body, as an ongoing discursive practice and thus it is open to intervention and contestation (Butler 1990). This notion brings about an understanding that gendered identities can be creative and also have transformative possibilities, within a particular socio-cultural context. Performativity refers to behaviour that cites hegemonic norms. In other words a body becomes understandable as a body, when its actions conform to hegemonic norms. While Butler and Bourdieu both focus on embodiment as central to identity formation, Butler defines identities to be performed in a *phenomenological sense*. This means that identities are performed consciously in accordance to the dominant norms. Thus varying situations in life offer infinite possibilities for constructions of identities. These constructions are limited however, by existing historical and social repertoires of behaviour. It is primarily the connections, tensions and conflicts between these notions of embodiment that I explore in the lives of the female participants in my study. While Bourdieu and Butler argue in favour of social construction of gendered bodies in socio-historically specific cultural contexts, Bourdieu’s emphasis on *pre-reflexive or unconscious aspects of gendered identity* refers to a more durable form of identity. On the other hand, Butler’s conceptualization of gendered identity, which is performed according to demands of the situations (through limited hegemonic heterosexual ideals), create opportunities for *conscious transformation* in identity. This debate between stability-change, reflexivity and pre-reflexive enactment of gendered behaviour provide some of the important standpoints for exploration. In my thesis they provide a good place in order to explore the construction of gendered

identity in particular socio-cultural environments, as well as to study the influences/ changes / incorporation of new changes into these identities.

### ***Patriarchy, docile bodies and crisis of agency***

The views on a universal form of patriarchy influencing the socialisation processes or a docile body subjected to power relations, precludes the explanation of how specific experiences, situations or changing economic and cultural scenarios might give rise to different forms of practices. The discussions on the socialization of women as objects of patriarchy and religious and cultural symbols does not provide a good platform from which to explore agency and the experiences of women, as it does not provide an explanation for how women might have a vantage point from which they can speak. This perspective thus constrains an analysis of the abilities of women to reconstitute their identities as active agents based on development of an inner political awareness that could challenge these all encompassing patriarchal values (Thapan 1995; 1997). Such a framework also suggests a simplistic understanding of femininity as an outcome of patriarchal oppression wherein women as gendered subjects are *passive* products of socialisation (Thapan, 1995: 36). Bearing this in mind, Young (1990) contends that such writings merely looked upon women as 'sites', where cultural and religious values are formulated and debated and this reinforces the passivity of women, within their own subjectification.

Everyone else speaks for her; so that she is rewritten continuously as the object of patriarchy... She is a signifier, whose distinction is that she is shifted from one position to another without being allowed any content (Young, 1990: 164).

If scriptures are considered as the basis of traditions — and traditions are the foundation on which everyday cultural practices of Indian society rest — then it follows that gendered bodies and identities are solely determined by a woman's place within the larger discursive constructions of law, traditions and scriptures. The one sided inscription of cultural norms and values also proceeds with the assumption that Indian women are unreflective and compliant within the discourses they come across in their families or those dictated by scriptures. In contrast to this view several other feminist scholars provide a critique of such a portrayal of women as victims of traditions and call for the reconstruction of women as active agents (Mani 1992; Spivak

1988; 1990). For example, Lata Mani (1992) questions the passive acceptance of inhuman traditional practices such as sati or widow-burning (during the colonial period in India) by widows. She attempts to reconstruct women as subjects, by re-reading actual eye-witness accounts, in order to restore to the centre the elements which had been marginalised in official accounts of widow-burning. More specifically, she draws attention to “the violence of sati, the active suffering of widows, and women’s resistance to, and coercion in widow burning” (1992: 403).

These broad discursive constructions of women as passive beings without a voice, action and consciousness, thus, turn our attention towards a variety of other feminist writings which focus on the lived experiences of women and conceive them as agents. The limitations of conceiving a gendered body as a docile body is suggested by (Mohanty 1991), who claims that such over-generalisations obscure investigation into actual social, economic and political arrangements that impinge upon the construction of subject-hood amongst women. Thus, the differing configuration of these arrangements is neglected in writings about the presumably ubiquitous experiences of women’s oppression in the Third World: women as objects were understood as having no reality existing outside the hegemonic framework (Mohanty 1991). She persuasively argues that such binaries of male dominance and female exploitation which follows from such constructions, is non-reflective of the subject positions of women.

The literature which attempts to identify *resistance* as a dominant theme in the life histories of women provides an alternative to the conventional representation of women as passive victims. These writings attempt to enter into the real women’s world and they problematise the normative ways in which Indian middle class women have been portrayed in sociological literature. Thus it is argued, that such a passive construction of the female body and sexuality is not sufficient to answer questions concerning the reflexivity or agency of women. The question that arises in this context is as follows:

*If patriarchy exists as a dominant force operating universally in social and familial relationships and gendered identities are constructed through a process of subjection,*

*then how do we explain the effects of new social processes in the lives of women?* In this context Lois McNay notes that:

The effects of gender restructuring [such as the de-traditionalizing effects evident in transformation of status of women in the post-independent India] upon the lives of men and women are ambiguous in that they do not straightforwardly reinforce older forms of gender inequality; nor however, can their de-traditionalizing impacts be regarded as wholly emancipatory. New forms of autonomy and constraint can be seen to be emerging which can no longer be understood through the dichotomies of male domination and female subordination (McNay, 2000: 2).

Therefore, explanations relating to the roles and identities of the women and the behaviour exhibited by them in complex relationships cannot be explained through an emphasis on relatively “ahistorical notions of patriarchy and female subordination” (McNay, 2000: 2). This marks a shift from the conceptualisation of gendered identity (as a product of patriarchal forces) and as relatively enduring, towards the understanding of the processes of resistance, subversion and emancipation within identities. The conceptualisation of a docile female body, which is the site of patriarchal power relationships, is thus overtaken by the perspectives of a *lived* female body, where the *experiences* of women remained crucial for the formation of gendered identities.

### **Formation of gendered identities through a lived body**

Till now, the discussion has centred on literatures which propose the formation of gendered identities through a docile body. In this section, I discuss those streams of literature which define embodiment as a form of experiencing and understanding the world through the body in lived experience. Lived experiences are experiences of the everyday world that are taken for granted including practical knowledge. The views of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1965) provides the philosophical foundation of this stream of literature. “The world is not what I think but what I live through” (Ponty, 1962: xvii). Judith Butler further elaborates Ponty’s position as to how body is the vehicle to live through the world and results in an ongoing process of embodiment which forms the basis of gendered identities:

Merleau-Ponty maintains not only that body is an historical idea but a set of possibilities to be continually realized. In claiming that body is an historical idea, Merleau-Ponty means that it gains its meanings through a concrete and historically mediated expressions in the world. That body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate (Butler, 1988: 521).

I cite here some of the research studies in the Indian context to further clarify how the conceptualisation of a lived body helps us to understand the active interface between the body and the socio-cultural matrix as one of the important basis for formation of gendered identities. It also creates a scope to understand female agency.

Veena Das (1988) in her study narrates how the young women experience and embody the norms related to puberty in the Punjabi families. The menstruating female body is perceived to be in a ritually polluting state by the community. The young women too learn to perceive their own bodies as impure over time, through various puberty related cultural practices that they have to carry out in their everyday life. For example, the women are discouraged to be mobile and interact with the male members of the community. They are confined to particular areas in the houses or the communal spaces, so that they do not pollute others. Moreover, they wear less or no jewellery and dress in particular clothing prescribed by the families. Slowly, the process of spatial confinement, adornment of the body in specific ways and keeping distance from the male members of the family and community leads to embodiment of shame and a polluted state of being among the women during their menstruation.

This takes place as a result of the interface of the female body with the socio-cultural environment over a period of time. Further, it involves some learning on the part of the body as to how to act in a particular situation than norms simply being imposed on it. Moreover, the experiences of shame or pollution are not exclusive inner experiences unavailable to outside observers. Rather it takes place in the commonly shared cultural matrix. The women are not passive recipients of adult and social

practices. They participate actively in their own learning through the daily social interaction with their siblings, peers and adult female members of the house.

[According to] the restrictions on the movement of women in the Punjabi community, during which period they are not allowed to wear ornaments, change her clothes or take her bath, converts her into a concrete sexual being, where she oscillates between the position of purity and pollution. During the pure times, her body will bear all cultural symbols and be available for the gaze of her community, while the pollution period make her hide her body bound by space and definite clothes. This notion of pollution associated with female body during the puberty curtails their freedom and spontaneity as well as robs them of their mobility (Das, 1988: 24).

Thus, Das's notion of a lived body provides an instance of the feminist theorisation of embodiment, where gendered identities are formed through the lived experiences of the female through the medium of space, forms of adornment and specific rituals. I take the position that relationship between the gendered self and the body is a complex process than which involves inscription of the text upon the surface of the body. Therefore, discerning the process of embodiment as purely an object of cultural inscription is to undertake an insufficient analysis. The prioritisation of a lived body is also central to the understanding that representation of idealized femininity are resisted, contested and transformed to embodied identities. This is apparent in the following study.

Meenakshi Thapan (1997), in her study among upper middle class women in Delhi, narrates the differences between a lived body, which *resists oppression* experienced in intimate relationships, and a docile body, which *remains passive* in such situations. Some of the women in her study experienced oppression and felt alienated from their own bodies when their partners labelled them as ugly, neglected them or engaged in extra-marital relations. The description of these female bodies as ugly in culturally specific ways (short, dark skinned or fat), however, also led to an act of defiance where some of these women took divorces from their partners and withdrew from intimate relationships. These women searched for new means of regaining their self respect and rejected being labelled as inferior on the basis of normative definitions of a female

body. Emphasising the significance of lived experiences in the construction of gendered identities Thapan further adds:

... [It] is shaped and redefined in the everyday experiences of women as they both contest and submit to the images and constructs that impinge on their sense, their emotions, and their material and social conditions (Thapan, 2004: 413).

Reinforcing the significance of lived experiences of upper middle class females in her study, Jyoti Puri, argues that such experiences not only "... tells us much about contemporary aspects of womanhood and sexuality but help question these categories as well" (Puri, 1999: 1). The female participants in Puri's study (as daughters) constantly challenged the restrictive norms of menstruation imposed on them by their families. These norms which signified the (socially ascribed) 'polluted state' of female bodies were articulated as irrational in the current lives of these women. The women (in her study), as mothers, also denounced the relevance of the norms of puberty for their daughters, based on their own bodily experiences.

The body thus becomes the important medium through which the different values assigned to masculinity and femininity are reflected and experienced. In order to account for the complexities of social processes, such as patriarchal power relationships, the socialisation processes in the family and the "potential of women to defy the containments" (Visweswaran, 1994: 42), I stress embodiment through a lived body as a vital process by which to understand the development of gendered identities amongst women. This emphasizes a more dynamic and lived body, or a body as a "transitional entity" (Grosz 1994), which shapes a person's identity.

As the point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological, the body is a dynamic, mutable frontier. The body is the threshold through which the subject's lived experience of the world is incorporated and realized and, as such, is neither pure object nor subject. It is neither pure object since it is the place of one's engagement with the world. Nor it is pure subject in that there is always a material residue that resists incorporation into the dominant symbolic schema (McNay, 1999: 98).

In contrast to symbolic feminism, where gender identity becomes synonymous with sexual identity that is constructed symbolically, through the dominant norms of the society, material feminists (the theoretical stance that I take) argue for the inclusion of dimensions such as class, employment, economic prosperity, experiences of new space, cultural elements etc., into the conceptualisation of embodiment (Fraser 1989; Niranjana 1997; VanEvery 1995). Central to my thesis is the understanding of the female body of being rooted in experiences and capable of negotiating spaces for itself in wake of conflicts and contestation.

Therefore, the important area that needs to be explored in order to understand the identities of women is *“how the social representations and power relationships affect the subjective constructions and how the self representations of gender affect its social constructions”* (Moore, 1994: 53). Women’s perceptions of their own bodies and femininity are therefore as important to my analysis, as the patriarchal gendered representations.

### **Habitus, practices and cultural capital**

The framework that I provide to theorise these aspects of the young women’s lives in their day to day lives as daughters in middle class families, builds upon the concepts of ‘habitus and practice’ as advanced by Pierre Bourdieu (1990; 1998). “Habitus” is defined as ‘a system of durable, transposable dispositions that mediates an individual’s actions and external conditions of production’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). The set of dispositions which comprise the habitus generate perceptions, appreciations and practices and allows one to think, act and orient oneself in the socio-cultural world (Bourdieu 1990). In creating a habitus, a child learns to read the world of objects, and how to act physically and verbally (Bourdieu 1977; 1990).

The concept also offers the ways of dealing with the problematic nature of the sweeping influences of socialisation process in the lives of the women by referring to individual practices, which cannot only be explained in terms of dominant norms. Based on this framework, I shall argue in the subsequent chapters that at a broad level the women idealise and speak in favour of familial and class values, that provides a coherent sense of self around the notion of respectability. However, the experiences

of the women as friends, school/ college students, employees, colleagues give rise to an array of practices based on desires, ambitions, interests and contingencies of daily lives. While Bourdieu does speak of variations in individual practice, he also emphasizes gendered identities as relatively stable.

“Habitus” (1992, 2000) is the term put forward by Bourdieu, in order to explain the construction of identities as a “...lived set of embodied potentialities, rather than as an externally imposed set of constraining norms” (McNay, 2000: 32). The theory of “cultural capital”<sup>32</sup> developed by Bourdieu (1984), within which conceptualisation of “habitus” seems meaningful, is crucial here. Within this framework, the complex relationship between the familial and class location of women and patriarchal values (symbolic aspects of identities, such as purity and chastity), in addition to the experience and agency of women (the manifestation of these symbolic dimensions in the practices of women), can be comprehended in the construction of gendered identities. A brief synopsis of Bourdieu’s thinking highlights the intergenerational processes of transmission of values, norms, feelings of belonging and tastes, which are the basis of the construction of identities, without compromising the agency of women. In other words, female bodies are conceived as lived bodies — and not “docile bodies”. To effectively work against the complete ascription of gendered identities, Bourdieu stresses on ambivalences expressed through individual practices, as being crucial to the lives of agents, who engage with the social structure and realm of gendered prescriptions, during their day to day lives. According to him ‘practices are produced as a result of the interaction between the dispositions of the habitus and the constraints and possibilities which are the reality of any given social field’ (Jenkins, 2002: 83). A “field” (to use Bourdieu’s terminology) indicates the socio-cultural or the economic arena within which an actor operates. In order to be a part of the field, the actor has to learn the rules and logic of operation of that particular field. In this sense, modern transnational call centres, families or communities of the young women and the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore can be defined as various fields in the present

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<sup>32</sup> According to Bourdieu’s theory, cultural capital forms the basis of class formation and it disguises the way in which class differences are structural. Rather, it makes them appear as natural, through factors such as income, education and networks and cultural knowledge.

study. Each of these fields operates with its own set of rules, customs, norms and values.

Taken together, the notions of habitus, capital and social field, help us to understand the agency of women in the construction of their own identities on the basis of their changing lived experiences, which provide new foundations of embodiment.

The same habitus can produce very different practices depending upon what is going on in the field... the habitus can be transformed by changed circumstances, and the expectations or aspirations [of the agents] will change with it (Bourdieu, 1990 *cited in* Jenkins, 2002: 82).

Many recent studies (Daya 2009; Oza 2001; Patel 2008; Puri 1999; Radhakrishnan 2009) suggest that 'respectability' still remains a central marker of Indian feminine identity within a patriarchal society that revolves around the preservation of purity, chastity, female modesty and restricted female mobility, in an era of economic liberalisation. However changes are also marked in these realms, as the post-liberalisation period has created new opportunities for women in the area of employment, career mobility and it has enhanced their scope to travel abroad, through their employment within global software organisations (Grewal 2005; D'Mello 2006; McMillan 2006; Radhakrishnan 2009; Singh and Pandey 2005).

The notion of "recolonization" (Thapan, 2001: 359) and "post colonial habitus" (Thapan, 2004: 412), developed by Meenakshi Thapan, attempts to capture a context, against which a changing notion of respectability amongst middle class women could be articulated. In contrast to the social constructions of gender according to patriarchal principles, Thapan (2001), in her study amongst the young urban upper class women, emphasises the significance of both the familial forces (based on the values of patriarchy) and the broader forces of globalisation, which provides the basis for the formation of fluid and ambivalent gendered identities. The prevalence of conflicts in the lives of these young women is rooted in simultaneous operation of some of the traditional and modern forces. Thapan coins the term "recolonization" to conceptualise a transitional phase in the backdrop of cultural globalisation and the emergence of active and global media and the forces of economic liberalisation in India. She defines it as a "[process] characterized by a mix of global elements

translated into socially and culturally acceptable, and thereby legitimate ideas, values and practices in everyday life” (2001: 359). These new cultural and economic processes (seen in the urban Indian), have given rise to the “ formation of a ‘post colonial habitus’ among the women - a specific social and historical condition that shapes the “habitus” in diverse and particular ways through familial relations, schooling practices and other modalities of the social and public domain” (2004: 412). Furthermore, she stresses the increased public visibility and role of women in contemporary urban India (Chaudhuri 2001; Dutta 2005; Fernanades 2000), which deviates sharply from the norms of respectability associated with the middle and upper classes, who have dictated the domestic inner sphere, or the home to represent the spiritual self and true identities of women and provided them with respectability (Chatterji 1989). This public role of women could be cited as an example of “recolonization”, through which globalisation has entered Indian homes and brought about changes in the identities of women (Thapan 1999). She is emphatic that the above process of cultural change can be seen to be different from westernization which signals a one sided transfer of superior western values to the eastern culture context.

Through her study based on questionnaires amongst young adolescent women (age 16-17 years), Meenakshi Thapan provides specific instances of the creation of a “post colonial habitus” (Thapan 2004) or the processes of ‘recolonization’ (Thapan, 2004: 412). The women in her study exhibited the desire to be both like their mothers, in addition to being independent. The women’s expression that their husband should be ‘a little dominating’, in addition to being a ‘caring man’, demonstrates that these women wanted to be dependent on their husband, or that the wife should take care of the family, since there is no substitute for a mother’s love and this demonstrates the influences of their family on their choice of husband. The cultural influences of globalisation were displayed in the following ways:

The women wanted to take up unconventional professions, such as being neuro-scientists or neuro-surgeons, which emphasised the importance of careers and being independent, in addition to an emphasis on the cherished ideal male and female bodies, which were grounded in western culture. She provides an instance of the

recolonisation of gendered bodies where, “bodies are appropriated from popular cinema, television serials, and novels: Leonardo di Caprio from the film Titanic; Howard Roark from Ayn Rands’ novel, *The Fountainhead*” (Thapan, 2001: 368). Similarly, fiction, such as the ‘Sweet Valley’ series or the novels of Gorgette Heyer, Lousia May, Sydney Sheldon and Daniel Steel provided the women with countless images of western men and women and the ideal relationships between them. Thus, her study brings out the relevance of peer group culture and the images, symbols and myths available to women through the media and other resources, which were equally important in shaping the identities of these women.

Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase’s study (2003) among the lower middle class women in West Bengal also highlights the changing context of middle class families in the wake of economic liberalisation and influences of the media discourses. In contravention to the colonial legacy of the domestic inner sanctum which bestows respectability on women, Ganguly-Scrase emphasises the mobility and public visibility of women (and their employment outside of home), as being a matter of pride for their family members.

In a recent sociological study by Smita Radhakrishnan (2009), the complexities of respectable femalehood are explored amongst women who are employed in global software organisations. These women, on the one hand prioritised their middle class family; while on the other hand they also derived pride from their jobs and spent most of their time at their place of work. Above all, they displayed anxiety over a possible perceived promiscuity by others (Radhakrishnan 2009). This conflicting identification with some of their familial gendered norms, together with an inability to incorporate these norms into their place of employment in the software sector, draws attention towards exploring the persistence of respectability, as a durable middle class family feature, in addition to understanding the changing connotations of the word ‘respectability’, in the changing lives of women.

Radhakrishnan’s study focuses on female software professionals, whose jobs are considered as highly respectable, due to the high qualifications required to enter such sectors of employment. On the other hand, call centre jobs, which are associated with

a low level of education, technical skill and night shifts, are generally considered as being 'disrespectable' (Radhakrishnan 2009; Singh and Pandey 2005) and not the correct place to find women from 'good' families. Few studies have been conducted to examine the dilemmas of such women, who generally come from English speaking middle or lower-middle class families, and they face the onerous burden of defining their identities, as an employee in a call centre. The changing nature of respectability amongst middle class women (outside the realm of their family) and in the light of flow of a new set of values and symbols in the wake of globalisation, remains an unexplored area in academic research. My study seeks to address this research gap by developing a theoretical frame with a focus on the *shifting construction of class respectability, amongst young women caught up in the process of migration.*

### **The middle class family 'habitus' and a shifting notion of respectability**

I argue here that respectability can be perceived of as a lived set of embodied potentialities, rather than an externally imposed set of constraining norms. I define respectability as one of the key dispositions of the middle class habitus, which has been further 'transposed and became the conditioning elements of a variety of social practices of the women in different social contexts' (Bourdieu 1977). Whilst the notion does provide an important anchoring point for defining a class identity (and various subject positions), I would argue for a more complex understanding of the experiences, events and disjuncture that occur around this key notion and one, which provides for a shifting construction of gendered identities by the female agents in my study. The women creatively use, contest and change these subject positions and thus this influences the broader processes of social change. Therefore, I set the stage for a later exploration of the processes of female migration and mobility, in addition to exploring the diverse ways in which these young women make sense of their lives within a cosmopolitan city. This evolving sense of respectability, through new practices, can be explained in terms of habitus being a generative structure, where new practices emerge out of its dynamic relationship with the field (Wacquant, 2006: 7). I assert the idea that the women interface with a variety of differentiated fields in their lives. Whilst at home, for example, they interact in the field of education (schools

and college) and the cultural field (participation in community and family celebrations and religious affairs). In these interactions, there is a greater compatibility between the notions of respectability, which they have acquired within their families and the practices of caste and class communities, within their small town. This compatibility between the field and dispositions of the habitus also ensures the continuity of institutions such as marriage and family and the reinforcement of dispositions, such as chastity, modesty and being dutiful etc., as being the essence of the middle class families to which they belong. However, as the discussion in the following section reveals, their lives in the city and at their work place, creates a 'field of action', where the compatibility between the dispositions of the 'habitus' and the requirement of the new socio-cultural milieu display disjunctures and create potential for a changing notion of respectability amongst these women.

Thus, the analysis of the embodied disposition of respectability (as rooted in the familial habitus of the women) and a new social context (field), which has been created through the forces of globalisation, becomes inevitable, in order to understand both stasis and change within the gendered identities. In the following section I move on to discuss the second theoretical frame pertaining to the process of globalisation and cultural changes.

## **Globalisation frame**

This frame elaborates the idea that the current phase of globalisation is distinct from such earlier processes because of its *faster and unique modes of communication system* (Castells 2000; Castells 2008; Gielis 2009; Harvey 1989). This in turn has given rise to a world of flows, where sources of identities are fed by local, national, and transnational elements at the same time. This conceptualisation to some extent displaces the sole significance of familial and nationalist discourses in construction of gendered identities. There are two specific contexts of globalisation in the current study - *transnational call centres* and *Bangalore* (the city where the young women reside currently, as migrants from smaller towns and cities in India).

In the first section, I discuss various propositions relating to effects of globalisation on local cultural forms, individual lives and identities. For example, several researchers

contend that globalisation leads to cultural hybridisation (Appadurai 1997; Elliot 2007; Featherstone 1990; Tomlinson 1991) or to cultural homogenisation and hegemonisation (Castells 2000). Secondly, I discuss the frame that evolves out of a critical review of literature in the area and seems appropriate for the present study. This frame which has the *placial perspective* suggested by Doreen Massey (1994) and Arjun Appadurai (1997) at its core, provides the basis to understand Bangalore, a cosmopolitan and a global city, as a place which is related to a multitude of places and social processes beyond its geographical boundaries. The multiple cultural forms represented through a variety of local, national and continental restaurants, coffee houses, shopping malls displaying a variety of branded clothes from different parts of the world, as well as the ethnic wears, the coexistence of local temples along with numerous pubs and discotheques 'make one sense the simultaneous presence of everywhere in the city' (Massey, 1994: 162). I adopt Appadurai's (1996; 1997) concept of 'social imagination' to describe the construction of subjectivities in such an interconnected place. The movements of numerous cultural symbols, values and images fuelled by a global media, work sectors as well as migration of people from varying locations into the city provide the building blocks of such imaginary worlds.

I begin with a general discussion on various forms of cultural changes that are initiated with the process of globalisation.

### ***Effects of globalisation on culture and identity***

A common interpretation of globalisation is the idea that the world is becoming more uniform and standardised, through a technological, commercial and cultural synchronisation, which has emanated from the west and that globalisation is tied up with 'modernity'. In several prominent conceptualisations, such as that by Giddens (1992), globalisation is seen as the outcome of modernity and this implies that the history of globalisation began with the history of the west. This view of globalisation has been challenged on several grounds. If globalisation is conceived to have emanated from the west and its influence on the cultural, economic and other domains of life, in other parts of the world, then it should be called westernization — not globalisation. Tomlinson challenges this western-centric view of globalisation and advocates the importance of local cultural histories or national cultural identities in the

study of globalising processes (Tomlinson 1991). For example, the insurgence of movements which emphasise revival of national cultural identities<sup>33</sup>, local consciousness and other forms of regional assertions to protect ethnic identities and minority rights are also by-products of the broader processes of globalisation.

Several arguments have been developed in order to theorise the interactions between local, national and regional in a global space, which constitute a different dynamics, other than the westernizing / modernising views of globalisation. Citing an example of the prominence of the local amidst the global, Booth suggested that “Identity patterns are becoming more complex, as people assert local loyalties but want to share in global values and lifestyles” (Booth 1990, *cited in* Lipschutz, 1992: 396). Reinforcing the position of Booth, Spronk (2009) explores the significance of local and cosmopolitan influences on the lives of young Nairobi professionals, who engaged in different processes of identification and subjectifications - as professionals as well as Africans and cosmopolitan citizens. This group, who migrated to Nairobi for work, maintains bonds with their rural family or local organisations, whilst still being members of an urban society in Kenya. Their financial independence from their rural family was a result of their stable income within global organisations, and enabled them to remain unmarried and to have premarital sexual relationships and a consumer lifestyle. However, on the other hand, they were influenced by the globalisation process that was being ushered into Kenya and Spronk describes this as “cosmopolitanism with a Kenyan flavour” (Spronk, 2009: 512) or they displayed their cultural identity as “being modern in the African way” (*ibid*: 511). This young group took pride in being modern Kenyans, referring to the vibrant popular culture in Nairobi, as a leading force in the area and also exhibited general familiarity with the particular customs and ideologies of their communities. This study thus delineates the construction of individual subjectivities, as an important arena to observe the intricacies of interaction between the global and the local.

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<sup>33</sup> The politics of religious revivalism, for example, the rise of the *Hinduvta* movement in India based on the consciousness of a Hindu identity driven by certain political groups, during the era of economic liberalisation has been a response to the perceived threat to national cultural identity, because of the so called westernizing influences.

### ***Migrant lives at the cross section of the local and the global***

A new research field has been created where the interest is focused on exploring the problems of identity, ethnic conflict and changing self identification of migrants e.g. (Askland 2007; Gielis 2009). Migrants have always been thought of as people who need to cut off most of the relations they have with social networks such as friends, families, communities or caste groups in their former places of living (Gielis, 2009: 271) as they develop new ties within their new places of living. However, in the current phases of globalisation and migration, “the increasing compression of time and space are now linking once distant localities in such a way that local events are shaped by other events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Resurreccion, 2005: 36). This has demanded a more context- specific framework in order to understand the complex lives of these migrants (Casey 1997; Gielis 2009; Levitt and Schiller 2004). In an informational society, Castells (2008) perceives:

...an undermining of the patriarchal and ideologies, as well as future of families in the wake of decreasing protection of authoritarian states within the boundaries of the nation states (Castells, 2008: 321).

He argues that the current stage is particularly ‘...emancipating for the women, who through networking can increasingly substitute their emotional and material dependence on nuclear families as the primary support system’ (*ibid*, 321). His thoughts on the endless reconstruction of the self in a networking society bears a striking resemblance to the ‘highly individualized, disembedded self’ of Giddens (1991: 36-42) where the self is no longer seen to adapt to “...what were once conventional social roles” (Castells, 2008: 321).

The most fundamental transformation of relationships of experience in the Information Age is their transition to a pattern of social interaction constructed, primarily by actual experiences of relationship. Now-a-days people produce forms of sociability, rather than follow modes of behaviour (Castells, 2008: 322).

Castells argues that a ‘real virtual culture’ has emerged in the fast moving world of today, which renders the existence of isolated/exclusive national and local cultures meaningless, and disembodies social relationships out of these contexts. For example,

global work sectors such as call centres, where sophisticated technological instruments make it possible for clients and customer from two different hemispheres to interact with each other, allow cultural exchanges to happen much faster, as it does not involve any geographical shift. The instant communication through e-mails, online chat and telephonic conversation through internet service providers seem to have compressed both the temporal gap and geographical distance between different locales and cultures. The interface of diverse cultures in a virtual way, which is termed as the “real virtual” culture, provides symbols to constitute the experience of people and form the basis of their livelihoods “in the space of flows and in timeless time” (Castells, 2008: 322). The dominant values within such a networked space like the transnational call centres, thus, escape experiences embodied in any locality. Thus, for Castells, the individual is completely encompassed by the global, whereas the global function is independent of the individual and the local and national.

Ananda Mitra (2008) in his study calls attention to creation of such virtual places at call centres, where

... technologies of the internet and personal computers are reforming what it means to be in a place – real and virtual. [According to her] in the virtual cyberspace, the key defining elements of experiences and identities are the texts and discourses disseminated to the members through the web pages (Mitra, 2008: 207).

Thus the experiences are independent of cultural influences embodied in a particular physical location and gives rise to diasporic experiences for the employees in their own country. He further points out that a US-centric culture rooted in the US political and economic structure is prevalent in these global work sectors. Thus the experiences of the employees are dominated by a US-centric culture which continuously shape and reshape their identities. In short, the study reinforces Castell’s position that the experiences of the global prevail over the local ones and are disembodied from any locality.

Giddens (1996) and Beck (2000), endorse the increasing de-traditionalising and individualising effects of living in an interconnected world. According to them, the global processes break the traditional relationships as well as network and undermine

the traditional sources of social and political identity. This approach portrays the contemporary self as a reflexive project. In a similar fashion to Castells, who visualizes constructions of identities within social experiences, rather than according to roles and conventions, Giddens emphasises the lifestyles of agents where choices were adopted by the agents, rather than merely handed down. These choices are related to “who to be rather than only about how to act” (Castells, 2008: 356). Identities are thus conceived to be the product of individual experiences and rationality. Such assertions, however, tell us nothing about some of the deeply ingrained and pre-reflexive aspects of identities, where the emphasis is on the centrality of the local, individual and deep emotional identification of the agents, within certain institutions, such as family and class, or caste communities.

This presumption of the global shaping the local and the individual has been criticised by Sassen (2007) and Appadurai (1997), amongst several others. Arjun Appadurai argues that ‘globalisation is a deeply historical and uneven process, and to the extent that different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently it is also paradoxically, a localizing process’ (1997: 17). Saskia Sassen (2000) articulates similar thoughts, as she notes that global processes are constituted within the deeper dynamics of the territorial and institutional domains of the local and national.

This theorisation of the local and global as mutually reinforcing has been supported in a recent study by Marissa D’Mello (2006) in global software organisations in India. The study highlights the significance of local factors, such as gender hierarchy and caste identities which form part of the gendered identities of female employees and interacts with the work norms to produce specific employee behaviour. These organisations which have grown in numbers in the metropolitan cities of India can be described as a consequence of the economic liberalisation and globalisation process. On the one hand, the work norms challenge the traditional mobility related restrictions, through the opportunities of overseas travel and unconventional timings of the work. However, on the other hand, the socio-cultural dimensions of femininity and family counterbalance the emancipating opportunities offered by such organizations. With a specific focus on gendered identities, D’Mello’s study suggests that the alterations in gender identities of women, who worked in such organisations

amidst opportunities for career enhancement and personal development, also had to face the challenges of “...negotiating power and equality in the family system...” (D’Mello, 2006: 15). Any type of disruption within the delicate balance between the sphere of work and family, threatened the breakdown of families, and thus it affected the self esteem of the women in the study. The women functioned as the nurturer of their families in addition to their responsibilities at work to strike a balance between their personal and professional lives. This study thus invites our attention to other foundations of social and cultural life, such as family, neighbourhood and friends within the global spaces (Wilding 2007).

In order to overcome limitations of studies which emphasize the global at the cost of the local, and also to explore the diverse cultural experiences as a result of multiple interaction between the global, national and the local, I adopt the “placial perspective” (Massey 1994; Appadurai 1995; 1997) and conceptualisation of ‘imagination as a social practice’ (Appadurai 1997). These notions help to explain the lives of the women as daughters, employees, caste members and modern women in a global space situated at the intersection of various social networks and exposed to multiple gendered discourses.

### ***The placial perspective***

This perspective offers a better understanding of a globalised world, where rapid means of transportation and communication has made it easier for migrants to keep in touch with several cultures, people and places, all at the same time. Arjun Appadurai, one of the major advocates of the placial turn in anthropology, argues for a “trans-local understanding of the place” (Appadurai, 1995). This perspective also provides valuable insight into how individual identities are constituted within the socio-cultural complexity of the global place they inhabit. According to Appadurai (1997) in such places migrants can simultaneously reach out to the symbols, images, values and traits of people in other places. Thus, the individual does not just experience the social relationships located in place where s/he is corporeally standing, but s/he could also experience social processes and relationships, which were located in places elsewhere.

He cites such translocal experiences in the following examples.

As Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats, as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cab drivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermon recorded in mosque in Pakistan or Iran, we see moving images meet deterritorialized viewers (Appadurai, 1997: 4).

This view of de-territorialised life calls for the analysis of migrants' life at the intersection of various social networks they are part of in the city, their families or communities all of which can be experienced at one place. Large scale changes have been reported in studies, which describe places such as Chaing Mai (Morrison 2004) Kenya (Spronk 2009) and Bangkok (Mills 1997) as confluences of multiple social, economic and cultural processes and networks which rise to new experiences of consumption and social transformation.

For example, Mary Beth Mills (1997) elaborates the lives of migrant young women from rural Thailand in Bangkok who participate in the low wage economic sector. In the city the women are localized at a single place, but at the same time articulated with other places such as their rural homes and the world outside of Thailand through mediated images and communication circuits. The women keep in touch with their rural families and remit part of their wage as good daughters. At the same time, the hypermodern atmosphere of the city and its intense commercialization influence the life style of the women, who long to acquire a pair of jeans and put on cosmetics to match the imagery of modern women they come across on television and the modern pockets of the city such as restaurants, shopping malls or coffee houses. The migration place thus 'can be seen as open and relational' (Gielis, 2009: 276) and 'acts as a site of multiple identities' (Creswell, 2004: 74). To quote Creswell,

... uniqueness of [such migrant] places is not embedded in the local, rather it is defined by the ways the [migrants in the] place interacts with places and processes beyond (Cresswell, 2004: 74).

According to Ruben Gielis (2009), these situations question the essential one-to-one relation between a place and a social network. Appadurai specifically emphasises the means of communication as being important in the creation of a "more complicated,

disjunct, hybrid sense of local subjectivity” (Appadurai, 2002: 35). This then leads him to the conclusion that “people inhabit ...a complex sense of locality, in which many different empirical scales coexist” (Appadurai, 2002: 35). As a result, a “place is no longer a single locality, but it has become a complex of localities or, in other words, a trans-locality” (Appadurai, 2002: 35).

I argue that the trans-local experience of these women, who live within a cosmopolitan and global city (as migrants), refers to the ability of the women to reach out to other places without corporeally changing location. In Bangalore, Priti (one of the participants in the present study) visits her uncle on weekends and has an *Oriya* lunch (the specific food from her native place), explores the departmental stores and shopping malls, or watches an English movie in the plush theatres with her fiancée. She is also an active member in the Oriya Association formed by her linguistic community members in the city and interacts with them frequently during specific cultural occasions or religious festivals. Kiran’s mother visits her frequently in the city, performs puja in her modern flat to ward off the evils and prepares ‘homely food’ for her, which she might be missing in the cosmopolitan city. At the same time, Kiran loves to dance with her partner in the official parties or on their weekend visits to the discotheques or pubs which can be described as the more westernised places in the city. Massey (1994), writing along similar lines to Appadurai, argues that migrants, who inhabit a global place, rather than their place of origin, can sense a number of places, which can accompany the social networks at the place of their location. In a similar manner, Gielis puts forth that:

This placial turn takes us from an understanding of migrant places as inward-looking and local, to an understanding of migrant places as open and relational (Gielis, 2009: 276).

Appadurai’s conceptualisation of a “virtual neighbourhood” describes some of the important ways in which people experience other places and lifestyles at a single place. For example websites, chat boxes, webcams and video rooms, create groups with common interests, objectives and experiences across geographic borders (de Mul 2002; Graham 1998). Massey’s analysis of Kilburn, a particular district in London, vividly shows how social processes (beyond the local) were acted upon and hence

people could 'meet' each other in one particular place. By pointing to ordinary symbols (Irish newspapers and Indian clothes in a shop window) and describing her own impressions (aircraft flying over the place), whilst walking along the streets of Kilburn, Massey shows us how various networks and systems were present and inter-related, in one place in Northwest London (1994: 154). Drawing on Massey, Smith argues that "cross cutting local, translocal and social practices come together in particular places (Smith, 2001: 5).

In my study, the same circumstances can be observed within a cosmopolitan city, such as Bangalore, where the female migrants experience various social networks which act and intersect with each other. The migration of women from smaller towns to a global city<sup>34</sup> (Sassen 2007) such as Bangalore (Heitzman 1999) implies their active contact with the forces of globalisation and thus, the city marks the "frontier zone or the borderland" (Sassen, 2007: 110) where the local actively interacts with the global. The new economic sectors in the city, which are novel in the form of requisite skills, transnational operations, the establishment of world class infrastructure and westernised work culture, embodies the rationale that globalisation creates "borderlands" (Sassen, 2000: 219) or "in between" spaces (Bhabha 1994) in global cities.

### ***Imagination as a social practice***

While the placial perspective provides an understanding of the city as a confluence of social networks and relationships that transcend the geographical boundaries, the important question that needs to be addressed here is how the subjectivities are

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<sup>34</sup> Global cities are places where global finance is found to be deeply embedded in the national. Global finance, in the form of a set of highly specialised functions or multinational corporations, is actively implemented, serviced and manned in some of the nodal cities in the world, which are highly connected to each other. Thus, there exists a transnational aspect to these global cities, which further creates an infrastructure and social conditions, which are more consistent with global norms and values, rather than only the national ones, within which they are situated and thus, it also create a sense of de-territorialisation, in terms of economic activities, infrastructure, social conditions and cultural manifestations, which are independent of national boundaries. On the other hand and to a great extent, global cities are also the contexts wherein economic globalisation is also nationally embedded. The manpower coming to work in these organisations are locationally and institutionally embedded (Sassen, 2007: 110-112).

constituted in such in-between places? In other words, *how do the women construct their gendered identities in a world of mediated images and discourses?*

I adopt Appadurai's concept of imagination as a social practice to link the cultural processes of globalisation and construction of identities. It proposes that new global space can provide resources which may undermine the meaning of the pre-existing localized norms on the one hand, while on the other, the insecurities of occupation and association with new population may facilitate exertion of the earlier identities and emotional ties. However, the construction of identities in this new global space is not always the outcome of their given lives in the family, around the core values based (exclusively) on the socialization in the early lives. The migrants in their current 'in between' place carve out identities with the employment of imagination as a social practice.

...the new power of imagination in the fabrication of social lives is inescapably tied up with images, ideas and opportunities that come from elsewhere, often moved by the vehicles of mass media... ordinary lives today, [thus] are more often powered not by the givenness of things but by the possibilities that the media (directly or indirectly) suggests are available (Appadurai, 1997: 54-55).

At a broad theoretical level, the discursive formation of global and national in the media influences the imagination of women to carve out new identities. On the other hand, factors such as the ability of the women to reflect upon and adopt such practices in their real lives, are also important for changes in gendered identities.

Wildermuth and Dalsgaard (2006) in their study among the lower class youth in a small Brazilian town suggest that mediated images can be powerful enough to shape the future ambitions of the youth. For example, many of the participants who watched news channels like BBC, CNN, and CNBC wanted to be journalists in future and report on war-fare. Watching television also provided them with resources to dress in a particular way, going out dancing at a disco, playing a particular music and so on, in order to be modern (Wildermuth and Dalsgaard 2006). The study raises certain questions which needs attention in the current research work along with the practices of imagination. For example, one of the participants in the above study emphasized

on the importance of existing opportunities as well as the person's drive to change in the context of translating imagination into real life practices:

People have to want to change. Broadening your views on life and your own possibilities does not change anything if you do not want to change accordingly (*ibid*: 25).

There was also a gap perceived between the imagination of certain respondents and their ability to fulfill those imaginations in real lives. The study cites the case of a student of journalism who was also a single mother and wanted to pursue an academic degree in an university in France. However, like many others in the study, "[she] did not seem fully aware of the work and dedication that her wishful ambitions implied, especially for a person of her economic status" (Wildermuth and Dalsgaard, 2006: 19).

The study emphasises that active and reflective engagement of the individuals with the media images, educational and income level are important to bring in changes in identities and realize one's imagination built upon the media symbols. The female narratives in my research display the influences of multiple gendered discourses through the media. The images involve that of a modern global Indian woman<sup>35</sup> as projected by the national media (Fernandes 2000; Oza 2001) or images through global channels such as star movies, HBO, AXN etc., where sexual images of women are explicit without moral connotations that are outside of 'traditional norms. These channels also forecast a different version of the family system from that of the ideal Indian joint families projected in various Hindi serials in the satellite television and

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<sup>35</sup> Modern Indian woman- Fernandes (2000) argues that in recent times, the protection of the borders of the Indian nation state in a globalizing world is achieved through the preservation of gendered social codes. The emphasis is on the emergence of a hybrid identity, where Indian women are both global and traditional. This nationalist construction of an Indian woman has taken place in response to the global images of women as sexual and consuming agents in the wake of economic liberalization. Rupal Oza describes this hybrid construction of Indian womanhood as 'collapsing of the scales of the nation onto the bodies of the women due to the anxieties of territoriality' (Oza 2006). The global and the modern Indian woman, in this hybrid identity is represented as a modern urban consumer, who practice a global life style based on consumption of global products, while the Indian side of her is embodied in her domesticity and purity of her body.

national media. I argue that the practice of imagination that is created through these mediated images are crucial in articulating self narratives and creating self identities; however it is also important to consider how the women (with specific educational, economic and cultural backgrounds) reflect upon and appropriate the new cultural symbols in their lives.

### **The reflexivity frame**

As discussed in the previous frame, the place of migration as well as electronic mediation creates “border lands” (Sassen, 2007: 110) and “global space of flow’ (Appadurai 1997) where multiple cultural forms and social networks cut across each other. My data demonstrate the post-migratory lives of the women in Bangalore, as a space, between their family and culture of origin and the new world of work and city. On the one hand they are the daughters from middle class families, while in the other, they are migrants with career aspirations. The world of images they come across in call centres and the cosmopolitan city provides the basis of their new lives, while their socialisation in the families and ties with their place of origin are still an integral part of their lives. I focus here to evolve a theoretical frame that will explain the constructions of gendered identities of the women in my study (rooted in various traditional and modern spheres) as they move across different fields of action such as family, work place and their city life.

In the first section of the following discussion, I critically review research studies which focus on the construction of gendered identities as a result of migratory experiences. These new experiences accrue as the migrants inhabit a space between the so called traditional familial sphere and modern city life. The third section discusses the frame on reflexivity that helps to explain emergence of gendered identities, as the women inhabit the space between and make their own choices of living.

### ***Construction of migrant gendered subjectivities in the ‘space between’***

According to De Ruijter “migrants act, take decisions and evolve identities while embedded in social networks which might bind them with two or more places and culture at the same time” (De Ruijter, 2001: 19). The migrant’s incorporation into a

new land and transnational connections to an outside world, or to networks of family or persons who share similar regional, caste or religious background, reinforce each other. Whilst many studies emphasise the increasing opportunities in global spaces, through the flow of capital, resources, cultural forms etc, (Faist 2000; Levitt 2001), feminist critics draws attention to both the experiences of women and the burdens borne by them, along with opportunities.

The experience of exclusion from the host society and a denigration of their status within the host society, led female Filipina domestic workers in the city, to interface with multiple worlds comprising variable rules and mean (Huang *et al.*, 2000). The women in Huang's study thus invoked their status within their homeland, such as being educated and being a landowner and a decent woman, in order to restore their dignity and identity. The experience of downward mobility, within the new place, invoked the idea of their native place being a location of positive value and status (Huang *et al.*, 2000). This position is reinforced in several other studies, where the effects of the local gendered hierarchy and roles at the place of origin of the migrants influenced identity construction amongst the female migrants, rather than them being overturned in the place of migration. In Grewals's study among Indian female immigrants in America, the females constantly referred themselves to multiple orientation points, such as being dutiful daughters, wives, mothers and guardians of their family honour, as defined by traditional culture (Grewal 2005).

Another strand of research literature, on migration from rural to urban areas, from a political and economic perspective, has similarly revealed that a great deal of the movements was circular, and they did not involve only one-way movement. The majority of migrants maintained links with their place of origin and thus they constructed their migration as a series of exchanges between places (Bremner 1996; Locke *et al.*, 2000). In these cases, migration also seem to be mediated through the households and influenced by the social networks of the migrants at both the place of origin and place of migration. Battistella (2003) and Brettell (2000) contend that in such cases the migrants could not uproot themselves from their households completely, and that decisions and opportunities to migrate were influenced by social networks, gender power relationships and household resources, which were then

deployed in order that the migration process took place. These linkages were also facilitated by the current phase of globalisation, where the means of communication and transportation rendered the division between rural/urban and local/global more elusive.

Thus these increased intensity of interactions, between the local and global, in the lives of migrants has also increased the complexity for rural / urban mobility studies. Negotiation with patriarchy has emerged as one important dynamic, which remains to be explored in such in-between lives of migrants, including how it affects the identities of migrant women who are part of both the rural and urban networks. The placial perspective, as discussed previously, provides one of the important lenses, through which we could see migrants' lives as a meeting place of social networks and also as a site where migrants could reach out to other places: and where networks could offer a deep insight into the matrix of gendered values, norms and power relationships, within the everyday lives of women. The question, which bears significant relevance to my research, is as follows: *How do such places affect the gendered identities of women, who inhabit such in between places, in the course of their migration?*

Mary Beth Mills's (1997), study of rural women in Thailand, who had migrated to the global city of Bangkok, provides a useful framework, with which to conceptualise the complex interaction between the local and the global and how it shapes the construction of identities of the migrants. Her analysis draws attention to the significance of both local and global in giving rise to multiple potential selves amongst the women. Migration amongst the rural women has been encouraged through the images of consumption brought into the villages by friends or cousins returning from the city and whose glamorous and up-to-date lifestyles lured these rural women. The women in the place of migration became part of the commodity culture and they experienced new technologies of representation, such as television and other forms of mass media, which created their aspirations to be modern and progressive, which was defined in terms of new forms of consumption. The city provided opportunities for them to engage in the construction of an identity based on consumption practices such as visiting a restaurant, dressing up, rushing down the city pavements with a take-away coffee etc., which were more compatible with the dominant images of modern life available in the city. This gave

rise to imagined possibilities of identities, or what Moore calls the “fantasies of Identity”: that is “ideas about the kind of person one would like to be and the sort of person one would like to be seen by others” (1994: 66). By relating the various material realities in the lives of these women, such as a low level of education, low wages and long hours of work, Mills is able to generate an explanation of how identities are constructed, as symbolic discourses were mediated in the material lives of the women. This mediation allowed the women to participate in the consumption culture in *limited ways*, such as watching television and popular movies, going to departmental stores and parks (and similar sites of modernity), which cost less money. Thus, the significance of economic variables is highlighted, in addition to the images of modernity, which affected the lives of these women.

On the other hand, the realities of modern lives in the city made it essential for the women in her study to maintain ties with their rural families, which offered them long term security, in terms of a future marriage and assistance with exigencies, during their short term contractual employment in the city. This study emphasises the agency of women who consciously negotiated between various aspects of their lives, which were embedded in their rural homes and also the city where they worked. It is also underscored that global discourses are mediated through the material lives of these women and also rooted in families, traditions etc, around which individuals re-work or re-fashion their identities. In short, the findings of the study challenge the emergence of a post modern identity, in the context of creation of liberating possibilities in a global city.

In contrast to viewpoints which assume the “self as a mere spectator, watching endless images of mass culture ... or the self that [only] receives information is lifeless, bored, drained and atomized” (Baudrillard, 2002 cited in Elliott, 2007: 150), we could obtain a sense of the dynamic self, which negotiates between the multiple representations and discourses available, within a subject’s life. In this context, it can be suggested that the images of a modern Indian woman is gaining a great deal of momentum within academic circles, as were the assumptions of new symbols of modernity in the media, such as television serials, female orientated magazines and advertising campaigns (Oza 2001; Parameswarn 2004; Rajagopal 2002; Thapan 2004).

However, to what extent this image of a modern woman is practiced or visible in the 'real' lives of women remains mostly unaddressed, within current academic literature. To effectively understand the realm of interactions between the discursive images of the modern Indian woman, which is available in the Indian context and the real lives of women, who are exposed to such cultural images, it is crucial for sociologists to ask questions about the material processes by which such images are incorporated/challenged, within the real lives of women. Material processes imply the significance of the economic, educational, cultural aspects of the place of origin, families that influence the ability of the subject to engage with the new contexts and influences in life. It is the emphasis on these ground realities that is central in the current study, in order to understand the complexity of images/person/context interactions and how they shape gendered identities. According to the view points of the material feminists, changes in identities are more a result of the conflicting roles and practices at ground level, than just the exposure to ideas and images, at a discursive level. Whilst the latter is important, the opportunities or constraints, which rendered such discursive notions, translated into real life practices /material practices, has helped to explain the embodiment, disembodiment and re-embodiment of certain key notions of gender identity.

Singh and Pandey (2005), in their study on the nature of employment of women in call centres in India, highlight how social constraints such as appropriate marital age and demands of a family life (where women shoulder the majority of household responsibilities) prevented married women continuing their work in night shift jobs and/or rising to higher positions within the organisations. This study provided an insight into how the realms of modernity and tradition interacted in the lives of these women. In (re)emphasising such viewpoints, I move away from the stereotypical constructs of gender and sexuality which offers an understanding of this change in terms of binary constructions, such as a housewife/career woman, subjugation/emancipation and modernity/traditional etc. The question that arises, within the context of my research, is as follows: *What challenges does a woman face with respect to her gendered identity, as she simultaneously remains a dutiful daughter, embedded in the patriarchal values of her family, in addition to aspiring to*

*be a professional worker in a modern work place?* Other studies have drawn attention towards the ambivalences and conflicts which are the self experiences of migrants in these in-between places (Huang et al. 2000; Sarausad 2003). These ambivalences arose on the one hand from the desire to be independent and to extricate oneself from the moral obligation of sending remittances home, and on the other hand the need to fulfill the obligations expected from the women. The belief that identity is “already an accomplished fact” has been usurped by the view that identity is “a production in such in-between places, which is never complete, always in process...” (Hall, 1995: 34).

The challenge posed to the women in my study, who are in a new place, is in the form of a downward mobility and their labelling as outsiders or migrants. Research studies by Sarausad (2003) and Resurreccion (2005) also suggest similar findings. These studies further reveal that the migrant women (in such cases) try to anchor their identities to traditional gender stereotypes, as a positive frame of reference. It also motivates them to invest in social networks, such as being part of associations based on shared language, region etc. and help their relatives by sending remittances or bringing back gifts, when they travel back home. It helps them to sustain their links with their household of origin, within the rural area or town, from which they could derive material and symbolic benefits, during a period of crisis (P: 69).

Certain research studies have suggested the “layeredness of gendered identities” in such contexts, where the migrant women have had to nurture multiple identities in the in-between places. While consumption practices provide an important resource for acquisition of a modern persona in the lives of the women (in my study) as many of the migration studies (Mills 1997; Salo 2003; Sarausad 2003; Spronk 2009) suggest, the process of identity construction displays a much more complex process than many of the studies discussed above. For example Spronk (2007) in case of the young Nairobi professionals, describes a process of self construction through a Foucauldian lens of “technologies of the self”. To say that the female agents are reflexive enough to judge and craft selves out of these various choices is to comply with the erroneous assumption that that ‘gender identity is a matter of self reflection — and to ignore the deep rootedness of gender identity, in any particular socio-historical context’.

Based on the narratives in my study, I propose a frame which blends the various facets of the lives of the females in my study. These involve an expansion of horizon of their experiences, as well as life choices available to them, as a result of their imaginative practices (that goes beyond the notions of familial respectability) in the city and the work place. The other aspect includes the familial ties and influences with certain embodied and pre-reflexive aspects of gendered identities. The frame that evolves to bring together both these above experiences, addresses the question - *how do the familial 'habitus' of the women with certain embodied predispositions, interact with this expanding field of opportunities and life style choices that transcends their locations within the family and the national geographic boundaries?*

### ***Young women and reflexive agency***

The emphasis in this section is on feminist accounts of reflexive agency which emerges within a global space of flow<sup>36</sup>, where the dispositions provided by the "habitus"<sup>37</sup>, does not provide the inner sense of practical mastery over the situation. Whilst Bourdieu foresaw the compatibility of the habitus and the field in most situations, it is argued that he also proposes the 'emergence of discordant situations and experiences, where the field and the habitus do not match each other' (Wacquant, 2006: 9) .

The lives of the women in my study, within the global space of flows, represent a context, where there was some ambivalence within the nature of the dispositions acquired in the habitus and the dynamics of the new field of action<sup>38</sup>. I define the

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<sup>36</sup> Global space of flows - I use this connotation advocated by Arjun Appadurai (1997) to indicate the socio-cultural context of the city of Bangalore. The city at present as discussed in chapter-one is undergoing several changes due to the boost in the information technology sector. In addition to entry of a number of multinational companies, the cultural landscape of the city also sees numerous cultural influences through new consumption patterns, food habits, media images etc.

<sup>37</sup> As discussed in the first frame in this chapter, "Habitus refers to the principle of generating and structuring practices and representations, subsequently producing identity through particular dispositions and structures of perception which are associated with a sensory environment" (Asklund, 2007: 240).

<sup>38</sup> Field of action: Following Pierre Bourdieu's terminology of 'field', in the present study, the small native towns of the participating women, transnational call centres and the cosmopolitan city are defined as three different fields of action. Each of these spheres has its own logic operation and indicates specific forms of economic, socio-cultural behaviour to the inhabitants.

global city and the transnational work space in the international call centres as the new fields of action within the post-migratory lives of these women. As a field, the post-migratory space (the global city and the work place) can be conceived as the social arena where the women engage in securing a desirable salary (economic capital), consumption practices or lifestyle (cultural goods) and prestige and status (symbolic capital). The novelty of this field of action is displayed in a new logic of social behaviour and appropriateness, which is related to gender practices and definitions of what is 'respectable' or 'not so respectable'. I argue here that the migration of these women, into a context of global flows, creates varying degrees of correspondence between the habitus and the field. Such a situation arises as a result of the de-traditionalisation of certain gender norms, within the economic field of action: represented by the transnational call centres, cultural field of action embodied in the transnational call centres and Bangalore, the cosmopolitan city.

In many of the current writings, the de-traditionalisation of gender norms has been described as consequent upon the feminisation of the public sphere. This feminisation of the public sphere has been expressed in terms of there being more opportunities for women in the public sphere, which is in contrast to the patriarchy practised in their homes (Bryant 1995). In addition, there has been an increased importance of femininity, which has been seen as a cultural capital in the labour market (Lovell 2000; Illouz 1997). McNay, also speaks of the "transposition of a feminine habitus into the public sphere, which clashes with the conventional notions of femininity and gives rise to a reflexive stance on the part of the women towards the earlier gender identity" (1999: 109). Lisa Adkins refers this as the "restructuring of the gender regimes, particularly in regard to the public sphere... especially in the movements of women into professional and high status occupations previously coded as masculine" (Adkins, 2003: 27). The question that I raise here, is, *how are these changes in other fields of action affecting the domestic field, or the familial cultural sphere which has been central in construction of "gendered habitus" of the women during early childhood?*

### ***Lois McNay's conceptualisation of reflexivity within the limits of habitus***

In my study, the young women remain rooted in several places, social processes or networks at the same time. They are daughters in the families, workers in the transnational call centres and part of the global space of flow in the city as migrants. The simultaneous embeddedness in varying social fields, according to Lois McNay (1999), is crucial in giving rise to a form of,

“...reflexive awareness based on distanciation provoked by the conflict and social tensions of social forces operating within and across fields. It is not an evenly generalized capacity of subjects living in a de-traditionalised era but arises unevenly from their embeddedness within differing sets of power relations” (McNay, 1999: 22).

This proposition of McNay differs from the accounts of intentional agency that are found in the work of reflexive modernisation theorists and the conceptualisation of radical reflexivity. Ulrich Beck sums up the thrust of this framework as follows:

The more the societies are modernized the more the agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on their social conditions of their existence and change them accordingly (Beck, 1992 *cited in* McNay, 1999: 22).

Such accounts of agency, in the era of globalisation, has offered a disembedded and disembodied notion of the subject, where changes are related more to thinking consciousness, rather than the material aspects of life (Adkins, 2003; McNay, 2000; McNay, 1999). For example, factors such as educational and economic background of the subjects and cultural context of their place of origin have been highlighted as important to mediate the exposure to external influences.

For McNay, reflexivity does not imply the universal capacity of the subjects, to objectively reflect upon the external world and bring in changes in their identity. She emphasises the notion of reflexivity as accounting for change, where a conscious subject position emerges, on occasions, unevenly, in some aspects of life. The changes in the external world, its images, symbols and discourses of gender are not enough to give rise to changes in gendered identities of women who are subjected to them. Some aspects of gendered identities which are deeply entrenched, (for example,

maternal instincts), which, may escape reflexive monitoring, even in the face of rapid changes in the life style. The views of Lois McNay reinforce the gendered identities being rooted in the habitus of the women, where gendered dispositions operate independently of individual consciousness or are 'deeply entrenched and pre-reflexive' (McNay 1999).

The acquisition of gendered identity does not pass through consciousness; it is not memorized but enacted at a pre-reflexive level. At the same time, bodily dispositions are not simply mechanically learned but lived as a form of practical mimesis. Thus the changes that may be effected in gendered identities in such situations are differentiated and uneven (McNay, 1999: 103).

Adkins (2004), voices similar concerns relating to changes in aspects of gender, as she argues that, whilst women might enter unconventional forms of work in the public sphere, these changes in their economic sphere might not translate directly into other spheres of their life. This also brings in Appadurai's contention on the disjunctured flow of various dimensions of globalisation and its uneven impact on the economic, cultural and ideological aspects of human life (1997: 33). McNay's proposition, which puts forward women's development of a form of reflexive awareness within the global space of flows, is based on the idea of a 'mismatch between the habitus and the field' (1999: 107). The specific case of entry of women into traditionally non-feminine sphere of action is cited as one such case where the habitus will not match the field and thus give rise to reflexivity. Bryant (1995) provides the example of such a mismatch in the following way:

Patriarchy [exists] at home but, school and university offers girls and women opportunities (Bryant, 1995 *cited in* Adkins: 31).

Following these contentions, I would theorise that the lives of these women in the city reflect various dimensions of change and continuity, at the same time. Whilst their entry into an unconventional form of work, within the transnational call centre, does provide them with material power and the symbols of alternative notions of gender norms and values, it may not translate uniformly to the sphere of embodied values and norms. However, in a space of flows, where there is no single way of having a united view of the world, the women experience conflicting notions of respectability, within

the realm of gendered values and practices. Against the backdrop of this new social milieu and the unfamiliar terrain of gendered values and practices, there are some challenges that accrue to the dispositions of the habitus. The dissonance between the habitus and the new objective conditions, as symbolised in the global flow of space, leads to experiences such as the collapse and modification of meanings and emergence of alternative practices. In this study, based on my data, I propose the emergence of a post colonial habitus based on the conceptualisation of an “uneven transformation of gender identities” (McNay 1999: 103) in the event of continuance of both traditional and modern elements in the lives of the women. The uneven nature of the transformation of gender relationships illustrated Bourdieu’s claim that the “habitus continues to work long after the objective conditions of its emergence have been dislodged” (Bourdieu 1990b: 13 *cited in* McNay, 1999: 103). I would argue that this varying relationship, between the new global space and the familial habitus, can be explained here through the process of an emergence of a “post colonial habitus”, as advocated by Meekashi Thapan (2004), who uses this concept to capture:

...specific historical and social conditions that shape habitus in diverse and particular ways through familial relations, schooling practices and other modalities of social and public domain. [It also includes] the possibilities of resistance and transformation as these are embedded in the nature of habitus itself (Thapan, 2004: 412).

## **Conclusion**

In this study, I contend that the formation of the gendered identities of these women, against the backdrop of a changing socio-cultural context, may not be understood in terms of the binaries of traditional/modern/familial or the outer realm of the work place. The simultaneous and interface of various traditional and modern forces in the lives of the women in my study can be explained on the basis of the various theoretical ideas that I have pulled together in the three frames discussed in this chapter. Now that I have certain theoretical frames in place, which can render the data collected during the field work with a sociological meaning, I shall discuss in Chapter 3, the research methods and writing styles that I have adopted in the thesis. I

discuss my intention to bring the readers closer to the lives of my participants as acting human beings, rather than just sources of information.

## Chapter Three

### Engaging with the field Site

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#### Introduction

There were three research objectives that followed from my aim to explore the 'changing gendered identities of the young women in my study, as they migrated from their family homes to the city'. Firstly, it was crucial to understand the experiences of the women as daughters in their middle class families. I wanted to have an insight into the norms, values and the socialising practices in the families, as well as the lived experiences that marked the daily lives my participants. Secondly, as employees in transnational call centres, these women were part of a peer-subculture that was dominated by the so called American cultural elements. I wanted to delve into this subculture and explore how the women participated in it. Lastly, the new experiences of consumption, freedom of movement and interaction of the women with their peers in the city formed a realm, where, for me (as a researcher) 'being-in-the women's world' (Hammersely and Atkinson 1995) was vital to observe the influences of these new cultural elements in their lives.

The emphasis on '*embodiment*' as *central*<sup>39</sup> to the formation of gendered identities of my participants also guided the research in specific ways. It required a deep sense of inter- subjectivity or a close engagement with the women to comprehend how their gendered identities are constituted in the realm of family. My aim was to explore *how / if these familial influences still remained pivotal in the self perception of the women after they migrated to the city which broaden the horizon of their experiences.*

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<sup>39</sup> In this context, I reiterate that I adopt a Bourdieusian notion of 'embodiment' as crucial to the formation of gendered identities of the women in my study. In this theoretical scheme, certain aspects of identities are neither acquired nor displayed in a conscious manner. These facets of identities become deeply rooted in the gendered bodies as form of second nature through the early experiences or what Bourdieu (1992), calls as the primary socialisation in the families.

## **Structure of the chapter**

The first section in this chapter involves detailed discussions on the two field trips that I had undertaken to the city of Bangalore during the course of my research. The first trip was a short one and lasted for four months. I interviewed a range of employees in order to understand the nature of employment in transnational call centres and the prevalent work culture. The total number of interviews conducted during this period was 18.

The second trip lasted for a longer period of seven months. During this period, I conducted participant observation in two transnational call centres and interviewed thirteen female call centre employees. I also discuss how I recruited the participants for my study and obtained permission to carry out participant observation during the first field trip. In the second section of the chapter, there are discussions on the mode of coding and analysis of the data collected, issues of reliability, validity and maintaining confidentiality of the participants from an ethical point of view. Here, I begin with the initial conception of the project, followed by the details of the research process carried out during the two field visits to Bangalore.

## **Project Beginnings**

During preliminary meetings with my supervisors, the focus of the project was on an ethnographic study of the lives of women who were employed in international call centres. The ambivalences surrounding the portrayal of this group of employed women, as posing challenges to the gendered values of a traditional society and harbingers of westernisation, in terms of their sexual practices and life style, pervaded our discussions. We decided that I should make an initial field trip to Bangalore, in order to decide on future methodological considerations. The first exploratory trip to Bangalore helped me to ascertain the possibilities of making my project 'take flight', both in terms of the research objectives that I had in mind, and seeking access or recruiting participants in the field. I intended to formulate my research objectives, based on this pilot study, where I would talk to the managers, supervisors, trainers and employees about their experiences of work in this industry and also the cultural changes they had experienced.

### ***The First field trip (January - April 2007)***

As I began my fieldwork, I had no absolute idea where this phase of research would lead. The open ended approach to explore the field seemed the most natural way to proceed. At this early stage of my research, I was curious about the nature of call centre employment and the night shifts and wanted to learn as much as I could about the social world of call centre employees. With this objective, in the first few days I was simply contented to hang out, observe and keep notes. The following field note represents the beginning of my journey to develop a general understanding of the trans-national call centres that functioned in Bangalore.

***10<sup>th</sup> January, 2007***

*I travelled for nearly two hours in an auto from the place where I stayed in Bangalore, to reach M. It was peak traffic hours; I was hot and sweaty after passing through the stream of dust and smoke on the roads in the city. As I entered the campus of M at Bannerghata Road, the guard asked me to sign the entry register. I was not stopped as it was a day for the walk-in-interviews in the organisation. I was nervous and apprehensive as I slowly walked down the granite pebbled path to enter the reception area. There were almost 40 young men and women who gathered in the lobby for the interview. Most of the women interviewees were young and seemed to be in their late teens or early twenties. Some of the young men looked different with their pierced ears and pony tails. Some of them were busy speaking to their mobile phones in the lobby while waiting for an interview call. Few queued up at the city bank ATM in the front; I sat on one of the black leather sofas in the reception area and tried to relax in the air conditioned lobby after the strenuous journey in the bumpy roads of Bannerghata Road where the call centre was located.*

Apart from the one narrated above, I visited several transnational call centres, hung out in the lobby and spoke to several managers, supervisors, trainers and customer service executives. While some of these conversations were casual and lasted for few minutes (10 -15 minutes), I also conducted several formal open ended interviews to establish myself as a researcher, deal with the issues of getting into a transnational call

centre and evolve my research question. I conducted 18 interviews during this period and each interview lasted for 45 minutes to 1 hour in duration. The topics discussed in the interviews covered areas such as the structure and function of call centres; performance during night shifts; physical and mental concerns of the employees associated with night shifts; and the employees' perceptions, relating to the nature of cultural changes in the industry. These interviews clarified some of my initial queries and they helped me to formulate my research objectives more precisely. For example, one of the common responses from many of the trainers and team leaders was in respect to employees loss of (outside the call centre) social life due to the night shifts. To quote one of the team leaders, who worked the 'graveyard' night shifts<sup>40</sup>:

India sleeps when we get up; when we go back to work, India goes back to sleep. When we come home, everyone else is awake and active. It's hard to be part of normal family activities when you work in the night shift. I used to take my mom for shopping or go to my sister's place, who stays nearby and play with her kids, chat with my *jiju* [brother-in-law]. I have not seen them for ages since my late night job. On weekends I am too tired to go out and on week days I sleep till late mornings. Sometimes my nephews and nieces complain; my sister tries to explain about my work and ask them not to disturb me. Mom lets me have a good sleep during the day so that I am not sick. I have a supportive family. They make me survive the night shift.

This aspect of the lives of the executives who worked the night shifts and remain away from the family members (in spite of being physically present at home) made me frame one of my research objectives — where I wanted to explore the aspects of their new social life, such as peer groups, interactions amongst colleagues both inside and outside of work place and the development of personal relationships which were formed inside the call centres. Whilst it was insightful to listen to people who worked

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<sup>40</sup> In this shift, the agents (or the customer service executives) take calls from 12 am to 8 am, in the morning. In the course of the interviews I also came across the 'super graveyard shift' which is usually from 3 am -11 am in the morning. Some of the participants found it extremely difficult to cope with this super graveyard shift in the beginning of their career at international call centres.

in such organisations and thus gain an overview about call centres, I was also motivated to obtain an “insider’s view” (Bradbury 1998) of call centres and the prevailing culture within that industry. During an interview with one of the consultants, who had been associated with the industry for the past fifteen years, it came to the surface that call centres had shifted their recruitment strategy and they now hired more high school students. It was also part of their aim to start training young students from their final year of the school, so that these students became proficient in speaking ‘good American English’, which was an entry requirement for gaining a position at a call centre. The consultant voiced his concern over this, since the young age of these school-leavers, coupled with the attractive salary offered by the call centres, might lead to more ‘westernisation’ among their employees. Such discussions brought forth the importance of exploring the social life; future life plans concerning marriage; higher education; consumption patterns; and sexual behaviour of the participants, in order to gain insights into the changes that has occurred (and continues to occur) at the intersection of their personal and work lives.

Thus the first field trip, in many ways, contributed to the background preparation for my research. I consulted with a broad range of academic literature across many disciplines, in addition to discussing the general area of call centre employment, remuneration, and lifestyle with experienced trainers, supervisors and the vice-presidents of various international call centres. During this trip, I also visited various trans-national call centres in Bangalore and I obtained permission from their human resource departments to place flyers (see Appendix-I) on the notice boards of these organisations, in order to seek voluntary participation of women working in call centres. The flyer mentioned that I was looking for female participants, who had at least four years of work experience in call centres and who had stayed on their own in the city. I also left information sheets (see Appendix-V) in the lobbies to ensure a wide circulation of information amongst the employees. At the beginning of this process, the long wait for responses from interested women prompted me to revise my plan for placing flyers only in call centres. I began visiting women’s hostels and paying guest accommodation, in Kormongla, Jaynagar, JP Nagar, which were the places near to the electronic city and the central part of Bangalore, where many of the trans-national call

centres were located. This latter means of approaching women proved more fruitful. Many of the women, who became part of this project, later expressed that they felt free to respond to me within an informal and non-threatening environment, rather than at their work places. In addition to these two means of seeking voluntary participation, I also visited recruiting agencies in MG Road, Kormongla, where 'walk-in' interviews are conducted for recruitment in various call centres. With the attrition level close to 33% (NASSCOM 2006), these agencies organise interviews almost every day, with the highest number of interviews being conducted during the weekends. One of the consultants suggested that I should place flyers in some of these agencies, since many of the candidates who come to these agencies, have already worked in various call centres in the city. With the demand for roles in customer service being high, the experienced ones in the sector attempt to 'switch' jobs, in order to gain more lucrative salary offers or roles within other companies. The consultant introduced me to some of the women, who had been working in transnational call centres for some time. It was helpful to talk to them, since two of my research participants Peyashi<sup>41</sup> and Tanima were recruited through these acquaintances. The following extract from my field diary describes how I met Tanima, one of the female participants in the study at one of the recruiting agencies in Bangalore.

***April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007***

*I met Tanima today at the agency. Sheila, the consultant introduced me to her. T says she is unhappy about her job at X, a transnational call centre (TNCC) and wants to change over to Y, another TNCC. She wants an increase in the salary and a promotion. According to her, her hard work at X is not recognized. She is in the same role since last 2 years and has been drawing the same salary. I pass on the information sheet to her; she folds the paper neatly and slips it inside her hand back. "I shall call you. Let this interview be over".*

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<sup>41</sup> I have used pseudonyms for each of my participants to maintain their confidentiality

Whilst the thirteen (13) women I interviewed came from different states in India and belonged to different castes, they all belonged to an age group of 19-25 and showed similarity with respect their English speaking abilities and educational levels. I came to know seven of my participants through their response to the flyers and the rest six were recruited through a form of snow-ball sampling. While I conducted 13 narrative interviews with the young women, four women did not want to be part of the research for various reasons at a later stage. I decided not to include those narratives in the thesis, because of my own ethical commitments as a researcher.

### ***Issues of reliability and validity***

The method of purposive theoretical sampling is more suitable for qualitative methods as it allows for selection of participants in accordance to the conceptual categories used in the research and the nature of data required answering the research question (Tolich and Davidson 2004). I had certain predefined criteria to recruit my participants in order to study the long term impacts of migration and employment on the lives of the women. Therefore, I wanted to interview women who had at least four years of work experience in international call centres in Bangalore. Thus, the methods used for the selection of participants in my study, fell under the category of 'purposive sampling' (Creswell 2007).

The selection of participants, in the study, was voluntary and it involved a process of self selection. Whilst I attempted to include a more representative sample, by inviting participation from various trans-national call centres in Bangalore, I actually received more responses from the two call centres where I conducted my participant observation. I also recruited some of my interviewees through 'purposive snowball sampling', by drawing on existing contacts I had already established in the field. All my participants (but two) were selected through this snow ball sampling. The adequacy of a sample was revealed through consistent repetition of the interview themes, which is also termed 'saturation of qualitative data' or 'interview themes' (Rowles and Reinharz 1988). As suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003), the exercise of theory building and thematic representation of data require fewer numbers of participants, compared to other models such as testing of hypothesis. In the context of my research, I began to see data saturation after eight to nine interviews. However, I continued to collect the

narratives until I had accumulated thirteen interviews with these women. Whilst the women I have interviewed represents the average demographic age of the women (20-25 years) working in the call centres, the results might be skewed, in terms of the non-recruitment of participants from many different call centres. The majority of my participants (five) came from the two call centres, where I have conducted my participant observations. The other four participants came from three other transnational call centres. However, these five women also had experience of working in different transnational call centres, (since they had switched jobs) and thus, they could draw on their variable experiences, across different call centres.

Apart from the narrative interviews, I also observed the nature of call centre work and lives of call centre workers in two transnational call centres. In the following section, I describe the period spent in the field, in search of gaining access to these call centres for conducting participant observation.

### **Getting in:**

Wolcott (1990) emphasises that the research questions play a significant role in determining the kind of fieldwork technique that shall be used in the field. My research agenda for learning more about the lives of women in call centres guided me towards observing the participants in their work places. The aim was to gain an understanding of the cultural context of their work place and to sit through their training programmes which required the employees to significantly reduce or eliminate the influence of their mother tongue and to adopt the accent of their clients. They were also required to use a different name, in addition to joining in the team building activities and night shifts, all of which were new norms of work for these young women. Participant observation is also one of the core methodologies of ethnography that requires researchers to simultaneously observe and participate (Hume 2004; Jhonson 2006; Whyte 1984). The rationale of this approach is that:

“by being there” and actively taking part in the interactions at hand, the researcher can come closer to experiencing and understanding the insiders point of view (Hume & Murlock, 2004: xi).

This method has different meanings for researchers, depending on the nature and the objective of the research (Jhonson *et al.*, 2006: 113). For example, Salisbury (1976) notes that the researcher needs to completely immerse him/ herself in the daily lives of the people under study, but without active participation. Nelson (1969) on the other hand believes in full participation, in contrast to the passive participation implied by Salisbury. Combining the best of both approaches I devised my own method of being a participant observer. The degree of participation depended on the context and the demands of multiple situations, where (occasionally) I had to withdraw from being an active participant — or completely immerse myself in the setting. I was able to establish a better rapport and be less conspicuous when I participated actively in my role as a customer service executive, within two trans-national call centres.

### ***Issues in gaining access to transnational call centres for conducting participant observation***

In order to understand the cultural context of call centres and to participate in some of the work processes, I intended to seek permission for conducting participant observation in two international call centres in Bangalore. This process involved the preparation of a carefully drafted letter (see Appendix-II) to the manager/ vice president of the transnational call centre where, I asked for permission to access their organisation. The letter explained the research objectives and what participant observation in the organisation would involve, in addition to the ethical aspects of the research. With my strong commitment to ensure the confidentiality of the organisations, where I would carry out my observations, I was confident of gaining access, when I posted these letters and information sheets for manager (see Appendix-III) to the senior executives of these two call centres. This however did not quite work out as I anticipated. The discussion, which is presented in the following section, is an attempt to “explicitly demystify fieldwork or participant-observation by showing how the technique is practiced in the field” (Van Maanen, 1988: 73). My comments may be understood as ‘confessional tales’ (*ibid*, 1988)

where the field worker provides stories of infiltration, fables of fieldwork rapport, mini-melodramas of hardships endured [and overcome] and accounts

of [what] field work did to the fieldworker are prominent features of confession (Van Mannen, 1988: 73).

Prior to leaving for the field, I anticipated that obtaining permission to conduct a research project would be a straightforward task. I intended to select the organisations and post my drafted letter, relating to the field research, to the gate keepers<sup>42</sup> (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) in order to solicit their consent, gain approval, and then get started. I reached Bangalore in early January and I spent the first few days collecting information about various trans-national call centres in Bangalore, including their locations and other details. I also talked to some of my friends in the city and attempted to connect with people who worked in those call centres. I wrote e-mails to the human resource executives and vice-presidents of those organisations and I personally visited nine transnational call centres in Bangalore to seek appointments with some of the country's managers, in order to be able to ask for permission to undertake my observations. The first two weeks were disappointing and I only encountered vague promises, switched off mobiles and negative email replies. I present one such instance from my field diary as below:

**19<sup>th</sup> March, 2007**

*I spoke to Chitra today for the fourth time. She tells me that it might take some more time before she can organize a meeting for me with her vice president. In our first meeting, she has informed me that the permission to do any kind of research in their call centre has to come from the VP. I made a call to Poonam, the head of human resource cell at 'T'. She did not lift the phone; I left a message for her, requesting to let me know, if I could have an appointment with their country manager. I received no message or a return call from her... I am losing hope; I hardly have anytime left before I fly back to New Zealand*

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<sup>42</sup> The gatekeeper is the initial contact for the researcher and s/he leads the researcher to other participants. The researcher needs to provide detailed information about the study, to the gate keepers, such as why the site has been chosen for the study, how much time will be spent on the research and how the research will be reported. For detailed discussion on this topic, see Bogdan and Biklen (1992).

This was the period when I took comfort in statements, such as “gaining access to a social setting can be one of the key yet most difficult steps in ethnography” (Bryman, 2004: 294). I had limited time for my first field trip: The shape and feasibility of my doctoral project completely depended on the work undertaken during this phase. I was becoming frustrated with non-responses from the top executives — and promises that were certainly not promising enough. In the meantime, I had to accompany one of my friends to her interview with an agency which only dealt with call centre jobs. Apart from supporting my friend, I was also driven by a desire to experience the recruitment process first hand and to talk to some of the aspirants who wanted to join these call centres. The agency was located in one of the busiest commercial buildings (Manipal Centre) in Mahatma Gandhi Road and their recruitment service covered the majority of the international call centres in the country (such as, Accenture, IBM, Infosys, HP and Dell). Since I wanted to attend one of the interviews, I quickly registered myself with Yr.com, which is the largest online job website in India and I indicated my preferences for a role as a customer service executive.

Whilst nothing was happening for me as a researcher, (in relation to the information sheets I had placed at various locations and the carefully drafted letters I had sent to the heads of these organisations) it was exciting to receive at least ten telephone calls from the agency, for job interviews regarding call centre position, during the first week of completing my registration with them. The recruiters asked me why I wanted to work in a call centre, my qualification and if I had any previous work experience in call centres. The salary for call centre agents is dependent on their work experience.<sup>43</sup> Some of the personnel in the recruiting agencies even assured me that they could provide a ‘false experience, one year certificate’ in case I was a fresh woman. I also received a call from another young female job agent, from the Manipal centre, who asked me to come for an interview at the weekend as they had all the internationally

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<sup>43</sup> A complete freshman/woman (without any work experience) would receive a lower remuneration than someone with experience, for the same type of work. This is due to the fact that the companies have to invest in voice and accent and language training for a fresher woman, whereas an experienced agent would start to take calls immediately.

reputed companies coming over for recruitment during the weekends. The reason for the vacancies, as reported to me by a person working for the recruitment agency “was the high turnover in the industry coupled with the new demands”. A preferred candidate for the role of customer service executive was one who had a 10+2<sup>44</sup> pass certificate, good communication skills and was under 25 years of age. Whilst these visits to the recruitment agencies were one way of becoming familiar with the sector, I also continued (at the same time) with my efforts to gain permission to make observation within the call centres.

Over the following weeks, I again contacted the human resource executives in the call centres, in order to make an appointment with their vice-president or a manager. Many times, I would be asked to call the following week, since they were extremely busy that week, but when I called the next week, I was again told that they were too preoccupied with the budget meeting for the coming year to meet me.

Eventually I asked a friend, who had worked as a trainer and a consultant, for different call centres, to introduce me to some managers and vice-presidents. She gave me the telephone numbers of few senior executives and advised me to call them and mention her name. Her reference worked for me and I was able to make an appointment with one of the country managers of Comet<sup>45</sup>, on my first call. I met him just after he had returned from a trip to Australia (he was head of the Asia Pacific division of the organisation) and I handed over my information sheet and a letter requesting access for participant observation. Many of the managers, who I met during the following weeks, expected that (as a social scientist) I would only want to interview individual people. Therefore, it was necessary for me to explain that (in my methodology) participant observation involved observing the employees at work in the call centre and also some of the organization’s training programmes. At the beginning, this led to a certain amount of skepticism concerning my research and my presence within the organisation. Over the weekend, the manager of ‘Comet’ called to inform me that I

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<sup>44</sup> 10+2: This includes two years of junior college after one completes school or the 10<sup>th</sup> standard.

<sup>45</sup> In all cases I have used pseudonyms rather the actual company names, to maintain confidentiality.

could talk to some of the team leaders and the executives, but providing me with access to the centre would violate some of their organisation's security policies.

After almost eight weeks of the fieldwork I received an email, from a human resource executive from Acro who had arranged an appointment for me with one of their vice-presidents. I was not very hopeful, since a number of initial meetings in other call centres had been disappointing and I was beginning to wonder whether my research would 'take off' at all during this first field trip. We arranged to meet in his office the following week and the meeting was very amicable. However, I was asked a range of questions, not only about my research, but also about my background, references and the reasons for undertaking such a type of a research. The vice-president advised me that he would take my request to a group comprising of other heads, at the next meeting of the organisation (which was fortunately the following day) and their decision would be communicated to me through their Human Resource (HR) executive. The following week, the HR executive rang me to say that the organisation had made a decision to allow me access, but they would like me to work 'on the floor', or to observe the floor activities from a different room, so as not to disturb the work flow.

I was totally unprepared for the one and a half hours of intense interviewing by four of the heads of different Acro divisions the next day. They wanted my complete assurance of anonymity and confidentiality of information and identity of the organisation. It was also decided that they could review whatever was written while I was present in their organisation — and I was not to publish anything that would harm the reputation of the organisation. I eventually passed their 'test' and it was suggested that I begin my observations at the beginning of June. I later learned that the HR department had made some inquiries about me, during the time between my initial meeting with the vice-president and the second meeting with all the division heads. Whilst I had access to the centre, I was not supposed to carry any recording device or mobile phone into the organisation.

In another transnational call centre, the path to obtain permission for observations was smoother, due to the co-operation of a senior human resource executive who

clearly valued academic research and she expressed her own interest to undertake doctoral research sometime in the future. The conditions for accessing the premises for my observation were however along similar lines with that of the first international call centre. I was not permitted to carry my mobile phone or digital recorder into the training rooms or the shop floor. I was allowed to take part in their culture training programme and I was also offered work in the role of a customer service executive, with opportunities to participate in their meetings, team activities and office parties, both in the office environment and also outside the organisation.

## **The second field trip to Bangalore, India (May, 2007 – January, 2008)**

This trip was preceded by a number of different activities, including preparation of the research proposal, followed by a presentation to ensure the confirmation of my doctoral candidature and an ethics review meeting, held at Massey University. I began planning for my fieldwork and I looked for someone who could look after my seven year old daughter in my home, whilst I began my participant observation in the call centres, during the night.

### **Life in the field**

#### ***Managing family with night work***

I called up one of my old friends, Priya, who stayed in *Sanjay Nagar* and asked her to find someone for me who would look after my seven year old daughter in my absence. I had known Priya and her family for the previous six years when we (me and my husband) lived in the same apartment complex in Bangalore. She was happy that I was coming back to Bangalore for some time and told me that she would try to find someone trustworthy. I stayed at Sanjay Nagar, which was an hour's drive from the central part of the city. However, during the night, as I was regularly picked up by the company cab/taxi, the distance appeared to shrink, since there was far less traffic on the road around midnight. I started to enjoy the quieter drive along the roads and I looked out for other cabs and vans. Slowly, I became familiar with where the

employees lived, as the cab picked up other women who were also working the night shift from their residences.

There would be several vans on the roads around 12 a.m., dropping off and picking up employees. Each employee had a specified place (closest to their place of residence) where they were picked up at a particular time. I would be picked up at 10.30 p.m. (for the 12 a.m.) night shift, and dropped off after 8 a.m. the following morning. When I returned in the mornings it would be a time of activity at home: My daughter would be getting ready for school, with the help of *Lakshmi*, a young eighteen year old woman who took care of all my housework during the day (since I would sleep through until noon) and she also took care of my daughter during the night. Whilst Lakshmi spoke three local languages, we generally communicated in *Hindi*<sup>46</sup>, due to my non-familiarity with the region's languages, such as *Kannada*, *Telugu* or *Tamil*<sup>47</sup>. Apart from being the caretaker of the house, she also acted as my confidant and she was my medium of communication with my neighbours. Slowly, my continuous night shifts, coupled with the status of single motherhood (my husband was in the USA on work related business) invited a great deal of speculation in the neighbourhood, which was translated by Lakshmi, in her broken Hindi as follows:

*Ye aanti puchh rahithi, tum raat ko kidhar jata. Idhhar sab log humko puchhta.*  
(The next door aunty was asking, where you go in the night. Everyone in the colony is talking about it).

In the initial days, I avoided contact with the neighbours, because of my busy and erratic work schedules, until a crisis occurred at home, which culminated in my daughter losing her best friend in the colony of IT employees, due to my 'bad reputation'. I decided to talk with the friend's mother, a young woman of 28 years, in order to comfort my daughter and regain our respectability within the middle class neighbourhood. In addition, I started taking walks to the local children's park with my

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<sup>46</sup> *Hindi* is the national language of India. In addition to English, Hindi acts as one of the common mediums of communication throughout India.

<sup>47</sup> *Kannada* is the regional and state language of Karnataka, of which Bangalore is the capital. Migrants to Bangalore come from the bordering states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu, where the regional languages are *Telegu* and *Tamil*, respectively.

daughter through the narrow lanes (with houses on both sides) in the evenings, in order to increase my acquaintance with my neighbours. Within no time, I was 'reclaimed' as a 'nice young woman' who studied in a foreign university and who took great care of her daughter. With my husband's return from the USA to Bangalore (towards the middle part of my stay in Bangalore) the images of the ideal Indian family was complete and we received many invitations to attend marriages or other religious functions which took place within the locality.

The initial period of isolation and being discriminated against on the basis of my night work, made me sensitive to the issues of the call centre women, for whom their jobs were an important part of their livelihood. This prejudice against night work for women later became the topic of our discussion in the narrative interviews, in addition to conversations within the call centres. Some of the participants spoke of police harassment and the unpleasant behaviour of some cab drivers, in addition to the difficulties of single women, who worked night shifts, obtaining accommodation.

### ***Conducting participant-observation in the transnational call centre***

I spent six months working in two different international call centres in Bangalore, observing the orientation and training processes and struggling in the role of a customer service executive, undertaking a number of USA and UK shifts. I interviewed many of the female employees, in the car pool and also in the cafeteria, during break time (before a shift started or at the end of a shift). We sometimes shared lunch and/or breakfast together after the shifts and we walked together to the gym or the sports room, which were generally empty at that time. We also met with our teams outside, during the weekends. There were many awkward moments during this period, when I encountered disappointment and frustration, since I was obliged (as a result of my prior agreement with the heads of the divisions) to negotiate with 'organisational control' about what I was writing, during some of my break times.

In addition, there were difficulties working in the role of a call centre worker and (at the same time) managing my domestic role as a mother and wife and also catching up with my interviewees during the day. The physical and mental exhaustion, which engulfed me during the continuous night shifts and even in the taxis as I travelled with

the women before and after my shifts, led me to cut short my second observation phase, to a period of only one and half months. Nevertheless, this was a valuable period in my research, which helped me to understand more about the nature of call centre work, including my experiences before and after the shifts, the pleasures of travelling on a traffic free road in the night and the yearning for coffee to keep myself alert. Time spent with some of my female participants, in the restaurants or pubs or visiting a shopping mall or on a trip to Coffee Day<sup>48</sup>, also opened the doors for me to experience the lifestyle that these women led in their leisure times. It was not possible to record our conversations during these trips, where the interviews were short, spontaneous and situational. However, I took copious notes<sup>49</sup>, generally during the same night or the following day, after I came back to my home. These activities provided a first-hand glimpse of the independent lives of these women in the city who were defying the traditional and conventional notion of gender roles and/or identities within Indian society.

The data from the participant observation phase established some of the important cultural changes, which affected these women in their city lives: where they were independent and strove to fit into their work place and their peer culture, and/or the demands of a middle class life style within the city. This suggests the significance of larger structural forces, such as globalisation and the economic liberalisation in the lives of the young women that creates such call centre jobs. Participation or interactional data implied how my participants prepared themselves for taking calls: how they worked on their accent, manners and even dress code; or how they coped with a night shift, or participated in a team party. It also illuminated how the loss of a social life made them bond closely with their colleagues or even speak in a different

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<sup>48</sup> Café Coffee Day is a chain of coffee shops in India which has its headquarters in Karnataka. The chain has been successful in creating a café culture in various cities of India and its success can be linked to the increasing spending power of the urban middle class in the wake of economic liberalisation.

<sup>49</sup> The essential process, during the process of either interviewing or observing, is to record information. Lofland and Lofland (1995) stated this as “logging data” (P: 66). This process involves recording information in various forms, such as field notes, interview write ups, photography, and sound recording etc.

accent outside work. These data imply what changes these female employees have had to accept as part of their daily lives.—Being a part of all these changes ensured that I experienced the excitement of assuming a different persona as a call-taker. In the call centre, I was able to casually engage in close interaction with my team mates. We talked about our families, future plans, romantic relationships and made plans to spend time during the weekends. It also enabled me to experience the physically draining effect of night shifts, as I kept drinking more coffee and eating more chocolate, or joining the group for a walk or a cigarette outside the office. Some of these habits actually stayed with me for a long time, after I came back to New Zealand — chocolate becoming one of my favourite foods, while I wrote my thesis.

The observational data indicated who interacted with whom and when, where and how and which specific night spaces within the city were no longer prohibitive places for women. It also highlighted the more ‘westernised’ ways of interaction amongst male and female colleagues in addition to indicating the vast opportunities for male-female bonding and dating and the increased aspirations of women to improve their careers in the call centres (or outside) and to exercise independent choice. Whilst these data provided me with a sense of the impact of this work on the lives of these women, the multiple session interviews with the women enabled me to contextualise and establish the framework of interplay, between the observed behaviour and the underlying power relationships, which conferred meaning to this outward behaviour.

## **Conducting narrative interviews**

The method of participant observation that I had undertaken provided insights on the work lives of the women in the call centres and how they spent their time in the city. As discussed above, during this period I mostly spoke to the women during the tea or lunch breaks while they were at work. Similarly, when I joined some of my participants on trips outside of the call centre to a restaurant or a movie theatre, we were also accompanied by the other team members. Therefore, the opportunity to speak with them at length was limited. In order to complement the data gathered during the observation period, I wanted to adopt an approach which would enable me to gain a

holistic view of the lives of the women. Therefore, I also needed to speak to the women in my study at length to understand their past experiences as daughters. This included an intention to develop a nuanced understanding of their familial values, beliefs and practices and the changes that my participants have experienced in the course of migration. I also wanted to know what my participants felt about the impacts of new cultural elements in their lives. These insights into the lives of my participants demanded a method, where they could talk about their lives retrospectively, order the events in their lives and establish connections between their past and present lives<sup>50</sup>.

### ***Eliciting stories through in-depth interviews***

I therefore wanted to conduct narrative interviews, as I felt that by inviting the women to tell stories about their lives, there would be a natural flow of the accounts of their lives as a whole (Soderberg 2006). By telling stories about their lives, the participants also engage in a meaning making process of various experiences in their lives and try to correlate the past with the present from specific view points (Bryman 2004; Franzosi 1998; Plummer 1995; Polkinghorne 1988; Richardson 1990; Riessman 2008; Soderberg 2006). Narrative interviews have been reported to be ‘particularly useful in capturing the lived experiences which are transformed into stories that make sense to the narrator as well as the researcher’ (Soderberg, 2006: 399). At the heart of narrative interviewing is the basic idea to reconstruct social events from the perspective of the informants as directly as possible (Jovchelovitch and Bauer 2000). Thus, these interviews seemed the best possible way to understand how the women organised their experiences into “meaningful episodes” (Polkinghorne, 1988: 1) at their homes, work place and in the city and link these episodes as integral parts of their lives as middle class women. As Richardson notes:

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<sup>50</sup>For example, the ideological and structural forces at work in smaller towns are different from those operating in metropolitan India (especially in the wake of economic liberalisation and information technology revolution). While the power of media as a potential carrier of new cultural influences question such geographical boundaries, a consumerist culture and the ability to participate in it through higher earnings is more visible in urban metropolitan India, than smaller towns and rural areas.

The meaning of each event [in a narrative] is produced by its temporal position and its role in a comprehensive whole. Narratively, to answer the question, “What does something mean?” requires showing how the “something” contributed to the conclusion of the episode. The connections between the events constitute meaning (Richardson, 1990: 118).

Moreover, “... the chronological succession of events that provides the building blocks of narrative” (Franzosi, 1998: 520) seemed useful to study the varying experiences of the lives of the women over different time periods in their lives in families, schools, community events, at work etc. Narrative interviews also elicit data that document the inner experiences of the individual and how they interpret, understand and define the world around them. Thus, these interviews hold the promise of “providing a more complex and complete picture of social life” (Hendry, 2007: 489), with its aim “to tell a story” (McClusky, 2001: 14). Katherine Reissman emphasises the significance of narratives to identify the intricacies of how a culture shapes the individual identities:

The experiences that are revealed through stories also deeply enmesh with the structural features about the nature of life in a particular culture. Thus the connection between the biography of individuals or their identities with the society becomes apparent when narratives are analysed (Reissman, 2008: 10).

Bochner (1994) maintains that narratives are “stories people tell about their lives” (P: 30). Kreiswirth (1992) describes narratives as “human constructs that operate by certain conventions” (P: 650), and Richardson (1990) positions narrative as both a “mode of reasoning and a mode of representation” (P: 118), a way to perceive and describe culture. She argues that “people make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them, and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories” (Richardson, 1990: 129).

Narrative inquiry could thus offer a number of advantages, from the viewpoint of my research. It proved to be a valuable research tool to understand the past lives of the women as daughters and their cultural experiences in the family. In the unstructured interviews, the women appeared to be natural story tellers as they articulated their past and present lives within various episodes and stories. Thus eliciting stories

seemed to me (in this context) as being central to gaining an understanding of the relationship, between the women and their communities — and the cultures in which they find themselves to be a part. Narratives also hold the immense potential of “making human” (Stewart 1988) the experiences of these women rather than portraying them as stereotypical and norm-bound dutiful daughters, or future wives. As the interviews with the women flowed over several sittings, there were narrations of experiences at school, birthday parties, the death of a father, early sexual encounters, dating, buying new dresses to fit into the peer group in the city (after migrating from a smaller place) and stories relating to the first night shift or an experience in a cab/taxi or a pub, which all created (for me) an understanding of these multiple experiences and encounters, together with their underlying socio-cultural realities. The opportunities to “remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage” (Riessman, 2008: 8), during these unstructured interviews, also revealed the reflexive engagement of the women from the perspective of their present. This, in turn, enabled them to rationalise, or contest, some of their past actions, situations and brought to the fore who they want to be at the present.

### ***Speaking to the women***

Narrative researchers privilege the method of “storytelling”, over the traditional “question and answer” model of interview research (Elliot 2005; Frank 1995; Landay 2001; Riessman 2008). Petert Munro Hendry (2007: 494) emphasises “attentive listening power to be one of the foremost qualities of a narrative researcher” which has to be coupled with “trust or act of faith” (Armstrong 1990). This faith in the story teller symbolises a “political act where we also acknowledge the role of participants as meaning makers, and central to our meaning making” (Hendry, 2007: 494). The skills which have been identified as important for a narrative interview include: “...the willingness to share your own experiences, if this seems appropriate” (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 20), to establish rapport, listen actively and judge when and how to ask questions appropriately. Before leaving for the field, I instigated several ‘mock’ interviews with colleagues, family and friends, in order to sharpen my interview skills. Over a period of time I learned to be a more attentive listener and I allowed the stories of the interviewees to flow spontaneously: I would however occasionally ask further

questions in order to clarify or expand on something or to probe further. I followed a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix-II) which contained an opening question and a number of key themes that I wanted to explore at some stage during the interview. For example, I would invite the women to talk about their early lives in their families, sometimes emphasizing a specific experience, such as dating, the first menstrual experience within the family, or a trip to watch a movie with their friends. However this guide or list of questions was flexible and I included any new aspect that emerged from the interviews. I also collected certain background information on the families and daily habits of the women through this interview guide.

Conducting interviews generally took the following shape: Typically, I had made contact with the woman, as a result of a previous communication, where she had shown an interest in one of my flyers and she had contacted me. In the majority of the first sessions, I would introduce myself and provide an overview of my research and background and I would explain what her participation would entail. The first meeting generally lasted for 30 minutes, or a little more, depending on the course of our talk and the initial rapport, which was building. Sometimes, the session would extend to one hour and we would then decide to meet again very soon, in order to continue our discussion. The first meetings were always casual and I used that to develop a rapport between me and the participants, which would then lead onto the next session of interviews. During the first sessions I also provided the women with information sheets and asked them to read the consent forms and decide whether or not they would like to continue their participation, or not. Many times the women were happy to set a time for the next interview but these schedules had to be often changed, given the nature of their shift work. The day before our interviews, I would call the participant and ask her if she was still in agreement to conduct the interview. We generally met in restaurants or coffee houses, or sometimes in public parks, such as the *Lalbagh Gardens*, or *Cubbon Park*, situated in the middle of the city. It was easier for the women to come to those places after a hard day's work, or during a weekend. These places also provided a pleasant environment for the interviewer and the interviewee. I also conducted some interviews in the paying guest accommodation of the women and in their apartments. Three sessions were conducted at my home. The

majority of the interviews were conducted on Sundays since during the remainder of the week the women worked night shifts.

Conducting these sessions was fascinating and truly pleasurable for me as the interviewer. I would begin by talking about myself and where I stayed in Bangalore during 2001-2005. I would talk about my family and how we spent our time. After this introduction, I would then begin with an opening question about their stay in the city. I always opened the interview by asking “how long have you been in Bangalore?” Generally, the women were spontaneous story tellers and they would comfortably talk about their families or work, or their friends at their work place. I realised that a great many participants became more comfortable and easy going, after I had shared parts of my life story with them. Over time the personal trust that some of the participants had in me translated into a greater ease about sharing in detail many intimate aspects of their lives. I recorded these interviews on a digital recorder, which were later transcribed. Narrative interviews provided me with stories about the various temporal phases of the lives of these women, both in their families and in their work places in the city. In addition, these specific and episodic experiences have also been woven into coherent meaningful wholes, where the women have engaged in the meaning making exercise of constructing their identities. In conclusion, the two sets of data obtained from the process of participation and interviews complemented each other, when constructing the life stories of these women. Whilst the observational data provided information about the participation of women in call centre work and in their current lives, the narrative data yielded a better picture of how individual women experience being part of a global work place or a cosmopolitan city as they articulated their stories in which where they were also daughters from smaller towns or cities.

### **Analysing / writing**

As suggested by Denzin, “Experience only exists in representations, it does not stand outside memory or perception” (Denzin, 2003: 471). My experiences in the field were documented in my field diary and the piles of transcriptions of the interviews that I had with the young working women in Bangalore. It, however, remained a challenge to interpret and construct meaningful stories about my participant’s lives out of these gathered materials. In the beginning I tried to classify the different kinds of data that I

had collected in the field. For example, I put long narrative interviews under a different index than the short interviews I had during the observation period. Interviews with some of my participants during the first field trip (a pilot study) were grouped under a different index system. The initial organisation of the collected data is also referred to as “file work” or “indexing” (Sanjek, 1990: 386). I took more than a month’s time for the initial classification of the various kinds of data before starting the interpretation /analysis process. Wolcott describes ‘analysis as a sorting procedure, where specific materials are highlighted or findings are displayed’ (Wolcott, 1994: 26). I began the analysis of my field text by providing a thick description of the field site – Bangalore the ethnographic site and its flourishing information technology sector that has created occasions of rapid cultural changes in the city. This discussion provides the entry of the reader into the broad ethnographic site with specific reference to “description of the culture” or “what’s going on there” (Wolcott, 1994: 12). As he puts it:

Description is the foundation upon which qualitative research is built... Here you become the storyteller, inviting the reader to see through your eyes what you have seen... Start by presenting a straight forward description of the setting and events. No footnotes, no intrusive analysis – just the facts, carefully presented and interestingly related at an appropriate level of detail (Wolcott, 1990: 28).

The other significant aspect of the data analysis process was “identification of patterns or themes [which] are central to much of ethnographic writing” (Cresswell, 2007: 193) and helped me to make sense of what I gathered and learned in the field.

[One of the] ways of working with narrative data is focusing on “what” is said rather than “how”, “to whom” or “for what purposes”... thematic analysis can be applied to stories that develop in interview conversations and group meetings... Stories can have effects beyond their meaning for individual storytellers, creating possibilities for social identities, group belonging and collective action (Reissman, 2008: 54).

In order to analyse the data from the narrative interviews and participant observation, I colour coded<sup>51</sup> the transcripts, interview notes and participant observation notes, line by line, in a variety of thematic categories<sup>52</sup>, which I identified as common amongst the various transcripts, such as ‘experiences around dating’ or ‘family norms and experiences of going out in the night’ and ‘changes in spending habits’ etc. In some instances, a participant’s response to a specific question was coded to multiple categories, since the answer fitted into more than one theme. This process involved going through the transcriptions again and again and (as my supervisor had suggested) “completely living and breathing the stories”, in order to immerse myself in the data. Agar and Hobbs (1982), along similar lines, suggests that researchers should read the transcripts in their entirety several times and immerse themselves in the details, trying to get sense of interview as a whole before breaking it into parts. In the initial stage, I would write several notes on the side margins of the transcriptions, as I went through each category a number of times. For example, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggests that writing margin notes, memos in field notes, writing reflective passages in notes or drafting summaries of field notes helps to explore the data base in the beginning. Slowly, I was amazed at the emergence of themes and the remarkably similar patterns of responses, within the huge piles of transcribed data.

Lastly, I presented the themes, sub-themes and divergences amongst the data in a tabular form and I enjoyed working on my research endeavours, as the thick pile of data was converted into a cohesive and comprehensible format. The themes so formed out of many of the categories of data were used to write the narratives of my participants.

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<sup>51</sup> As Charmaz (2006) suggests codes are the shorthand devices that can label, separate, compile and organise data. At the initial stage, open coding is more useful, since it is detailed and it generates as many ideas as possible, from the data. At a later stage, selective coding is preferable, since it can emphasise the most common codes and those that are most revealing about the data.

<sup>54</sup> Thematic analysis is a form of narrative analysis, where stories account for events in people’s lives; attention is drawn to what is said and why is it being said. Social conditions that prompt such narratives draw the attention of the researcher for further analysis (Bury 2001; Riessman 2008).

Before leaving for the field I collected numerous media clippings that referred to the call centre industry in India and the debate surrounding the cultural changes amongst its younger employees. Although I do not focus in any single chapter on the analysis of these media clippings, they clearly helped me with the initial framing of my research questions. In different chapters, I weave my understanding of the broad domestic media portrayal of these issues and I fashion my arguments around them. These data provide an excellent source with which I could consider the popular construction and perception of female call centre workers within the current media. I also coded the newspaper reports, journal articles and notes, on documentary films<sup>53</sup> and popular fictions. This level of coding allowed me to analyse the data across a broad spectrum of issues and sources. In undertaking the whole analysis process the thematic charting technique (Ritchie *et al.*, 2003) was particularly useful, since it enabled me to gain a more comprehensive view of the data, in addition to using themes. At a later stage, data analysis involved discussing the conceptual and theoretical categories, which were more appropriate for the emerging ideas coming from the data. This involved reading an extensive range of theoretical and research literature and try out with the alternative frameworks that would best describe the data.

My last efforts involved (re)storing the themes into a framework, which had a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002). In this framework I looked for life-course stages or experiences of the women (childhood, puberty, dating, education marriage, work lives etc) to develop a chronology of their lives. I looked in the transcripts for these experiences of the women based on which I constructed the narratives. The three main analytical chapters focus on these various life stages or experiences of my participants as daughters, workers and consumers.

Along with analysing the data collected, I also experimented with various writing styles that have been adopted by researchers to construct the final tale (See Van Mannen 1988). In current sociological research, the strict boundaries between literary and scientific writing has become blurred, with the emergence of new forms of writing within sociological inquiries (Ellis 2000; Richardson and St. Pierre 2005; Richardson

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<sup>53</sup> I watched English documentaries, such as 'Jhon and Jane' by Ashim Aluhuliya and Hindi films, such as 'Hello', based on Ketan Mehta's novel 'One night at the Call Centre'.

1982; Richardson 1990; Tedlock 1979). Tedlock traces the origin of this new form of writing:

... to ethnography as [being] a continuation of field work rather than a transparent record of past experiences in the field. The ongoing nature of fieldwork connects important personal experiences with an area of knowledge; as a result it is located between the interiority of autobiography, and exteriority of cultural analysis (Tedlock, 2003 *cited in* Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 165).

This emphasis on various literary forms of writings, such as drama, poetry, conversations etc., to represent ethnographic data, has been an outcome of 'keeping the interests of the audience in mind', in addition to taking into account the subjectivity of the researcher. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to write about all the different styles and modes of ethnography. I shall therefore emphasise the styles which I have used in my present work: reflexive writing and ethno-dramas. These various form of writing are classified under the category of "Creative Analytical Practices" (Richardson 2000). Taking into account the emergence of various forms of ethnographic writing, especially in the last decade, Richardson notes that the boundaries of these forms of writing has become "blurred, enlarged, altered to include poetry, drama, conversations, reader's theatre, and so on" (Richardson, 2003: 509)<sup>54</sup>.

### ***Reflexive texts***

Denzin and Lincoln defined the qualitative researcher as a "bricoleur", or a quilt maker, who puts together the various pieces, in order to create the composite of a research project, such as the research problem, methods, strategies and other empirical materials at hand (Becker, 1998:2 *cited in* Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 5). This acknowledgement of the researcher's role, as a subjective interpreter, challenges the "myth of silent authorship" (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997, *cited in* Goode, 2007: 366). Indeed, a reflexive form of writing builds "a conscious form of interpreting where a closer attention is paid to the interactional processes through which knowledge is

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<sup>54</sup> Such writing styles have become popular, with the writings of Deborah Ceglowski (1997), Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2002), Caroline Ellis (2004), Ruth Behar (1996), K. Visweswaran (1994) and numerous others.

acquired, shared and transmitted” (Robbins, 2006: 443). Embracing this form of writing implies the rejection of the veil of neutrality, which provides such objective findings. The central issue is that this assumption of neutrality is unrealistic, since it conceals the complexities of the research and it also heightens the distance between the researcher and the researched. Inspired by this, I have drawn on “reflexive ethnography” (Denzin and Lincoln 2002), in some of my chapters, in order to make the reader aware of my socio-political position and how it may have influenced the direction of this study.

Reflexive ethnography “... is that ethnographic form that privileges the presence of the writer in the text” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002: 1). It fosters a more equal relationship between the subject and the participant, since the authority of the ethnographer is challenged (Visweswaran 1994), on the basis of the ethnographer becoming a part of the inquiry.

### ***Ethnodramas***

In some of the chapters in the current thesis, I present the analysis of my study in the form of ethno-dramas. As a form of writing, these imply collaboration between ethnography and playwright (Barone, 2002: 255). Expressing the voices of my participant through this form of expression reaffirms the significance of reality as subjective and interpretative (Denzin 2003; Nimmon 2007; Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002; Richardson 1995; Richardson and Lockridge 1998; Sikes 2005). Sparkes claims the validity of using this kind of a writing style, as it remains true to the lived experiences of the participants, whose voice is expressed in textual forms by the researcher (Sparkes 2002). Generally an ethnodrama is a form of:

... script, [that] consists of analysed and dramatised significant selections from interview transcripts, field notes, journal entries or other written artefacts. Characters in an ethno-drama are generally the research participants portrayed by actors, but the actual researchers and participants themselves may be cast members (Saldana, 2003: 218).

I shall write more about the practical appeal of ethno-dramas in detail in the subsequent chapter, where I use this mode of presenting the data to introduce my participants.

## **Ethical considerations**

Qualitative research poses ethical issues and challenges (Eide & Kahn, 2008: 199). Openness about the project and ensuring that the informants clearly understand the field worker's intentions is important in order to minimise the participants' concerns. At a general level, the project was guided by the 'Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants' (2007) of Massey University. The code provided the opportunity to consider a range of ethical issues relevant to my study. There were concerns raised by the members of the ethics committee with respect to possible conflict of interests between the management and the employees due to my presence in the transnational call centres. It was possible that the employees would believe that I was working for the management and spying on their activities within the organisation, whilst the management might think differently. They might consider my interaction with their employees as a potential cause of expression of discontent and it could also be seen as a threat to the organisation's security policies.

The second issue, with respect to participant observation, concerned the method of obtaining written consent from the employees, prior to the observations. In both international call centres in Bangalore, the number of customer service executives is fairly large, ranging from 2000-5000, at any point of time. On average, the number of employees working on each floor would be within the range of 200-500. Since it was practically impossible to obtain a written consent from each of these employees on the floor, it was proposed by my supervisors (and members of the Ethics Committee) that it would be practical and ethical to present a seminar in the call centre, before I began my observations. I would talk about the nature of my research, within the call centres and discuss, at this seminar, any element of conflict or objections, raised by the employees or the management staff. Accordingly, my participant observations in two trans-national call centres were preceded by seminars, where I talked about the

objectives of my research and discussed at length the way I proposed to carry out my research inside the call centres.

The other concern raised in the ethics meeting was in respect to any possible interference that my presence could cause during the daily work process on the floor. Bryman (2004) discusses how “participant observation can be very intrusive in terms of amount of people’s time taken up in an organizational setting. There are always possibilities that it will interrupt the work lives of the employees” (P: 341). In order to minimise any interference, through my observation process in these centres, it was suggested at the ethics review meeting, that I carry out my observations from a place where my presence would least interfere with the organisation’s activities and daily work lives of the employees working in the centre. Accordingly, I was provided a corner seat in the shop floor that minimized any intrusion in the work that was going on in the shop floor.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussions sum up my approach to the methods of collecting data in the field and the ways of presenting the data in writing up this thesis. These particular methods were employed with the aim of exploring ‘why and ‘how’ the women acted as they did and what potential spaces for transformation existed in their lives. By bringing the narratives of these women and the data from my experiences (during the participant observation) together, I shall try to answer the questions (which I raised in the first sections of this chapter) in the subsequent analysis chapters. This chapter is followed by a section, where the readers are introduced to my research participants, whose stories constitute the writing up of this thesis.

## Chapter Four

### Introducing the women

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#### Introduction

In this chapter, I invite the reader to become familiar with the young women who are the 'main actors' within my research endeavours. I call them the 'central characters' since they shape the course of my writing process throughout the thesis. This chapter presents the personal accounts of these women's middle class position, within Indian society. Their dialogue also provides evidence that factors such as caste, religion and region are also important determinants of identities of women along with the middle class discourses. These discussions therefore mark a shift in the understanding of 'middle class women' as a distinct category, with a common identity and set of gendered interests<sup>55</sup>. While, taking regional and caste affiliations into account, there are grounds to move away from the idea that all middle class women in India uniformly share a common history and a matrix of gendered values. In some ways the narratives thus deconstruct the category of middle class women, as a stable marker of identity and they reinsert these women into specific context, through their own stories.

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<sup>55</sup> Indian 'middle class' women are often stereotyped as being traditional, family orientated, sexually restrained and subordinated within a patriarchal society. Mohanty (1991a) refers to this as the construction of "monolithic third world women". She maintains that the construction of a homogeneous category of women, with the same desires and interests, results in the assumption of a universal state of patriarchy. This approach fails to take into account variations of caste, class, region and culture. Due to these stereotypical notions of family, traditions and values, there is a presumption of experience and a victimisation of the women, regardless of their own individual experiences. Puri (1999) argues for an approach where experiences and self definition, from the point of view of the women, are also important, in order to explore the identities of such women.

## **Structure of the chapter:**

In this chapter, I discuss the form of writing that I have adopted i.e. ethnodrama, to introduce my participants at the outset. I also describe how I created the ethno-dramas that are presented in this chapter. Finally, I offer a few comments on the structural format of the ethno-drama. There are three acts in this chapter, each of which introduces three participants. Each act has two scenes. Scene-I presents monologues, which are performed by each participant. The purpose of this reconstruction is to communicate nuances of feelings and expressions and to also provide an interpretation for the audience. Witnessing the performance thus involves seeing the “facial expressions, movements and gestures of the actors... and deal with the concrete-particular people in particular places in face to face encounters” (Conquergood, 1990 *cited in* Ellis & Flaherty, 1992: 80). Scene II, involves dialogues amongst the women and the researcher (myself), in relation to their lived experiences, where gender, family, caste and respective geographical locations features as significant factors shaping their identities. These two acts are followed by sociological analyses of the themes, which have been drawn out from the acts. Throughout this section, I thus continually shift between dramatic presentations and analysis. I begin with explaining as to why I thought ethnodramas (as a mode of presenting the data), to be the most suitable to introduce my participants.

## **Forms of writing**

Within the recent wave of qualitative research there is not only a great deal of debate about exploring social reality, but there have also been discussions about the way it should be written. The following question seems important in this context: should we incorporate dramatic forms, poetry, fictional styles into our research accounts? (Linstead, 1999: 5 *cited in* Rhodes and Brown, 2005: 471). This is a question to which an increasing number of theorists have answered with a resounding ‘yes’ (Rhodes and Brown, 2005: 471).

In an effort ‘to tell the stories of my participants using the facts gathered in the field’ (Cheney, 2001:1), I chose to present the data in this chapter through the genre of “performance narrative, or performance ethnography” (Denzin and Lincoln 2002) and I

take up Mienczakowski's (1997; 2001) invitation to present my work in the form of "ethnodramas", in order to make my investigation more accessible to a variety of audiences. As Conrad further states, "What better way to study lived experiences than to re-enact it" (Conrad, 2004: 3). Thus (for me) writing an ethno-drama appears to be the most powerful way to express the multiple voices of these women — their language and dialogues — in addition to the interactional-nature<sup>56</sup> of the interviews. Whilst re-enacting field experiences and interactions invite the writer to be creative, the form of representation seen here, does not, however, compromise the representing an appropriate account of the women's experiences and meanings.

[Creative nonfiction writers] must not only understand the facts and report them using quotes... they must also see beyond them to discover their underlying meaning, and they must dramatize that meaning in an interesting, evocative, informative way — just as a good teacher does (Cheney, 2001: 1).

In addition, the interactional nature of the interviews could also be best represented through the emerging traditions of creative analytical writings that include both written and performative components. During the fieldwork period, I recognised that the women in my study were sufficiently forthcoming to talk (in detail) about their lives, as we shared gender, social class and ethnic backgrounds. This helped me to enter the lived experiences of these women with emotion and empathy, which has arisen out of my own experiences, as a daughter from a middle class family. My emphasis on presenting these lived experiences of the women, through ethnodramas, thus reveals my constant involvement in every aspect of the research process (Pifer 1999; Sparkes 2002).

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<sup>56</sup> Each narrative interview with my participant was not only in the form of a question-answer series. The interviews flowed more as interactions between two persons who shared life stories with each other, discussed around a common topic and revealed experiences. This form of the interviews could be more aptly represented through the ethnodramas written in this chapter.

## **The creation of an ethnodrama**

The process of creating an ethno-drama in this chapter involved several tasks. The first was to look at all the transcripts in order to identify overall themes which might be appropriate to use as a piece within a scene, or a dramatic piece. I studied the interview verbatim and transferred them into dialogues within a play. I also included some of the grammatical errors, such as local English expressions, in order to keep the play closer to real life. The acts have a setting in which “data are collected, characters who are informants, and a plot in the form of the social action, in which the characters are engaged” (Gay and Airasian, 2003: 248). In the script below, at some places the setting has been altered, in order to provide a more realistic context for the dialogue. The women enter into the discussion at various points, with or without the prompting of the researcher. Nonetheless, the characters are the source of the information. The women clearly inform the reader(s) of their point of view, in addition to their perspective. Through the dramatic conversation to be presented, I now invite the reader to witness the beginning of our narratives. The three following acts introduce nine young women<sup>57</sup>: RAMANI, VIDYA and SHILPI in the first act; SUMITA, PRITI, KIRAN in the second act; and PEYASHI, TANIMA and GITA in the third act.

### **Act I**

#### ***Scene - I***

*The stage lights up and four women are seen sitting and chatting around a coffee table. One of the women stands up and comes to the centre stage. Dressed in a blue salwar and matching top (an ethnic Indian attire), she has her dupatta<sup>58</sup> loosely fastened around her neck. The other women continue talking to each other in a semi-*

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<sup>57</sup> All nine participating women, during their interviews, self-identified themselves as middle class. For the purpose of this study, I have compounded a number of cultural factors (see Appendix -I) together, in order to describe the middle class, such as parental income, education and consumption pattern. Eight of the participants are Hindu, whilst Gita has an inter-religious background.

<sup>58</sup> *Dupatta*- A long cotton or silk scarf that matches the wearer’s dress. It is worn to cover the upper part of the female body.

*dark setting. The light falls on the woman in the centre stage. She turns towards the audience and starts speaking, hesitantly.*

### ***Ramani***

Hi, *(She stammers a little)* I am Ra..mani. *(She looks down and moves the bangles on her left wrist with her right hand)* Four years have passed, since I came to Bangalore. *(She looks up)* Of course I am happy that I came here — all the way from Himachal Pradesh<sup>59</sup>. *(She smiles)* Well, two very important things happened since I came here. I got this job in an international call centre. *(She smiles happily)* I am also doing my M...B...A *(She pauses briefly)* of course, it has to be a part time one... but in the end it will be great to have a good degree. *(She walks slowly, almost to the edge of the front-stage, and looks at the audience)* Don't you think so? *(She smiles)* My parents will be sooo proud. Everyone in the neighbourhood will know I am doing something worthwhile here — not only working in a call centre. *(She pauses, turns back and sits on an arm chair placed in the middle of the stage: she closes her eyes in a thinking mode).* For me, life is different here — living on my own, paying my own fees — professional courses are sooo expensive. *(She opens her eyes)* Thank God, my job pays well. *(Her eyes become bright. She gets up from the chair and pulls up her dupatta, which has shifted to one side, almost brushing the stage floor as she moves, straightens up and faces the audience again)* Hey, I have made so many friends here — SHILPI and VIDYA are my colleagues. We share our lunches, chat about our families — the good old days — I love my family. Let me tell you something really nice. *(She spins around gracefully)* *Papaji and mamaji* are coming for my 24th birthday next month. I want to spend lots of time with them while they arrive. *(Her eyes brighten up as something seems to strike her)* Yeess! *(She smiles widely)* I can ask VIDYA to cover for me — Oh, I mean work the night shift for me *(She looks at one of the woman seated*

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<sup>59</sup> Himachal Pradesh is located in the northern part of the country, nestled partly in the foothills of the Himalayas.

*near the coffee table, and points her hand towards her). Would you like to meet her? She is the coolest.*

*VIDYA smiles and slowly comes towards the centre-stage, as RAMANI hurries up towards her coffee mug still on the table... (Aside to herself) "Oh! It must be cold". VIDYA looks bright and vibrant as the light shines on her yellow top and black pencil jeans. With her light skin colour and long dark hair, she is considered to be very attractive amongst her friends. She walks up to the centre of the stage and sits on the arm chair, with her legs crossed.*

### **Vidya**

Hmmm —I don't like to talk about myself much — but SWATI has asked me to introduce myself. *(She looks up and smiles)* I really don't know where to start. Hmmm... *(She gets up from the chair and walks around)* I came to Bangalore in 2002; I was 20 years old then. Well, that makes it almost four years, since I left Belgaun, that's my home town, where my parents live. *(She sighs heavily)* I miss my home — thank God *(She smiles)*, it's closer to Bangalore —not sooo far like RAMANI's. Well, I came here for my job. I always had this big dream of going to America. *(Looks serious)* Amma says, "In our kind of family, girls do not work in the night." *(She paces slowly, from one side of the stage to the other and finally turns to the audience)* But then it was my dream — working for an American company — See I'm here now. I like Bangalore — but I am still kind of different — more conservative *(She sighs softly)* — a one- man woman type. Look at SHILPI! *(She points towards the young woman seated in the corner, with a red coloured coffee mug in her hand)*. She is a great girl — just 21 or may be 22 — she is very bold. *(She starts speaking in a low voice)* You see, in India, staying with your boyfriend before marriage is a bold thing to do. I am also engaged — but my family is very traditional. I am from a *Kannadiga Brahmin*<sup>60</sup> family — we have our own values. I like her, but our values are different. Oh *(She exclaims)*, She is sooo bubbly — I'm sure you would like to meet her. *(Her voice fades away).*

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<sup>60</sup> *Brahmins* are considered ritually to be the purest and they occupy the highest position in the ranking of the four castes, within the caste system in India. *Kannadigas* are the people of Karnataka (the southern Indian state) of which Bangalore is the state capital.

VIDYA calls out for SHILPI, who looks up and her short pony bounces up and down. She is 19 years old, tall and slim and dressed in a pair of shorts and tees, she walks over, picks up her mug and continues walking to the centre stage.

### ***Shilpi***

*(She clears her throat)* SWATI has been talking to me about her project. She wants to know about my work life. Oh — first, let me tell you who she is. She is this new customer support executive in my office — and she is my neighbour too. Well, that's a coincidence. *(She takes a big breathe)* I find night shifts exciting. That's because I have been a night bird from the beginning. *(She laughs)* Not everyone will agree with me though — I've been all over India with my Dad. He's a wing commander in the Indian Air Force. *(She looks up and straight at the audience)* It's a great job. Let me tell you something. *(She walks closer to the audience)* He is a great dad too. I have one brother and one sister. I'm the youngest one in the family. *(She speaks in a 'matter of fact' manner)* Of course, I am pampered at home. *(She goes to the arm chair with a wide smile on her face)* Dad never gets angry with me — and my sister is the best sister in the entire world. *(Her voice becomes low)* She doesn't stay with us any longer. That's because she is married. Bhaiya, *(She looks up)* — that's what I call my brother *(She pauses)* — he fights with me though. Boys! *(She grins widely)* they're all the same. My dad is friendly — Bhaiya is friendly too *(She pauses briefly)*. We fight and argue — and then we become friends again. Dad tells us to make our own decisions. Well, that's how I landed up in Bangalore, in the call centres. It is sooo cool. I've been here since I was 18. *(She speaks in a matter of fact manner)* I do Hip Hop *(She pauses briefly)* — I can sing too. Mom says I am very talented. *(She smiles to herself)* That's because I am multi-lingual. Let me tell you my secret. *(She looks around and speaks in a low voice to the audience)* My mom is a Bengali<sup>61</sup> and Dad is from Punjab. *(She speaks excitedly)* They are the most loving couple, I have ever seen. Some of my friends think marrying for love is bad. *(She crosses her arms)* Well, I'm not sure. I think love binds two people. Do you? *(She looks up)* I'm excited about today.

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<sup>61</sup> West Bengal is located in the eastern part of the country. Punjab, on the other hand, is a West Indian state.

We — oops — I mean VIDYA, RAMANI and SWATI are driving down to one of my favourite restaurants in the Ring Road. (*Speaking thoughtfully*) It will be nice to talk about our parents, grannies, sisters — I mean everyone — the things we did — the things we like or dislike. (*She looks at the audience*) Would you like to join us there? Of course I am inviting you all — the more, the merrier. (*Her voice fades away*).

*She turns away from the audience. As the light becomes dim, the four women slowly fade into the background.*

**Setting:** *The Tamerind Tree is a restaurant located in the outskirts of the city, almost 15 km away from central Bangalore. It is a Sunday, 7.30 p.m.*

*VIDYA, SHILPI, RAMANI and SWATI enter the restaurant. SHILPI walks ahead and speaks to the receptionist. He asks them to wait in an open garden with many small water fountains. The four women wander around and pick up some pale yellow coloured, wooden chairs near one of the fountains.*

RAMANI: This is beautiful — I could bring my parents here (*She smiles widely*) — maybe for my birthday? (*She speaks thoughtfully*) But then I must try the food inside. It has to be vegetarian.

SHILPI: Are all Rajputs like you? I mean, with their food? (*She emphasises the word 'food'*)

RAMANI: Mostly, in my family, no one ever eats meat. My parents are very religious. Sometimes my mother fasts for two days — she doesn't even drink water. I too fast every Monday — Papaji says, "If you are doing something, do it with full dedication — or else do not do it." For Mamaji, *ijjat*<sup>62</sup> of the family is priceless. She keeps telling us, "Whatever you do, always remember what kind of family you are from — think about Papaji and what kind of name he holds in the community". Their words stay with me all the time. (*She pauses briefly and covers her head with her dupatta*). For my parents, character is the most important thing. My parents never stopped us from getting into study (*She clears her throat*) — but some of the other Rajputs — say in

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<sup>62</sup> *Izzat* is a Hindi word that refers to honour/respectability.

Delhi or Rajasthan<sup>63</sup> — some of my cousins stay there. The families are quite strict — I mean, they get married early — becoming good ‘*bahus*’<sup>64</sup>.

SHILPI: *(She exclaims)* Oh! — No fun at all — I would find that quite hard then. I mean — what’s wrong in having a little fun?

RAMANI: *(Glancing at Shilpi)* Each community has its own way of life *(Her voice fades away)*.

*SHILPI nods vaguely... she does not appear convinced. VIDYA stretches her legs and looks anxiously at the receptionist. SHILPI marches to the reception desk to enquire about their table. She comes back and sits on the grass with her legs stretched out.*

SHILPI: *(Speaking mockingly)* Sorry guys. It will be another twenty minutes. Sunday nights are so busy. We should have booked a table.

VIDYA: *(Speaking in a matter of fact manner)* Come on — just another twenty minutes. *(She had been quietly listening to the conversation between SWATI, SHILPI, and RAMANI )*. It feels good to be here tonight *(She laughs)* — it feels good to be free! *(She smiles)*

SHILPI: *(Interrupting)* Does it really? I’ve been spending my weekends like this since I was with my dad and mom. Even my sis takes me out often. Mom lets us do everything — but it’s different when my gran — my dad’s mom — is around. I love her most of the times... *( She stretches back)*, but I hate her when she is after me... do not wear this .... don’t go out... don’t sit like a boy... bla bla.

VIDYA: *(Laughing)* Me too — I mean with my granny. She loves me so much *(Laughs)* — but she’s quite strict. She wanted me to be this typical Brahmin girl. *(Speaks mockingly)* She would be like “Take your bath in early morning, do not enter the kitchen without bathing, do not touch anything when you have your period, chant

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<sup>63</sup> Delhi is the capital of India and Rajasthan is located in the North Western part of India.

<sup>64</sup> A daughter-in-law is called *bahu*, in Hindi.

*mantras* and stuff — I could go on and on and on — it's a long list" ! *(She leans back and laughs)*

SWATI: *(Smiling)* That reminds me of my grandmother. She used to do her worshipping for hours together. I never saw her entering the kitchen, though. She was a very strict mother-in law. *(She laughs)* But I never took her seriously. *(She looks thoughtful)* — but when I think of it now — I've learnt many things from her, without even knowing it *(She pauses)* — like, I love to go to temples — that's something that my grandmother loved to do.

SHILPI: *(Interrupting)* I remember how my gran would complain to my mom if I wore shorts — or go to a friend who has a brother. She would go on and on — "Don't eat on the bed, talk on the phone — don't go out to friend's parties, bla, bla". She always had this fear that I would do something 'out of the way'.

VIDYA: *(She sits up and smiles)* Like what?

SHILPI: *(Laughs aloud)* Maybe run away with someone *(She slips to the ground and sits upright with her legs stretched in front of her)*.

SWATI: What about your parents?

SHILPI: They would understand — Gran is quite old — and they love her. I am also allowed to do my stuff. *(She takes off her shoes and tries to walk on tip-toes on the grass)*.

VIDYA: *(Flicking her finger through her hair)*, Ya, I can understand — my parents know me so well — They know that whatever I do — I would never lose our family values. But they also wanted me to be independent — I mean study well and get a job — that kind of stuff. *(Her voice fades away)*.

*The receptionist comes to inform them that their table is ready. There is a sigh of relief from RAMANI, who had been frequently looking at her watch. They had waited for more than an hour.*

**8.30 p.m.**

SWATI, RAMANI, VIDYA and SHILPI are seated inside the restaurant. SWATI pours some iced soda-lime from the large glass jug on the table. SHILPI asks the waiter for some sugar cubes — she wants it sweet!

SHILPI: Another family trait — my whole family likes the sweetish taste. I always like what my mom cooks.

VIDYA: *(Sitting upright in the chair)* I follow granny's recipes. *(Speaks thoughtfully)* Mine is a religious family. *Amma* — Mom — does lots puja. I remember my granny teaching me all the *Slokas and Mantras*<sup>65</sup>. It was very important for them to get me educated and make me stand on my own feet. But they also would like me to be properly married and settled. In our caste, it's important that you get married at the right age *(She raises her hands into the air)* — which, of course, I did not. Mom was married when she was — like 20. *(The waiter places soft Indian breads, with lots of butter and herb toppings, in front of the women. RAMANI and VIDYA look at their Paneer Makhani, as SHILPI' digs into' her favourite Tandoori chicken)* — and of course learning cooking is quite important. The kitchen is kind of a very sacred place in my house. *(SHILPI looks surprised and RAMANI nods with understanding)*

SWATI: How?

VIDYA: You are not allowed in the kitchen, if you have not taken your bath. *Amma* does her puja in the kitchen — if she has her periods, nana cooks... I started cooking when I was in school — sometimes we used to get the food from the hotel.

SHILPI: *(Nibbling at some sugar cubes)* Wow!

VIDYA: But it also helps to know how to cook — not just because you're a woman —but even just to feed yourself when required.

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<sup>65</sup> Slokas and Mantras: Religious prayers of Hindus

RAMANI: Ya, true — but in my house unmarried women are not allowed to cook. *(She smiles shyly)* Most of my uncles have someone to cook at their places. It's more of a status symbol for them.

SHILPI: *(Shaking her head)* I do not have any such thing at my place. My parents are from two different castes and regions. *(She pauses)* — with different food habits — we have kind of everything at home. *(She smiles)* I don't remember any restriction at all.

VIDYA: *(Looking alarmed and sitting up)* Oh no... my granny would make a real noise if I enter the kitchen without taking my bath; invited any boy — if any boy came to just maybe pick up a book or notebook, she would ask him a thousand questions — that poor guy would never dare to come again. *(She looks at her watch as the waiter, with the bright red turban and a white uniform, approaches and slips the bill onto the table).*

SHILPI: *(Smiling)* Time to go?

**Time: 10.30 p.m.**

*SHILPI slips into the driver's seat and tightens her seat belt. RAMANI and SWATI slide into the back seat, whilst VIDYA buys some chocolate from the nearest stall. She has to leave for her night shift in the call centre and chocolate keeps her going, during the graveyard shifts. SHILPI drops her near one of the pickup points for the office van and then she drives everyone home.*

## **Reflections on Act 1**

This conversation has been drawn from some of my earliest encounters with these women, during the narrative interviews and participant observations. As shown in Act-1, these conversations demonstrate the important aspects of the identities of these women, which weave together their family values, individual aspirations, regional affiliations and caste norms. Whilst the issue of class is not raised specifically, a great deal of their talk about the expectations of their family, in relation to their education, career trajectories, family ties etc. contain information about class and how it facilitates a class identity. This further blend with gender and caste, in addition to the regional and generational aspects of the lives of these women at various times.

Ramani's comments, during the conversation, "*izzat of the family is priceless*" take us back to two central questions in this project:

1. *How does the family influence the construction of the gendered identities of these women?*
2. *How do family practices, which vary so much, according to caste, religion and region (as discussed in the Acts above<sup>66</sup>), 'collapse' into a generalised idea of 'a middle class' around the notion of respectability?*

## **RAMANI**

One of the most dominant themes within Ramani's story is her identification with her Rajput family. Our conversation always centred on her caring parents', their expectations and the *izzat* (respect) of her family. Most of the decisions in her life were guided by her parents. As she puts it, "Their words always stay with me". This unquestioning allegiance to the norms of her family creates a disconnection between the moral norms of her family and her job in the call centre, which is perceived otherwise. She narrates her family as being a traditional and religious family, where moral values and strength of character get priority over education. Her dilemmas are clear: the call centre, according to her mother is not the rightful place for a young woman from a Rajput family and yet she finds the financial prospects of a call centre job attractive, since it supplements the family's income. The balancing of these two different spheres that coexist (due to her family circumstances) forms the ground of the discussion in subsequent chapters, as the reader slowly moves through her role as

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<sup>66</sup> For example, cooking is a sacred ritual in Vidya's family. It shapes her views and practices and she does not allow anyone else to enter her kitchen, or cook for her. Thus, the private space of the kitchen is instrumental in influencing her beliefs around a woman's job within her family. Ramani's family, on the other hand, links the performance of domestic chores to their class status and employing others to do these tasks signifies a relatively higher class status. Moreover, Ramani is not allowed to cook in her family home, since the services of unmarried daughters are preserved for their future family, after marriage. In contrast, in Shilpi's modern middle class family, cooking is a chore performed by cooks, who are available, due to the privileged status of her father. As such, this is not linked with her caste, or class status.

a daughter, an employee and also as inhabitants of a cosmopolitan city. In subsequent chapters, I explore how Ramani's life, within these different spheres, implicates Ramani "... in a complex web of social, cultural and economic relationships" (Elliott, 2007: 2), that span the Indian landscape in the wake of economic liberalisation.

## **VIDYA**

The strong familial identification articulated by Ramani, however, differs from Vidya's narrative. At the beginning of the dialogue, Vidya narrates her call centre job as being 'cool', which stands out as a contradiction to her mother's expectations, who thinks that night shifts are not intended for women from good families. On other occasions however, Vidya strikes a balance between her individual aspirations and her family and caste norms. Caste features more prominently in Vidya's accounts and shapes her daily life. On several occasions she would ask me to wash my feet and hands, in addition to sprinkling some water on my head, before I could help her in the kitchen. Her open kitchen, in the newly built modern apartment, has a corner for small idols and pictures of her family's gods and goddesses. She proudly describes those as 'family treasure' given to her by her granny. Thus, at various points of time, Vidya is full of surprises with her independent aspirations and strong caste identifications. On the one hand, she has her own dreams of breaking away from the conventional norms of mobility and morality for women while on the other, she sometimes sees herself as a 'perfect *Brahmin* woman' who has to discharge her caste role. I had several interviews with her during my stay in Banaglore. As subsequent chapters reveal, her narrative tells us much about contemporary aspects of womanhood and sexuality, which not only reinforce the various categories of middle class gendered identity, but they also help to question these categories.

Whilst for Ramani, the dream of her parents' facilitates the way she conducts herself within the thresholds of a Rajput middle class family and the communal values of *Rajputs*, Vidya speaks of the faith her parents have in her, which has led to the internalisation of her family and caste (*Brahminical*) values. These women, thus, weave familial values with class and caste norms, in order to express their gendered selves.

## **SHILPI**

For Shilpi, whilst family values were important, her ideas substantially differ from those of Ramani and Vidya's. Shilpi refers to the openness in her family and the independence she has, when conducting her own life. She is cognizant of the ways in which she differs from the 'middle classness' of Ramani and Vidya and yet, implicitly articulates the moral aspects as being important in her family life. This is echoed when she talks about 'parental trust' as being important in determining the boundaries of what she does in her life. For example, she says: "I am allowed to go to parties, but that's because my parents trust me". This reveals a delicate balance between the independence she is given, to enable her to cross the gendered boundaries of time and space, with the underlying expectations of conforming to certain core values held by her family. This set of values (which is expected not to be eroded) is subsequently revealed in different contexts, as she narrates her experiences, both at her place of work and in the city. Interestingly, both Vidya and Ramani, (two of Shilpi's colleagues) describe Shilpi as 'modern, daring and bold' because of her clothes and lifestyle, which involve late night parties, in addition to dating men. During the interviews, Vidya expresses her disapproval about Shilpi's life style. On the other hand, Shilpi identifies herself as being middle class and her core values are constructed around what her parents (who are more open and friendly according to her) expect from her.

Therefore, by playing off these three women, in relation to each other, it can be understood how family location and values are easily discernible, within expressions of attitudes and aspirations, by these women. Whilst all of them belong to middle class families, the variations around caste, region and parental profession are prominent and they facilitate a variation in class identities. Through an exploration of these women's narratives, about their middle class families, the discussion thus moves away from a tendency to oversimplify and generalise. Instead it prompts the researcher to bring to the forefront the complex ways in which these women talk about and react to these normative discourses, within their daily lives. The following act further substantiates this discussion, through the narratives of Priti, Sumita and Kiran.

## Act II

### Scene-1

**Setting:** *An open air auditorium on a cool evening. Three young women (in their early twenties) are sitting on rocks (carved into chairs) in a centrally circled area. In the back, solid green painted rocky walls, rhododendrons, small lemon trees and a plethora of weeds create the sense of a natural forest. Fewer than thirty people have congregated on the patches of grass, which encircle the stage area. One of the young women slowly stands head and shoulders above the crowd, and attempts to adjust the volume of the small black microphone in her hand. Dressed in jeans, a black T-shirt, long black boots (and with her waist long hair left loose) she looks up with a smile and starts speaking into the microphone.*

### **Priti**

*(She looks up at the audience and smiles)* Hi, I am Priti. I came to Bangalore as a nineteen year old — it's been four and half years since then. It takes almost two days in a train to travel here, from my home town. My parents used to live in Rourkela — a big industrial town in Orissa. *(She takes a deep breath)* — and of course for the best engineering colleges in the state *(Her expression becomes somber and her voice becomes heavy. Slowly she walks up to one of the rocks set as a small bench and sits with her face looking down)*. I miss my dad whenever I talk about home. He died when I was in class 10 *(She takes a brief pause)* — my final year at school — board exams — my life was kind of turned upside down *(Her eyes lighten up)*. Do you know how much he loved me? Well, I was his favourite daughter. *(She gets up from the rock and walks across the stage)*, I lived with my *Aaja and Aai*<sup>67</sup> for three years, when I was in college. It was kind of bold to leave home and come here. In my house everyone thought that call centres were bad places for women to work. *(She wrinkles her forehead, and clasps her palms tightly)* One of my aunts told me that they are places for bad girls *(She stops abruptly)* she meant they are call girls *(She sighs heavily)* but I want to be independent. *(She looks directly at the audience smilingly)* Oh, look

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<sup>67</sup> In Oriya, *Aaja* means a maternal grandfather and *Aai* means a maternal grandmother.

who is here! She is one of my closest pals in the office (*She pauses and then speaks more cheerfully*) Well, let's listen to what she has to say about herself. (*Her voice fades away*).

*Slowly Priti fades out onto the side walk. A voice from the background becomes audible. It grows gradually louder. The audience can see a very pretty and tall, slim young woman with a peaches and cream complexion walking to the front. She is dressed in a half sari<sup>68</sup> with her long, dark brown hair neatly tied in a plait that reaches her waist. There is a bunch of white jasmine flowers pinned onto her hair, near her neck. The woman starts speaking in a very soft voice.*

### **Kiran**

Well, I'm here with my friends. They all work for an international call centre. They say I am the chatterbox in the group (*She laughs*) but then I have always been a talkative child, Mom used to ssshhh me all the time (*Her eyes light up*) and Akka<sup>69</sup> used to fight with me. I would make lots of noise when she studied. (*She walks up to the front of the stage and smiles*) — but then I am closer to Nana, while she is closer to Amma. I'm never scared of my father — but Akka is. She is kind of quiet — just the opposite to me. After her marriage, she has become quieter (*She looks directly at the audience*) — of course it was an arranged marriage — what else could it be? (*She looks puzzled and her eyebrows wrinkle. Slowly she walks closer to the audience and continues speaking with a low voice*) I am almost 25 but I'm scared of marriage (*Her expression becomes somber*) I'll talk to you about this some other time. (*She laughs*) Look, I've been telling you all about my family, without even telling you my name. I'm Kiran and my parents live in Vishakhapatnam — and I never wear short skirts. (*She pauses briefly*) When I was doing my MSc. in Microbiology, I used to wear *salwars* and *half saris* to college. I see most of my friends wearing skirts and shorts in Bangalore — but that

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<sup>68</sup> A *half sari* is a traditional wear in many of the southern Indian states. It is worn mostly by unmarried young women. The women wear a long pleated skirt, with a matching blouse on the top. There is also a long matching fine cloth, which is wrapped around, across the shoulder and the end of it is left to float at the back.

<sup>69</sup> Kiran told me, during one of the interviews, that in Telugu families (people from Andhra Pradesh, a southern Indian state) the elder sisters are called *Akka*, by the younger siblings.

would seem odd to me. I guess that's because *Amma* would say, "Kiran, nice girls don't wear short skirts". I like to wear dresses that cover my legs. I am too conscious of any skin that shows in front of men (*She laughs, as she walks across the stage, holding the side of her long purple and blue skirt*) — I make friends very easily. The other day someone from the office called up and *Amma* was here. He — I mean my colleague — spoke for a long time and *Amma* was annoyed. She asked me not to speak for such a long time to him again. Sometimes I understand what she says and means — but sometimes I don't — but I try not to hurt her. (*She looks puzzled*) But I don't want to be shy — I want to be confident! Anyway we will talk about it later. Now it's time for you to meet Sumi — I mean Sumita (*Speaking excitedly*) — look there she is! (*Her voice fades away*)

*A tall and slightly plump young woman walks in. Her short skirt is worn well above her knees. As she comes closer, her recently coloured hair (shades of brown and black) swing around her head, she casts her large, light brown eyes over the audience and picks up the microphone.*

### ***Sumita***

Hmmm... I am not very good at study. Kiran keeps talking about her degrees and a lot about micro-biology. Well, for me it was kind of cool at home. My mom never forced me to do anything. Dad has a small family business in Bihar. We hardly see him at home. It is always my mummy (*Says fondly*) — she is always there for us. (*She wrinkles her eyebrows*) Nooo — what I really mean is that daddy spend most of the time earning for us, but he hardly has any time to spend with us — I love them both (*She laughs*) I have lots of friends (*She takes a brief pause*) — and cousins too. Last year, my cousin got married. Her parents had to almost spend 10 lakh rupees (NZ\$ 30,000) for the marriage. My parents too hope that I shall get married soon. I turned 25 two months ago— just after Kiran did. Me and Kiran are best friends here (*She laughs*) We both like to go out for coffee and chill out in the late evenings. (*Hurriedly she looks at her watch*). Oops — have to join my friends now. We've made this plan to go to Coffee Day, a nice place for coffee in the MG Road. It's almost at the heart of Bangalore. If you would like to join us, I could give you directions — I promise you

would enjoy the trip — we could even talk more and get to know each other. *(Her voice fades away)*

**Place: Coffee Day, MG Road — a Saturday, 5.30 pm.**

*Four women, PRITI, SWATI, SUMITA and KIRAN emerge from a red Maruti Zen... PRITI parks the car, whilst the others wait on the pavement. KIRAN looks excited with her wide eyes and big smile. SUMITA nibbles at her fingers and looks anxiously towards the heavy traffic on the road, as PRITI struggles to park the car. COFFEE DAY, the famous coffee house in M.G.ROAD Bangalore, is crowded with young men and women. The strong aroma of freshly made coffee embraces the air, as they walk by Food World, a departmental store selling groceries and vegetables, all under one roof. SUMITA and KIRAN wait outside, whilst SWATI and PRITI go inside to find a table. SWATI's eyes light up as she spots an empty place — she waves her hand at the other three woman, who make their way swiftly towards a table.*

PRITI: *(She turns to look at SUMITA, who is looking at the menu)* I have a graveyard shift tonight.

SUMITA: *(Smiling)* You can call the cab from my place. It will be closer from there.

PRITI: *(She speaking casually and lights a cigarette)* Oh, Don't worry about that.

KIRAN: *(Interrupting)* Does your mom know about this? *(She points her finger at PRITI smoking).*

PRITI: She doesn't like it, but she lives with it. *(Thoughtfully)* I remember the first day I smoked; I think I was 17. It seemed liberating to be a female smoker in the college. My grandparents didn't know about it. I wasn't even allowed to read romantic story books *(She laughs)* — which I always did.

SUMITA: *(She laughs aloud and turns towards PRITI)* Did you have a boy friend?

PRITI: *(Giving a wide smile)* Actually — no. I started reading all kinds of books because of my dad. He got lots of books for me. That's how I got into reading habit. But they

were not about romance — kind of short stories for kids and other fiction. *(She leans forward and smiles)* — I was quite responsible as a child.

SUMITA: *(Sitting up and speaking cheerfully)* I'm just the opposite. I used to freak out with my friends and my mother wouldn't know about it. In her time, it was a big thing to go out alone. Now-a-days, nobody would even bother to look at you!

KIRAN : *(Laughing)* Hmm... True. I agree with you. You have to do things on your own now. If you can't, then people will say that you're not smart. I used to book train tickets for my parents. It's no longer necessary for women to just stay inside. I had my birthday parties with friends in all my favourite restaurants. 'Teenage Point' was the most popular. I still remember the fun we used to have there. *(She sighs happily)*.

PRITI: *(Mockingly)* Well — did you have boys come to your party?

KIRAN: *(Taking a deep breath)* Noooooo...

SUMITA: *(Glancing at KIRAN)* No Boys!

KIRAN: *(Nodding)* Yes — that's correct — in Vizag, if people see a young girl with boys, or boys come to their place, she will be known as a bad girl. *(She turns to PRITI)*.

PRITI: *(Laughing a little)* You would always see me in shorts and T-shirts. I was kind of a tomboy. What people would say, didn't really matter for me. *(She twists the ring on her finger and smiles. The waiter slowly arrives and places a dark greenish coffee pot on the table. A large ruby shines on PRITI's finger. KIRAN and SUMITA look at her with curious eyes and then PRITI surprises everyone, as she starts speaking)*

PRITI: *(Continuing)* I don't know how my mother is going to react to this — but Sameer proposed yesterday. *(Her voice fades away)*

SWATI: *(Encouragingly)* She will be happy —it's such great news. *(She gets up and embraces PRITI; KIRAN and SUMITA extend their hands to shake PRITI's)*

PRITI: *(Shaking her head)* Not for my mother. She was never happy with her own marriage.

SWATI AND SUMITA: *(Speak together)* Why?

PRITI: *(Speaks in a low voice)* My Dad was an alcoholic. *(She speaks with her face cast downwards)* He never took care of her, us; always fought with her. She hates marriages *(She touches the ruby on her finger, whilst twisting the ring).* But Dad loved me dearly. He got books for me, took me out *(She becomes quiet).*

SUMITA: *(She swirls around in her chair and looks at PRITI, resting her face between her palms)* What about dowry? Do you have to give lots of dowry in your caste?

*PRITI remains silent... However, KIRAN picks up the thread and starts speaking*

KIRAN: *(Speaking matter of factly)* Not really. I mean you have to give something to your daughter, but it's not huge. In Andhra Pradesh — in other castes like *Reddis and kammās*<sup>70</sup> — you have to gift diamonds, gold, land etcetera to the daughter. It's kind of compulsory *(She looks thoughtful).* But as far as I know, it's not so rigid among the Brahmins, I mean in my caste. *(KIRAN continues to speak as she bites into the complimentary cookies that came with the coffee).* My parents gave my *Akka* (Elder sister), whatever they wanted to give. There was no demand from my *Jiju's* (Brother-in-law) side.

SUMITA: *(She interrupts)* I wish, in Bihar, we did not have this custom at all. I have one more sister at home. My parents spend less on our education and save more for our dowry.

PRITI: *(Slips back into a relaxed position)* Anyways, I'm not going to pay any dowry to Sameer.

KIRAN: *(She looks at SUMITA and says jokingly)* Why don't you find someone for yourself? *(Adds jokingly)* But ensure he is ok *(Turns towards PRITI and starts speaking seriously).*

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<sup>70</sup> *Kamma* and *Reddy*- These are two land owning dominant castes in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

KIRAN: *(Almost whispering)* This is important before you get married to Sameer. *(Stammers)* I mean do you know him closely? Look, I know you love him; but it's important that you know for sure, he is heterosexual.

PRITI, SUMITA AND SWATI: *(Together in chorus)* What?

KIRAN *(Sighs)*: I know it sounds odd. But *Akka* got into this arranged marriage and that guy was gay. He tortured her a lot *(Pauses for a while)* *Akka* tried to stay with him for the sake of my parents. It would have been scandalous for the family. But in the end it was too much. They also threw her out; now he wants to get married again... to another woman.

*Everyone becomes quiet; KIRAN cautiously wipes away her tears with a pink handkerchief.*

SUMITA: *(Pressing her lips tightly together, she tries to speak seriously)* Yes, I agree with you. It's a life time decision after all. *(She gets up from her chair, as the waiter hands over the bill and asks them to pay near the reception)*

PRITI: Me too *(On that note, the four women walk towards the counter)*

## **Reflections on Act II**

### **PRITI**

My meetings with Priti became an outlet for many of Priti's deep-seated feelings, anxieties and dilemmas. These feelings emerged from a disturbed childhood, where she witnessed constant fighting and violence between her parents, at home. For example, in the group conversation in the cafeteria, she becomes remarkably open and discusses her father as being affectionate, courageous and studious. However, in the next moment, her mood shifts and she becomes serious and portrays him as being irresponsible towards the household, because of his alcoholic habits. Secondly, she was agitated when talking about her mother's total dependency on her father. This situation had resulted in her family being totally vulnerable, after the death of her father. Currently, her family is also a source of anxiety, since the expectations of her mother clashed with Priti's own expectations from life. This becomes evident by her distress in the cafeteria, as she speaks of her long struggle to convince her family to

allow her to 'get into' the so called 'bad job for a woman from a good family', or when she talks about her engagement, based on her own choice.

## **KIRAN**

Kiran speaks of herself as a 'very social' woman, who loves to help others and organise and participate in activities — and she loves her own freedom. On the one hand, Kiran feels close to her parents, who are extremely important to her. While she lives with her family at Vizag she wears long dresses, such as *half saris*, *salwars* and jeans that cover her whole body and (according to her) being dressed this way connects her to being a woman, who shares her caste and community values. At other times, Kiran visibly struggles to achieve a balance between her choices to be friendly with everyone (including men,) and the familial and communal limits of being seen with a man in public places, which may harm her reputation. To say that Kiran's behaviour always confined her to the familial and her class and caste expectations is to strip her of any agency: The following chapters speak about a reflective Kiran, who talks about the socio-cultural expectations of her family and how she lives through these expectations which sometimes clashes with that of the work place. This further highlights the notion of an

“...agent who is active and reflexive; [a young woman] who have the properties and power to monitor [her own life], to mediate structural and cultural properties of society and thus to contribute to societal reproduction or transformation” (Archer, 2003: 25).

## **SUMITA**

For Sumita, at the beginning of our conversations, being a woman from a good family implied marriage, which is further entangled with the customs of dowry. Unlike Priti and Kiran, for whom call centre employment serves as a source of independence, Sumita hopes that her job would ensure a stable marriage and a secure future for her. At the outset of our conversation, Sumita articulates what she wants out of life in clear terms. This coincides with her parent's expectations of an arranged marriage. As we became closer, during our frequent interactions within the call centre, I came across

another facet of her personality. When we met in the cafeteria during the midnight lunch sessions, she speaks about her individual aspirations. Her four years of experience in an international call centre has the effect of increasing her affluence and financial stability. Through her increased interactions with women in the call centre and her long stay in Bangalore, she seems to distance herself from her earlier ideas of supporting a dowry based marriage for herself. The subsequent interviews with Sumita detail how her experience outside of her home, has made her think differently, in addition to her articulating herself as a woman who wants to achieve something on her own.

### **Act III**

*This act presents conversations amongst the four women, GITA, TANIMA, PEYASHI and SWATI, as they meet in the cafeteria of one of the international call centres in Bangalore. I worked with the women in the call centre, as a customer service executive, for a period of six months. The cafeteria provided a gateway for more intimate and informal interaction with these women, during the lunch break (approximately 12-2 a.m. in the morning, when they could take a break for 30 minutes). The young employees (in the age group 19 to 25 years) would walk in and out of the place, with their electronic swipe ID cards hung around their necks: Sometimes, they would be fatigued and stressed from an early shift and other times they would be fresh from a day's sleep and getting ready to log onto their graveyard or super-graveyard shifts. The cafeteria and the car pool were also places for social interactions, where the employees would meet their partners and spouses, during (and in between) the shifts.*

**Setting: Office Cafeteria — a Monday 1.30 a.m.**

*GITA, a tall woman with a light brown complexion, hurriedly walks into the cafeteria. The cafeteria, at midnight, looks crowded with employees rushing to collect their lunches. GITA carries a lunch box in her hand and her long fingers are wrapped tightly around it. As she looks around, she finds SWATI at one of the small round tables, scribbling something in her small yellow covered notebook. She joins SWATI for lunch and they both wait for the other women to join them. Moments later, PEYASHI, looking bright in her grey skirt (worn well above the knees) and navy blue top, approaches the*

table with a tray loaded with idlis<sup>71</sup>, soft drinks and water. GITA pulls up a chair, as PEYASHI bends down to place her tray carefully on the table. She wipes her hands, closes her eyes and leans back on the chair. She tells the other two how much she wishes to sleep for an hour, rather than have food in the middle of the night. GITA says that she does not mind doing a night shift for a little more time, until she settles down in a good business. The conversation continues for another ten minutes, focusing on night shifts, fatigue, the problem of indigestion due to midnight lunches and the conversation ends with TANIMA coming over, looking slightly irritated. “My team leader always makes me late for breaks. I’m not sure I can stand him any longer. He makes some excuse to bother me all the time.” TANIMA says as she stands and yawns with a half eaten burger in her hand.

### **Scene I**

*Gita faces the audience and starts speaking.*

### **Gita**

I grew up in Goa... an Island in western India (*She moves her fingers through her red and brown short hair, with her long stone earrings jingling*). There are so many beautiful beaches and resorts in Goa (*She smiles*) — the tourists flood in during all seasons of the year. Dad runs a family bakery in Panaji<sup>72</sup>. We all — I mean my two brothers, mom and me, used to take care of it. Mom comes from a Hindu family outside of Goa — she fell in love with my Dad, who is a typical Goanese — a Christian — and got married to him. (*She takes a big breathe*) Mom had difficult times adjusting to my dad’s family. Now she hardly has any contact with her own family — (*She looks thoughtful*) Well, my mom still goes to the temple and eats a Hindu diet — she’s a vegetarian and fasts three times a week — but she’s still an outcast from her own family. I love my mom, but I am different. I’m more into my dad’s side than my mom’s. I love to eat fish and have beers (*She whispers*) — mom will be horrified. (*Her voice fades away*) Marriage takes a backseat in my future plans (*She laughs*) — I am

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<sup>71</sup> Idlis- Fluffy steamed rice cakes made out of rice flour mixed with other ingredients

<sup>72</sup> Panaji is the capital city of Goa.

miles away from many of the social skills I need, like needlework, music, home economics. *(She beams)* But I like to play tennis and swim in the sea with my brothers and sell cakes in my dad's bakery — I came to Bangalore some four years and eight months ago *(She pauses and counts in fingers)* — no — it's exactly nine months ago. I always wanted to be independent — or maybe I was running away *(she smiles wryly)* — from an arranged marriage that I would inevitably face, if I had stayed. Mom wanted me to be married and settled early. I turn 24 on the 30th of October — but here I'm working, staying alone and still unmarried. *(Her voice fades away and she turns away from the audience).*

*(The spotlight shines on Peyashi. She straightens her skirt and walks in with a big smile. She looks slightly hesitant as she slowly walks towards the front of the stage.)*

### ***Peyashi***

Hi, I am Peyashi. Like most of my colleagues here, I am in my early twenties. There are heaps to tell you about my life. But here I'll begin with my family. I belong to a middle class family. My father works for the government, and my mother is a housewife. I think in my mother's generation, it was common for women to be housewives *(She pauses)*. I think it is o.k. for women to stay at home, if they have a loving husband who takes care of them — Mamuni never let us do any work at home. She would ask us to study instead. *(She crosses her arm)* Although I never enjoyed studying all the time. I think Mamuni is quite modern, despite being a housewife. Look at Tanima *(She turns back and smiles)* — her mom doesn't like her call centre job. Mamuni understands that I have to work hard here. She's always proud of us and she's happy with my job *(She takes a deep breath)* — she feels happy that I get more money than Baba already. They — I mean Baba and Mamuni — want my younger sister to come to Bangalore and work too. Hmmm — she's already in the last year of her engineering degree. That will be sooo cool.

*The light shines a beam across the stage that creates the impression of a path. Peyashi turns away from the audience and starts walking away from centre stage. Tanima is seen on the other side of the stage, talking to someone on a cell phone. She walks hurriedly towards the stage, as she sees Peyashi going backstage.*

## **Tanima**

Oooops (*She puts the mobile in her hand bag*) — Sorry — I was just speaking to my brother. He misses me and wants me home on *Durga Puja*<sup>73</sup>. (*She pats her forehead lightly with the right palm*), silly of me — I have to tell you who am I — right? I stay here in Basavgudi — in a paying guest accommodation. I have been here for the last four years. (*She walks towards the chair and hangs her hand bag on the back of it*). I always wanted a homely place to stay in. That’s why I chose to stay with other families as a paying guest. (*She pauses*) I feel safe in a family. (Her eyes lighten up) They have a good security guard for the whole house. My parents live in Kolkata now — but we, as a family, have lived all over West Bengal. My father worked for the state government. (*She becomes serious*) He is retired now and I want to take care of my two brothers and sister. They are all studying. My current job pays well. (*She speaks cautiously*) Initially, when I took up the job, no-one was happy. Night shifts were kind of a horror. (*She sighs heavily*) — all my relatives started talking — some of them even told my mother, “Do not send her to a city for night work”. But after Baba came with me, he was kind of convinced and he met everyone in the office and knew that it was good job (*She sighs again*) (*she takes a brief pause and then speaks cheerfully*) —it’s awesome though, to have friends here — and go out with them. (*She stops and looks at her wrist watch*). Sorry — we are meeting tonight at Swati’s house. (*She grabs her handbag from the chair*) I guess it will be fun, as we are going to have take-aways and lots of chatting. (*Her voice fades away and she turns away — the lights become dim*).

**Setting: It’s a cold evening. 7.30 p.m.**

*A white Santro car drives into the curved and narrow lanes of BEL layout in Sanjay Nagar. It stops in front of a two storey white building. Gita slides out of the driver’s seat and opens a large black iron gate. She looks at the house number, engraved near the entrance, to make sure it matches the address in her notebook. The door bell rings and SWATI opens the door.*

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<sup>73</sup> Durga puja- It is a festival celebrated with lots of grandeur in some of the East Indian states like West Bengal, Orissa and Assam. Goddess *Durga* is worshipped for a period of ten days during this occasion.

Sometime later: TANIMA and PEYASHI arrive in a yellow black auto- rickshaw. TANIMA steps out to check the house number. PEYASHI reads the meter and pays the driver. PEYASHI walks briskly to join TANIMA and they both look for the house for some time, before finding the correct number.

## **Scene II**

**Setting: Living Room in SWATI's house, 7.40 p.m.**

Four women, PEYASHI, TANIMA, SWATI and GITA, are found in conversation at a round glass topped dining table. SWATI arranges plates filled with biscuits, cakes and chocolates on the table. PEYASHI comes from into the kitchen carrying a pot of coffee and couple of mugs in both hands. GITA sits on a straight backed chair near the doorway to the kitchen, with her short hair tied in a pony tail. TANIMA sits next to GITA, wearing a a silk maroon coloured salwar suit, with her arms folded and legs stretched out.

PEYASHI: *(Pouring coffee into a grey coloured mug and turning towards SWATI)*. I could hardly make anything when I lived at home. It helped me to be on my own. I have learnt to feed myself. *(She lifts her mug up in the air)* Now I can make good coffee or sandwiches — or even idlis! *(She beams with pride)*

TANIMA: *(Nodding)* Mm-hmm. I had never cooked at home. My mother always thought it was more important to study than to cook.

GITA: *(Sighing softly)* I was the pampered one in my family. I have three brothers who have to do all the work inside and outside the house. My elder brother cooks special fish curries for the guests at home. I sold cakes while my father and brother helped with the baking.

PEYASHI: *(Looking thoughtful)* It was perhaps different for me too, as we are only two sisters at home. Education and jobs were more important than basic household chores. But I helped with housework, when mamuni was sick, or had her period and she wouldn't enter the kitchen.

SWATI: *(Nodding)* That was the case in my house too. Studies were more important — my mother would do most of the house-hold work — my father was supportive

though. When my mother was posted to a different place, we would be alone with *Nana* (Father). He made us do our homework, took us out and cooked for us. However, he is a typical patriarch (*PEYASHI, TANIMA and GITA look up with curious eyes*) — o.k. what I mean is nobody ever questions him about anything. We all trust his decisions and abide by it even now.

PEYASHI: (*Turning to TANIMA, as she pours some more black coffee from the pot*) I think it's important to trust one's parents. In my family, respect, trust and love are the important things that bind us together. I always pay attention to Baba's decisions. When I came to Bangalore, he thought it would be better if I stay in a PG (*Paying guest accommodation*). He has lot more experience of life. He wants me to be secure in a big city. I think this understanding between parents and children is very important.

GITA: (*Interrupting PEYASHI : everyone turns towards GITA, who has left the table and is half lying on a long sofa with two cushions propped behind her back*). Well — understanding is important, but then you should be able to express your own views, rather than only listen to your parents. What I think is — there should be a two-way understanding (*She continues after a pause*) — my mother wanted me to be married early — but I did not. She was o.k. with my decision, after I told her about my dreams. She understood that there is no harm in doing a job and then getting married. Dad too understands that I want to have my own business. He knows that I can do it — just like my brothers.

PEYASHI: (*Shaking her head*) Sounds too good to me. Baba calls me three times a week to check my safety. There are certain principles at home which we have to follow.

SWATI & GITA : (*Speaking together* ) Like what?

PEYASHI: Let's say, if I want to go out alone late night — the answer will be a big "No" — unless of course it's very urgent — like going to a medicine shop or a hospital — or someone is sick perhaps.

SWATI: What if you told them you were going to a friend's house or to a party — or something other than going to a hospital — maybe going to a second show movie?

PEYASHI: *(Taking a long pause)* It will be like a loud “NO” again.

SWATI: What do you prefer?

PEYASHI: *(Throwing her arm in the air and speaking with strained voice)* It's not a matter of what I prefer. It's rather what others will think if I do all those things. After all I have to live with people, not all by myself. I know it might really be hard to make you understand, but Mamuni keeps saying, “If you lose your respect once, it's never going to come back”. *(She takes a long pause)* — I too believe in this. It's virtues or respect that counts for me, in the long run.

GITA: *(Interrupting, she gets up from the sofa and picks up couple of biscuits from the centre table)* In a way, we all have our own ways of maintaining our self-respect.

SWATI: *(Speaking, as she quickly piles up the cups and the empty pot from the table)* My father was always upset if I stayed out in the late evenings. I think it was not until after my marriage that I stayed late outside of my home — other than reasons such as travelling.

TANIMA: There was this friend of mine, Rosy — she was different. She would always play outside and she would not do anything; just laze around. Her parents were not well off. I used to play with her in the evenings and all she ever used to do was play outside all day long — everyday. After I grew up a little, mom wouldn't let me play with her and she would tell me, “If you become like her you will end up in some slum. Good girls don't stay outside all the time.” *(She yawns and gets up from the chair to get some water)*

*TANIMA lies down on the sofa with her eyes closed. GITA takes some CDs out of her hand bag and hands them over to PEYASHI. She flicks through the titles quickly, as she orders some food over the telephone. For the next few minutes, the women start arranging their own seats in front of the TV, and SWATI puts a movie on...*

## **Reflections on Act III**

### **PEYASHI**

In line with many of the narratives above, her family seems to be paramount in Peyashi's accounts. She reveals a strong sense of self awareness and confidence, which she has achieved through her education. She perceives her independence as being the ability to pursue her studies and a career. This is perhaps due to the fact that her mother is a housewife, who stays in the house all the time. During the first initial interviews, Peyashi appears to be an epitome of a dutiful daughter, whose identity has been built up within the boundaries of the gendered norms of her family. Her sense of duty emanates from her sense of obligation, which she terms as the 'understanding between parents and children'. Sometimes, it also seems to be the result of a positive family atmosphere, which encouraged Peyashi and her sister to be free from all types of domestic chores and to concentrate on their own careers. It appears from her narrative that the contribution of Peyashi's mother, towards her self-development has been immense, since she has recognized her daughter's hard work and she is proud of her daughter's call centre job. This, in turn, had bred a strong sense of moral adherence, on the part of Peyashi, to the norms and class values her family followed. Most of all, she seems able to reconcile her desire to become a modern career woman with her desire to be a dutiful daughter. By the half way point of my fieldwork, as I observed Peyashi in her role as a customer service executive (which made it necessary for her to overstep some of her strictly home-defined boundaries), a new ground emerged, where Peyashi became more reflective and she discussed the new dimensions in her life. The subsequent chapters will show the new realms where Peyashi discusses more about her personal experiences outside of her home and the challenges these experiences has created for her.

### **TANIMA**

In a similar way to Peyashi, Tanima understands that her family is the key to her identity. Together with Peyashi, Tanima, too has stayed away from domestic chores

during her childhood. Both these women articulate the differences between their mother's role and their own, as being a natural consequence of generational differences<sup>74</sup>. However, Tanima does not completely disconnect from her gendered role in the household, since she helps her mother with the housework, if they have guests or during rituals when her mother does not enter the kitchen. She is however, critical about the 'traditional gendered division of labour' prevalent in her family, since her brother is not allowed to "even helping their mother". Whilst the initial interviews provide clues to Tanima's family background, I was able to gain the most significant insight into Tanima's life in the city, as a confident young woman, who takes her job seriously and who is self assertive. On the one hand, she is a responsible sister, who takes care of her siblings, but she also consciously articulates the role of her career in the development of herself, as well as her family. These dimensions are explored in detail in the following chapters, which speak about the self identity of Tanima, as she is exposed to her post-migratory experiences.

## **GITA**

This 25 year old from Goa, presents a refreshing contrast to most of the women I spoke with during my field work. She expresses a more liberal understanding of family values and gendered norms as a result of her specific positioning in the family. Her privileged position, as the only daughter in a financially well off family, provides opportunities for her to explore realms, which are different from the other women. This partly drives to her to be quite independent and she expresses her opinions quite freely. Unlike the selective emphasis on education and career narrated by Tanima and Peyashi, in their path towards independence, Gita nurtures a different view of an independent woman. For her, exploring a world of her own choice extends beyond the scope of what was prescribed as 'a woman's job'. This is clearly explicit from her casual narration of the things she loves to do. She managed her father's business, whilst her brothers cooked and she hopes to have a business of her own sometime in the future. Her inter-religious background facilitates her free choices and it also makes

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<sup>74</sup> Jyoti Puri (1999) terms such changes as "marrying too early or lacking self-ambitions altogether as part of our retrograde traditions which slowly perish with time" (p.x).

her reflective. She goes on to say that, “each person can define his/ her own ways of being respectable or a good woman”.

She firmly believes that the desire to be an entrepreneur moves her to have a mindset that questions the interpretations of what a woman should do. Rather than only listening to her parents, Gita prefers a two-way communication process, which would enable the development of a positive self. Her strong sense of self makes her different from the other women, who have dilemmas between being a good daughter and making adjustments in their current life. Through her understanding of individual choice, which she has experienced in her inter-religious family, she crafts a new identity and a new set of ideals for herself. Her own ability to do things differently (and competently) provides her with the self-confidence that her life could be different.

### **Summary of Reflections on Acts I, II & III**

My specific task, in this chapter, has been to acquaint the reader with the educational, familial, caste and regional backgrounds of these women and to locate them within the broader realm of gender and culture. A large amount of the contemporary literature on women in India, analyses the socialisation of women through categories such as tradition, modernisation and patriarchy within their family situations (Dhruvaranjan 1988; Dube 1988; Kakar 1988; Kumari *et al.*, 1990). However, these analyses do not emphasise how socialising practices are internalised by women in their families, or how they shape the identities of women, through the recounting of their experiences, expectations, obligation and duties. Thus, throughout this project, I have placed an emphasis on the experiences of these women, during their daily lives, in various social contexts. My aim is to gain an understanding of how identities are produced, through day to day practices in the families and also these identities being reinforced in reality (Puri 1999). What the women recounted as habits, love, duty and ambitions (in Acts - I, II and III) suggests a wider cultural framework, through which female identities are

produced and regulated within families, in addition to being re-invented and challenged.

Whilst it is evident that class, gender and caste are mutually constructed and they facilitate the identities of these women in their families, in various ways, a very strong sense of individual self also consistently emerged within the narratives. Gita, Shilpi and Priti's stories emerged as the most powerful examples of individualized selves, where new ways were devised to understand culture. Gita feels the need to overcome the gendered roles of women around the domestic sphere, as she perceives herself to be talented and able to succeed in the area of the construction business. For her, being a successful career woman with definite goals and perseverance shall make her a good daughter; thus she has attempted to devise her own sense of gaining respect for her family, through her deeds, rather than adhering to some of the prescribed norms and values. She describes some of these norms and values in her family as being "outdated". Although Tanima and Peyashi comes from backgrounds where women seldom worked outside the home, they see themselves as women from a different generation, who must study and work in order to be fully grown-up people. Kiran visualises herself to be assertive, smart and outgoing. She describes these situations as the qualities which are required from women of the new generation, who wants to live with dignity.

Vidya's interview illuminates the understanding of these women about older perceptions of domesticity, which were related to traditions and rituals that were no longer relevant within their current lives. She narrates this viewpoint through her relationship with her granny, who (according to her) was ".....lovable, but not to be taken seriously in her prescriptions of being a Brahmin woman". Shilpi speaks about her grandmother, who is critical of her freedom to live as a young woman within the family. She has her parents' support and they are more open to her daily practices. She calls this sense of openness a 'very big freedom', which had been achieved over generational changes. An important strand from these individual selves, which is displayed by these women, involves the creation of new ways to incorporate or understand culture.

The narratives also provide a direct challenge to the simplistic characterisation of these middle class women as obedient females who perform domestic chores and look forward to future arranged marriages. Exploring the ways in which the women talk about themselves, demonstrate that there is no single subject position that can describe middle class women. Various castes, regional and familial factors shape the experiences of the women who self define themselves as middle class women in some discursive contexts, mainly with reference to aspects of morality and honour.

## Chapter Five

# Dutiful daughters: embodying respectability in the middle class families

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### Introduction

The analysis in this chapter focuses on the early life experiences of the female participants as daughters. The middle class families of the women in my study emerge as sites where the construction of women as gendered subjects is achieved through various norms, values and strictures of behaviour which are imparted in the process of socialisation.

In line with previous academic studies undertaken in the area, respectability emerges as one of the powerful narrative tropes which foster a middle class feminine identity. I specifically explore how the female body is *socially constructed* and how respectability is normalised as an *integral part of femininity* within middle class families. The emphasis on a lived body<sup>75</sup> as being central to my theoretical framework simultaneously highlights a tension *underlying* the cultural regulations of the female body and the experience of the body as *a private or personal domain* of experience. The important questions that I raise in this chapter are as follows:-

1. In what ways do the *gendered dispositions* acquired in middle class families facilitate the construction of an enduring gendered identity?
2. How do the *practices* of women differ from and challenge the hegemonic norms?

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<sup>75</sup> Lived body: The notion of a lived body, as the basis of embodiment, is central to a Bourdieusian framework. The process of embodiment is realised through individual practices or lived experiences. "In this sense Bourdieu ... speaks of social agents than subjects" (McNay, 1999: 101).

## **Structure of the chapter**

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the various literatures on socialisation of women in Indian families. In addition, I draw attention to some of the key concepts such as “habitus”, “pre-reflexive aspects of gendered identity” which explain the formation of gendered identities among the participants in my study.

In the second section, I present the analysis of some of the key socio-cultural realms in the middle class families, which emerged as significant areas during the narrative interviews with the women. These pertained to the experiences of puberty, emphasis on education as a mark of distinction for middle class females, restrictions on dating practices and the embodiment of dutifulness by a daughter.

The narratives implied that by being dutiful and obedient, the daughters are conforming to familial values and they are therefore considered honourable. At the same time, these experiences also make apparent the *tensions that exist between the social meaning of the female body and body as a domain of private or individual experiences*.

## **Literature in the area**

Several researchers underscore the socialisation processes in families as being crucial in the development of gendered identities (Chanana 1988; Dhruvaranjan 1988; Dube 2001; Kakar 1988; Nandy 1994). An ideal Indian daughter is expected to be dutiful in protecting her reputation and honour within her family (Dube, 1988; 2001). Citing conformity as a two-way process, it is emphasised by various scholars that that women conform to these prescribed roles and expectations, because of the obvious social rewards of being a wife, daughter or sister (Rao 1999; Ghadially 1988; Sethi and Allen 1988). Thus, these understandings of the process of female socialisation stress “... the reproduction of a social system characterised by gender asymmetry and the overall subordination of women” (Dube, 2001: 113).

In this thesis, however, I argue against the representation of women as passive recipients of socialising practices. I discuss the relevance of individual practices and I explore how the identities of women as daughters are shaped through the experiences

of their bodies and sexuality in their daily lives. In this context, Judith Butler suggests that gendered acts do not follow a prior gendered self: rather that gendered identities are constructed through numerous regular practices/ acts that are historically defined as appropriate or normal (Butler 1988). Bourdieu strikes a similar chord, as he describes a lived body as the medium through which gendered dispositions are acquired and become a form of second nature (Bourdieu 1984). It is also important to reiterate that the Indian familial site provides a space of ambivalence and conflict, with numerous mixed messages being passed on to daughters. For example, Wadley (1988) stresses the coexistence of varying feminine images in religious and familial discourses such as powerful and powerless, dominant and submissive, nurturing and destructive. Therefore, it becomes crucial to understand the specific experiences of women in families, which leads to the *selective* internalisation of these images.

## **Theoretical concepts**

I frame my argument through the Bourdieusian notion of ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 2008; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) and individual practices. Habitus is responsible for producing gendered identities through particular ‘durable and transposable dispositions and structure of perception developed during early familial socialisation processes’ (Bourdieu, 1997/2000: 131-146&208-237). The habitus is a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour people acquire through acting in society. It reflects the different positions people have in society, for example, whether they are brought up in a middle class environment or in a working class suburb (Bourdieu 2008). As Lois Wacquant notes, “... these systems of dispositions are malleable, since they inscribe into the body the evolving influence of the social milieu, but within the limits set by primary (or earlier) experiences, since it is habitus itself which at every moment filters such influence” (Wacquant 2006: 7).

The unique feature of habitus is that these “dispositions are acquired at an unconscious and pre reflexive level, and thus form an entrenched part of the female body” (McNay, 1999: 101). Bourdieu explains that the habitus is acquired in the family — but over a period of time it becomes durably incorporated in the body, in the

form of permanent dispositions (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This process, known elsewhere as 'embodiment'<sup>77</sup> (Butler 1993; Grosz 1994) in feminist literature, provides the main conceptual apparatus to understand the gendered identities constructed in middle class families.

In the following section, I discuss various experiences articulated by the women during the interviews, which emerged as important themes for the study. One of the important discussions that carried a range of socio-cultural meanings pertained to the realm of puberty. Socio-culturally, it signifies transition of young daughters into a matured femalehood based on biological changes of the female body. In the narrative interviews, the following questions elicited varying responses on the pubertal experiences of the women.

Does your family have specific rituals related to puberty?

What happened when you first attended puberty?

### **Puberty: A rite of passage**

Anthropological literature constructs puberty as a significant life phase for women (Dhruvaranjan 1989; Dube 1988; 2001; Das, 1988). Dube describes menarche as a turning point in the life of a young girl (Dube, 1986; 1988), whilst Veena Das (1988) based on her field work among *Punjabis* in Northern India narrates the radical change in orientation to a female body during menarche. Dhruvaranjan (1989) and Das (1988) stress that various puberty related rituals generate a (self) perception of the female body as being inferior<sup>78</sup> and polluting and that it needs to be guarded, secluded and hidden. These traditional norms of socialisation in families gives rise to the embodiment of shame and a constrained sexuality, where mingling with men, visiting public places such as temples and cooking at home etc. are prohibited.

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<sup>77</sup> Embodiment: In contrast to the academic discourse of a sex-gender distinction where the body is perceived as biological, upon which a social construction of gender is imposed, embodiment emphasises a more dynamic and lived body that shapes a person's identity.

<sup>78</sup> Dhruvaranajan (1988) emphasises that ritual menstrual restrictions (such as seclusion) reinforce the premise of female inferiority.

Veena Das (1988), in this context, notes that menarche represents a shift from a pre-pubertal ambiguous gender status to a stage, where gender socialisation is both unambiguous and central. In her analysis of the meanings of menstrual taboos amongst Hindu women, Jocelyn Krygier theorises that the ritual restrictions during menstruation express and maintain gender inequality. For example, women are prohibited from entering a temple, cooking, playing, jumping, or touching other male members, both inside and outside of the families, during their menstruation (Krygier, 1982: 76-92). It is also suggested that the women may be prevented from taking a bath, washing their hair, engaging in sexual activity etc. which thereby signifies a ritually polluted state of being (Jeffery 1979: 110-112; Nath, 1981: 19).

These arguments, which visualise the shaping of a gendered body “through the grip of culture in their everyday life” (Bordo, 1993: 16), refers to embodiment as a *one-sided process* of cultural inscription. For example, rituals and customs inculcate the sense of an inferior body in addition to a sense of shame. The question that I ask here is *whether the young women passively embody the sense of inferiority and shamefulness about their body within their families, or whether there is an element of resistance and a generation of practices which supplement the process of embodiment?* Theoretically, this is a distinction between the conceptualisation of a “docile body” by Michel Foucault (1977), where the socio-cultural prescriptions related to phenomena such as puberty completely determine the understanding, behaviour and perception of the women and a ‘lived body’, where different forms of resistance and process of negotiation form a part of experiencing these norms and living through the normative discourses. My argument is that *the body is not passive, since it experiences the culture — and not only just receives it.* The bodily experiences of pain, discomfort or oppression may give rise to individual actions, where the individual devises creative practices in order to minimise such repression. The lived experiences thus “... defy making the female body a passive repository of discursive traditions” (Puri, 1999: 44).

The narratives of the young women in my study, who stand at the crossroads of traditions and modernity, with their exposure to higher education, liberal family discourses, media influences etc. emphasise such individual experiences of a female body as being primary to the facilitation of the embodiment process. In the narratives

of these women, I am attentive to the ways in which the individualised pubertal experiences of these women (located in specific socio-cultural locations) can explain why some women acquiesced to these norms, whilst others did not. Their experiences, which vary according to the familial, caste and educational background of the women, reveal the individual negotiations needed to minimise the subjugation, frustration or shame that is experienced with the onset of puberty, rather than complete acceptance and acquiescence. The key point is that the norms (or rejection of them) are embodied in lived bodies, i.e. specific practices are adopted.

I observed that various experiences narrated by the women during the course of the interviews were marked with anxiety and resentment that resulted out of the restrictions imposed on them during their menstrual cycle in the families. These restrictions were off-shoots of the gendered norms and values relating to the sphere of purity and pollution. As the women live through these norms, they engage in various practices which challenge the dominant norms on puberty and display the agency of women.

### ***Anxiety, resentment and embodiment***

SUMITA: There were so many women who came... my mom called them, I did not like it... it felt like I was terminally ill. It is so disgusting.

SHILPI: I would shout for my mother every ten minutes. Then I kind of thought she is responsible for making me a girl and putting me through all these ordeals of changing pads, turning and looking at my back in the school, or feeling scared as the day approached. I often used to ask her, why didn't you make me a boy?

Whilst menstruation has been romantically described as a process of flowering and blossoming in religious texts (Dube 2001), or an important life phase where there is passive acquiescence on the part of young girls to the norms and rituals of their society or family, there was a sense of resentment amongst many of the women I interviewed, as they articulated their first pubertal experiences. Tanima was so upset with all the fuss made by her mother, concerning something that was exclusively a private thing for her, that she stopped letting her mother know when she had her subsequent

periods. “It made her [Tanima’s mother] wonder, whether it has stopped for sometime or something was wrong with me”. In order to overcome the embarrassment, she tried to manage herself during the periods and keep it as a secret from her mother. Tanima seems to recognise that periods are understood as making her feel inferior. However, she seems to reject this by managing her knowledge about them. She thus displays her agency and negotiates a space, where she is away from the familial impositions on her private affairs. Therefore, on the one hand, she accepts the changing nature of her female body, which is defined as inferior — and on the other hand, she contests the ways in which her body should be managed.

The experiences of puberty came all of a sudden for Vidya, Sumita and Peyashi, who had no prior knowledge of it. The lack of proper understanding of the phenomena, coupled with the tensions of their mothers and the fussing of neighbours and relatives made it worse for them. Vidya, for example, was always anxious about the way she was supposed to behave during her periods within her Brahminical family that practiced the rituals of purity in a rigorous way. Moreover, the presence of her grandmother added to her anxiety:

VIDYA: I was always conscious about the distance that I had to maintain from other members in the family, so that I do not touch them and defile them. I would not enter the kitchen or go near my grandmother or touch her things. Sometimes, I would hide from everyone, if by mistake I touched something considered as sacred or auspicious during my periods.

This state of fretfulness, that she might be responsible for defilement of the ritual status of her family, made Vidya rigidly conform to the normative prescriptions. It also provided her with a type of ‘mental peace’ and lessened her anxiety level as she revealed during the interview. Kiran narrates her experience as a real ‘metamorphosis in just three days which she would never forget in her life’.

KIRAN: I was shut in one room, even the windows were closed, so that no one could see me. I was supposed to go on a school picnic. That was cancelled. I was sitting in one of the corners during the day. On the third day we had all the ladies from our neighbourhood and relatives coming over for a small function. I

wore the half-sari<sup>79</sup> for the first time... some jewellery. I felt very different. Even after everything was over, I was kind of different. I also felt different. My mother was very anxious. The neighbours would always say, now you are grown up. I grew up overnight. I did not like it.

For Kiran, who comes from a Brahmin family, the rituals and ceremonies associated with puberty were unavoidable. The ceremonies associated with puberty made her feel like a grown up overnight and there was a change in the way she was treated in her family.

KIRAN: I was very close to my father... often I would hug him and sit on his lap. I was quite pampered by him... one of my aunts... she once scolded me for sitting on my dad's lap. She told my mom, you do not teach your daughters anything, they even don't know how to behave as a big girl.

As Kiran articulates, there were changes in the way she physically interacted with her father during her periods. She stopped sitting on his lap or hugging him when he came back from the office. She was bothered by the thought that he would know about her periods and think that she was no longer his little girl. She recollects how it gave rise to irritation about her own body, where she could not be as close as a son to her father. She even tried hard to cover her breasts, so that no one would notice that she was transforming into a grown up woman. However, she always resisted the idea that she should not be close to her father, because her body was polluted: rather she articulates the messiness or un-cleanliness during the period as the factors 'that made her be away from everyone for a little while' every month.

Priti was a revolutionary, who questioned each and every aspect of the gendered norm and practices she was subjected to in her family. Narrating her experiences of rituals relating to puberty, she shook her head and said "I do not believe in these rituals but my mother forces them onto me". I shared Priti's disgust, when she told me how her mother put the first menstrual blood on her face, so that she would never have pimples in the future. Priti claims that such norms are impractical and outdated. She tries to substantiate her claims by giving reasons for cleanliness:

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<sup>79</sup> A *half sari*, is a form of traditional clothing to be worn by a pubertal girl in Andhra Pradesh and symbolises the changed status of a pubertal girl (Dube, 2001:98).

Women of my generation mostly use modern sanitary pads and not cloth, which could be contaminating. During my mother's generation, they used some sort of soft cloth which would be washed and reused. I think that's the reason why they were kind of secluded and not allowed to mingle. It does not have any meaning now-a-days when you have good products to use and can avoid infections.

Priti thus expresses a personalised account of menarche and rejects the social customs that should be observed to make it public. However, she took special care during her menstruation, so that her brother and father would not know about it. Thus, her attempts to conceal and contain early menstruation reflect her efforts to gain control over the experience.

Shilpi reveals her experience of utter physical discomfort and depression during the early menstruation cycles. Whilst her mother helped her a great deal during this time, she complained persistently about the difference between her brother and herself, who was just a year older and did not have to pass through this ordeal every month. In the initial days, severe back pain confined her to the home. However, as time progressed she tried to overcome the 'lameness during those three days' by doing specific physical exercises, drinking milk to increase her calcium supplement and using good sanitary products, so that she would not stain her clothes and thus avoid embarrassment in front of her classmates and other family members.

In the cases of Tanim, Priti, Kiran and Shilpi, their experiences within their family, during puberty facilitated the process of embodiment in specific ways. These women made conscious efforts to hide the fact that their body was menstruating and they took care to maintain personal hygiene and keep a distance from the male members of the family. Whilst the phase of menarche did symbolise the transition of these young girls into sexual beings and it was defined in culturally specific ways, the women contested the norms and rituals which they found repressive and they provided a more personal account of the event. The embodiment of shame concerned with the pubertal body amongst these women thus takes place with their varying cultural experiences of a matured female body and it involves both acquiescence and resistance. The narratives of these women show that normalising discourses and

disciplinary strategies within their family operate through a lived body, as the women internalise, reproduce and contest these strategies of social control. For example, the normalizing discourses in Vidya's family emphasize that women are not supposed to enter the puja room<sup>80</sup> during their periods, as a menstruating female body is perceived to be in a polluted state.

Amongst the women I interviewed, I also found instances where the socio-cultural location of the young women accounted for a conventional description of menarche as a community affair, and normative prescriptions were accepted without a great deal of questioning. For Ramani, her upbringing in a traditional *Rajput* family made her gracefully accept the rituals related to puberty. As she recounted her experiences it was clear that there were distinct changes in her way of dressing, sitting and even making friends, after she reached puberty. She switched over to wearing dresses which covered her legs and arms, started putting *dupattas* (used to cover the upper body) with her dresses and stopped riding her bike in the evenings, as she had previously enjoyed. On many occasions, it was explicit that Ramani not only followed the values of her family, but she also believed in them and this could explain why traditions were an important part of her family. Her family live in Kasauli, a small town in Himachal Pradesh and they have a considerable reputation in the locality. Being part of a rich heritage and a close-knit community, it is always important for her not only to understand, but also to follow the traditions.

In a similar manner Vidya, who comes from a traditional Brahmin family in Karnataka, narrates how the occasion was celebrated in her family. Her female relatives were invited and they gifted her with new dresses and ornaments. She took her bath using turmeric instead of soap and her mother bestowed a great deal of attention towards her food and physical discomfort during those days. Looking back, Vidya feels that the presence of her grandmother was also instrumental in the elaborate observation of rituals during her puberty which gradually reduced as she grew up and she started to resist the way she was treated as an untouchable during her periods. Slowly she was allowed to eat with other family members, although there were strict prohibitions

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<sup>80</sup> Specified space meant for worshipping in a Hindu household.

against entering the kitchen and the *puja* (worshipping) room. Thus Vidya's experience of repression due to the distance maintained with other family members during puberty and being made to sit in one corner of the room on a mat made her resist, rather than passively accepting the labeling of her body as polluted. Thus she negotiated a space for herself where her frustration was minimised. For example, as she revolted against being treated as an untouchable during her periods and refused to eat, her grandmother (whom she describes as being extremely traditional) relaxed the rules for her and she was only made to sit for the first day during her period. However, Vidya accepts the fact that she should not enter the *puja* room or the kitchen during her period, since these are the more sacred realms of her *Brahminical* home. As a result, Vidya's embodiment of an impure menstruating body follows on from her pre-reflexive acquiescence to certain norms, as being more important than others in the familial habitus.

This also signifies the fact that gendered dispositions are entrenched to various degrees and they are not subjected to changes uniformly. The accounts of these women illustrate that cultural diversity, caste status, familial location and the role of mothers are important, together with the experiences of the women in the processes of female embodiment. In the discussion that follows, I show (based on the narratives) that these gendered experiences which seem pivotal in the lives of these middle class women in my study, also form potential grounds where ways of being sexually respectable is learnt and embodied.

### ***Puberty and embodiment of sexual respectability***

PEYASHI: All of my favourite clothes were out of size at once. I could not wear frocks any longer. My mother would buy long dresses so that my legs will not be seen; it was also not ok if I sat cross legged.

VIDYA: One of my aunties said, "Gosh, she is growing too fast." I knew it was not my height that drew her attention. I had full breasts and she was hinting at that. I was too conscious and started wearing really tight cotton vests to hide my body.

RAMANI: I started wearing full dresses like *salwars*<sup>81</sup> and slacks. My mother was very particular about how a girl should behave. She would tell me not to sit cross-legged, or in any particular posture in which panties will be seen... particularly about wearing *chunris*<sup>82</sup> when I started growing breasts. She was very particular about our upbringing in regard to all this. Actually the place was quite small and the culture for women and the prescriptions are mostly obeyed by all. So you cannot be an exception.

Puberty was accompanied by visible changes in the bodies of the women — which made them self-conscious. The need to find different types of clothes that would fit their growing body and remarks from parents and relatives, all contributed towards this self-consciousness. The bodily experiences of these women were accompanied by a more explicit form of gender socialisation, where expectations related to sexual propriety were subtly inculcated through scripts of decency, morality and threats to the female body etc. As most of these women narrate, it became important that they dressed appropriately. The emphasis on covering the body, especially the upper part, rendered a feeling of ‘shame’ for Tanima, ‘irritation’ for Ramani and ‘disgust’ for Vidya, concerning their own bodies. These negative feelings are also a result of ‘feeling different from her brothers’ as Gita implies in her narrative, or restrictions about playing with the boys outside home, as spoken by Ramani and Tanima, or ‘becoming a centre of attraction for all unnecessary reasons’ as described by Kiran. Thus, ideas, such as the female body having to be guarded, breasts needing to be covered and interaction with men needing to be limited, are not accepted without resistance. These assumptions are instrumental in the further creation of internal boundaries around the female body and in generating embodied practices. Peyashi articulates that it is not safe for women to go out alone and therefore, she is always escorted by her parents to family functions and festivals.

Ramani and Tanima had to learn new ways of dressing and also appropriate postures that made them look respectable, by hiding the signs of their burgeoning sexuality.

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<sup>81</sup> *Salwars*: Traditional clothes of Indian women, both young and old. The bottom is loose pants made in different styles. A top is worn over it, almost touching the knees or even below it.

<sup>82</sup> *Chunris*: A long colourful scarf which is worn to cover the upper part of the female body.

Priti was more of a tomboy, and dressed in loose T-shirts and shorts to hide her femininity, so that she could be friendly with all her male cousins. Many of the women faced restrictions about going outside of their home, after a certain time in the evening. Kiran describes how her mother would panic if she came back late from her extra classes during high school and she would send out a search party to look for her. These concerns expressed by her mother also influenced Kiran's perception of safety and risk for herself, and this created internal boundaries, with respect to time and place. Although she lived in Bangalore alone, she confides that she never goes out in the evening on her own, except for the night shifts or sometimes with her colleagues. Kiran's perception of safety and risk in the city thus stem from her embodied experiences in the familial habitus. Kiran always wears loose T-shirts or tops, which will not emphasize her breasts at work or during any of the team parties. I always found Priti wearing her jean jacket and keeping up her tomboyish image whilst at work.

The socialisation processes within the families at the onset of puberty, which constrained the emerging sexualities of the women in my study, have many underlying socio-cultural meanings. These are however, 'embodied by the women in a pre-reflexive<sup>83</sup> manner' (McNay 1999). At a surface level, new ways of dressing meant 'looking decent', thus emphasising female modesty and 'getting on with one's life without appearing as a 'big girl', or resisting the perception that they have crossed the threshold of their childhood. Similarly, familial restrictions on their movements outside of home in the evenings (after 6 p.m.) are perceived as norms, which are enforced by these families for the safety of the women themselves. However, most implicitly, these norms reinforce the middle class cultural value of a sexual respectability constructed through the female body. For example, Leela Dube (1988) points out:

The young women in their post pubertal period of life enters the phase, when the body acquires the capacity to reproduce; however it does not have the

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<sup>83</sup> I borrow this term for Lois McNay (1999). Here it implies that certain norms practiced in the families are so deeply internalised by the young women in my study, that they act it out in most situations unconsciously.

social sanction to do so. Therefore the period between the onset of puberty and marriage is the most vulnerable period when the sexuality of the young unmarried women must be contained with restrictions on their movements, and interactions with males etc. It is also tied with her role as a future mother and wife (Dube, 1988: 14).

Based on the narratives of the women I interviewed, I argue that embodiment of sexual respectability amongst the women, who perceive a threat in going out of their house in the evenings or interacting with members of the opposite sex implicitly reinforces gendered values such as morality and chastity as being an important part of middle class feminine identity. The Bourdiesian notion of “symbolic violence” is important in order to understand how familial values, which constrain the sexuality of these young women, are inculcated through the socialisation process in a subtle way and they are entrenched in the bodies of these women (unconsciously), but with their complicity (Bourdieu, 1992: 167). Lois McNay’s conceptualisation of pre-reflexivity (which I have used before in this chapter) aptly captures this facet of embodiment in the following way.

The acquisition of gendered identity does not pass through consciousness; it is memorised at a pre-reflexive level. At the same time bodily dispositions are not simply inscribed or mechanically learnt but lived as a form of practical mimesis. (Bourdieu 1990, *cited in* McNay, 1999: 39)

The notion of habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) becomes central here, since it explains the ways in which the social is literally incorporated into the body. Whilst their pubertal experiences shaped some of the ways in which the women conducted themselves, through appropriate dressing, decent postures and developing certain understanding about their own bodies, it also became an entrenched part of their identities in the long run. According to Bourdieu,

... [The body] does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, bringing it back to life. What is learned by the body is not something one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is (Bourdieu, 1990: 73).

Thus, drawing on the narratives, I argue that the experience of puberty simultaneously endows women with certain bodily experiences, which form an integral part of their

personalities and it helps in “maintaining the boundary of the middle class families at the same time with emphasis on purity and restraint in behaviour” (Dube, 1988: 15).

## **Education and gendered identity**

There is a range of literature that examines the role of education and employment, related to gender roles in families. A large number of illuminating studies argue that the participation of women in education and employment outside of their home has not brought about a substantial change in the notions of Indian femininity (Bhatty 1988; Dube 1988). On the other hand, several recent research studies challenge the more traditional understandings of feminine identities, within a rapidly changing socio-cultural context. In middle and upper class families, the effects of urbanisation, migration and employment has led to a restructuring of the gendered norms (Banerjee 1999). For example, parents support and approve of a girl’s aspirations and her plans to enter into various careers (Gupta & Sharma 2003; Saraswathi 1999; Scrase 2002). These factors also contribute towards an enhancement of self-esteem and confidence amongst such young women (Gupta 2003; Jha & Pujari 1998; Ganguly- Scrase 2003). With greater values being attached to education, it is no longer only seen as the means to acquire a good husband (Chanana 1996): it has become a means to obtain autonomy and socio-psychological independence (Jha & Pujari 1998). This aspect of higher education, in the lives of women from middle and upper classes, delays the age of marriage (Banerjee 1999; Thapan 1997) and reinforces a lifestyle that prioritises women as being individuals who are able to make decisions, as a result of their earning potential.

Whilst this literature reports many of the changes occurring in the lives of women, it does not address the important question of how these women, who are subjected to the processes of changes and new relationships in the outside world, associate with their more traditional images of being a mother, a wife or a daughter at home. Nor does the literature explain the relationship between the the liberating aspects of thoughts that emerge from higher education and aspirations for a career with the material dimensions of their identities. These material dimensions include dealing with child rearing duties and other domestic responsibilities, which are traditionally

defined as the domain of women or the concern of families or communities that women should get married at a certain age etc.

As the narratives in my study indicate, educational privilege can be seen as an integral part of middle class families and a medium to fulfill parental expectations. However, I also look at the ways education brings in certain un-intended consequences by opening up arenas of aspirations, creative practices and agency. In the narrative interviews, the movement from housework to education and occupation were discussed through the mother's role, where each generation of women has worked to lift themselves up and out of patriarchal repressions. As Priti puts it, 'she (her mother) did not want her daughter to suffer the way she did'. In interviews the women favoured the image of an educated, working woman, who did not spend her time (only) cooking and doing other types of housework or merely tolerating repression at home.

KIRAN: We no longer stay with our grandparents like we used to do when I was a kid. My father was mostly away from us... he had a touring job. My grandmother was a tyrant (*Expression becomes somber*). She used to abuse my mom, make her do all the work. It was a very clumsy atmosphere at home. I did not like it. Now we stay separately. My mother sometimes remembers all those days. She thinks we should be independent (*Smiles*). We are both post graduates.

Kiran's expression was full of loathing as she spoke about her extended family. The experiences of her mother, as a helpless woman in a repressive patriarchal extended family structure had a profound influence on how she was brought up. Kiran, as a young girl, was taught to do well in studies and to be independent, so that she would not be vulnerable in her future married life. For Kiran, the journey towards higher education began more as a duty to make her father happy. Slowly, she developed her interest and completed her Masters in Science. She directs our attention towards education as serving several purposes at the same time. On the one hand, it fulfilled the expectations of her father and made him proud of his daughter. Education is also a further reference for the wider community, where the class positioning of their family

also depended on the educational achievements of their daughters. Her family has a good reputation in the community since 'it has two well educated and homely daughters'. On the other hand, becoming a post graduate also enables Kiran to look for a job outside of her home and expand her opportunities to be independent.

In contrast to the traditional emphasis on a daughter's education leading to being an informed mother or marrying well, education for Priti was a means for empowerment: a road to financial independence. It translated into her future choice of working in a call centre rather than pursuing her MBA, as insisted upon by her maternal grandparents. However, it was interesting to note how Priti had to switch over to the role of being a dutiful daughter, in order to obtain permission to migrate to Bangalore. She had to convince her mother that she would not compromise the family name in any way, whilst she was away from home.

Here, Priti reiterates her middle class positioning as a dutiful daughter who, in spite of her aspirations for a career and independence, is bound to familial expectations and therefore makes a commitment to guard the family honour in the distant city. In Priti's case, education and being independent through a job carries a meaning, which cannot be explained by either referring to a traditional identity, or a modern persona. She inhabits a space which is between her own ambition to be a career woman and that of the expectations of her family to be a daughter, who would study and work and shut herself out from the external world, which they perceive as being morally corrupt.

Ramani and Sumita explain the importance of education in their families in the following way:

RAMANI: Mamaji does not let me work. She thinks I should just study which is more worthwhile than doing housework.

SUMITA: I was never asked to do housework while in school: Actually the younger ones are not allowed to do much work. Papa tells me not to do all those ladies work and ask me to study instead.

The women's discussions centred on the shifting gendered roles within the family, which resulted in the rejection of housework in favour of education and employment outside the home. This perception is also rooted in the experiences of mothers who perceive that a lack of education and an exclusive preoccupation with household work may not be beneficial for their daughters /grand-daughters to lead a good life. Thus, in contrast to the confinement of women within the inner domestic sphere, the employment of women outside of their home was valued more in the middle class families of these participants. This was, however, accompanied by the expectations that the women would conduct themselves properly in their place of employment and agree to an arranged marriage, when desired so by the families.

Vidya is another young woman who had come to Bangalore from a very traditional *Brahmin* family. She narrates that her father is an ambitious man who wanted his daughter to be highly educated and well placed in a job. She was motivated by her father's influence and she wanted to take up a well paid job in one of the international call centres. Gita and Shilpi also describe the role of education in their lives as being empowering along similar lines to Priti, Kiran and Vidya. In conformity with several studies (Jha and Puri 1998; Scrase 2002; Ganguly-Scrase 2003), which identify public visibility, education and employment of women outside of their home, as being a matter of pride for middle class families, the narratives in my study reveal the aspirations of middle class families that their daughters should study and get into jobs, rather than being confined at home or engage in domestic chores.

In the current study, the reference of the women towards their education and career carries several meanings since these are distinct from fulfilling parental expectations and affecting upward mobility. Being educated also opens up the horizon of new experiences and practices, which are not part of the consequences intended by their families. For example, Ramani, who comes from a very traditional family and wants to pursue her career by doing MBA, consciously articulates the barriers that are part of her privileged middle class location. On the one hand, an arranged marriage into a Rajput family would bring her security and respectability, whilst on the other hand it would also create anxiety for her, with the possibility that her future family might not allow her to continue working. For Kiran and Shilpi (as revealed during the interviews)

their peer group at school provided the strength for their resistance towards familial norms, such as dating, going out with friends or dressing up in particular ways. The desire to blend in with their friends rather than to stand out, made Shilpi and Sumita resist the family norms, which did not allow them to go to parties or wear fashionable clothes etc. Whilst this type of rebellion was aimed at feeling comfortable with their peers, it did not always challenge the gendered identities acquired at home.

The following discussions pertaining to the sphere of dating tells us more about how respectability as a form of 'symbolic capital' is further reinforced in the families of the women in my study.

## **Dating**

The stories that the women told about dating portray how the behaviour of the women is regulated through normalising discourses of conduct, which are mostly related to norms of heterosexuality, premarital chastity and the expression of female sexuality within the boundaries of marriage.

Most of the women displayed a heightened concern for the sexual modesty and respectability after puberty. This is evident in the various forms of regulations and restrictions imposed on their behaviour and movements as young girls. The women consistently talk about dating as one such arena, which invoked intense parental reactions. Unpacking the women's stories concerning their early experiences of attraction towards boys or young men, their desire to go out with them to a park or a movie or on a long drive, all of which were fulfilled in a hidden manner, provides an insight into how culture shaped these women's experiences of dating. On the other hand, the behaviour of the women indicates that transformative possibilities were created through their practices. Whilst the role of culture in the construction of identities is important, Judith Butler (1990) extends an understanding of the female body as an active medium, which mediates cultural construction. According to her, embodiment is not determined, but instead it is produced through construction with both creative and transformative possibilities, the extent of which needs to be examined in any given cultural setting (Butler 1990).

## ***Familial resistances to dating***

*Once I was in my college my mom said, no boys, only girls- Sumita*

Sumita describes why dating is not acceptable in her family.

Mom says, "It is not good to speak to guys on the telephone for one to two hours. They take a long time". I say, "Mom, from my side it is good"... Mom says, "You may have a pure heart but they may not". One day you go out with one of them. Next day the rumour comes. If you just sit with him then he would say that he has kissed you or something else. One of my friends had this kind of experience. It's not only society but also the guy with whom you go out with, talks. It's not good for a woman's reputation.

Sumita holds the opinion that reputation is important for her, as well as for the family and 'being seen with a guy or going on a date might spoil it'. Her narrative raises several analytical issues: The expectation of her family relates to the value of premarital chastity, which is reflected in the norm of keeping their daughter away from talking or going out with men. Here, the link between family respectability and class positioning is undoubtedly played through the female body and achieved through a constrained sexuality. On the other hand, Sumita also thinks that she should comply with these norms, since her behaviour not only affects her own reputation: it is also related to how her family will be considered in the community. These aspects of a repressed female sexuality, which is at the heart of such normative injunctions, escape the conscious monitoring of Sumita and lead to her subject formation according to the middle class positioning of her family. What she considers as 'normal' marks the experiencing and knowing of her own body, through a set of value systems that is defined as appropriate in her middle class family. Susan Bordo (1993) suggests that such bodily lessons which women learn through routine and habitual activity, are far more effective politically than explicit instructions for appropriate behaviour.

Dube (2000), in her illuminating anthropological work on socio-cultural construction of gender, argues that "construction of femineity is a continuous, complex and occasionally contradictory process, where the subordination of women is achieved through control over their sexuality" (P: 96). Extending my focus to include the

narratives of other women allows me to analyse each of these issues (such as subtle and continuous inculcation of gendered norms) in turn. Of particular interest is how women narrate these experiences of constraints (related to their sexuality) and the ways in which they contest and negotiate the politics of sexual respectability, from the viewpoint of the middle class.

### **Kiran**

I am known as the chatterbox in my group. I have some men friends too ... (*Self consciously*) but I tell them if you ask me for a long drive or for a movie, I cannot oblige. I am just not that sort of a girl. I can look into a guy's eye and tell whether he is good or bad.

Kiran suggests that it is not only parental restriction that prevents her from being friendly with men: She also knows exactly where to draw the line in the relationship. Whilst she is friendly and often renders a helping hand to someone with a problem, she refuses to do anything where she would be seen as morally wrong. In the small town where she resided during her adolescence period, being seen with a guy outside could have had serious consequences for the reputation of a girl, as well as her family. Whilst being friendly with a guy could be all right with her, being a 'girl friend' to a young man (which would draw attention to her female sexuality) was certainly not acceptable.

### **Tanima**

Tanima is quite articulate about her traditional upbringing and the things she learnt in the process. Most crucial of all, was 'not to give into temptations'.

I have had several opportunities to date in college... but I have turned them down. A few times I have gone to movies with one of the guys while in junior college. (*Self consciously*) They were all morning shows. I mean I liked him and I would have continued being friendly and knowing more about him but my mother objected. She said that guys are more interested in the physical aspects of relationships...that's because they do not have to suffer if something goes wrong, like getting pregnant. The female will be identified if she is pregnant and if unmarried, that's the end. I want to have a smooth life: I listen to what my mother says...she has huge experience in such matters (*laughs*).

The difficulties which Tanima narrates refer to her sexuality, which is culturally constructed and makes women vulnerable to male aggressors. Thus, the fear of the families, that their young daughters will lose their virginity (either through external aggression or voluntary desire) gives rise to several direct and indirect rules in the family, which then minimises the interaction of young women with men, in addition to restricting their mobility.

### **Peyashi**

Frankly speaking, I never had any opportunity to date. I was in this girl's high school, which was very strict in terms of behaviour of the students. The dress code was defined: we were not allowed to wear any jewellery, put nail-paint or wear makeup. Mingling with boys was definitely not allowed... actually there was no scope. In my neighbourhood, there were boys: When I was a kid I used to play with them. But I do not remember playing after I had my periods. There was this boy who lived in my colony and in the same grade. I remember him coming over to my place and asking for my school notes... once or twice. But in college, I had gone out with my class mate, maybe to eat or chat or for a movie ... not on a regular basis. If you do these things on a regular basis, then there is lots of unnecessary attention that you invite towards yourself... from the family and outside.

The restrictions on young girls to dress up or adorn their bodies in various ways were pervasive in Peyashi's school. These controls were implicitly directed towards containing the emerging sexualities of the young girls and to keep them safe from any kind of physical violation. The scope for knowing a boy or a young man was limited for Peyashi, with such restrictions also being common in her home. She was not allowed to exchange notes or chat with boys who lived in the neighbourhood. Her reputation as a nice girl involved the avoidance of male company or going out on dates with young men.

External threat to a girl's sexuality, which might ruin her reputation or make her impure at a broad level, expresses the link between the middle class position of Peyashi and her female body — where these distinctions are culturally coded. These

inscriptions are also deeply internalised by her and she perceives familial restrictions as being important for her safety, rather to be constraining. For example, Peyashi is articulate about why she should not go outside her home after dark. Her parents worry about her safety and she defends their concern as being valid, in order to ensure that she is not molested by anyone. She was not allowed to go to late night parties or go out with young men. She proudly declares “I do not like these things myself”.

Thus, across these narratives, what is common is the familial concern for consistent regulation of female sexuality and the protection of the female body from external threats. It also shapes the ideas of what is ‘respectable’ and ‘acceptable’ and this becomes embodied through the initial experiences of the young women in my study within the families. For example, Kiran implicitly agrees with the normative discourse of her family that she will have a bad reputation if seen with a man outside. However, her narrative is silent about ‘why should it matter if she is seen with a guy outside of home’, which implies a form of pre-reflexive- or unconscious complicity with what is expected of her. Ramani presents accounts of what Jyoti Puri terms as a “negative perception of womanhood” (Puri, 1999: 69), as she articulates being unfriendly with some of her classmates, who would wear revealing clothes showing part of their legs, or a low neckline exposing their cleavage and drawing unnecessary attention towards their sexuality. For Ramani, “sexuality is dangerous if not guarded properly and the fault lies with the women themselves”. Analysing the narratives of Sumita, Ramani and Kiran, illustrates how an awareness of the female body is heightened on a daily basis, in the experiences of these women, since they are constantly being told by their family members to self-monitor and manage their behaviour, according to normative gender and class-based standards of respectability. These regulating strategies of families are implicit in the narratives of these women and they also indicate how the gender and class-based tensions of sexual respectability thoroughly shape what may be called ‘experiences of the female body’. These experiences also lead women to shoulder the burden of protecting their socially constructed bodies, which signify their positioning as daughters in middle class families.

However, not all the women with whom I interacted unquestioningly accepted the dictate of their family -- not to interact with boys or young men. In the following

section, I discuss the narratives which challenged restrictions in the family that confined the movement or sexuality of the young women. What are noticeable from these narratives are the accounts where the women repeatedly question the range of restrictions related to dating, which were imposed upon them by their families.

***Negotiating the normative boundaries: “Sshhh... I did not tell my parents...”***

GITA: I enjoyed dating my ex. I was like 15 or 16 and he was 20: we loved each other. It was so exciting, romantic... one thing led to another and before I realised I was having sex with him. We used to go to the beach, to guest houses ... I kept it all to myself. While my parents knew that I loved this guy and they kind of accepted him... I mean he would come and have tea with us or sometimes invited for family functions and stay on for dinner: but the sex thing was between us. I could never tell my parents... did not know how they would have reacted.

Gita challenges the familial restrictions on her movements and to some extent upsets the disciplining of her body (which is being attempted through the strategy of curbing dating) as a potential threat to feminine chastity. The sexual restrictions imposed within her family becomes a source of ire for Gita and other women like Shilpi and Priti, who are unconvinced of the role of such restrictions. As a young girl, Gita dated frequently and she was more indirect in her disruptive behaviour, by keeping it a secret from her parents. Concealing her sexual activities meant that she was not bound by the restrictions related to the chastity and modesty of the female body. She takes several pauses while she talks about her early teen-dating and sexual relationships. She retreats into the past and describes how she would sneak out from school or during the night from home to meet her boyfriend, which was exciting for her. It was however clear (although unspoken) that sexual relationships are beyond the permissible line in her family.

GITA: I would go for a swim with him: We would take long walks in the beach, ride on his bike, or go to parties. I never dared to tell them, though I always wanted to be truthful. They also were kind of thinking that I should get married to him and it was all fixed.

Dating behind closed doors seemed to be the popular strategy amongst some of the women, such as Shilpi and Priti, who wanted to enjoy themselves without raising alarm in their family.

SHILPI: I dated several boys while I was in the last years of my school. My parents did not know about it. I always needed permission from my parents to go to any party while in school. While I was allowed to mingle with boys or young men when they were invited home, outside of home my mom would want me to go to female parties at my school.

PRITI: Having male friends or talking to them was always considered bad at home. It would be impossible to get permission to go to a college picnic or go to a movie with a group of friends. My mother did not like it. It was difficult to have a normal social life with my mother thinking that I may end up doing something wrong. I never told her while going out with friends especially if it's a boy. Several times I tell her that I have extra classes and go on a date.

Dating threatened parental views on the propriety of how their daughters should behave. In the case of Priti and Shilpi, their parents prohibited free and unsupervised mingling of their daughters with young men or boys. The rigidity of the rules of dating, however, varied with the educational and regional backgrounds of the families. Shilpi, in comparison with other girls had a liberal upbringing and she was allowed to mix with young men and dance at house parties. The few women who dated were also aware that their practices should not affect the family's social standing in the community and they were therefore secretive about such practices. In their daily lives, the young women reproduce, as well as reinvent, the gendered norms through their experiences of pleasure and excitement (as well as shame) through a lived body. Gita rationalises her sexual behaviour with her boyfriend on the ground that "I loved him and was soon going to be married to him". Thus, through marriage, the chastity of her body and respectability would be preserved. On the one hand, she experiences her female body through sexual pleasure, whilst on the other she embodies the value of chastity that makes her aspire to marry her boyfriend.

The narratives reflect that the gendered boundaries, which have been created for the women within their families (for their so called safety), is deeply related to the honour

of the family. This is with reference to values such as the purity and chastity of women at home, which needs to be upheld against any type of male aggression. I argue that socio-cultural symbolisms, such as aggression, safety, defilement etc. disguise various forms of domination over the female body and this disallows the voluntary participation and willingness of the women to be sexually active and thus satisfy their desires before marriage. Unmarried motherhood remains one of the major curses in Indian social life, right across class, cast and regions. Sexual pleasure is denied to the female body which is ripe for it — yet missing the social approval of marriage. This is an extreme form of gender inscription on a sexed body.

Whilst many of my participants conform to the gendered norms prescribed in the family and rationalised their actions in terms of family honour, safety etc. it was not the universal form of behaviour amongst all of them. Gita indulged in sexual activities with her boyfriend without the knowledge of her parents and Shilpi was quite equivocal about her relationship with her partner. The resistance to these dominant discourses, as apparent in Gita and Shilpi's stories, refers to "various aspects of their subjectivities" (Moore, 1994: 52), which is dependent on their familial and regional location and educational or ideological commitments. As demonstrated here, middle class families play a significant role in facilitating the gendered identities of their daughters around certain core values such as respectability, which is enforced in both an explicit and implicit manner.

The deep rootedness of the families in the lives of women further becomes clearer, as the women in my study articulate their reasons for moving out to Bangalore. It tells us a great deal about how middle class families shape the objectives of migration in an important way and the aspirations of a career and earning a better salary is articulated as a supplement to the familial income and status.

### **Leaving home: entering the call centre**

For Tanima, her family is not a modern family and indeed it can be described as a very conservative one. She constructs conservatism around the norms of staying away from habits, such as drinking or having sexual affairs (which are modern) and keeping the family name upright. She justifies her entry into a call centre and working the

night shift on the basis of “supplementing the family income” which might not compromise the family name. Although she is away in the city at present, her family is always concerned and vigilant about her safety. Peyashi gives an account of a patriarchal family structure, where the father is the central figure. She describes him as being a very hard working person who “takes care of the family, keeps everyone away from difficulties, above all keeps everyone secure”. Her father desired that she should have a good career and marriage, to keep up the family name. Whilst she was loved and had the privilege of being educated, she often wished she could have been a son. These wishes emanated from her desire to have more independence than that which was granted (or available) for a daughter in the family.

TANIMA: I remember heaps of time when I would rather be a boy and play all day: go out in the evenings or even talk in a loud voice. I hated those times when I was asked to talk in a low voice, to be respectful and not watch too much TV. If there is some grown up serial and I would be watching it, I will be asked to leave the room. It continued till a very long time... till I was almost 18.

Ramani’s narrative reflects her proud association with a traditional Rajput family. She was grateful that her parents let her stay alone in Bangalore and work in a call centre, since she came from a community where “... very few females are actually allowed to work”. In return, she strived hard in her role as a customer service executive, engaging herself in undertaking a new MBA course in Bangalore and trying to stay away from “vices such as dating and drinking”. When I asked her if she did not like something whilst growing up (in a similar vein to Peyashi) she expressed her interest in outdoor activities, such as trekking and swimming, which she was not allowed to do.

Sumita and Kiran were appreciative of parental support for their education and their permission to take up a job in the call centre. The sense of gratitude also came from their perception that call centres are not suitable places to work, for women from good families. The young women had to step out into the night, which questioned the conventional norms of gendered mobility and always aroused a sense of guilt.

SWATI: Your parents must be proud of you ... you work for Deltas and earn such a good salary.

PRITI: My mother is allergic to call centre jobs. She thinks it's not nice to work for the night shifts. I had a tough time to convince her to let me come here and work. She was really nice to understand and let me come and do what I wanted.

SUMITA: I do not know. I am not used to going out of home in the evenings or late at night. Now when I leave for a night shift in the office, it brings a kind of a feeling that I am breaking rules. My mother also thinks it might create problems for my marriage. Actually two of the marriage proposals which came for me broke because I work during the night.

KIRAN: I am a post graduate in micro-biology. Most of the women who work here are like those who have completed their junior college (10+2), or are mere graduates: My parents feel that I should be working in a better place, not doing a night shift with a bunch of undergrads. I feel the same way.

The seeming acquiescence of the women to their family's use of a particular discourse about honour and suitable places of employment for women enables a reproduction of the intersection of class and familial identities, based on acceptable codes of conduct for women. However this relationship between family honour and class *is not consistent* across the interviews. The conventional understanding of a middle class family and the expectations associated with a dutiful daughter changes, as Gita walks into the picture and talks about her background. She categorically denies that her entry into the call centre was intended to serve family interests or supplement the familial income, as told in the case of Tanima or Peyashi. Furthermore, she questions the norms that tend to decide the life course of a woman according to the ideal gendered norms, such as arranged marriages or premarital chastity, rather than according to her choice. This situation perhaps arose from Gita's disillusionment with the conventional norms of an arranged marriage, which was defied by her mother:

GITA: When my mother got married to my father who was from a different religion, her parents did not maintain any relations with her. It has been very difficult for my mom all through. She has been kind of tortured by her parents for her marriage ... the emptiness of being rejected by her family is still there ... I did not come here [to the call centre in Bangalore] to support my family.

Gita in her narrative talks about her inter-religious background and about the marriage of her parents. She expresses her anguish as her 'Hindu mother' was disowned by her family, as a result of marrying a Christian. She expresses her own independence in terms of choosing her career in a call centre and coming to Bangalore and not fulfilling any familial obligations. Later, she told me that she did not enter her family's baking business as desired by her father and she joined the call centre instead.

Shilpi, along similar lines to Gita, raises her voice when it comes to negotiating her own choices with the expectations of her family. However, she is proud of 'the broad outlook' of her family, and the 'independence given to her to choose her own career'. She tells the story of her family through a narrative of opportunities and obligations within a middle class family.

SHILPI: Whenever I talk about my family, it's natural to talk about the independence. I mean the space I get to make my own choices, be it studies, choosing my clothes or making friends. My parents are always supportive. My dad always prided us with a kind of understanding that might be missing in other families.

Both Gita and Shilpi are able to articulate the independent choices they could make in their day to day lives, which did not meet any parental expectations. In doing so, however, there was an inclination to negotiate with the family norms, rather than completely denounce them. Shilpi found this negotiating space in the freedom given to her in the family, in addition to her parent's acceptance of certain choices, which were not too radical, in terms of the reputation of the family.

### ***Primacy of family and embodiment of dutifulness***

Bourdieu (1998) provides a powerful account of family as a social institution, which shapes the behaviour of the member, in order to ensure structural continuity. The bond of affective love, rights and obligations within the family and the effect this produces, in terms of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1998: 68) through conformity to marriage rules (as Ramani implied in her narrative), or sanctions in case of non-conformity (as in the case of Gita's mother) become clear through the narratives of these women. For Tanima, her parents' concern creates an affective bond for her to implicitly agree with the conservative values of her family and to be conscious about

her practices. Here, the family can be “conceived as an active agent, endowed with a will, capable of thought feeling and action, and founded on assent of cognitive presuppositions and normative prescriptions about the way to conduct proper domestic relationships” (Bourdieu, 1998: 65).

The articulation of *familial* expectations in the interviews (which also provide the norms of behaviour away from the family) is built upon the deep entrenchment of the familial values of pursuing a good career, higher education, staying away from vices (such as drinking and dating) or feeling obliged to the patriarchal figure in the family, who works hard and provides for everyone in the family. The deeply rooted gendered norms of restricted mobility arouses guilt when Priti or Sumita stepped out for their night shifts. Whilst at home, Priti discusses how her parents trust her if she goes out on her own.

PRITI: They will be totally cool if I go out on my own. I shall always come back before it is six p.m. I know it's not safe to stay away after its dark. I mean they (parents) will be worried about my safety. I have a younger brother at home. I did not want to set a bad example.

Whilst for Priti it is a restricted sense of female mobility with respect to time that arouses a sense of restlessness, as she steps out into the night, Kiran articulates her employment in a call centre as a matter of contingency.

KIRAN: I just wanted to get employed and not sit idle. There were no other jobs available.

According to her, she should be working with highly qualified professionals based on her postgraduate degree in micro-biology — and not be in a call centre. Thus, in various ways a specific middle class culture through norms around respectability is articulated in the narratives of these women, as they leave their family homes and migrate to the city, to work in call centres.

## Conclusion

### *Respectability as a middle class disposition*

Paying attention to the narratives of these women provides us with important clues to understand the class and family location of women as being crucial to their self making process. The *respectability* of the family emerges as an important factor that drives the gendered socialisation of the women in these families. Furthermore, the specific ways in which 'being respectable' is emphasised across all the families draws attention towards certain "symbolic and cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1984), as the basis of such construction. Bourdieu recognises the values of various forms of capital (social and cultural resources) as being important for families within their class location, in order to exercise power and dominance, in addition to maintaining their class status. Apart from the economic and cultural resources, in his view, class status also flows from the possession of symbolic capital, where social recognition plays a key role.

I argue that being *honourable*, which forms an important part of gender socialisation within these families, is a form of symbolic capital which establishes their belongingness to the middle class. Citing gender as one of the important principles, along which class distinctions are established, Bourdieu notes that:

Sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity: a class is defined in an essential respect by the place and value it gives to two sexes and to their socially constituted dispositions. This is why there are as many ways of realizing femininity as there are classes and class factions. And the division of labour between the sexes takes quite different forms, both in practice and representation, in different social classes (Bourdieu, 1984: 107).

Beverly Skeggs (2004), in her study amongst working class women in London, substantiates Bourdieu's theory of class and self-formation when she argues that "the cultural resources for self making and the techniques for self production are class processes and making the self makes class" (Skeggs, 2004: 75). Whilst habitus is thoroughly individualised, it also reflects a shared cultural context. "The cultural commonalities of a class become inscribed upon the body, and are reproduced in personal departments in the field" (Adams, 2006: 514).

In continuation with the above theoretical insights on class habitus and dispositions, I argue that, in the case of the young women in my study, the emphasis on respectability (as a form of symbolic capital within middle class families) informs and shapes the lives of women in a pre-reflexive manner. Furthermore, this notion of the construction of respectability, as a form of symbolic capital of the middle class, owes its origin to the colonial constructions of ideal Indian womanhood, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The norms that followed, in order to accumulate this form of capital, also emerged from a historical construction of gender and class in India. Women who are subjected to these constructions, within middle class families, constantly rework them to accumulate these legitimate norms of respectability, as a form of symbolic capital and to enhance their class status. Bourdieu (1984) highlights how secondary principles of class divisions, such as gender, become important during a process of political mobilisation, such as the anti-colonial struggle in Indian history, indicating potential lines of divisions amongst the classes (Bourdieu, 1984: 107). Such mobilisations may be short-lived or even rare, but their effect may be more enduring insofar as they sediment in the form of habitus, ethos and doxa<sup>84</sup>, which continue to shape action outside the periods of political contention. The colonial construction of respectability, as a form of symbolic capital, provides the background upon which the class theorisation of Bourdieu can be elaborated.

Gender played its part in the ideological services of both colonial empires and third world nationalist movements, helping to position western and non-western women against each other, as competing cultural embodiments of appropriate femininity and virtue. The Indian woman of the nationalist discourse bears a striking resemblance to Victorian womanhood, not only in her imputed respectability and refinement but also in the explicit contrast between her coarse and vulgar lower class sister (Narayan, 1997: 9).

Whilst I retain this theoretical proposition that being honourable is undoubtedly manifested as an important aspect of female lives, in my study, *there is no single way*

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<sup>84</sup> Doxa: This concept in a Bourdieusian framework connotes 'a taken for granted understanding of the social world' (Bourdieu 1977). "What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu, 1977: 165-7).

*of defining it:* The women articulate different ways of being respectable, depending on their regional location, family situation and educational background. I argue that the socio-cultural values of their family are deeply ingrained in the habitus of these women, who consciously or unconsciously discipline themselves to be the bearers of traditions, harmony, familial and social honour. For Ramani, staying away from parties and male colleagues refers to the unfolding of the durable familial dispositions, where such things violate the female body and affect the honour of the family and community. Kiran articulates higher education as the source of her familial and class identity and takes pride in belonging to a *Brahmin* family. She also expresses her anxiety over her call centre job which requires lower educational qualifications. Sumita's expression of anxiety about the night shifts can be seen as an extension of the deeply ingrained notions of restricted gendered mobility.

This also reveals the "transposable" (Askland 2007; Crossley 2005; Jenkins 2002; McCall 1992) nature of habitus. It denotes the most compelling principle of social continuity in Bourdieu's theory. The dispositions or the inclination to act is stored in individuals and "it gives form and coherence to the various activities of an individual across the separate spheres of life" (Wacquant, 2006:7). Thus the choices to be obedient, to stay inside at home, to not go out after a certain time in the late afternoon or to stay away from men and not engage in casual sexual affairs before marriage, can all be seen as the transposition of the familial habitus of these women, which is also embodied and operates unconsciously. As Maton (2008) argues,

Our aspirations and expectations, our sense of what is reasonable or unreasonable, likely or unlikely, our beliefs about what are the obvious actions to take and the natural way of doing them, are all for Bourdieu neither essential nor natural but rather conditioned by our habituses and thereby a mediated form of arbitrary social structure (Maton, 2008: 58).

The seeming conflicts or tensions, which emerge between the individualised experiences of the female body and a socio-culturally defined female body, provide the ground for agency to negotiate several norms and values that have been handed down by the families — and contested by the women who have to live through them. According to Bourdieu 'the dispositions which are formed in habitus however can only

be defined as a propensity, inclination or orientation to do something' (Boudieu, 1977 *cited in* Jenkins, 2002: 76). For example, being socialised in a middle class habitus, the women have developed a propensity to appreciate being honourable and highly educated or to refrain from dating. However, their practices in their day to day lives may differ from these dispositions (based on ideal normative prescriptions) when they come across opportunities, demands and experiences (outside of the family) in the work place, in peer groups or in their quest for sexual pleasure. This flexible conceptualisation of individual practices provides an explanatory framework for the emergence of agency.

## Chapter Six

### Entering the transnational call centre

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#### Introduction

While the socialising norms in the family define boundaries for physical movements, and interaction of the young women with men outside the families, migration to Bangalore to work in call centres also entails a shift in gendered practices. The women have to step out of their rented accommodations in the metropolitan city after midnight to work in the night shifts. They also have to work and travel with their male colleagues outside the schedule of a working day as dictated by the norms of the family. In addition, the virtual atmosphere created with the aid of a highly advanced communication technology in the call centres place the women "... temporarily in foreign place while they still dwell in India" (Mitra, 2008: 214).

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which international call centres, as sites of globalisation, affect and alter the texture of the lives of the women and create the occasion for reframing respectability as a core of middle class gendered identity. The discussion identifies the problems associated with challenges provided by call centre employment to the identities of women who still want to be recognised as respectable in some way. The analysis here is based on my participant observation in the cultural training process in two trans-national call centres, for two months. I also worked as a customer service executive in one of the call centres, for a period of one month in the US shifts (12.30 am to 9am). In addition, I conducted interviews with thirteen female employees working for the US shifts over a period of six months. Of these women, each has at least four years of work experience in the trans-national call centres and lived on their own in the city.

While the assertion of independence in living and the material freedom provided by the high salary received from call centres is undisputed, I want to explore how this new

found independence translates into the personal lives of these women, in terms of their sexual behaviour, bodily habits and the gendered relationships in and out of work. Their gendered identities as daughters reflects embodiment of respectability around a restricted female sexuality which prevents interaction with boys and young men outside the family circle, emphasises on modesty in dressing and chastity as crucial gendered values. In the transnational call centres on the other hand, a westernised work environment where these women have to participate in training sessions on American culture, night shifts etc. creates a context of varying gendered dynamics from their familial context. Exploring these new lives of the women in my study provides clues to the challenges that are posed to certain gendered predispositions acquired in the families as daughters. The key question that this chapter addresses is, *how do the new cultural and technological processes of the international call centres affect the gendered identities of the women?*

## **Structure of the chapter**

In this chapter, I begin with the academic discussions on cultural influences of call centres on individual identities. This is followed by elaboration of the theoretical concepts that shall be applied in this chapter. In the third section, I provide a detailed discussion on my participant observation in the transnational call centres. I sat through the various training programs conducted for employees to make them familiar with the culture, language and accent of their clients, guide them towards appropriate modulation of their voices to carry out a pleasant conversation with the clients etc.

In the last part of the chapter, I present the various themes that spell out the discords or the conflicting experiences of the young women who participated in my study and how they try to resolve it.

## **Transnational call centres and cultural influences**

Several research work focus on the cultural impacts of call centre work on the worker's sense of cultural identity. Gentleman (2004), emphasise the emergence of an unstable identity among the agents who "... are forced to live as Indian by day and westerner after sundown" (Gentleman, 2004 *cited in* Mitra, 2008: 214). Divya McMillan (2006), terms the call centre workers as "the global proletariat" who has to undergo a form of

“cultural transformations” to get their jobs done. Her study also refers to a form of economic and cultural homogenisation which emerges in settings like transnational call centres, where the process of globalisation is imposed from above. The training of employees in the accents and cultures of their foreign clients along with the creation of a virtual western landscape through glamorous infrastructures, form part of this global hegemonic process. She draws on the work of Homi Bhabha, and particularly his concept of “hybridisation”, to describe the increasing interplay between local and global meaning systems in call centres, which leads to destabilisation and transformation of identity. As she puts it:

For call centre employees, to live and breathe the cultural contexts of their clientele, names are changed from Indian to western ones (particularly for US based clients) and fictional personal profiles are developed with residential roots in some prominent city in the US... (McMillan, 2006: 238).

Lauri Cohen and Amal El Sawad (2007) provide a critique of these approaches of identity transformation as too simplistic, which assume the existence of a ‘coherent and essential Indian culture’ (P: 1952) that changes with westernizing influences in the transnational call centres.

The implication would be that new, western forms of organisation seemed to have landed on a cultural landscape that was previously untouched by such influences. Furthermore, from this perspective the individual appears to have no free will as to which of these identities she or he takes on (Cohen and El-Sawad, 2007: 1952).

Based on the female narratives from my study, I contest views which report a fundamental identity transformation that results out of role playing in the call centres (McMillan 2006; Shome 2006), or the virtual diasporic experiences of call centre workers, through new technology and the physical environment of the transnational call centres (Mitra 2008). Raka Shome (2006), for example, proposes the emergence of a hybrid identity among the workers in call centres through “... colonisation of the body’s clock and its biological functioning” (P: 116). Bodies of call centre workers according to him are colonised, as they enact the American during work and put on new accents, language and mannerisms in order to be successful agents. Kiran

Mirchandani (2008), in her study among call centre trainers and managers who serve American clients in Delhi based call centres, contests Shome's view and argues that:

Workers object strongly to the routinized and deskilled nature of scripted service work, and their resistance (in various forms) is largely directed toward attempting to improve quality of their jobs (Mirchandani, 2008: 246).

Carla Freeman provides a vivid illustration of how female workers in a call centre at Barbados attempt to define their work, and notes that they "demonstrate through a variety of practices that they are not the passive pawns of multinational capital they have sometimes been depicted to be" (2000: 36). She notes that women's jobs are both a source of pride and pleasure, and simultaneously a source of stress and dissatisfaction. Freeman demonstrates that global capitalism is not monolithic; constructions of the "ideal third world worker" are both shifting and context specific. For example, while for Indian women, night shifts in transnational call centre work are cited as barriers for married women to enter the sector (Kelkar *et al.*, 2002; Singh and Pandey 2005), Freeman's study reveals that family responsibilities make the women in her study more committed to their jobs (Freeman 2000).

Several studies in the Indian context also highlight the fluidity of female agency as the women move out to work during the nights. A study by Kelkar, Shrestha and Veena (Kelkar *et al.*, 2002) explores the women's agency in Delhi and Bangalore among women employed both in the software industry and IT enabled services. While the women in their study continue to work in gendered homes and work sites, they (also) pose some challenges to the embodied patriarchal relations within the family and inside the industry. The study highlights that these women worked outside their homes to improve their social position and enhance their agency, than be subjected to familial restrictions and coercion.

I expand upon this form of context specific and micro level differences that call centre employment makes in the lives of the women in my study, rather than focusing upon the broad changes in the patriarchal family system. While the study by Kelkar and Shrestha (2002) has been a point of departure from the previous studies done in the area to explore the impacts on the Indian family system, it is limited by its wide

coverage of women from both the software industry and IT enabled services, who are highly diverse in terms of their age, qualifications and conditions of employment.

The narratives of the women in the current study draw attention to these gaps in the literature and explore the complexities of identity changes against the backdrop of new cultural influences in the transnational call centres.

### **Imagination as a social practice and situated reflexivity**

This chapter applies the idea of “imagination as a powerful social practice”<sup>85</sup> (Appadurai 1997) and a notion of “situated reflexivity” (McNay, 1999: 110) in the work lives of the women. I argue that, transnational call centres create a context of everyday American life in the organisation, through the process of culture training and an Americanised work environment. The employees are encouraged to imagine and embody ‘the American’ to succeed in their roles as professionals. In the shop floor, they are provided with further mental and physical cues to deeply immerse themselves in the American context, while talking to the clients from different states of the US. The concept of ‘imagination as a social practice’ contributes to explain the relationship between the mediated images, symbols of the American in the call centre and the way it influences every aspect of the female employees who get exposed to these cultural influences. Thus the new transnational work context can be understood as providing mediated resources that not only provide new forms of social and cultural knowledge about the world, but also play an important role in young women’s drive to create meaningful identities for themselves. This form of imagination according to Appadurai, differs from the earlier form of imagination;

... imagination has broken from out of the special expressive spaces of art, myth and ritual and has now become a part of the mental work of life of the

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<sup>85</sup> Appadurai proposes that ‘the core of the link between globalization and the modern is defined by the global movement of images, symbols and ideas through various means of communication including an electronic media into every aspects of individual lives and large scale migration of people across the world’ (Appadurai, 1996: 4).

ordinary people in many societies ... [Thus] ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives (Appadurai, 1997: 4).

I further develop my argument by incorporating the concept of reflexivity. The embodiment of the American in the work lives of the women in my study creates scope for 'reflexivity and agency' in the lives of the women. The concept of 'reflexivity' (McNay 2000), helps me to understand and discuss the ambivalent and conflicting positions of the women in two different worlds as discussed in this chapter and the strategies devised by them to negotiate between different expectations. These strategies signify their gendered identities as they try to hold on to 'who they are' as well as adapt to the new demands of their work lives.

Reflexivity as a concept has been widely used in the sociological literature with reference to identity. For modernization theorists it entails "a project of the self" (Giddens 1991; Giddens 2008) which leads to identity transformation (Beck 1994). Bauman (2000), in this context notes that 'the traditional solid loyalties and obligations gets eroded with the onset of modernization and leads to disembeddedness of the agent from the local rules and obligations. This results in an individualized, private version of modernity' (Bauman, 2000: 8). Thus there is greater reflexivity on the part of the agents against the backdrop of the withering and weakening influences of class, gender, family and other such categories which previously defined their life experiences. This result in the availability of more choices and autonomy to the individuals over the kind of identities which they wish to assume (Bauman 2000; Beck 2004; Giddens 2008). In 1994, U.Beck in his work *"The re-invention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization"* writes "the more the societies are modernized, the more the agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them accordingly" (P: 174). In short, there is a strong argument made in favour of the increasing power of social agents to create their own identities at the cost of declining familial or communal influences (Lash 1994).

As I set out to do my participant observation, I found trans-national call centre as a place which offered new cultural experiences to the women considerably different from that of their earlier lives as daughters. The dress codes which governed the sexual respectability of the women and were defined as modest in their families are challenged by the prevailing dress codes at the work place based on current fashion and selection of contemporary clothing according to occasion. The work culture in the international call centres, which can be defined as relatively modern, considers rapport among male and female colleagues as normal and desirable both inside and outside of the work place. For example, “dating allowances”<sup>86</sup> are a part of the incentive structure of one of the international call centres and competitions are held where only couples can participate.

The dialectic between all that is defined as desirable and ‘modern’ from an organisational point of view, and the ‘local or familial’ carried into the context in terms of the embodied values of the women in my study, leads to the emergence of ‘reflexivity’ or ‘conscious articulation of life situations’ by the women. There are ambivalences in the realms of dating, dressing and aspirations for a future life, where the image of a smart, modern working woman is favoured over that of a housewife or an obedient daughter. During the interviews, the women in my study talk about their aspirations with reference to the norms and values they find liberating and attractive about American culture. This leads them to further reflect upon some of the gender norms and values as practiced in their own lives, and the desire to change them. Some of the female participants appreciate the American notions of a career woman with relatively less family burden and equality of husbands and wives in assuming household responsibilities. However, there are instances where others also contest and resist American sexual mores as experienced by them through the television shows and American movies. They are described as corrupting, while perceived as liberating in other aspects at the same time. These varying responses from the female participants orient my perspective towards a more ‘situated view of reflexivity’ where the opportunity for transformation in gender is far more limited than has been

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<sup>86</sup> Dating allowance is provided as an incentive to the young employees who date someone from their own organisation.

suggested by modernisation theorists (McNay 1999). According to Lois McNay, the experiences of specific dissonance give rise to reflexivity and it is not an inherently universal capacity of the subjects (McNay, 1999 *cited in* Brooks and Wee, 2008: 503). McNay (1999) argues in favour of a differentiated form of gendered identity, where some aspects are less subject to reflexive awareness than others. For example, certain “conventional images of femininity” (McNay, 1999: 103) of being a mother or a wife or a daughter, are deeply entrenched in our bodies and difficult to be subjected to reflexive awareness.

Smita Radhakrishnan (2009) in a recent study among female software professionals examines the durability of middle class femininity in the face of changes in professional lives and exposure to global forces in multinational software companies. She argues that in the case of these women, being a good mother or a wife or having a family is perceived as integral to their identities as middle class women. These pre-defined feminine roles in accordance with the patriarchal values motivate the women to place their career only as secondary to their families and children. Similarly, “for these women role models are not the women who gave up families for their success, but those who manage to balance the two, most often by sacrificing the climb up the company hierarchy...” (Radhakrishnan, 2009: 212). Moreover, these images are “misrecognised” as natural and permanent (Bourdieu 1990) by these women as they are acquired pre- reflexively in the middle class family habitus. Referring to such deeply embodied aspects of gendered identities, therefore, McNay suggests that exposure to modern forces of change may not have uniform impact on various aspects of gendered identities to give rise to reflexivity and identity change (McNay 1999).

... Women’s entry into the work place has not freed women demonstrably from the burden of emotional responsibilities. Rather it has made the process of individualization more complex in that the notion of ‘living one’s own life’ is in a conflictual relation with the conventional expectation of ‘being there for others’ (Beck and Beck- Gernsheim, 1995 *cited in* McNay, 1999: 103).

Thus, McNay convincingly argues for specific situations of dissonance which may give rise to reflexivity unevenly. Holland further develops McNay’s argument as she points

out that ‘these discords can vary across a continuum from minor daily conflicts to serious experiences of dissonance’ (Holland *et al.*, 1998). It is also important to note the fact that similar situations of conflict may give rise to different forms of dissonances among individuals. “... what counts as trivial or traumatic [situation] is ultimately a matter of subjective apprehension” (Brooks and Wee, 2008: 506).

In this chapter, I discuss the various themes which display the discords experienced by women during the cultural training process, their efforts to fit into the lifestyle of a professional in a global work place and developing rapport with their male colleagues transgressing the normative sexual boundaries of their families. Some of these dissonances can be described as more profound than others and give scope for the emergence of reflexivity and agency in the lives of the women.

I shall begin the discussion with narratives of the women where aspirations to start jobs in transnational call centres are articulated more in familial terms; as the chapter proceeds, a rare space opens up where the women can make sense of their life conditions in critical ways and imagine new possibilities of freedom within multiple social constraints operating in their lives

### **The lure to work in a transnational call centre**

In the first instance, it struck me as to why women chose to work in a sector which had unconventional timings; factors of risk associated with travelling in the night and implications for their own reputation as respectable middle class women. I often asked them the reason for migrating to Bangalore, especially in the context of working night shifts at the call centres. According to most of them, the transnational call centres provided a better salary, and incentives along with world class infrastructural facilities.

VIDYA: I wanted to move out of Belgaum, because it is a small town; you know there would be no point since by staying there I could not make my career. In fact, the moment I completed my graduation, I went for an interview for a job in the call centre. I did not go with the intention of taking up the job. I was curious to know what a call centre is, how to attend interviews. Since I got through and it was a good package that was being offered I took it. It was 6500

rupees (approximately 250 NZ\$). To begin with, it was a good amount. Then in the evening, the manager called up my parents; of course they would show you big things, about you getting opportunity to go somewhere abroad. All that mattered and I walked out of Belgaum and into a call centre.

TANIMA: If you want to earn at an early age and cannot pursue your studies further, for some matter or the other, you have good breaks here. I joined because that's the fastest way to grow. It has given me exposure and financial stability, faster given my skill sets.

RAMANI: The salary package was good. Therefore I got into the job. They also offer good facilities. Working conditions and environment are excellent.

Transnational call centres provided an attractive salary package for the newcomers. Most of the women started in a domestic call centre with a salary of Rs 6000 to Rs 7000 (NZ \$ 220- 250) per month and it almost doubled when they made their entry into the transnational ones, having accrued some experience in the industry. The salaries of the young women working in the call centres were almost equal or even more than the earnings of their fathers, who worked in the government sector, or owned a small business. Tulika<sup>87</sup>, a consultant with seven years experience in transnational call centres summed up the reason for migration of women in the following way:

TULIKA: Money is the biggest thing that attracts these people to the call centre. 13,000 rupees for a newcomer is very good. Father would be a clerk in the government sector or in a private company. Mother either would be a house wife or a teacher or working in a textile firm; that would be the kind of family background. For this person, father would be earning say, 7000-8000. Mother would be earning another 4000 rupees. So the entire income would be around Rs 12,000 (NZ\$ 400) brackets.

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<sup>87</sup> As in case of other participants, I have used a pseudonym here. Tulika was one of the consultants in the sectors to whom I spoke to during the first field trip.

Apart from the salary, the glamour associated with working for a famous, foreign brand like IBM, Dell, HP or Accenture, also attracts the women to these jobs. Kiran recounts her choice as follows:

KIRAN: The main thing was the building. When I saw the DSC building while doing my project I was impressed. Working for this bank has been like a dream. It is not an Indian company, and you have worldwide branches.

As her narrative unfolds, it is revealed that she is regarded as a son by her parents. For example, unlike a daughter, they wanted her to completely focus on her studies and get employed. She was also not encouraged to do any housework. She also tries to be dependable for her parents and earn for the family 'as a son would do'. While her parents do not expect her to contribute financially to the family, they are happy that she is employed. Priti lost her father at a very early age. She was brought up by her mother and decided to work as early as possible, and provide for the family. Priti completed her college education with the financial support from her maternal grandparents with whom she lived. She wanted to earn after she completed her graduation. She always disliked her mother's helplessness and dependence on her father 'even to buy grocery and vegetables for the house' and decided to be independent as soon as possible. Priti has changed two jobs in Bangalore and currently works in a technical support role in one of the call centre. She earns a good salary and provides for her brother's education as well as for minor expenses of the family.

Tanima, who worked for the last four years in different call centres, came from a family where her father was the only earning member. According to her, as her parents could not afford to provide for higher education, she preferred to start working after her graduation. The call centres provided a 'good break' for her to begin her career.

Sumita's father has a grocery shop and with a big family it was impossible to send all the children, especially the girls, for higher education. Her elder sister got married at a very early age, and Sumita preferred to work for some time before getting married. She articulates that call centres are 'right' places to work, as it provide the opportunity

“...to earn more money and save for the dowry that will be required for her marriage in future”.

The women came to the city for various reasons and with different expectations. However, there are various elements of hope underlying these narratives. For some, this hope originated to some extent from the financial constraints in the families. This combination of ‘hope and despair’ has been explained as a process of ‘feminization of survival’ by Saskia Sassen (Sassen 2006). Migration of women to big cities for employment is facilitated by the new opportunities created in the global cities by the transnational companies. Thus it can be argued that global economic processes do seem to challenge certain gendered realms of middle class families specifically with respect to mobility related norms (Patel 2008). As daughters, the women narrate the stories of their respectability in terms of their restricted movements outside of home after 6 p.m. As I ventured into the participant observation phase, it is interesting to note that the women are particularly reflexive about the changes in their temporal mobility and try to incorporate these changes into a form of respectability that is achieved through being modern, independent and a career woman. Using a proportion of their salary for the family also forms part of a new discourse of honour. The complexities of the interaction between the local and the global are reflected as Sumita enters the call centre to earn for her own dowry. This in turn implies that a modern work sector may help a traditional system like dowry thrive rather than challenge it.

In addition to the night shifts, the training processes in transnational call centres also create a space where discord with traditional gendered values and images are encountered and articulated variously by the participating women. In the following section, I focus on the ways in which new trainees are expected to embody the American<sup>88</sup> in their work lives in the transnational call centres. In addition to the

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<sup>88</sup> Almost 80 percent of services provided by the call centres located in India are for the US customers (McMillan 2006).

specifically designed training modules which aim at making the employees learn and enact American culture, the physical landscape of transnational call centres in metros like Bangalore and Delhi provides an experience of being outside of India and “virtually transport the agents into the space of American-ness” (Shome, 2006: 116)

The spatial landscapes of the technology parks - in which call centres are often housed - are deliberately designed to assert the physicality of a new modernity and cosmopolitanism (read: Americanism) brought about by global technology, and to distinguish that modernity from the rest of the city (Shome, 2006: 116).

### **Participation in the shop floor and the cultural training**

The employees receive extensive training of one and half months before they can start taking calls on the shop-floor. It generally follows the recruitment process where trainees are placed in intense training workshops and programmes that may last from three weeks to four months (Upadhaya and Vasavi 2006). There are two kinds of training that is imparted in the call centres. In the first phase, the employees have to undergo what is called as ‘voice and accent’ training and ‘culture training’. The aim of culture training is to make the employees understand and acquaint themselves to a different name, time of work and accent; in short reorganising elements of their own identity. The emphasis is on the embodiment of an American identity, to shoot up the company sales and provide services for the 1-800 (toll free) numbers in the United States, at a much cheaper cost.

Knowledge about products of the companies and other services is imparted in the second phase through process or product training. The first two days in many of the the international call centres involve the induction programmes with introductory sessions and a welcome party for the new entrants. Triveni, a voice and accent trainer in several international call centres sums up the induction program in the following manner.

You have Induction for two days in the beginning. It is about the company, its policy, salary, people who come from other places, accommodation, transport, sick leaves, paid leaves. This is not specific to call centres. Any company even the software companies have similar induction programs. There are general

things discussed in the induction programme. There are 100-140 new people in the induction. They will split you into different groups. Each group performs a specific shift and provides service to clients from a particular country like, USA, London, Australia or Russia.

Smita, a training manager tells me that the organisation aims to make the employees get used to night work from the beginning and it starts with conducting the training sessions late at night. The change in the biological clock is one of the many aims of the training sessions in the night. It also aims to create a transnational cultural space in the call centres, amidst a different time zone with various cultural (verbal, visual and physical) cues. These cues provide exposure to new information and understanding about the American way of life to the employees. 'In this sense call centres also formed a part of the new global order, where cultural transactions are no longer confined to travelers, immigrants or warfare; nor is it restricted by the facts of geography or ecology' (Appadurai, 2005: 27). The process of "virtual migration" (Mitra 2008; Shome 2006) becomes significant in such a context, where new forms of mobility is facilitated by the spread of sophisticated forms of information and communication technology. Ananda Mitra (2008) adds that the meanings of being there in a place have also changed with evolution of new technologies of communication in the present era. Viewed from a placial perspective (Massey 1994), transnational call centres can be perceived as places, where the employees can reach out to several places without corporeally changing their location. As Mitra (2008) states,

... the idea that the people working in call centres are indeed living in two places is also visible in the ways call centres promote themselves. As a consequence of the need to align Indian lives with western customers, the workers in India emulate the temporal rhythm of a different place (P: 214).

This becomes clearer as I present the inside story of two transnational call centres during my participant observation. I began my participant observation with a new batch of employees who were recruited for the US shifts (referred to as the graveyard shift). I intended to sit through all the sessions for the whole month. However, I

began having dizzy spells after staying awake for three days and I could not go on continuously without falling sick. I had my domestic responsibilities as a mother during the day and lack of sleep resulted in a continuous headache most of the time. It was during this period, that I understood the rationale for the absence of married women in the call centres except for a few. All the women in the batch were unmarried, and between the age group of 18-22. Kiran told me how she would go and crash on the bed till midday, after the night trainings. Vidya felt jealous of the women staying with her at the working women's hostel and doing a day shift job. "They would be hitting the bed... looking so cosy and I would be getting ready for the night work". During the first week most of the women had problems with their digestion, developed a minor headache and were assisted by the trainers to overcome it. During the second week the training session focused on bridging the cultural gap between the American clients and the Indian executives who would serve them. In the context of training, A.R.Vasavi in her work *"The making of India's global youth work force"* writes that:

[The training program in transnational call centre aims to] negate the cultural origin of the worker and attempts to make each into an acceptable global service worker, a citizen of the company catering to the needs of the global customer. [As the employees in call centres] interact with a range of customers predominately from the West, they are taught to be polite, to listen carefully, to build rapport, to sell, persuade or dissuade, and to be solicitous and considerate (2008: 221).

Various other studies reiterate the need to train the employees by providing intensive inputs on the culture of their clients, language, mannerisms etc so that they could easily interact with the customers from other parts of the world (McMillan 2006; Mirchandani 2004; Mirchandani 2005; Mitra 2008; Shome 2006).

### ***Taking new names: 'The Alias'***

... taking on of western alias is part of the role playing as an American where Indian names are replaced by Anglicized names. Agents may not only talk like Americans they also speak about American culture with their clients (Shome, 2006: 112).

As Shome suggests, taking up a western name in place of traditional Indian names is part of the role playing of an American by the call centre agents. It becomes essential that the identity of the agents is masked, as they interact with the American customers. "... call centres may run the risk of losing their franchise with the parent company if the agent does not convincingly come across as an American" (*ibid*: 112).

The second training session starts with the display of a list of 'aliases' in the LCD screen and Sandy asks the employees to choose new names for themselves. The reason stated is simple. The customers in other countries can pronounce the names easily.

We do not want to waste our valuable time explaining how to pronounce our names or the meaning of it or even making them understand that we are different from them. We have to speak over the telephone and they do not know us, the 'real person'. Taking up an alias will make us one of them and make us closer.

In the following section, I cite the details of the training programme (from my field diary) in one of the transnational call centres, where I conducted my participant observation. I was not allowed to write/record anything inside the organisation during the training sessions by the management. It was therefore, useful to take detailed notes everyday after I came back home.

There is a firm instruction to the trainees in the room to address each other by their alias throughout the training session and on the floor and to speak only in English and complete avoidance of their native languages. In the class room I watched Ranjita turning into Rachael, Vivek into Vicky, Shanti into Shelly, Sagarika into Shirley. There is excitement in the room and everyone is having fun choosing their names and saying it aloud themselves. There is one more round of introduction with the young trainees introducing themselves by their new names and others were asked to call each other by their alias. It is also important for the person who picked a new name to be able to pronounce it correctly. If someone fails to speak the new chosen names correctly they have to choose another name. Rohit picks up 'Sean' which he could not pronounce properly. Sandy makes him practice the name for some time. But as he continues to be uncomfortable in telling his new name, Sandy asks him to choose a new one. He prefers Kevin this time and can easily say it. So "you are Kevin Smith now", said Sandy.

Sandy asks them to choose their last names from two families, the 'Smith' family and the 'Cliffton' family. Sagarika is Shirley Smith, Ranjita is Rachael Cliffton and so on. There is conscious and deliberate effort to make the person memorize and report to the new names.

The 'naming ceremony' as it is popularly called in call centres is generally followed by extensive voice and accent training where the trainees are trained to imagine and behave as per their names. The new names go a long way to prepare the trainees to acquire a different accent, imagine themselves in a different country and fit into the role. Taking up an 'alias' is the first step in creating the 'mediated experiences' of the American in the lives of the women in the training session.

Mediated experiences, 'are in contrast to social experiences that take place in face to face encounters, and are created as people are exposed to multiple accounts of situations and others with whom they have no direct association through time and space' (Giddens, 2005 cited in Kenneth, 2006: 282). This experience is one of the significant features of the modern world, where the co-presence of different cultures is created and felt (Appadurai 1997). This simultaneous presence of the American and the Indian, through the mediated experiences of accent acquisition training and taking up new aliases create an experience of "... virtual migration in which the body both departs into another national world and time in the performances of American-ness through virtual technology but also simultaneously remains geographically and temporarily situated inside India," (Shome, 2006: 116).

Mitra (2008), narrates the cultural experiences of the employees in a call centre as similar to the experiences of 'real diasporas', who acquires new names and interacts virtually with different nationals in their day to day lives, through sophisticated communication technology. She cites the studies of Chen (2004) and Karpinski (1996), where "accounts of name changes in case of Jewish people and Africans in the America and Chinese people in Canada shows that the diasporic go through a fundamental identity transformation as part of the acculturation process" (Mitra, 2008: 215). Citing her own experiences as a migrant inhabitant in America, she adds:

Over the years in the United States, I have witnessed how a Sujata becomes a “Sue” and how children of immigrants are named with transformational names such as “Neal” that can be used across cultures (Mitra, 2008: 216).

I attempt to think through and against the dominant assumptions of a fundamental identity transformation under new cultural influences as suggested by such studies. The women’s experience of mediated American cultural influences was always found to be open to questioning and personal interpretation and not necessarily leading to complete identity transformation. Sumita did not have a problem in having a new name in the call centre, as it was more a matter of being a professional, and serving the US clients without any communication barrier or inhibition. Kiran did not choose a new name at all. Her trainer pointed out that she could use her first name during work as it was simple to pronounce.

KIRAN: She just told me to forget about my middle name which is a real big one, like Satyabala. My full name is Satyabala Kiran. Sometimes I use Kiran, sometimes Bala, Some say Kim. They also ask, can you spell it for us? Then I spell it for them. I become friendly with the customers and have a good time with them except for the offensive calls.

PRITI: We do not give them our real name. We give them a pseudo name. Like my pseudo name is Priya. I tell them- hi, this is Priya from this. Priya is not only an Indian name. You find foreigners with this name. You find these names like Priya, Riya also in countries like Australia. U.S. Even I came across a name which is same as my real name.

PRITI (Priya) proudly points out that, she just has to shorten her name from PRITI to Priya as it is a western name and she does not have to take a different alias. In this way, there was an open acceptance of the new names or abbreviation of the real names on the part of the women. For them, it was a matter of making it easier for their customers to have a ‘trusting and open communication’ with them. In the shop floor, the employees are directed to log in with their aliases, and refer to each other by their pseudo names (new names). They have to leave their Indian name as a marker of their Indian identity outside, before they log in as Priya, Kim or Margaret. It is also essential to leave their personal baggage outside the floor to perform the emotional

labour with their US clients. There are various cues used in the work place to make it more American. The display of pictures of various cities of the US on the wall, the flag, soft leathery cushions and the neon lit interiors makes the employees travel thousands of miles in their imagination, to be with the clients in different states of the US. The use of common American vocabulary among the colleagues like 'hey, what's up', 'buddy', 'chill-pill', 'it's break time man', seemed more appropriate to the work context, than any local versions of it.

The creation of these mediated experiences of being in an American setting facilitates easy communication of the executives with their clients, as if they come from the nearest neighbourhood. Most of the information about a particular locality in the cities of US, like the time, weather, traffic conditions of the day, are displayed on the computer screen of the executives. While I talk to the clients in Florida, my computer monitor always has the beautiful green suburbs along with the pictures of the beaches in the background, with other information about the place. While Bangalore seethes with a peak temperature of 35 degrees, the pleasant air conditioned environment of the call centre seems more real as a place in a green Florida with partly sunny and partly cloudy sky, displayed in the monitor. The accented English and opening of calls with... "This is John, Sally or Naomi speaking..." produces a powerful image of a place that is not part of India. The street number, zip code and flash of the maps of the places along with suburb and detailed outline of streets make the imagination more vivid about the place. Most of the employees have never been to the US. But their understanding (as narrated during the interviews) of the states, geography, location, are found to be in-depth. Apart from the training sessions, the women also put in their own effort in securing information about the location of the clients they work for.

GITA: We need to reduce the gap between us and them when we take the calls. It helps to know more about everything. You never understand what the client will talk about.

KIRAN: It is not necessary to have all the information... but sometimes it excites me to learn more about the people I am talking to. Sometimes I do some searches on the internet or get some book and read. Of late, I have started

watching some of the TV serials like Bay watch and Friends just to know more about what kind of people they are.

It is emphasized during the training sessions in various ways that if the women are successful in changing their accent and recalling their new names, it would benefit both the individual and the organisation. The incentives and the promotions of the employees are dependent on a number of factors including responding correctly to their aliases. There are role plays, mock calls, and team games to make the new names familiar in the work context.

### ***Voice and accent training:***

Call centre employees can be seen as virtual diasporas for whom acquisition of accent, specific anecdotes and phrases of the clients are important to fit into the culture of their clients. Furthermore there is evidence to suggest that having a proper accent is as important in the acculturation process as having a appropriate language (Mitra, 2008: 216-217).

The next phase of training is voice and accent training and training on oral communication. Sandy tells me during one of the breaks:

That the organization through the training program tries to give the employees a good command over the language [English; She always referred to English as 'the language'], improves their accent (over the Indian accent, reducing the Mother Tongue Influence-MTI ). It provides the best training in the industry and picks up the top trainers for behavioural and cultural training. This is a great opportunity for the people who work in the call centre to improve the presentation of their selves, language and help themselves to shape their future.

During some of the training sessions on voice and accent, Derek (Dilip) cites examples of the "wrong ways" of speaking English by translating the word or phrase directly from the Indian languages. "We speak wrong English by translating directly from our own mother tongue. This is a wrong way of conversing in English and not acceptable to customers from the English speaking world." Direct translation and repetition of speech are cited as two errors of Indian English which was not accepted in the industry as it offends the clients. One of the examples cited by him is using the phrase of 'you

people 'as a direct translation from many of the Indian languages which refers respectfully to a group of people. However in many of the English speaking countries it would sound offensive to the customers. Derek is a young man of 26, who recently married a young woman working in the same organization as an executive. They both lived together for three years before finally tying the knot. He is very proud of his English which he said, "was very good from the beginning".

Derek tries to highlight the common mistakes in the Indian way of speaking English in daily life, makes the participants identify them and be conscious about it when they are speaking to the customers on the phone. The trainees are also encouraged to watch American TV programs, newly released Hollywood movies, some of the news channels as a way to constantly improve their accent. They are encouraged to watch some of the dvds/cds of American movies/serials together. They have to discuss the way of life, conversations and way of dressing, life style of the characters and how they are different from the Indian ways of living.

During some of the next training sessions, we watched movies like 'My Fair Lady', 'Nanny Diaries' and other clippings. There are images shown from American homes, dinner tables with turkeys, malls, subways, Christmas and Thanksgiving parties to encourage the employees to imagine and suggest the correct conversations for each occasion.

During one of the training sessions Sandy (Sameera) asks the class, "How do you find America"? I am surprised to hear the views of the trainees who have never visited the country. Sagarika (Shirley) is watching the English movies in the Rex theatre on weekends and finds the way of life exciting. Tanuja (Tanya) has been borrowing movies from the library to improve her accent and understanding of the American customers. They describe their own perception of Americans in words like cool, confident, friendly, honest, casual, partying and achievers. The discussion is exciting and animating for everyone in the room. Many of them describe having relatives and family in the US and express that they would love to travel there sometime. Shirley proudly announces that her elder sister is settled in the US and does not want to come back to India. "If she comes for a short visit, her children want to go back after

sometime; They like it here but only for a short time. They are more used to the life there”.

There is a common thread of emphasis running through all the training sessions. It pertained to the importance of clients, interaction with them and ensuring customer satisfaction through communication. The trainees are asked to be polite, courteous, modulate their tone and always sound warm and friendly. There are audio-visual aids to demonstrate the activity of a successful customer service executive. The sessions are helpful in building up the speaking of English in the right ‘American way’ and the grammatical knowledge. During the interviews with the women, I asked them about their acquisition of an accent as a result of the training. Many of them were emphatic that ‘they did not acquire an accent and speak neutral English’ which is internationally accepted. They prefer to speak neutral than American English as it was ‘kind of losing your identity’, ‘It’s kind of half here and half there’ and emphasis on ‘there is no need to speak accented English”.

PRITI: No, I speak in a neutral accent. Only good English is enough to get you inside the call centre.

VIDYA: No no... I don’t have an accent. I don’t mind having one, but I speak neutral English. Some manage to develop a good accent but for others it may not work out.

Kiran and Gita are the only ones, who say that they speak with an American accent, while speaking to the customers and not while speaking to others. It is even fun to watch both of them switching over to their accents as if they are speaking to their customers. They say that the shift in their accent comes very swiftly when they start speaking to their customers, ‘sometimes we even don’t realise it’.

The influence of accent training on the identities of the call centre worker has been discussed in several research works (McMillan 2006; Mirchandani 2004; Mitra 2008; Shome 2006). Raka Shome (2006), in this context notes that “the linguistic identity of the Indian subject has to be erased first before s/he can enter the virtual, modern, high-tech space of call centres and data entry” (2006: 110). Kiran Mirchandani (2008: 239-241) extends the argument that ‘speaking in the accent of the customer helps to

mask the geographical location and cultural identity of the agent who takes the call'. Swales (Swales, 1997 cited in Mirchandani, 2008:231) asserts that the language training in call centres thus results in 'language trafficking' implying the spread of a particular type of English throughout the world.

I identify accent training as giving rise to a form of resistance among the women as they favour speaking neutral English and not Americanised English. Some of the participants are emphatic that they do not have any change in their accent thus contesting the "racist hierarchisation" implicit in identifying American English as legitimate and Indian English as illegitimate (Phillipson, 2001: 11). The stories of the young women and their attempt to identify the changes in their linguistic ability as only a matter of their professional roles demonstrates both reflexivity and agency, where regional languages are defended and the validity of a neutral or American English is accepted with reason and without passivity.

### ***Training on US customer expectations***

There is a whole session on the US American customer expectations for the trainees.

It was emphasized that US Americans want to trust you. Building rapport is essential to establish trust with the customers. Rapport in turn is essential connection between two people. It is recognition of an individual's personality, emotions and needs (Work book, US American customer expectations: 43).

The timing of the training continues to be always around midnight; the aim is to make the trainees adjust their biological clocks to the odd hours before they get into the shift. There are coffee breaks during the training period. The trainees have free meals and snacks after midnight. However the stress is clearly visible in the frequent yawning, many of them sleeping with their heads on the desks and fetching frequent cup of coffee and tea during the breaks. The trainer encourages them to get up from their seats in between if they feel sleepy, to have coffee and smoke. There are big bowls of chocolates and wafers on each of the tables with bottled water. The trainers try to reach the objective of making the trainees familiar with the language, culture and attitude of the Americans through various sessions on 'empathy, transparency and inculcation of professional skills'. They are asked to use words and phrases similar to words and phrases the customers use.

When you match the words and tone of the customer, it acts like a mirror and helps them relate to you. People feel rapport more easily with others who are similar to themselves (Work book, American customer expectations).

They are also asked to be active listeners, as with active listening they could learn about a customer's attitude and communication style. There are aspects of "emotional labour" (Hochschild 1983) for the trainees, in that they had to be empathetic and not only listened to the customer, but also to their feelings. They are asked to take full responsibility for their actions and make all their customers feel glad when they speak with them and are asked to put happiness in their voice by smiling. The challenge for an agent as the trainer clarifies is to maintain the 'wow' factor every time they talk to a customer. It is stated that good communication with your American customers can dramatically improve your customer experience scores on the quality audit, which leads to confirmation of the jobs and further promotions in the future.

There are discussions on the weather in Boston, Florida, California, New Jersey, Minneapolis, the streets, addresses, social security numbers, festivals, food habits, American National Holidays in the culture training classes. The sessions are highly interactive. The class is divided into small groups and these act as a bunch of customers and agents and make mock calls to each other. In small groups Derek makes the trainees listen to audio recordings of previous calls and each group has to analyze customer expectations, ways of building trust, rapport and personalizing the call. I borrowed one of the books on the United States from one of the trainees. It provided an overview of the politics, religion, education, history, accent and food habits of the country. The voice and accent training along with the lessons on communication process, etiquette, transparency, and empathy come as a package for equipping the trainees to interact confidently with the customers as if they belong to the country of their customers. As I participate in the training sessions, I can see the trainees adapting themselves to the night shifts and becoming familiar with their co-trainers. I cite here an extract from my field diary.

*In the class room Arpita (Amy) had stopped dozing off, continued with her frequent coffee breaks; her accent was really good according to Sandy. "She has a good future in the industry. She is smart and has a good voice and presence of mind". She has*

*moved from the hostel to the paying guest accommodation with the help of Tim. I watch both of them going for their breaks together; help each other during the training sessions, taking each other as partners and travel back in the same taxi. Priti wanted to shop for the party organised by the organisation at the end of the training session. She got a very enthusiastic response from Amy who wanted to buy a party dress as she had only salwars. When I asked her if she has anything specific in mind, she said she would look around the malls and decide. Priti wisely suggested that, “we can ask the older girls about it”.*

The employees are provided hot beverages before they logged in with their alias. ‘This is the time for switching into a different self’ as Vidya told me during one of the interviews and the excitement she derived during her initial days.

VIDYA: You know talking to an alien on the other side; a person who is completely unknown to you. You do not know his culture, his accent; this was something that causes lots of butterflies but still excitement was there.

The comfortable work environment, sophisticated work stations, slow English music, floor games all contribute towards smooth performance of the night shifts. There is usually a large emphasis on creating a highly energetic atmosphere on the floor during the nights.

## **Creation of a world of imagination and construction of self identities**

The training process tries to evoke the powerful tool of imagination in bringing in the process of enculturation and bridging the gap between the employees and the clients. The physical (visual, audio) cues presented in the shop floor along with the intensive cultural training in the organisation, produces an effect of ‘creating imagined selves’ (Appadurai, 1997) within the shop floor. These offer “... resources and new discipline for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds” (Appadurai, 1997: 3) for the employees. Applying this conceptualisation of imagination, I argue that the lives of the participating women inside the call centres is constructed through rapid flow of technologies which ensures interaction with the American clients seems real, as long as the women work there. They are fed with the cultural resources of these clients

which not only enable them to be successful agents, but also give rise to ideas that life can be different and imagination of what they would like to be.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I describe how the disembodied experiences of being an American in the international call centres affect the practices of the women in complex and varying ways. In this context, I can situate my project in between studies which talk about the production of a racialised, modern subjectivity under the hegemonic American cultural influences (Babu 2004; McMillan 2006; Mitra 2008; Shome 2006) and studies that assume that there are no substantial challenges to patriarchy due to the employment of women in call centres (Kelkar *et al.*, 2002; Patel 2008). I argue here that the trans-national call centres create a kind of “cultural scape”<sup>89</sup> (Appadurai 1996) fed by cultural elements of the local, national and the American. I use his conceptual metaphor ‘scape’ to explain the sites of work as a cultural space, which is not rigidly defined by a given set of relations or perspective. In this cultural scape, the images, information and symbols of ‘being an American’ are electronically produced and disseminated among the employees. It blurs the line between the real and the fictional and makes the employees construct imagined worlds of living and thinking away from any direct experiences of the American way of life.

Kim Youna (2006), in her study among young Korean women from working class and middle class background discusses how the mediated experiences of globalisation through American television serials and films affect the experiences of the women and give rise to imagination of new possibilities in lives.

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<sup>89</sup> Appadurai (1997), adds the the suffix “scape” to describe the five dimensions of globalisation such as ethnoscape, ideoscape, technoscape, financescape and mediascape. These scapes indicate the rich complexities of interaction between various actors, such as the nation-state, transnational corporations, individuals, migrants etc and their historical, political and linguistic contexts. The emphasis that the global is ultimately constituted by the experiences of the local and individual who constitutes larger formulations makes his approach more contextual, and actor oriented.

[Television according to her] provided the opportunities for travel and mobility, where the women could distance themselves from their immediate environment and imagine life styles and possibilities beyond the constraints of their class realities (Youna, 2006: 452).

The openness of western society for choosing any profession without any attachment of stigma, sexual freedom, choices that can be made freely with respect to dating and marriage etc attracted the women in her study who in turn yearned for mobility and individualization in their lives. In an important note, Youna's study also refers to the class constraints within which the women sought to incorporate the imaginative possibilities into their lives. Dalsgaard (2006) in his study among the Brazilian youth too highlights the cultural, educational and economic background of the young participants in his study as important factors which influence the way imagination, accruing as a result of mediated global cultural experiences are adopted as a social practice in real lives. The important question that this study addresses, as the women undergo intensive exposure to an American culture through the training process is as follows:

*To what extent the resources of imagination fed during the training process translate into real practices of the women?*

The stories of the women in my study demonstrate that on the one hand, the training process orients the women to acquire an American persona and give rise to hope for a new form of life; on the other hand, the embodied gendered dispositions also interact with this hope/imagination to determine how these aspirations are incorporated into the real lives of the women. Thus, I argue that 'cultural scape', does not involve a one sided process of Americanisation, induced through the organisation. It also involves the socio-historical context of the women and their local perspectives emanating from the socialisation processes in the family and the native towns. While the work lives of the women are a medium for the organisational effort to mould the employees into the cast of Americanism, it is also a product of their familial and historical specificities. To sum up, on the one hand, the imagination of the female employees expands with the circulation of new cultural images influenced more by an American culture at the

work place while on the other, they are appropriated and interpreted locally and under particular socio-economic conditions.

To continue the argument that I am trying to develop here is that, the culture training, the physical cues of America integrated into the environment of the call centres, create a context for evoking a powerful imagination about the American way of life for the women. The video clippings of American daily lives in living room or the dining room, sharing of a 'Thanks giving turkey' in the dining room or the casual dating and sexual relations among the couples in 'Friends' TV serial provide resources for an imagined life for the women. Further, these virtual experiences of an American life on the part of the young call centre employees in my study who are located in India, also form the basis of a de-territorialized life (Appadurai, 1996: 49). This concept directs my attention towards the cultural dynamics and experiences that go beyond the geographical location of individual subjects. In the present study, I suggest that the transnational call centres bring in such experiences into the lives of my participants infused with the power of imagination.

The women during the interviews used this power of imagination that is evoked in their work context to understand and reflect on the American way of lives, and draw comparisons with their own life context. This virtual, trans-cultural dialogue motivates the women to rethink some of the gender norms and values in their working lives. They express their own aspirations and frustrations, attractions and repulsions between their lived experiences and their imagined lives. The majority of young women in my study went to great lengths to describe who they wanted to be and become. They did so, however, with different degrees of consistency between various, and sometimes conflicting, self-images. While the imagination of future possible lives often interfered with the familial commitments, concerns and expectations related to the present sometimes (it also) directly contradicted any serious commitment to the imagined future.

In the following section of this chapter, I present those sections from the narratives, where the women articulate their deliberations and negotiations in face of experiences

of dissonance, to fit into both worlds. The questions that I raise here and try to explore are:

- ✓ *What is the nature of this trans-cultural experience in the lived experiences of the women at work in the call centres?*
- ✓ *How does the power of imagination facilitated through the process of training and work at the call centre bring changes in the lives of the women?*

### ***Favouring a life in America***

RAMANI: You find very few married women in call centres; but there are number of married men working here in the night shift; why because they do not have to handle the household responsibility. Actually it will be good if I get to married to someone working in the US or UK. Then I can go there and work without any barriers. You know you can earn more easily within a short time. We interact with so many people there. It will be nice to go there and stay for sometime there. I appreciate their attitude towards life and quality of life. As I have been telling you people are so casual; that does not mean that they do not do good stuff in life, but because of their coolness they do so much better in life and achieve great things; I am not saying India is behind; what I am trying to imply is that if we could just put away so much of fuss that we make over trivial things like someone talking to someone, working late in the office, women working outside late after marriage, or not cooking an elaborate meal for guests, husbands or members of the husband's family, then it would be much better for women.

Ramani had never been to America. However she thinks that, American society has much more in store, for her career than India. According to her, marriage and family responsibilities are the major barriers for the career of women in India. America, as she constructs the land from her exposure in the call centre, is a land of 'equality and opportunity' where she can build her career along with her marriage. I provide an excerpt from my interview with Peyashi in the following section where she narrates, how an American life could be good for her.

PEYASHI: America is a big country; I want to see the Statue of Liberty. I would be interested to work in America if the offer is good and it is good job. I can adapt myself to any place. Working in America offers lot of financial stability

and that is the attraction of going there. You have a good social security system and if you fall sick or cannot get a job there is no need to panic.

In Peyashi's imagination, a job in the US would provide her all the security, she wanted in life. Her family had faced financial problems, because of her father's retirement from a government job. While her job in the call centre did provide some financial relief for the family, there were insecurities associated with it. She expressed her desire to work in the United States sometime in the future. She perceived life to be comfortable and stable in a rich country like the United States.

SUMITA: When we speak to customers in the US we are different; there is an automatic change in accent and you like to be one of them over time. So even when I leave the work place I feel, I am so close to them, their culture, different places in those countries, their food, dress, weather, coffee etc and you feel you are from there. When America is awake we are awake and we are more in touch with that country. The office also provides magazines from these countries. You read New York Times; the times, watch their TV serials. What is acceptable there also becomes acceptable in this industry; no one really bother if you have a boy friend or you are sleeping with someone or have more than one boy friend or girl friend. We still do not accept in our society love marriages and other things and there is dowry. It is so awful for women. I think we need to change those things for women.

Sumita provides her insight into the American norms around dating and marriages based on love. She was quite depressed with the prospect of her boyfriend being rejected by her family. He comes from a different caste and inter-caste marriages are not accepted in her family. Her relationships with her boyfriend was formed and developed during work, as they both worked in the same team for a long time. She appreciates the open work environment, which was more American than Indian. While her love and desire found expression in such an open environment, the normative regulations of inter-caste love marriages in her community frustrates her. Faced with this ambivalence she becomes conscious of those restrictive gender norms, and how they should be changed as with reference to the American society.

These three women spoke at length about how they love to watch various American TV programs and like the characters in them. Sumita watched the "Friends" serial on Star TV regularly. She would even record her favourite episodes and watch them

again. Rachel in the serial was her favourite character, as she was 'so slim and pretty; she even broke her marriage decided by her parents'. Priti thought that 'the tall slim woman in the serial was, really cool. She seemed stupid yet funny and shameless; she approached all men on her own.'

Thus the women develop their understanding of the other world (America) through watching TV serials, movies and reading books. Engagement with their world of imagination also creates the scope for reflecting on some of the gender norms in their own life that they would like to alter or find more desirable in comparison to the other. Ramani questions the gender norms that make women undertake all the domestic chores in the Indian context, while Sumita seeks non-interference in the issue of marriage. Peyashi compares the government security available to the citizens in America, the insecurities associated with her own job in the call centre and how it affects her life. Thus their reflexivity arises out of their own material conditions and social context. The construction of the American in the work environment influenced their perceptions to a great extent; however the 'cultural scape' is in no sense rigid. It is simultaneously shaped by the perspectives of the women, who are attracted and constructed images of 'being American' in different ways.

A second theme arising in this chapter concerns the new habits that the women in my study adopt, which slowly become an accepted part of their daily lives. These new habits take shape in course of their work lives in the city.

### ***Expanding the normative sexual boundaries of the middle class families***

The women work for long hours in teams with their male colleagues. The timings of the shifts increase the interactions among the colleagues, while it affects their social relationships outside the call centre with their friends, and even the family. They celebrate festivals in the call centre and spend time on weekend team parties together. The timing and nature of the work provides the women with the opportunity to spend more time with their male colleagues. There is also a desire expressed by few women to be a part of the 'cool culture' where, 'it is ok, to talk or go out with a man without being labeled as promiscuous' (Peyashi). Most of the women (seven out of the nine) I interviewed, had their boyfriends with whom they had been going around

with for more than a year. I worked with Kiran for sometime in a team, and had gone out with her and her boyfriend on team parties. She is always forthright in claiming her share of love and attention from her boyfriend. She told me during one of the coffee breaks, 'here these kinds of relationships are common among my colleagues and no one bothers about it'.

Gita's initial friendship with her boss has bloomed into a romantic relationship. She leads an active life in Bangalore with a group of friends who are from the call centre.

I make lots of friends and it is chill that way. We hang around in the office as there is not much time to spend outside the office. I spend almost 12 hours for the office a day, travelling time included, so where is the occasion to meet people from outside? It is great to have friends from inside the [the organisation]. They share our work stress; understand the values and culture at work. It is easier that way. I can tell you, here in the office most of us interact and have friends among colleagues. Many of us are away from home and leading a lonely life here. It will be tough to sustain without good friends ... sometimes to share your work stress, feeling and values we have at office.

The fact that the women were all experiencing having to work in a different time zone and geography made them understand each other better. Some of them even provided moral support to each other in events of stress and other problems. The work place also encourages dating practices and marriage among colleagues. There are special leaves for married couples on anniversaries, and dating allowances provided to unmarried couples. In one of the call centres, there is a competition held for couples, while I was carrying out my observation. The company announced a free trip to one of the hill stations near Bangalore and a cash voucher. The various team and office parties are other occasions, where the women get introduced to alcoholic drinks or a smoke and tried it with excitement. Sumita met her boyfriend during the office party and danced with him, which made them more intimate. The opportunity to 'dance and drink' are two major activities in which some of the women had never indulged before and it provided them with lots of stimulation.

SUMITA: Being social is the first thing you have to do; you need to groom yourself to be part of your team. Team members are important and the team

leader is also important. If someone calls you for a drink you can say no to them but you still can join, sit with him and talk to him. Try to be a part of the group activities and outings.

Team parties are also the occasions for forming future relationships. Kiran danced with Saheel for a very long time, and that was the beginning of a love-sex relationship. She was never touched so closely by a man before, and according to her,

...it was pure love at first sight. I loved him then. That was the reason I danced with him. I never let any one touch me. But he is special and I want to get married to him.

Shilpi too thinks it is her love at first sight with Sur, as she danced with him on her first office party. Gita, on the other hand had prior sexual relationships and she was looking for something 'more matured' in her relationship. She has a closer relationship with her boss (team leader) currently. Her 'special friend' as she describes him 'gives her a lot of time and helps her to improve her performance at work. There is a special kind of understanding between them which was missing with her previous boyfriend.'

The narratives of women who found their love in dance parties, or while travelling in a taxi sounded more like the romantic love stories I had often come across in my college days or during the hostel nights where the dance floor marked the beginning of many love affairs. But the affairs were always constrained by the strict rules of an academic campus where morality in behaviour was also part of the learning process. There were hidden love affairs, which often would either break with a silly fight or lead to marriage, if the partners were committed enough. But the scope of living-in relationships was constrained with limited material freedom. The brave ones who dared to have clandestine affairs would often be the subject of gossip and labelled as 'notorious', 'bad', 'too modern for their own good' etc.

The context of call centres differ from a typical college life, or a campus life in two different ways. The high salary received in the call centre make the women relatively 'affluent' at a younger age and materially independent from their families (Patel 2008; Vasavi 2008) compared to their counterparts in the colleges or even university campuses. Secondly, the westernised atmosphere of the call centre made the women more comfortable in conducting their private affairs, free from gossip and among a

similar group of young people sharing a similar kind of subculture. The role of 'imagination as a social practice' also offers newer choices to them to conduct their lives 'without feeling guilty or being an immoral person'. While the women seem to become more open in expressing their sexual desire and love, I could always trace a craving for steering clear of being branded as immoral or a promiscuous woman. Thus, in the process they try to broaden the boundaries of their middle class sexual respectability by always identifying 'love with sex' (Kiran), 'love and duty' as the basis for living in relationship 'which of course will culminate in marriage' (Priti) and 'we are now engaged' (Shilpi) as the way to social acceptance and thus protecting the 'virtues of being a one man- woman'. More importantly, the women in their negotiations to attain respectability and express sexual desire, which have been mutually exclusive, in their middle class 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1992), try to shift the boundary of what may be considered as promiscuous behaviour. During one of the interviews, Kiran repeatedly distinguishes her 'pure, one man relationships' from that of casual dating and seeing many men by emphasizing 'mine', 'ours' and 'theirs'. She watches lots of American movies and TV serials. During one of her interviews, she tells me:

KIRAN: It is kind of repulsive, that you go and kiss so many men; almost every week one man on an average. They change boyfriends and girl friends; there is no restriction on being married or not. They do not mind to have an affair, even if they are married. Mine is not like that. Once married, it is forever; unlike theirs. I love to watch Friends as it is so funny. But see, what they do there. Every time it is sex talk; even their parents have affairs. Imagine our parents... they cannot even think of this. Ours is so different.

In the new 'cultural-scape', which the women inhabit in their work lives, the resources that provides them with alternative choices and possibilities of life, also act as reference points to be accepted or rejected. The new possibilities are judged according to the possibilities that can be incorporated into the 'habitus' without completely violating it. 'Thus the most impossible practices are judged and discarded' (McNay, 1999: 110). The habitus is 'generative' of the new practices in the lives of the women around their sexual desire, without completely violating the norms of middle class respectability. The women contest and resist the image of 'being an open

western woman' as experienced through the movies and TV serials. Thus the 'emotional quality of love' features more significantly in the narratives of the women compared to the 'physical and desire' based love of the western women.

### ***Contesting western sexuality***

While the new globalised work context fuels the desire of the women to aspire for changes in their sexual lives as is expressed in the narratives of Gita, Sumita and Kiran, it also brings about a strong reaffirmation of the local 'habitus' as apparent in the responses of some of the other participants like Tanima, Vidya and Ramani who narrate sexual relationships differently.

The rejection of the elements of American culture is more pronounced in the realm of sexuality. While some of the elements of American culture, like independence of women, sharing of household responsibility with men in the house and being carefree in daily lives were instantly incorporated, the relative openness of sexual morality is very often contested. Tanima identifies some of the female employees as being too open as a result of being 'too westernized and women of loose morals'. She criticises the changes in the lives of some of the younger women 'as unhealthy' and describes them as victims of 'an easy go policy'. In her words, "in order to gain money you lose everything". By 'everything', later elaborated by her, she meant sexual chastity and purity. While Vidya describes the changes in her life as a result of her employment in the call centres 'as more positive, like increasing her confidence and assertiveness', she rejects the 'open sexuality as displayed by other women as unhealthy'.

VIDYA: With respect to healthy relationships, it's fine. There are occasions when I have seen the floors which are under construction or not used by the office, you find couples being in intimate positions. You might be surprised or just have to put your head down and walk off. You would like to avoid those places. If by mistake you walk through those places, you never know what surprise is coming.

Tanima was quite emphatic in her discussion about the westernization of call centres. According to her,

TANIMA: See, mostly the western culture has completely taken over our traditional culture and people tend to be become more and more opportunistic and grab each and every chance that comes to them; grab it with both hands leaving behind their traditions, culture or values, whatever it is. BPOS give money to young people and expose them to a different work culture and life style. Slowly, you get used to that life, living standard and method of life. When you are out of that bpo /life or any other bpo it's very hard to come down to the real life. Real life in the sense of our traditional culture and values. Once they start making friends in the bpos , they go out, start drinking, smoking and that's the end of it. They end up nowhere. They don't know what's next. That's the bad influence. There is nothing to carry from the western culture. The western culture poisons people. The culture is so. The culture is so. Look, in a bpo you need to work together; you need to communicate, talk to each other, share with each other and discuss about work. But there is a limit where you should carry your friendship. I don't say having a boy friend or a girl friend is something wrong. But at the same time we have to be very careful. Down the line we should not be left empty-handed. There are many success stories also where people are tied in wed locks and have happy life. It may be common to have a boy friend or girl friend every week-end but in Indian tradition, it does not hold it as a healthy tradition. It's not acceptable in India. Even we are in nuclear families the culture is there even till now, because we are born and brought up in that culture.

For Tanima, marriage forms the core of traditions in Indian social life. While she does not reject the possibility of romantic love, a relatively modern basis of marriage, a successful love affair as noted by her is one which ultimately culminates in a marriage. At one stroke, Tanima brings in the the dispositions acquired in her familial habitus to construct her views about an ideal love affair. The middle class feature of respectability constructed through the purity of the female body blends with ideas of romantic love. The boyfriend becomes the husband and at once it is legitimated from a familial and class point of view.

For Ramani, who comes from a traditional Rajput (warrior caste) family, priorities in life were very well defined. She defined westernization as 'short term enjoyments for which you may have to pay long term prices'. Short term enjoyments, according to her are the temporary love affairs and changing habits of consumption which result from call centre employment. She expresses her concern about the bad reputation a

woman would get, if her affair becomes public knowledge and the families come to know about it. She is more concerned about 'what if people know about it and what will happen in the future'?

RAMANI: What we learn at home from our parents; what is appreciated in our society and basically our Indian culture is important for me.

Peyashi, who has worked for four years in different call centres in Bangalore, defined herself as being 'untouched by the western influences'. For her, it is the work stress that accounts for many to take up habits like drinking and smoking. She attributes her 'strong family values and strong family bonding' as the major stress busters in her work life. While she strongly rejects western values especially with regard to relatively open sexual values, she likes American food like sandwiches and burgers a lot. Ramani, Tanima and Peyashi reject having affairs before marriage, which according to them is a western practice. Tanima fought with one of her colleague when he proposed to her. Peyashi emphasises having a marriage where the 'character of the man' is most important. While she argues that, there are some regressive traditions which need to change in our society, she disagrees with too much openness in the realm of sexual matters. She speaks about some of the younger women in her work place who date lots of men just to earn money. In her opinion 'changing your boyfriends and taking money and gifts from them is like prostitution and not part of our culture'.

From these narratives I identify dating relationships and living in relationships to form the ground of major conflicting experiences for the women, as they challenge the previously acquired notions of purity and chastity that defined their gendered identities. However the negotiations of the women to get married to their boyfriends present an aspect of 'improvisation in practices located in their own experiences of reality' (Bourdieu, 1990: 60). The women '*broke the rules*' in getting into pre-marital sexual liaison; but by seeking the acceptance of their parents and defining it as love and seeking to get married, they made it '*socially recognisable*' (Bourdieu 1990). The other form of dissonance experienced by the women, is with respect to the exposure

to the more liberated ideas of pursuing one's career without the interference of marriage or getting rid of household work as the 'Americans do'.

However the women further rationalise this aspects of their life with the importance of marriage and having a family in their future. The following theme potrays yet another way in which some of the young women in my study negotiate between their choices to be a professional imbibing the characterstics that the work place demands, and the lines of respectability internalized as a part of their familial habitus.

***Being a 'professional' is different from 'being immoral'***

There are clear-cut distinctions established in some of the narratives, between being professional and immoral. Thus travelling in the nights or doing night shift with men in their teams, and close interactions with them is perceived as part of the job, and thus acceptable. Kiran who came from a South Indian Brahmin family is very particular when it comes to her vegetarian food habit as a marker of her caste. However, she has brought in changes in her ways of dressing and interaction with men, in order to be in good touch with the team and fit into the culture of the place.

KIRAN: I don't want to be the odd one out. When all my team members talk to each other and work together or go out for a drink, it does not look good to stand out. I wear jeans to the parties. I buy loose tops. When my mother told me not to buy those, I told her mom you have to trust me. You know me. It is part of my job.

For Tanima, taking occasional drinks with her team mates is part of her new profession. She is emphatic that this however does not make her a habitual drinker.

TANIMA: Networking is very important in this industry. If you just stick to your job and don't show up in any of the parties you will be a customer service executive your whole life. However I draw my boundaries. Sometimes I would just fake sickness, if I know it's going to be a wild party. Because the men in my team freak out when they get free drinks.

Gita refers to her relationship with her boss as a 'matured one' and tells me that he helps her a lot in the professional life. Kiran enjoys talking to the customers and solving their problems. While she has to work on her way of dressing and hair style to

fit into the group she was part of, she also enjoys flirting with customers which she describes as part of her job.

KIRAN: Some of the customers talk for a long time. They like my voice and they sometimes even flirt with me. Once there was middle aged man who was around 40; he asked me, would you mind going out with me if I come to India. I say yes. I know it is never going to happen. Just talk and enjoy to your heart. But do not cross your limits.

For Priti, talking to the customers sometimes is an enjoyable affair. She likes to make friends and talk about personal things about the customers. However according to her,

PRITI: I have to build rapport in order to generate sales, to keep up with my targets. If I just don't talk and be shy and very conservative, then there will be no sales at all. Just two days back, I had this customer; he said my voice was good and I sound sexy. I knew that he was trying flirt with me. I talked very nicely and sold him two printers.

The logic of 'being a professional' serves to normalise certain things in the work lives of the women, which would not be considered respectable in their family lives, or even outside the call centres. Thus the call centres emerge as a site where, the nature of interaction between the opposite sexes and construction of respectability is shaped by a host of factors. The important factors are the culture training process, which introduces the women to the American way of life, the efforts of the women to have a better understanding of it through watching movies and television serials and the acquired notions of professionalism in the modern work atmosphere.

I categorise the responses into two major groups. While the first group of women welcome the positive changes in their lives like becoming assertive, confident and feel happy about their improved communicating abilities, they strongly reject the open sexual values associated with Americanisation. However, the possibilities of alternative choices of life, as Ramani speaks of 'less household responsibilities to nurture her career' or Kiran appreciates the freedom with respect to marriages in the American

society, create reflexivity on the part of the women. Among the second group of women who form new heterosexual relationships and experience dissonance between familial values such as chastity and the desire to have sexual pleasure, flexible moral norms at the work place, as well as the mediation of American experiences expressed as 'cool dating culture' provides a new framework for behaviour. The new cultural experiences in the work place provide opportunities, where lived experiences and moral fixities are compared with an alternative vision of choices available in the American culture. The comparisons are more pronounced in those areas where constraints were deeply felt. Ramani speaks about the way her mother devotes all her time to the family and wonders how she would manage her career after her marriage? While her marriage is important for her as well as the family, she thinks it would be better to get married to someone from the US to get the best from both worlds.

### **Call centres, high earnings and remaking of respectability**

RAMANI: I have to get my management degree this year; it is tough to go for a full time degree with the night shifts. However I have managed to complete two years in the part time one. It is important to get the degree as it will be more prestigious.

SUMITA: I save a part of my salary and send it to my father. Bihar...you have to pay lots of dowry. My father cannot arrange for the money. My brothers have to be educated and we are two sisters. He tries hard but I like to help.

PRITI: I already bought everything for the house. Even we have taken a house in a decent place. I got the plasma TV, fridge and computer. We have completely furnished the house like microwave and gas stove and all things for cooking etc. I used part of salary and Sameer took a loan.

While the lack of higher educational qualifications made the call centre employees at the customer service executive level 'young brats' in popular notion, the narratives in my research emphasise the efforts of the women to reinforce their class status, and belonging in various ways. The economic dynamics in the post liberalisation period has brought in new patterns of consumption, particularly global consumer goods, as the symbol of the middle class status (Fernandes 2000; Rajagopal 2001; Rajagopal 2002).

Thus the possession of a new car or other household consumer durables has become both a necessity and a marker of class status and material prosperity.

Peyashi, who has been working in the call centres for the last three years, is saving a part of her salary to buy a new 'Santro' car manufactured by the Hyundai company from Japan. She does not like her mother to go shopping in autos or buses. Her family had difficult times after the early retirement of her father from a government job due to an accident in which he lost his legs; it is time to reclaim their status with the salary earned from the call centre. Investing in a car is not only a matter of easy transportation, but also a symbol of their material prosperity and class status. Gita has bought a flat with her savings from four years of work at call centres. She beams proudly, as she claims that the 'flat is located very close to Indira Nagar', one of the most plush localities in Bangalore. Sumita, Ramani and Tanima also try to save part of their salaries and invest in their marriage and education respectively. For Sumita, marriage is important as it will facilitate a respectable and stable future for her, while, Ramani aspires to get into a more respectable job with her management degree. Priti wants her house in a decent locality, furnished with all the household consumer goods before moving in, after marriage. It is important that for her to be a respectable married woman, and live in a house symbolising belongingness to a prosperous middle class.

While the women earn a good salary, the popular notions about the night shift work in call centres remains negative. This association brings in the efforts of the women to counter these notions in everyday lives, in various ways. During the interviews, they emphasize the frequent relations with their families, plans about higher education and arranged marriages. They invest in buying flats, cars, branded electronic goods and clothes which are the markers of the new middle class status in the globalising India. However the emphasis on the conversion of the economic capital (salary) into cultural capital (Bourdieu 1992) of the middle class, varies more (among the women) according to their familial habitus. While Ramani emphasizes higher education, Sumita seeks to achieve it through a respectable marriage. The high salary in the international call centres thus provides opportunities to engage in a process of conversion of capital and reproduction of the middle class (Bourdieu, 1992 *cited in* Jenkins, 2002: 140).

Bourdieu defines it as, 'a transverse mobility and usually is the result of the conversion and reconversion strategies. This is marked by cashing-in the economic capital to obtain cultural or symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1992 *cited in* Jenkins, 2002: 140). While the form of conversion varies in the form of education, house or a car, the notion of class and respectability are the key aspects for such conversion. Thus the chapter highlights how the 'power of imagination fuelled by the images and symbols' (Appadurai 1997) of a westernised work culture influence the lives of the women and their consumption practices. They in turn engage in efforts 'to annex the global and the American into their own practices of being modern' (Appadurai 1996). The majority of the women go to great lengths to describe who they wanted to be and become. This is however with respect to different degrees of consistency between various, and sometimes conflicting self images. The imagination of future lives often interferes with more down to earth and common sense commitments, expectations and concerns. For Sumita, imagination of a dowry free marriage based on love comes into immediate conflict with saving a part of her salary for her marriage dowry according to the wishes of her parents. Ramani's imagination to get married to someone from America seems almost impossible given her caste and family status where gendered values and norms with regard to marriage are strictly defined. The aspiration to be a respectable middle class woman defined in terms of arranged marriages, limited interaction with male colleagues or abstaining from attending wild parties comes into conflict with imagination of a life where these young females are professionals, modern and wish to make certain choices on their own.

These ambivalences which open up the space for reflexivity and influence the identity making process of these women however show individual differences. Young women like Priti, Gita, Kiran and Sumita demonstrate more ability to reflect upon the constructed, discursive nature of the American than Peyashi, Tanima and Ramani and appropriate these values selectively. For example, Sumita employs her active imagination of a love based marriage by forming relationships with a man from another caste and makes changes to her middle class familial practices. Ramani tries to employ her imagination of being a career oriented female by pursuing a higher degree and hopes to break the shackles of tradition in a less obvious way. These

practices signify that the discursive images of an American life do not only give rise to ‘... mere escapist forms of imagination or fantasy, that is thought divorced from projects and actions’ (Appadurai, 1996: 7).

## Conclusion

This chapter unfolds the stories of the women working as customer service executives in transnational call centres in Bangalore. The women migrate to Bangalore with aspirations to work for multinational companies, work on their careers and save their salaries for a middle class married life. This leads to a delay in their marriages resulting in dating and formation of casual relationships with their male colleagues at their work place. Significantly, their financial independence from their families due to a relatively higher salary<sup>91</sup> received in the transnational call centres and exposure to a new culture and work environment (during the culture training and interaction with the customers in the shop floor) translates into freedom of choices to live life on their own. The important question that this chapter addresses is *whether the exposure of the women to a new set of values, ideas and cultural symbols coupled with financial independence is sufficient to facilitate transformation in their gendered identities*. I sum up the important points of this chapter before providing a theoretical framework to explain the process.

It is fallacious to assume that all elements of American culture are taken in the same manner by all the young women and giving to imagination of a different form of life. Several women in my study contested and rejected the open sexuality as representative of American culture (as interpreted by the women from their viewing of American television serials, reading books etc.) as ‘potentially corrupting’. It signifies the anxieties arising from the issues of Americanisation and being an Indian woman. While on the one hand, arranged marriages were defended by most of the women as an integral part of the Indian familial tradition, on the other, the women rejected the

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<sup>91</sup> Salary in call centres while in dollar terms may be significantly less compared to what such workers receive in western countries, in the Indian context, the conversion leads to an attractive salary package for the young women.

customs of dowry, inter-caste marriages, lack of freedom in choosing one's own partner etc. As such, they were defending a traditional institution to which they actually objected to. This contradiction was related to the ambivalences of proclaiming cultural authenticity in the light of what can be called Americanisation.

However, for other women some aspects of the American culture seemed more attractive and positive than their own. These were the spheres where the women experienced tension from discrepancies between the expectations of the family and the demands of their current lives. The conflict between choices of marriage and pursuing a career made the women reflect upon the positive aspects of American culture where free choice rules over social prescriptions. In such situations the women were reflexive and talked about hope for a life, where they desired to prosper in their career, travel freely and spend long hours in the office without being labelled as women of loose morals. This form of reflexivity is termed as a form of 'situated reflexivity' (McNay, 1999: 110) which needs to be understood with reference to the socio-cultural context or the 'field' within which the individual acts. It implies that 'awareness about one's life situations does not automatically lead to identity transformations. However it facilitates de-traditionalization<sup>92</sup> of gendered norms in certain aspect of life' (McNay, 1999: 110). While adopting a new dress code may seem a mere cosmetic change it implies deep association with the ways embodiment of sexual respectability takes new shape. Preferences for up-to-date and fashionable clothes which show one's legs and stress one's cleavage as implied by Tanima, emphasise how images and symbols of western sexuality are integrated into daily lives, considered as modern, desirable and thus defended as normal and part of a progressive life. Thus exposure to new cultural elements not only creates imagination and hope, but is also appropriated selectively to feel less constrained by a normative social order.

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<sup>92</sup> These include: women's entry in large numbers into the labour market in late modernity (Marshall, 1994: 32; McRae, 1999: 56); and a more relaxed and liberal approach to marriage (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996); and the challenging of traditional biographies for women (Brook 2006).

The women demonstrate varying accommodation and adaptation strategies as a product of their reflexive awareness in the following ways. They engaged in the process of constructing a new kind of respectability, where interacting with the male colleagues or attending the team parties in the capacity of a professional does not compromise their gendered values. They defend their new way of dressing in terms of the demand of the work and to establish themselves as professionals. It is important to note that the women who preferred to be sexually active before marriage also defended traditional values. It can be suggested that the power of imagination deepens the reflexivity of women as they enter the call centre and come under the influences of American culture. They demonstrate their capacity to creatively reorganise the symbolic American resources and construct a preferred image of reality. The young women engage in a process of negotiating the dissonant experiences between their familial habitus, and that of the call centre while reflecting critically on their actual life circumstances. The practice of reflexivity helps them to deal with the dissonances and expand their horizon of hope or imagination to lead a fulfilling life. It can be concluded that the scale of imagination that is enhanced with the new cultural experiences through real and virtual means deepens the power of reflexivity as they continue their journey as call centre workers. Their yearning to become smart, modern and progressive crops up from the images of a smart call centre executive portrayed through various means in the call centre and the discontent in the exigencies of their familial life. But their imagination of a free, modern and progressive life is also bounded by the local rules pertaining to chastity and modesty. The structural position of the women as part of the middle class closes down opportunity to escape marriage or openly reject the virtues associated with female morality and chastity. However, through their imagination they strive to create new socio-cultural space where many American symbols are constructed as positive, incorporated into their personal lives with negotiations with the families. This is not to suggest that each element of western culture is taken as a stimulus for imagination or all the women become reflective about constraining gendered norms in the same manner. The women remake their lives in personal and complex ways through their own negotiation between the local and the global

## Chapter Seven

### Go to the city, get a job but don't get carried away

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#### Introduction

These are her parent's words that Kiran recalls when she migrated from Vishakhapatnam to Bangalore, to work in an international call centre and live on her own. Similar thoughts are echoed in other narratives, where there are parental concerns around the "westernization prevalent" in the Indian cities, and admonitions to steer clear from it. There is no singular meaning ascribed to the process of westernization in the narratives. The familial concerns are expressed mostly around the liberated sexual behaviour and love marriages which are thought to be western imports and stand opposed to familial and class norms of restricted sexual behaviour, chastity and arranged marriages. It also includes the disquiet of parents that their daughters if westernized would acquire bad habits such as drinking or smoking. For many young women who come from small towns, Bangalore presents the "chosen metaphor for the experience of the modern world" (Chambers, 1994: 92) and provides opportunities to expand their roles beyond the home and familial expectations. For example, the women have an independence to stay, move around, and choose their leisure activities or peers in the city which other females that in their families never had. Urban experience also expands the 'power of imagination' of these women where modern consumption practices and sexual behaviour entice the women into its fold.

As I discuss later in this chapter, while urban life offers potential for changes in identities of the women, the process is marked with ambivalence, contestation and negotiations. This is with respect to what can be considered as acceptable behaviour or desirable modernity from a familial and class perspective. Thus the women in their

urban sojourn endeavour to embrace some of these opportunities selectively, and adopt them within a broad paradigm of “respectable” middle class femininity. At a broad level, the women perceive themselves as carriers of respectability and honour, who will ultimately enter into heterosexual marriages at an appropriate age (which keeps shifting across generations) and become future wives and mothers. They are simultaneously the smart call centre executives who take care of their clients sitting thousands of miles away, efficiently applying their American accent, or one of the vibrant youth enjoying themselves with their boyfriends at Café Coffee Day (the favourite ‘hang out’ spot of young employees during weekends) away from the normative gaze of the family. I also encounter the incarnations of a dutiful daughter draped in a *half sari* with flowers in her long braid on religious occasions with her family, or the future daughter-in law touching the feet of her ‘future-in-laws’ with her head modestly covered with the *pallu*<sup>94</sup>, displaying feminine submission and deference.

This chapter thus deals with many of the threads that unwind backward and forward to reveal the fluid structures of hope, meaning and life in the two different worlds of family and city. While the women in my study narrate their childhood experiences in terms of rules, parental affection, emotional ties, moral obligation to be “good” daughters, and a deep sense of responsibility to the family, the threads pertaining to living in the city are expressed as aspirations to be ‘the modern women’ whose independence and mobility are tied to the experiences in the city. At a surface level, this is achieved through engaging in modern consumption practices and some of the markers of modern life style. There are efforts to dress well in clothes with brand names, acquire jewellery, get a new modern hair-do, and own a flat or a car. The women develop new pastimes such as going on long drives with their friends or partners or hanging out in places like little Italy, Pizza Corner or KFC which are considered modern and global. At a deeper level, the women also look for romantic

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<sup>94</sup> *Pallu* is the end section of a *sari*, which is a long cloth draped round the body in a particular style. It is used by married women to cover their heads in some parts of India as a mark of modesty and respect.

love and sexual pleasure, expressed through entering into living-in relationships with their male colleagues or going on dates during weekends.

## **Structure of the chapter**

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the recent studies which emphasise consumption and pursuit of specific leisure activities as a basis for acquiring a modern persona. I extend my area of research in exploring further the impact of a rising culture of consumerism as a resultant of the information technology revolution on the agency and gendered identities of the female participants in my study. This becomes clear, as I discuss the lived experiences of the women in the city under the themes of leisure, consumption practices and living-in relationships which provide the underpinning of new gendered identities in the second section of the chapter. Each theme highlights the contradictions, discontinuities and continuities marked in the narratives due to the movement of the women across different fields as daughters, friends, consumers or partners.

## **Being modern in the city**

Over the past few years, scholars have begun to note that the display of new technologies and consumer commodities are increasingly valued as symbols of modernity and social status in the context of developing countries (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Fernanades 2000; Guano 2002; Mills 1997; Spronk 2009). Paul Watt and Stenson (1998: 256-259) stresses that the city also provides a multitude of settings and social institutions like beauty parlors, shopping malls, movie theatres and night clubs where these new standards of consumption can be pursued. Mary Beth Mills (1997) underscores the importance of consumption as markers of symbolic value or social status and suggests that modern cities provide the grounds to nurture imagined possibilities of modern life. According to her “the power of new technologies of representation – television and other forms of mass media” produce and propagate “dominant meanings about progress and desirability of modern style and attitudes” (P: 40). Annuska Derks in her study among *Khmer* women who migrate from rural Cambodia to Phnom Penh highlights commodity consumption as one of the major allures of city life which contributes to the desire of the rural women to be modern.

'Clothes are probably the most desired consumer items for young rural women in Phnom Penh, especially jeans, skirts, T-shirts, blouses and shoes, which are considered modern compared to the old sarong and the loose clothing women wear in the village' (Derks, 2008: 145).

The question that is of relevance to my research *is to what a extent consumption based modern persona impacts upon the agency of women who participate in a city culture and facilitate changes in their gendered identities?* Mills's (1997), study identifies the connection between the nature of urban employment, wages earned and aspirations of modernity in the lives of rural women, who migrate from rural areas of Thailand to Bangkok. The low wages of these women created a gap between the hegemonic construction of modernity in urban Thailand through mass media and the affordability to do so. Such gaps between aspiration and realities led to the feeling of marginalization among these women. The pursuit of modernity was also confined to making some surface-level changes in their lives, while they retained relationships with their rural families that provided them with a sense of security.

A study by Derks (2008), of the migrant lives of rural Cambodian women in Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia in a similar way cites low paid wage labour, institutional barriers, global capitalism and expectations of rural families as limitations to development of individual autonomy and enhancement of status amidst the proliferation of symbols, values and signs of modernity in the city.

Theoretically these studies make a case for the arguments of the material feminists<sup>95</sup> who claim that gendered identity should not be understood as simply imposed through the ideals of modernity, rather how these ideas and norms of modernity are lived and realized in the embodied practices of the women should be studied. As Lois McNay puts it:

In short, materialist feminists have a more cautious view of the potential for transformation of gender relations than certain work within symbolic feminism (McNay, 2000: 16).

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<sup>95</sup> Material feminism: Material feminists emphasise material realities such as the nature of employment, kind of wages earned and the relationships of the women with their rural families as important dimensions of their lives.

The need to study the symbolic realms of modernity expressed through advertisements (media) or sites in the city such as glamorous shopping malls, theatres or restaurants are as important to understand how formation of identity follows from lived relations between the embodied potentialities of modernity in city life and economic, social and political dimensions of the lives of the women. This will result in an active concept of agency of the women as, “[they display] the capacity to manage actively the often discontinuous, overlapping or conflicting relations of power” (McNay, 2000: 16).

While I try to build upon this literature on migration and its theoretical implications, my contribution lies in emphasizing the *middle class dimension that mediates between the aspirations of the women to be modern and familial expectations and patriarchal power relationships they are embedded in as daughters*. The financial independence and self sufficiency of the female participants in my study as a result of their employment at transnational call centres (unlike the low waged women in the previous research studies referred above) enable them to participate in the urban culture and appropriate certain values and symbols into their lives, enhancing female agency and autonomy. The cosmopolitan city provides them with the opportunity to explore new pursuits of leisure and sexuality outside the surveillance of the families. Many of my participants appreciate ‘chilling out’ during the weekends after the busy, stressful nightshifts with relative freedom. The city-scape endows the women with the opportunity to appropriate and practice an urban lifestyle in movie theatres, pubs, restaurants, or amusement parks. As the women engage in makeovers from traditional women to modern women, they also reshape certain gendered norms and values and display creative agency. I begin with the reconstruction of a party in a plush, central locality of Bangalore during one weekend. I participated in the party as a team member and tried to draft the occasion in my research journal after I returned home at midnight. Weekend parties were occasions which provide the opportunities for young women to spend time with their partners in public places, explore their sexuality and re-territorialise time and space in ways those were not previously considered respectable in their middle class habitus within a small town.

## **Practices of leisure and consumption**

### ***Let's have a party tonight***

*A Saturday, 7 P.M.*

*Six of us, were crammed into a small Maruti car that belonged to SAMEER. It was a Saturday night. We were out for the night after the gruelling yet 'fun-filled and enjoyable' (As many of the young agents would put it) week long night shifts. The team had done well during that week, and it was about to be rewarded with a good dinner, and a visit to one of the popular night clubs on Commercial Street. PRITI suggested that we go to one of the famous Chinese outlets on the street, where she had been once with her partner. In the group of six, PRITI and KIRAN were with their partners, leaving me and Ramani as the single females in the group.*

*PRITI: It's too costly yaar to spend your own money here (She meant the restaurant)... Last time we came here, we paid around Rs 1000 (US \$25) only for both of us (she implies SAMEER, who is her partner). But this is a good place, I mean, I have seen lots of families here in late nights... it's quite nice and safe. KIRAN and SAHIL (partners) had agreed to it with a suggestion that we might like to visit the night club that is very close to the restaurant. "Next week we will do something buddies and manage some good money from our incentives. Let's have a real good time tonight".*

*"Yeah man, it was a really good week" says SAMEER. The call volume was so good ... there were not many jerks (frequently refers to abusive US customer) I enjoyed it. Anyways, I get to decide, if we can stay past midnight. If it's only us, no problem man. But not very safe for them" (he refers to the women in the group).*

*"Oh! this traffic, we should have started early. Everyone is out. Good that we are not going to MG Road". PRITI suggests from the back seat. "You will not find a parking space there. Remember, last time we went for that movie; we were 20 minutes late, SAMEER took three rounds in Brigade Road to look for a parking".*

*"Yeah, I know... anyways let them drive. It is important to be mindful", adds KIRAN.*

*"Are you guys ok"? PRITI asks looking at me and RAMANI*

*“I am fine”, says a cramped RAMANI, who is almost sitting on KIRAN’s lap with her head touching the car roof can only hear KIRAN’s voice, as I was completely squeezed between RAMANI and the car door. KIRAN has persuaded RAMANI to come for the outing, with a promise that we would come back before midnight. I had sat quietly as the discussion for Saturday night was on at the cafeteria of the call centre. Everyone was happy to have earned the award for the team. KIRAN made promises to RAMANI as part of her persuasion efforts to get her into the group.*

*We will be back before midnight... But please tum na apni woh salwars<sup>96</sup> mat pehen le na (please do not wear your salwars). It suits you, but when we go out, jeans or skirts look better. Nahin to behnji lagenge (otherwise we look dowdy). Aur jeans to aise bhi kafi decent hai, kahan hum log minis phente hein (anyways jeans are quite decent. After all we are not wearing minis). The crowd there is quite different. It’s not like one of those roadside dhabas<sup>97</sup>, or the road side places. We need to look (pauses for a while)... hmmm... impressive... sophisticated you know... (laughs) Otherwise they would think we are a bunch of desis<sup>98</sup>.*

*RAMANI – “I do not mind coming with you guys, but no drinks (alcohol), not for me, not for any one”.*

*KIRAN however had laughed... later told me “she is so prudish... we cannot stop the men. They are men after all. We go for the food but they go for the drink”. We arrived at ‘Alex’s Kitchen’, the name of the restaurant written on a glowing red board in both English and Chinese with the picture of a dragon below it. Our clothes made us blend with the crowd in the restaurant and in the street... RAMANI in a chic blue top and long flowing skirt... PRITI dressed in a short skirt and halter top; KIRAN and me in jeans and tops.*

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<sup>96</sup> *Salwars* are dresses that are considered more traditional, in the context of a city and modern places of consumption. In Bangalore, in such places women are found more in jeans and skirts that are classified as modern outfits.

<sup>97</sup> *Dhabas* are roadside restaurants which are quite popular in India.

<sup>98</sup> *Desis* is a local expression which means natives.

*One of the receptionists in her Chinese costume welcomed us in English, and bowed in Chinese style. We sit on a corner table, all men on one side and women on the other (RAMANI sat next to me). SAHIL passes on the dinner menu towards us keeping the menu for the beverages on their (men's) side.*

*"I am famished. I might as well get something to drink for myself", says PRITI*

*"But what about SAMEER, he would let you"? KIRAN sounds doubtful...*

*"Excuse me, he is not my father or husband. Anyways he is quite broad minded. He does not mind if I have a peg or two". PRITI retorts back.*

*While PRITI started talking to SAMEER and SAHIL, RAMANI sits rigidly with the prospect of a broken promise by KIRAN, "The females in the group would not drink".*

*"May be we can have a rule for both men and women. Two drinks for each of us". I sound crazy to myself.*

*"No, five for us and two for you girl"s, asserted SAHIL. "I do not get drunk that easily. I can manage".*

*"Nothing for me, thank you", says RAMANI grim faced, while enjoying her spiced cabbage at the same time. "I knew this, that's why I never come for a party outside". RAMANI hisses at KIRAN.*

*"OK, I am with you. Let's have Sprite", says SWATI (me) hoping that would make RAMANI feel better.*

*"I am not coming to the night club with them. I am sure they will have more to drink". RAMANI whispers to me" (loud enough for everyone to hear).*

*"Hell no, I have to drive. Trust me; I am your team leader. I shall take care of you", says SAHIL.*

*"Let's have our food...please no more drinks. RAMANI sahi keh rahi he (Ramani is right)...we have to go for the shift tomorrow night" says PRITI.*

*Room me bhi kitna sara kam hei na. Tum logo to bas sho te rahoge. Hum ko karna padega (we have to do all the domestic chores, you guys will sleep anyway). PRITI continues emphasizing the extra work females have to do on weekends.*

*“Hey come on, I cook for you”, says SAMEER looking at PRITI. We could all see PRITI blushing heavily before declaring that “it’s only once in a blue moon, when he feels like”*

*The waiter intervenes with more food, this time with RAMANI’s Vegetable Manchurian. That makes her happy enough to smile for the first time in the evening. We walk out of the restaurant at around 10 p.m. PRITI is all red faced from her cocktails. She leans over SAMEER as she walks. The street is still full of life with cars and people. There are eating places all over with big restaurants, small fast food outlets selling rolls and kebabs, Pizza Corner, Pizza Hut and MacDonalds. We take a short walk and came to a halt where two roads meet near a big shopping mall. SAMEER directs us to a place called ‘Neons’, one of the famous discos of the locality. There is a long narrow corridor leading to the place from the road. It turns further at a right angle leading to the real entrance shielding the place completely from the outside world. I can see a group of young men and women dressed in jeans, shorts, minis with immaculate hair, and make up, on one side of the street. The area is part of the entertainment hub for the upper class crowd in Bangalore, and emits an aura of sophistication in clothing and speech by people in the malls, restaurants and in the other places around.*

*“Do you want to have something to drink before we get in”, asks SAMEER?*

*“Thanks, I shall have something from that juice shop”, replies RAMANI.*

*I looked at the small yet elegant looking stall of freshly squeezed juices in front of one of the malls. The price is high, but it is all juice compared to some of the other shops where it would be a mixture of the juice and water in various ratios. KIRAN and PRITI sit silently while I go with RAMANI to the juice shop. In the meantime SAMEER and SAHIL are out for their smoke.*

*“Can we skip this dancing part? I want to go back”, whispers RAMANI.*

*“Are you sleepy”? I ask, knowing that something is bothering her.*

*'No, but see they are couples. It's all right for them to go and dance. I do not like dancing... [she appears to be agitated]. I have never danced with men'.*

*"Ok, you really do not have to dance. We can watch them dancing and have something to eat. We can leave after an hour, at 11.30. How does that sound"?*

*RAMANI is not sure.*

*I am not sure too. I had done this at my university... dancing and late nights. But it was always within the defined and safe boundaries of the time and space of the university campus. We (many of the JNUites<sup>99</sup>, back in the late nineties) could never afford to go to the night clubs in Delhi. Our night ventures included a trip to one of the plush theatres in nearby Vasant Vihar, which screened only English movies. It was exciting to be part of the young intelligent crowd who flaunted their distinctiveness in a newly liberalizing India by watching American and English movies. To attract the students from the nearby university campuses, there was a special price for all the students. We would occupy the front five or six rows of the plush theatre by just paying five rupees (NZ 20 cents) compared to the other tickets costing around 75 – 250 rupees ( NZ\$ 3-5).*

*Money however created no barrier for the pursuit of leisure activities of young employees from the call centre. SAMEER flashes his credit card to pay for the group (which he says he will try to get partially reimbursed from the office and then divide among each of us). RAMANI expresses her displeasure over spending such a lot of money for nothing (Rs 550 per person). This time I am the only one who can hear her. KIRAN is holding Sam's hand tightly and already imagining herself on the dance floor. PRITI is excited and humming and looking at others near the reception. It is 10.30 p.m. and inside the club the night is just beginning.*

*The songs are nice. RAMANI surprises me with her comment. We both have been sitting there in a corner place with our cokes for half an hour. "Do you want to go to the floor? No one is a professional here". I say, "No, it's too crowded and I cannot stand the alcohol smell. It makes me feel dizzy".*

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<sup>99</sup> JNU ites: Students who are part of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

*I chat with RAMANI, while KIRAN and PRITI completely enjoy themselves on the floor coming back occasionally for some drinks. KIRAN is kissing SAHIL while SAMEER and PRITI are in a deep embrace. We both (RAMANI and me) decide to leave the club around 11.45 as it was getting late, and it would not be safe to travel in a cab later than that. As my place is closer to the place, I ask RAMANI whether she would stay at my house for the night. She thinks it would be sensible...*

The above context represents one of the many nights out with my participants during the field work period in Bangalore. Such leisure activities marked stepping out of the limits that have been imposed on the women previously in the families as daughters. However in the city, participating in such activities forms part of the imaginative modern world for the women. Such occasions offered the women the chances to construct their identity as modern women and acquire more positive self image. Interestingly, many a times such interactions also took a gendered form. During the group interactions outside, I would observe the men and women sitting separately, engaging in different tasks such as the men examining the drinks menu and the women deciding the food, engaging in different conversations etc. During the above occasion, Priti and Kiran often evoke some of the entrenched aspects of their identities, while appearing modern and outgoing. Kiran is heavily dependent on her partner for her decision to stay out late, or going to the night club or even for her drinks while dining out. While Priti asserts her independence in deciding her own alcoholic drinks and movements in the city, she acted in a “pre-reflexive”<sup>100</sup> (McNay, 2000: 41) way or unconscious manner in responding to Kiran that ‘only her father or husband could be the decision makers for her and not Sameer, who is her partner. Priti’s complicity with some of the deeply ascribed gender norms become more prominent, while she talks later about her relationship with her partner, who always has the upper hand as the future husband. Thus there is a marked shift in dependency from fathers and brothers to partners in the city. Both Priti and Kiran feel protected and secured in the presence of their partners, while Ramani constantly perceives

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<sup>100</sup> On a pre-reflexive level, the actor is predisposed or oriented to behave in a certain way because of the active presence of the whole past embedded in the durable structure of the habitus (McNay, 2000: 41)

threat to her gendered self outside the normatively defined boundaries of time and space.

The party also provides an occasion for construction of aspects of identities based on the perception and imagination of the city-scape as a global place, where opportunities for sexual ventures are relatively accessible. Priti and Kiran are relatively open in the display of their sexual attraction towards their partners based on their perception of lives in Bangalore where 'such relations are normal in everyday life and people really do not mind'. Thus the young professionals participate in a subculture in the clubs, restaurants and malls that dot the urban night scape and are regarded as desirable. Although not all of the women participate in such leisure activities, the majority do, either during the weekends or during official get-togethers and parties. The relative anonymity, autonomy in the city life thus embodies the potential for creating new social relationships, recreates boundaries of acceptable norms and to facilitate new gendered identities.

### ***In Rome be like Romans***

Priti and Kiran perceive Bangalore as open and progressive, as it provides them with the opportunities for a "fast life" and to indulge in "dating and have sex" without inviting public criticism. Going out, having fun, chilling out etc are expressed as the indicators of a fast life in the city by these women. It is also important to note that dating and sexual relationships are to some extent legitimized by the subculture prevalent in the call centres as well as among the group of women who live away from the families in hostels or flats. While going out with one's boyfriend on the weekends is indicative of a more contemporary personhood amongst this subculture, anonymous sexual relationships without motherhood also preserve the honour of the women in their families. A more personal approach could be seen to evolve in some of the narratives towards partner choice based on values of companionship, egalitarianism, sexual satisfaction etc. Sexuality thus represents a space where they "...reenact their femininity ... by claiming entitlement to sexual pleasure as the young, the hip and the ambitious" (Spronk, 2009: 505).

Priti and Kiran's constructions of the modern and open environment in Bangalore clashes somewhat with my experiences as a resident in an older suburb of Sanjay Nagar, which housed retired couples and other middle class households with employment in the government sector. Before moving in, I was cautioned by the land lady with stories of deviant young female tenants who had been vacated from the house before. The aberrations are described in terms of the females smoking, and having late night parties in the house with loud music. During my stay in the area, there was a kind of cleansing drive in the local parks with a huge sign board being put up there. It said, 'Only family and children Please'. But both Priti and Kiran stay in areas which are more industrialized, and housed offices, and a floating population of employees in the software sector and the call centres. This section of population is more exposed to a global culture at work, and also brings in different notions of living as a part of their travelling overseas. Thus the norms of behaviour and marks of respectability differ among various localities and neighbourhoods in Bangalore. While as daughters, the women have defined boundaries of time and space with respect to their mobility, as independent citizens of the city, they are able to re-territorialise the night space in the city. It makes them feel liberated, modern and global without the 'feeling of being immoral'. As Priti states during one of the interviews,

PRITI: Now everyone knows that the IT (Information Technology) industry as well as call centre people work round the clock. Actually these are signs of us being global. There is no typical timing of 10a.m.-5p.m. work as we are working for organizations which operate for various countries. When I come out in the weekends, it is like we are part of the globe where you do not have a sense of time. Now here it is night in India, but people will be starting their days in the US. After I have started working in the call centre this is something that has changed for me. I do not feel bad anymore if I have to stay up late with my friends outside.

As Priti expresses the changes in her life as a global worker, for Sumita the city offers opportunities to make choices for independent living without encountering some of the gender stereotypes she encountered back home.

SUMITA: I have more freedom in Bangalore. I can dress differently, go to different places and even go to a restaurant with Ravi, no one comments. No

one bothers you or stares at you, if you are walking with your boy friend, holding his hands.

### ***Leisure: As a mark of distinction***

On the one hand, leisure activities facilitate the creation of new narratives in the city to fabricate a modern self. On the other hand, it also marked a quest for class distinction in the activities of the women at a more pre-reflexive level. According to Bourdieu, the symbols of distinctions can be moral, economic and cultural in nature (1984). The search for respectability in the new practices of modernity led to choice of distinctive consumption of brand-name goods. Many of my participants cite going to a good restaurant, pub, disco, or a trip to the shopping mall as one of their favourite weekend leisure activities.

The women prefer to spend time in the shopping malls, parks and theatres which are the 'spectacles of a transnational and elitist consumption, and a segregation that separated these places from the other less modern and low class enclaves in the city' (Guano, 2002: 187). The desire to express respectability is also manifested in the choices of places of leisure during the night times. The women select places which are considered safe, respectable and keep themselves away from places which associate night life with the stereotypes of being labelled call girls or prostitutes. There is also emphasis on being accompanied by male partners in the night space to express their respectability, and not be viewed as women who do not care about the protection of their female body or be labeled as promiscuous. Thus the leisure and consumption activities of the women cannot be considered as a collapse of their familial values and norms; rather it presents a reinvention of social and cultural identities

However, the above discussion also shows up that there is no absolute way of defining modernity in contrast to traditions. The creative ways in which the women engage in global / local interactions define their agency in choosing their own path to be modern. In similar contexts anthropologists like Arjun Appadurai talk about 'alternative modernities' or assertion of Tomlinson who calls attention to 'different routes to and through modernity taken by different cultures' (Tomlinson 1999: 65). Based on these conceptualizations, I argue that the notion of modernity in the case of the young women must also be understood within particular historical contexts of the Indian

society and with specific reference to a middle class notion of respectability that nurtures a pre-reflexive embodied aspect of gendered identities in middle class families. The path to being modern or the influences of a city life also showed variation among the women. While for women like Shilpi, Gita or Kiran, changing their ways of dressing are not articulated as a threat to their sexual respectability, Ramani provides a different perspective.

## **Ways of dressing and feeling respectable**

According to Ramani, who is from a more traditional Rajput family, ways of dressing are not only a matter of her habit, but also a part of her identity. Ramani's sense of dressing reflects a deeper part of her identity which is coupled with the notions of morality and respectability. These notions are strongly enforced in her middle class habitus in a smaller town, where feminine identity is enforced through work on the female body. Her sense of distinction as a daughter of the middle class family is further carried forward to the city life, where she is careful not to cross the internal limits imposed by herself. It may seem appropriate to conclude that the class norm of respectability still remains important in the urban lives of the women. However, such a conclusion does no justice to the new practices of the women who love to experiment with their attire while getting out during weekends or in the call centres.

Shilpi, who has a more liberal upbringing, claims that since her childhood, she has been fond of wearing trousers and skirts. She does not perceive her sense of dressing as western or more modern. Priti is casual about the way she dresses in the city, and tells me that she did not have to change much to adapt herself to her life in Bangalore. Kiran on the other hand, chose to dress according to the occasion. At work, she prefers comfortable clothes like jeans and trousers, which 'require low maintenance'. She likes to dress traditionally, while visiting her relative and family in the city or her home town. While, there is an articulation of differences between *salwars* as a traditional form of clothing, and jeans and skirts as modern outfits, there is also a notion of decency and modesty that is articulated for both types of clothes. The women think that it is important that they look 'decent', 'modest', 'respectable' and

not vulgar in both traditional and western dresses. Shilpi who mostly dresses in western outfits, tells me during one of the interviews that,

SHILPI: I am quite slim and all types of dress look pretty decent on me. I do not wear clothes which would not suit my figure. If you try to wear clothes just for the sake of being modern or imitate others around you it is not ok. It looks different and vulgar and people might get different impressions.

Shilpi's upper middle class army background always made her distinctive among the female participants. In comparison to the other participants, she is cognizant of the different ways of her living, which are considered as deeply conflicting by the other participants. She is always dressed in more western outfits, invites her male and female colleagues for parties at her place on different occasions, and lived in with her boyfriend to whom she became engaged recently. For her, there was no disconnect between what was expected of her, and what she ended up doing. She described her parents as being quite broad minded and supportive of her decisions in life. Whilst activities such as drinking alcohol, dancing with men in parties or wearing an outfit which according to Ramani 'can only be seen in movies', presented no conflicts for Shilpi around the notions of respectability or morality. In her family they had frequent parties where all the members participated and she often went out to restaurants or discos with her friends and cousins with her parents' permission. Such habits rendered these activities as normal and a part of her family life than being perceived as western. In contrast to Shilpi, for whom the current lifestyle in Bangalore presented no moral dilemmas between being Indian or western, Kiran and Sumitha spoke at length on the changes they have to make in their lives after migrating to the city.

Sumita who came from a lower middle class family, feels that it is important for her to bring in 'changes in her attitude' to construct a new life for herself in the city. It has been a substantial effort on her part to make changes in her appearance, so that she 'could make some friends and be taken seriously in her work in the call centre'. She narrates along with Peyashi and Tanima, who also find it difficult to go on with their old dressing habits and hair style that make them feel totally out of place in Bangalore. This sense of not fitting into the environment in the city, most prominently features

during occasions like parties, a trip to the movie or shopping trips to malls, where the women are attracted to look modern and up-to date rather than being small town women. I cite here the responses of two female participants, who speak about their uneasiness, as a result of their traditional ways of dressing in different occasions.

SUMITA: The first time I went outside with my boy friend on a ride, I was like...when he took me to the coffee shop. Most of the women looked so good and confident. I was like this country bumpkin, who knows nothing about being modern and sophisticated. Nobody tells you anything...but you feel it inside and you want to change, be one of them. It is very important that you dress as per the code of the place. Otherwise it is highly embarrassing.

TANIMA: I always look good in *sarees*... I mean that's what everyone tells me. My friends decided to go to Kormongla and have a birthday blast for one of our friends. I decided to wear this beautiful cotton sari, it was like summer and I thought it would be the most appropriate. But when I arrived what I saw made me like a fool. All of them dressed in their most casual outfits, giggling like a bunch of teens and I am like their mother.

SWATI: So do you think no one wears saris in Bangalore anymore?

TANIMA: I do not know. There is so much of change. I am quite surprised. I hardly see anyone in *salwars* or other traditional dresses anymore. It's of course the kind of industry you are working for and the people you be friendly with and socialize with. I have mostly my friends from the call centre. Most of them wear modern outfits.

While for Tanima and Sumita, modern outfits are more appropriate in their new lives, Kiran and Priti dress according to occasions. Kiran is the pretty smart woman who dresses in tight jeans and trendy tops while at work; during the family occasions however, she is the younger, quiet daughter presenting a complete contrast to her usual vivacious self at work. According to her, she spontaneously behaves on various occasions, and it does not present any serious dilemma to her. During one of the religious occasions, when I was invited to her house, I saw Kiran struggling to keep her *saree* (a traditional Indian attire) in place. She later told me that her mother helped her to wear it, as she does not know how to wear one. On another occasion, Kiran narrates the incident of arriving at a party in her office, when her mother visited her from Vishakhapatnam, an industrial town. She described how she took her party dress

which was a pair of jeans and a trendy low necked top to one of her friend's flat, so that she could change before joining the party.

KIRAN: She has never seen me in such dresses. I knew that she would not like it. (Laughs) I also could not go to the party in my usual dresses, as everyone would dress differently. Either I do not go there, or if I go, I have to wear the right clothing for it.

I accompanied Priti during the visit of her partner's aunt to Bangalore to one of the restaurants. Priti struggled with her saree as we got into the auto and the transformation was complete when she got down greeting the aunt (by touching her feet) with the *palu* over her head. Priti was the most casual tomboy among my participants, who loves to dress in shorts or jeans and T-shirts during work. However, she tells me if she were dressed in her usual work clothes, it would have given a wrong impression to the elderly lady who is from a smaller town. Most of the women in my study agree that when they wear short skirts, or low necked tops, they are modern. Among the women clothes and appearances are the first and most easily observable changes as they undergo the influences in the city. Enhancing a modern look through clothes, dating, going out etc. is expressed as a strong desire among the women. These women also struggle to find a balance between what is acceptable or desirable and emphasise in varying ways, their desire to maintain the so called familial and class respectability with respect to more modern aspects like clothing, going out and having fun in the city life.

### **Alcoholic drinks – pitfalls of westernization**

Most of the women barring a few such as Shilpi and Gita perceive drinking as associated with the negative effects of westernization in the city, which should be avoided. It is also interesting to note how such views are expressed along the gendered lines influenced more by a middle class family habitus. While Sumita accepts that her boyfriend can have alcoholic drinks, she describes it as 'strictly off limits for her'. She points to her family upbringing, for her food and drinking habits. Vidya, who comes from a Brahmin family in South India, thinks it is highly inappropriate for her to drink as it would shock the family. Whilst, she thinks it is acceptable for her boy friend to have alcoholic drinks occasionally, she feels proud that he does not let her even try

the drinks. During many of the team parties, I came across such gendered views relating to alcoholic drinks. For most of the women, it was acceptable for the men to have alcoholic drinks, but not the women. Men drank to get intoxicated while women joined them to socialize and appear friendly.

Priti, however, during many of our interviews confides how her father would not mind if she tasted some alcoholic drink with him, and therefore she never associates drinking alcohol as crossing boundaries of female respectability. Shilpi, who is more liberated and is from an army background, is used to both men and women engaging in alcohol consumption during parties, and associate it with something fun. During one of our interviews, our conversation became deeper when we chatted over a can of beer. The association of alcohol with something scandalous comes from women who had families where such limits are previously defined, and these women find it difficult to cross the internal limits so imposed on the self. For Tanima who comes from a middle class Bengali family, taking occasional alcoholic drinks with colleagues in the call centre and team parties is more of a social and professional affair. While she tells me that her parents would not like it if they come to know about it, she does not see any reason why they should know about it.

TANIMA: They have limited knowledge of what goes on here. I respect them and love them, but sometimes they also tell me. Like my father says, we do not know about this job, you think and take the decision. They know that they cannot guide me on certain things. The time has changed so much. The jobs are different and life in a city is different.

There are also articulations of mixed messages being received from the parents regarding how the women should conduct themselves in the city. While there are wishes expressed by the parents for the women to prosper in the career, many of the parents were not ready to accept the women if they overstepped familial decisions. These are more prominent in the area of making male friends, socialising in the late evenings and consuming alcoholic drinks or dancing at parties. Many of the women I interviewed have never been to late night parties or danced with men before they came to Bangalore. However, they enjoyed dancing, dating, going out for parties and consuming alcohol. The sources of ambivalences on the part of the women to engage

in a different life style in the city stem from the desire to be part of the global life style that the women found desirable, and a rejection of such living by their families as western and immoral, and beyond the purview of their traditional values. However, the dilemmas and conflicts are less where the families are already exposed to such lifestyle through their parents, or being part of a culture, where there is flexibility to accept changes to the life style. While the women are imaginative in creating a new life for themselves in terms of working on their new appearances, and adopting new means of consumption and leisure, they also reproduce the sense of locality or the familial milieu, in the context of flow and mobility. Here identities are anchored more to their roles as daughters and future wives that tied them to their family and the communities. The constructed localities in the lives of the women are also not a cohesive enclave of the middle classes. They are varied along the axes of caste, region and family.

### **Sex and the Indian city – living-in relationships**

I had initial reservations about talking to the women regarding their sexual lives. Reflecting back, it sprang from some of my own reservation to talk about the more intimate aspects of personal lives openly. Initially, I was apprehensive about asking them anything pertaining to their sexual lives, or their willingness to talk about it. Contrary to my perceptions, some of the women initiated and even enjoyed talking about their relationships with their boyfriends, or even gossiped about the sexual behaviour of their colleagues. As my rapport deepened with the participants, we were able to discuss more openly the sexual desires and activities of the women which made them move in with their boyfriends, an aspect which they kept mostly hidden from their families. Following Appadurai, I argue here that the new relationships established in the cityscape "...become the meeting points of historical pattern of socialisation (habitus) and the new ideas of proper behaviour..." (1997: 44). The agency of the women is reflected in the choices they make, at the meeting point of city living, imagination of being modern and global, and the internal boundaries set in terms of premarital chastity, arranged marriages and dating. The ideas and practices

of dating which are normalised and accepted in the context of an Americanized work place facilitates the new life choices of the women in the anonymous and independent living conditions of the city. Among the nine participants, six women have formed living in relationships with their partners after a period of dating in the call centres. The need for such a relationship was expressed in terms of 'romantic love', 'satisfaction of sexual desire', 'being part of a fast life', 'combat loneliness and stress' in the city, away from the family. The relationships can be observed as sites, where there is an active negotiation between the embodied gendered practices (*habitus*) around the notion of respectability, and the imagination of a new life, conditioned by the new material freedom, and ideas, images and symbols provided by a cosmopolitan city. I make three main observations from the narratives on the familial discourse around sexual behavior, and the current practice of living in relationships among women.

Firstly, it leads to a sense of empowerment and independence on the part of the women in making their own choices to move in with their partners. The decision also complements their aspirations for a long term career at the call centre.

Secondly, the situation captures well the notion of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1992) in the relationship between partners, where there is an unconscious assumption of more traditionally defined gender roles for the women and acquiescence to the sexual demands of the partners. Bourdieu defines it as the 'violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu, 1992: 167).

Symbolic violence according to Bourdieu, is the imposition of system of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. This legitimacy obscures the power relations which permit that imposition to be successful. In so far as it is accepted as legitimate, culture adds its own force to those power relations, contributing to their systematic reproduction (Jenkins, 2002: 104).

There is also awareness among these women that there exists a disparity between their living in relationships, and the general social expectations about marriage and pre marital chastity. This results in an inner anxiety, which further makes them reflexive

about its implication for their future relationships with the family. I discuss the narratives of three women in the following section to describe how this new life choice illustrates the agency of the women, as well as the more entrenched aspects of their identities.

### **PRITI**

Unlike most of the respondents who are struggling to strike a balance between the expectations of being a good daughter and a modern and hip call centre worker, Priti is always reflexive about the ways in which she has changed over time. She is one among the few other respondents, who has seen many ups and downs in life at a very early age. She has to cope with the constant fighting at home between her parents as a result of her father's drinking habit. To me, she seemed to have grown up at a much younger age, with a strong sense of independence, and decision making abilities. This is explicit, as she narrates how she used to intervene when her parents fought at home, or her father spent more money on buying alcoholic drinks than food for the house. She also had to decide about her education and career at the age of 13, when her father died. During her school and college days, she was more attracted towards romantic story books, and books on male-female relationships. Priti was disillusioned with her parent's relationship at home, and sought to find out more about romantic relationships in novels and other such books.

Priti's explorations to understand more about romantic relationships in the books and the novels found real expression in her life when she met Sameer at her work place in Bangalore. Sameer comes from the same state, and they both spent time with each other as colleagues before they entered into their living-in relationship after a year of dating each other. While their jobs in the call centres provided them with the opportunities of spending more time with each other, their regional and linguistic commonalities also facilitated their close bonding.

PRITI: We both were from the same states. In fact we both were from the same city. We keep meeting at work, in the cab all the time. I met him in the cab. He was in the night shifts and I was in the day shift. So we could just say

hi and bye to each other. We kept bumping into each other during the night shifts and talked about our home town, friends schools etc. He would come over to my work station and chat, when the call volume would be low or we have break. My colleagues would tease me that you are talking to him with so much of love. One of my friend Phalguni, she also had a love marriage with one of her colleagues. So they used to tease me about Sameer. I slowly started kind of bonding with him and we went out during team get together... did lots of weekend activities together.

At the initial stage of her relationship with Sameer, Priti was always conscious about her own respectability which was mostly defined in sexual terms. According to her even if, she had the opportunity of pursuing a sexual relationship with Sameer, without her family or others knowing about it, she herself always felt strongly against it. She articulates these internal boundaries in the following way.

PRITI: I could move around with him and spend time with him, but it was not until we decided that we might talk to our family members about getting married, that we actually got closer. But it was never purely sexual. I decided to move in with him, as I came to know that he gets these epileptic attacks. Once I was with him in his room and he was in the bathroom. He had this attack inside the bathroom and I had to call one of his friends who broke the door and got him out. Initially I had a different room than his. I was very self conscious that he would think that I am a cheap girl who comes easily.

Here Priti refers to some of the entrenched aspects of her identity which made her withdraw from pre-marital sexual relations. Her perception of sexual relationships before marriage as stereotypical of “cheap” women, made her negotiate between her sexual desires and being respectable in the eyes of her partner. While arranged marriage seemed to be a strong family norm among many of the young women in my research, Priti spoke strongly against it. This also sprang to some extent from the disillusionment with her parent’s marriage which was an arranged one.

PRITI: I do not want to get into an arranged marriage. You do not know the person before. You just have to get married to the person your parent decide for you. I shall never know whether he will agree for my job or not.

Her ideas of entering into a love marriage with Sameer (which followed shortly after the interview) was based on the ideas of more independence in decision making, pursuing her career in the future, and an expression of craving for a relationship based on equality. While in many ways she wanted to be different from her mother, yet there were moments when she was passionate about maintaining her groundedness in middle class culture. This was clear when she emphasized her decision to move in with Sameer, as a result of her sense of duty to her future husband, than for any other reason. She was also dutiful in taking over the other household duties of cooking, cleaning and shopping, even though both Priti and Sameer were working in night shifts. While her sense of autonomy made her reflexive about the choices for her future, she did not want to sacrifice some of the values and practices which she considered were feminine and should be only performed by women.

PRITI: If I let Sameer cook, he takes ages. He simply cannot do it. He makes such a big mess and then we can have dinner only around midnight. I never let him to do the housework.

While Priti feels it's natural for her to be in charge of the domestic chores as a good future wife, she emphasized the aspects where her life is different from that of her mother. According to her, she has a 'voice' in her life which is more important for expressing herself as a 'real human being and not a dummy partner'. She further elaborates what this voice means in her relationship and her independent life.

PRITI: I argue, answer back to Sameer on many occasions. I never accept whatever he says without questioning. I have seen my mother being completely speechless... mute. I am not like that. I have never seen my father even touching the broom to clean the house. But Sameer does that and some other work in the house.

While Priti is self reflexive about her own changing conditions in life which she perceives as empowering, she at many points emphasize her commitment to her family and her partner. She takes great pains to be compatible with her family responsibilities as a future wife in her current living in arrangement. She describes how she manages her domestic chores after a night shift.

PRITI: I start doing my housework immediately after I come back from my work. I cook for both lunch and the evening meals and then take my bath and go to sleep. Sameer comes back, and he just falls on the bed. He does not keep well, so I try not to ask him to help me. On the weekends, we do the shopping together.

In her current role, Priti on the other hand is the active, reflexive agent who understands the meaning and implications of her own decision to live in with her partner. She wishes to bring in some changes in her personal life from being a dependent voiceless partner and future wife, to being an independent career woman with more decision making capacity. However she also succumbs to the internal boundaries set in terms of her gendered 'habitus' that appear consistent with some of the traditional norms of femininity. At one point in our interview she further adds that even 'Sameer's mother knows about their living in relationship' and supports her because of Sameer's ailing condition. The sense of altruism that is repeatedly articulated by Priti, reveals a gendered identity where respectability arises from the sense of commitment, devotion and affection for one's future husband. Thus she subjects herself to the process of "symbolic violence", where her understanding as a partner is more shaped by a husband and wife relationship of an Indian family than the western notion of such a relationship. In this manner, Priti displays the role of a creative social agent who wants and seeks a close and more autonomous relationship with her partner. However she also tries to strike a balance in her life so as to be respectable in a socially recognized way.

While Priti's disillusionment with arranged marriage motivated her to choose her own partner, Shilpi and Sumita are more vocal about their sexual relationship with their partners. They both speak about romantic love and sexual desire to be the basis of their current living in relationships.

### **SHILPI**

At the time of our interview, Shilpi was 23 and had been working in Bangalore for the last four years. She started her career as a customer service executive at the age of 18. She is the only one among the research participants who has travelled extensively over various parts of India with her parents, and had decided to migrate to Bangalore after

her senior school. She demonstrates how prominently her family background is linked to her attitudes and aspirations in comparison to the other women who mostly talk about experiences like dating, dancing or having alcoholic drinks in their lives as conflicting with their family expectations. She describes her childhood as being privileged and open. Her parents were happy and supportive, when she made her decision to work at the very young age of 18. According to her, she never takes advantage of the freedom provided by her parents. She describes her parents as 'the most wonderful parents who shared her interests and understand that we live in a world where many things are different from the way they were in the past'. While Shilpi has a very liberal upbringing, she narrates that when it came to sexual behaviour, she has to be quite responsible. She never engaged in sex while she dated in her school or college days. However, when it comes to her current living-in relationship, she offers her own way of challenging the dominant stereotypical association of sexual respectability with pre-marital chastity. For both Priti and Shilpi, staying committed to one man and associating marriage with a living in relationship means resisting the label of being promiscuous and unrespectable. However, while Priti mostly defines her living in relationship around the notion of duty and love, for Shilpi, it is 'love and mutual sexual desire'. While on the one hand she is quite emphatic about her choice of having sexual relationship with her boyfriend, on the other, it is important for her not to dissatisfy her parents too much. In a revealing dialogue she tells me,

SHILPI: I am already 22...desire for a man comes naturally. I have never had sex with anyone before SUR. He is the first man whom I felt attracted towards, love to spend my life with. Right now we are getting along very well. We have great sex. I did not have a queue of boyfriend with whom I had slept with.

When I asked Shilpi about her family's views on her present relations, she replied,

SHILPI: I had to tell my parents about my decision... hate to do things behind them... was not comfortable how to tell them. I had told them that I had planned something really important and would like to know their reactions ... not their advice as the decision was already made. When I told them my

mother said it would be nice if you could get engaged to him. So now we are engaged. It was more of a family affair and now they are happy.

Thus both Priti and Shilpi imply the importance of their families to their living-in relationships, and normalise it with the social sanction of getting engaged and planning of their future marriage. For both of them, the city life provides them with the opportunity to spend their time and weekends with their partners where the intrusive gaze of a smaller community was missing. However, Priti tells me during one of the interviews, that in the residential middle class neighbourhood, everyone thinks that she is already married to Sameer. She also acts married, putting bangles or *sindoor*<sup>101</sup>, making everyone think that she is Sameer's wife. Shilpi's house owner had recently migrated from the United States. She describes the landlady as broadminded and open, who does not bother about their relationship. Unlike Priti and Shilpi, who has communicated to their families and negotiated acceptance about their choice of their partners, Sumita and Kiran display deep anxiety and ambivalence while speaking about their living- in relationships with their partners. The anxiety stemmed from the kind of reaction it might evoke from their families.

### **SUMITA**

Sumita comes from a traditional lower middle class in Bihar<sup>102</sup> and is the eldest one in the family of two daughters and one son. She is 23, and has lived in Bangalore for four years at the time of our interview. As a daughter, while she had all the liberties to pursue her education and make friends with women or go for shopping alone, she articulates the boundaries being drawn with respect to 'interaction with men, dating and even wearing pants or jeans which were considered as path to being westernised'.

SUMITA: I did not have any male friends at that time (during her childhood). But some boys in the neighbourhood whom I used to know, no...we (she and her sister) were not allowed to invite them to our house. My mother does not like it. Oh, god, back home there will be a storm at home if by mistake also one of us will be seen with a boy.

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<sup>101</sup> *Sindoor* is a dark red coloured powder, worn in the forehead of the married women in some parts of India.

<sup>102</sup> Bihar is a north Indian Hindi speaking state in India. It features low in the human development index and also the gender development index.

Sumita tells me about the ways in which she has changed over time and how the limits for mobility and morality have changed for her in the city. She enjoys working and going out with her male colleagues in the city, and fell in love with one of her male colleagues at work. After two years of dating, they both decided to stay together and Sumita moved in with her partner Ravi. She provides a detailed account of how her interaction with her colleagues in the call centres, and life in the city changed from that of a modest and conservative small town girl to a modern woman.

She grew up in a very small town without any exposure to city life. Her family did not even have a television till she was in her high school. She is the first in her family to move to Bangalore for a career. In the beginning, she stayed in a women's hostel sharing the room with three other women whose families were elsewhere. She came to Bangalore at the age of 19, with the dream of working for Dell, a big multinational brand. She was extremely shy, and found it difficult to make friends and participate in the city life. She felt lonely during the weekends, when her room mates would go out and have fun with their boyfriends, and would tell her all about their fun. She was a mediocre performer as a result of her shyness, and assumed that after some time she would quit her job to get married. She describes the changes in herself as a result of her association with Ravi, who was her team leader, and makes her view herself more as a career woman, rather than someone who has come to work temporarily in the city. Under his supervision she works long and extra work hours, took an English language course and made elaborate changes in her wardrobe to be more comfortable and feel acceptable in the work place. Slowly, she started earning lots of incentives, considered as one of the smartest woman in the team and made many friends. The satisfaction she derived at her work place made her perceive herself differently from the small town girl that she was when she arrived in Bangalore.

SUMITA: I have seen my colleagues kissing and doing all sorts of things in the public park when they like each other and desire each other. I know that I am in love with him (RAVI). So why not move in with him? He has provided me so much of support and helped me in everything. We take precautions in our relationships. I do not want to get pregnant. I have to work for some more

years before thinking of marriage and settling down. Houses are so expensive in Bangalore.

In their living-in arrangements, Sumita has to do all the household chores after her shifts, which she describes as 'tiring but definitely part of her job'. She also finds it disturbing to refuse the sexual demands of her partner when she is tired. Thus the entrenched gendered aspects of a patriarchal middle class habitus, where the wishes of the male members dominate over those of the females, make Sumita believe that it is inappropriate to refuse sex to her partner; this lead her to comply with the dominant norms of a heterosexual relationship. Thus her modern ways of being, implicitly enact some of the entrenched aspects of gender identity as inculcated in her familial "habitus". As Sumita's commitment to Ravi grew and she started feeling happy with her life in Bangalore, her distance from her family's expectations grew as well. She carries on with her life at Bangalore with Ravi, as her parents continue looking for a match for an arranged marriage. Unlike her former self, when she came to Bangalore initially, she no longer sees marriage as the singular aim of her life. While career seemed to have taken precedence along with a desire to be financially independent, she wants to be able to take care of her family at the same time. However, at times she is not sure whether her parents would appreciate the changes that have occurred in her, even though they are happy with her job.

SUMITA: Till now I have never told my parents about my relationship...do not know how they will react. We (she and her partner) are from different castes and that might be a major reason for raising objections. I take occasional drinks (alcoholic) during parties which I cannot again tell my parents, my mother will think that I have crossed all the lines. They will not understand.

Sumita's narrative makes transparent some of the important inner dilemmas that result from her simultaneous embeddedness in two different social contexts. She has become more individualistic and reshaped some of the earlier values in the light of the new demands in her current life. While she has been motivated by her successful career as an executive and financial independence, she does not want to hurt her parents. She describes her parents as highly conservative, who may not understand the new situation and demands in her life. However, the expectations of the family have not deterred Sumita to give up her choices.

## **KIRAN**

Kiran expresses her dilemmas about her relationship in the city in similar ways to Sumita. At the age of 24, she already had four years of work experience in two different international call centres in Bangalore and earned a salary of Rs.19, 000 which is almost equal to her father's salary in a government job after years of service. While her parents are proud of her job and career in Bangalore, they are anxious about her safety in the city and future marriage. She emphasises that her job in the call centre industry has made her family understand the nature of this new industry and shift timings. This has led to changes in many of her family conventions with respect to her mobility during the night for work, interacting with her male colleagues and attending parties sometimes. For Kiran, the changes that have come up in her family with respect to her job have been substantial and positive.

KIRAN: No one fusses anymore if I have to go out in the evenings alone for something or if one of my male colleagues drops by or makes a call while my mom is visiting. She understands that it's for work. I was never allowed to wear jeans or tops or even skirts while at home at Vizag. Now mom sees me in these dresses and says nothing. Of course first time she reacted, when saw me in trousers and tops. But then I told her to have trust in me. I would never dress indecently or hurt her for anything. She understood. I cannot go to a party in a half sari or a saree. I do wear salwars. But it feels nice to make changes. So mom has been ok with it.

While Kiran is happy about such changes in her life which had made her more acceptable among her peers and feels better about herself in a city, which is driven more by cosmopolitanism, she is not sure about her parental reaction about her relationship with her colleague Sahil. She met him during work a year ago and fell in love with him after one of the office parties when she danced with him.

KIRAN: I had never danced with anyone before. We hardly have such parties back home. Even in my college, we mostly go to restaurants in the town which were cheap and considered good for women. Sahil is the first man in my life I danced with.

Living in Bangalore has provided Kiran with anonymity and no one asks her prying questions about her personal life. The new context of living in the city provides her with the choice of forming a sexual relationship with her partner without being socially condemned or risking her reputation of her family. While she is not discreet about her relationship in the call centre where she worked, as 'almost everyone has a boyfriend', she is careful of her living arrangements. She still retains her one bedroom flat where her family visits her regularly, even though she spends most of her time in her partner's apartment. Kiran's eagerness to fit into two worlds of expectations, of being a good daughter and also a good partner and future wife reveals deep chasms in her life. This is heightened by the fact that her partner belonged to a different caste from her own Brahmin upper caste status.

KIRAN: I know that my mom and dad are looking for my marriage. I cannot tell them about Sahil as they will be terribly hurt. On the other hand, I love Sahil. It's a real difficult situation in my life. My sister's marriage had failed. They have enough worries to handle because of my sister.

Kiran tries to alleviate her anxiety by imagining herself not only as a partner of Sahil but his future wife. She refrains from taking alcoholic drinks and dancing with her other male colleagues. She also asks his opinion on what she wears, and does not attend late night parties without him. Her effort to maintain her honour was expressed in the ways she regulates her movements, and other consumption practices. She ensures that she is mostly escorted by her male partner while going out in the nights, goes to places which are considered decent etc.

KIRAN: I like to be considered as a modern career woman, but certainly not one who is available. I do not go to the discothèques regularly. Most of my friends go there on the weekend. Even Sahil does not like it.

Thus Kiran in her relationship with Sahil, draws on acquiescence as the meaning of love for women. This shapes her perception of what she should or should not do, to prioritize the need of her partner over hers and follow him. These new choices in Kiran's life in many ways are governed by the patriarchal regimes of surveillance, constructed as internal boundaries within her. She experiences a deep seated conflict while she tries to make choices like having sex before marriage against her family

values. The conflict is also manifested in the compensatory activities she engages in; by sending money, gifts, organizing *pujas (worshipping)* in her flat, when her mother visits her. Unlike Priti and Shilpi who try to negotiate with the values of the family to fulfill their wishes to make some independent choices, Kiran seems prepared to sacrifice her own interest and ambitions, so as not to hurt her parents. While she is highly cognizant of the ways in which she has crossed the family boundary of premarital chastity, her makeover in the city brought her rewards in her personal and professional life. Thus in the long run, she reinforces the idea of being a respectable middle class woman who agrees with the family decisions 'in some but not all' important matters of life.

Kiran's narrative made me think about the few young women whom I encountered and was friendly with during my journey as a student in the metros of India. While love affairs bloomed in the university campuses away from the normative gaze of the communities and families brewing promises and commitments, I was also a silent spectator of the family's influences in the long run. Family decisions of arranged marriages were accepted at the end of many love affairs, which probably offered financial security and stability in terms of long term family support. I can vividly remember some of my friends advocating for the dependability of arranged marriage through families, where a lot of investigation takes place about the background, job, salary of the prospective groom and families extend support in the times of crisis to the married couple. The fear to stand against the mighty institution of the Indian family was also one of the factors, which make the women sacrifice their love in favor of family decisions.

While I was happy to embrace all uncertainties and instabilities in my life by making an independent choice for my marriage, maybe I was among the lucky few who had family support at all times. However, looking back I seriously engaged in pursuing my own career to regain some of the respectability that I lost in my community of relatives and friends by entering into a love marriage. While I thought my career was important for my family, the conversation with Kiran and her inner dilemmas brought to the fore some of the compensatory activities I engaged in, to prove my respectability and ability to make independent choices in life. My decision to marry someone outside my

linguistic community was a protracted struggle between me and my family for a long time. Eventually my family agreed to arrange my marriage to make it look respectable in the eyes of the wider society from all angles. The fact that I was getting married to someone from my own upper caste background, appropriately employed, outweighed some of the anxieties associated with the reputation of my family in the smaller neighbourhood and community.

While relationships with the family feature as an important aspect in the lives of the women, their choice of new practices makes them look for a middle ground to strike a balance between the two worlds. Kiran keeps her one bedroom flat furnished and cleaned all the time, as her mother and sister visit her often in the city. She however spends most of her time in her partner's flat with whom she is living. Shilpi is more open with her relationship with her parents, who visited her once year. Their relationship with her fiancée became better after their visits to the city, as they all stayed together and got to know each other. It helped to improve the relationship between herself and her parents which 'would not have been possible if they did not keep in touch'. While Priti and Shilpi have better relationships with their families due to visits and open communication, this is not true for all the women. Sumita and Kiran are always apprehensive about the visits of their parents and their own relationship with their boyfriends. While awareness about the disparity of the expectations of the family and their current practices make the women ambivalent, they do not perceive anything inherently wrong with their new choices. Many of them express it as a matter of 'hurting their parents' that bothers them more than crossing the normative boundaries.

## **Conclusion**

The pattern that is observed in the present study is that pre-sexual relationships are pursued by some of the women in my study with their anonymous living conditions in the city, financial independence as well as use of contraception that does not lead to reproduction, an important violation of normative dictates; for example being an unwed mother would be considered as the blatant undermining of honour of the family as well as the young female. Thus the aspiration to be modern is carefully

balanced with the demands of what is supposed as familial and traditional. For example, on the one hand the women redefine the boundaries of space and time and participate in late night leisure activities, while on the other they are also driven by the principle of respectability in making choices on such occasions. While some of the 'dispositions of the familial and class habitus' (Bourdieu 1990) influence the practices of the women, the new experiences of the city life and symbols of being global are also incorporated into the 'habitus'. The practice of dating and knowing one's partner before marriage was considered as positive. Sexuality here reflects a space for the women to enact femininity by claiming their right to sexual pleasure as the young, independent and modern. According to Michel Foucault (1990), "sexuality is useful in studying how people realize their subjectivities, because it serves as a prism through which to analyze how social developments generate (new) notions of self" (Foucault, 1990 cited in Spronk 2010: 502). Therefore attention to new forms of sexual behaviour helps to capture how the young females become reflexive agents who blend tradition and modern aspects of sexuality to generate new forms of self identification. On the one hand, they are subjected to familial, local and moral definitions of being daughters and future wives. On the other, the emergence of a new form of subculture in the city which legitimizes casual sexual behaviour and living in relationships entices the women to be sexually active. A middle ground is devised, where the women as narrated in the chapter, try to construct identities reflecting 'being modern in an Indian way'. As a result, many of their new experiences in the city are drawn to their familial habitus to construct new grounds of respectability. The respectability for the women in the city is achieved by engaging in conspicuous consumption of the culture produced as hegemonic in the local imagination. As Mary Beth Mills notes "consumption [behaviour of the young women] is not simply a reflection of material interests or economic need but is also a cultural process, engaging powerful if often conflicting cultural discourses about family relations, gender roles, and ... construction of modernity." (Mills 1997: 54). On the whole, the chapter underscores the important consumption behaviour and sexual practices to be constitutive of young migrant's sense of themselves as modern women. However the latter is also limited by the lived experiences of women as daughters and associated cultural expectations. The space of negotiation that emerges demands more complex understanding of contemporary

cultural and economic transformation. These complexities of identity change, as I have discussed in my methodology chapter (chapter-3), can be understood through an 'extension of Bourdieu's theory of habitus and limited reflexivity' (Adams 2006). As Matthew Adams notes "Lois McNay's analysis in particular is a nuanced attempt to work through the relationship between habitus and reflexivity" (2006: 517). The explanation offered by McNay (1999) is specifically relevant to explain the forms of identity change, emergence of reflexivity and agency among women in contemporary society which can also be described as a 'world of flows' (Appadurai 1997) consequent upon paramount changes in communication technology, migration and fluid movement of global capital. The increased exposure to socio-cultural contexts beyond one's immediate experiences results in relativizing the established and individual practices to the point where nothing can be taken for granted as simply 'the way things are done' (Gergen 1991). McNay bases her explanation of emerging reflexivity among women in their movements across varying 'fields of actions' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) where the 'habitus may not always submit to the demands of the field' or the compatibility between the dispositions acquired in the family and the traits or skills that a new field demands may be broken.

The movement of young women as migrants and inhabitants in Bangalore, a cosmopolitan city can be described as their entry into a new field<sup>103</sup> where "the establishment and maintenance of habitus is problematized allowing reflexivity in" (McNay, 1999 *cited in* Adams, 2006: 518). While this theoretical position explains the varying thoughts and questions that the women ask themselves as they make choices in new situations the consequences of such reflexivity in relation to gendered de-traditionalization and identity change is not straightforward. What is observed in the narratives of the women needs to be explained by pulling together thoughts of Lisa Adkins (2003) and Lois McNay (1999). Referring to the complexities of gendered identities, McNay emphasizes that movement across varying fields such as the domestic sphere, work place, small towns and cosmopolitan cities leads to varying experiences for the women. While this may results in resistance and negotiation in

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<sup>103</sup> McNay (1999), stresses that the movement of actors between various autonomous fields of actions are the results of increased individual mobility and fluidity in socio- cultural processes.

certain areas such as the consumption pattern, way of dressing or dating practices, it is important to examine the implications of these negotiating practices for changes in the gendered identity of the women. It is observed that a classed notion of respectability regulates the choices of the women as they strive to adopt new sexual and consumption practices in the city. Therefore, it can be argued in this context that “reflexivity is a situated process that is ambivalently related to norms; not necessarily transformative or de-traditionalizing, nor simply incorporating the social order” (Adkins, 2003 *cited in* Adams, 2006: 519). The implication of the situated nature of reflexivity where the women take their habitual values and norms as a frame of reference has important implications for maintaining class based distinctions. For example values such as modesty, decency and particular patterns of consumption which are class specific are reinvented in the city and in a way leads to “re-edification of social differences and division” (Adkins, 2003: 131). I shall thus conclude this chapter arguing that the familial habitus of the women to some extent restricts and conditions a proportion of choices with respect to consumption, leisure and sexual practices of the women in the city. The narratives indicate a potential space for self reflexivity to emerge as a result of a multitude of new cultural influences “which penetrate the fog of structured dispositions; but identities are formed in the ability to translate choices which emerge from this complex interplay into meaningful realities” (Adams, 2006: 522).



## Chapter Eight

### **Recasting respectability: Tales of imagination, reflexivity and negotiation**

Throughout the world, North America is represented, among other things through contemporary 'cultural commodities' such as movies, music, modern attires, fast food chains and magazines/books. While these are important sources of images about the continent, the present thesis centred on the American cultural influences experienced through diverse sources (both real and virtual) by the young women who work in transnational call centres and serve clients mostly from the US. Moreover, the study also focused on the lives of these women in the cosmopolitan city, which represented a context of modernity. Against the backdrop of such varying cultural influences, I explored the various ways in which the young women in my study actively incorporated the new cultural values, symbols and images into their daily social practices. In each chapter, I have shown the interface between various cultural elements of the families, communities and class of my participants with the new cultural influences experienced in their work and city lives. One of the key findings of my research suggests that, for these women who have moved out of their family homes, the "imagination of new ways of living" (Appadurai, 1997: 6) characterise their daily lives. However, this imagination is not only fantasy or dream about a new life which does not have any basis in reality. Rather it provides a ground where the "imaginary" of a dutiful daughter, who embodies a culturally embedded construction of respectability, creatively fuses with the images of a modern woman. The 'imagination' of a new life thus becomes a 'social practice' (to use Appadurai's terminology), as the women incorporate these global images of being modern into the imaginary of being respectable as a middle class woman. In this final discussion, I draw together two central themes of the thesis:

1. The exposure of the women to images of a modern Indian woman through diverse sources.
2. Incorporation of these images into the daily practices of the women which leads to formation of new gendered practices. The dynamics in the gendered identities of the women based on these new practices is a complex process that I explain in the later part of the discussion through the notions of imagination, reflexivity, modifications in the traits acquired in the familial 'habitus' (to use Bourdieu's terminology) and formation of a differentiated gendered identity. Thus, I also offer a new framework for analysis of the process of embodiment and gendered identity in a transitioning society in the context of migrating young women. This remains one of the primary contributions of the present study in the area of culture, migration and gendered identity.

### **Exposure to the images of a modern Indian woman**

As the young women move outside of their middle class homes in search of work, wealth and opportunity, they also carry their imagination for new ways of living along with them. This becomes essential as the young women must adapt to the new environment and construct their own lives in the new socio-cultural setting. The thesis also illustrates that these women experience ambivalences in their daily lives, as the new symbolic domain outside of home not only consists of what they have learnt as daughters, but also the new images of a modern woman. This image is constructed out of their experiences in a city, which is characterised by its consumer culture as well as the mediated experiences of American cultural elements in the call centres. Several research studies in recent years have focused on a culturally transitioning Indian society and how it facilitates changes in class and gendered identities. For example, Leela Fernandes argues that the emergence of a commodity culture (especially) in urban India and images of a modern Indian woman as an active consumer in the visual and print media influences the construction of identities of urban middle class women in specific ways. She, however, argues that the constructed media image of a modern Indian woman is not that of a westernised woman. The media projects the modern Indian woman as a hybridisation of traditional and modern/ global.

The media has been characterized by images of the 'new Indian woman', one who 'must attend to her national identity as well as her modernity; she is Indian as well as new' (Rajan, 1993: 132 cited in Fernandes, 2000: 623).

Meenaskhi Thapan along similar lines notes the significance of media images which provide an important resource for crafting of new identities of adolescent women in Indian cities.

A new global media provides the symbols, myths, resources, ideas, and images for the construction of a common culture as well as of individual identities. Thus, the upper class, English-speaking, educationally advantaged urban elite in India emphasizes the "secular" (modern), non-traditional (contemporary), liberated (westernized) and "trendy" aspects of everyday life (Thapan, 2001: 360).

In the present study echoing thoughts of leela fernandes (2000) and Meenakshi Thapan (2001), I have shown that the images of a modern woman that my participants encountered during their work lives and in the city, influences their imagination in crafting new gendered selves. While influences of the middle class familial 'habitus' remains immensely significant in the lives of the young women in my study, in the following sections I discuss how the images of a modern woman provide the reference points for construction of identities for them. While they all engage with this image differently, there are some commonly travelled roads to adopt this modern persona: through their hopes for *individualisation*, be *consumers* in the city to retain or enhance their class status and display a more *open and modern sexual orientation*.

### ***Hopes of individualisation***

In the study, I have shown that the rising aspirations to be successful call centre agents and professionals remain a motivating factor in each of the narratives discussed in the thesis. While the women strive for those qualities considered essential for successful call centre agents, incorporation of these qualities and generation of daily practices vary among the women as a result of their specific familial circumstances. For example, they appropriate characteristics which range from being assertive and confident to socialise with their colleagues in parties or have occasional alcoholic drinks with them. These changes in the practices of the women display what Kim Youna notes as 'centrality of work identity in the modern lives of the women. The

work place can therefore be a distinctive site for the construction of identity' (2010: 31).

While these aspects are normalised at the work place, they are in opposition to a normal biography of a daughter from a middle class family. The desire to succeed as a career woman and rise in the hierarchy creates ambivalences and conflicts with normative expectations. Most of the women I interviewed displayed their aspirations to break away from some of the repressive norms in their present lives with an active engagement with the mediated discourses of the American. While the women have never actually travelled to America, they openly talk about an imagined American life where they will find more freedom. As discussed in chapter-six, Ramani imagines that she can lead a better life as a professional in America, as she will be less tied to domestic chores. For Sumita, imagining a future marriage free from the custom of dowry is more influenced by the practice of dating and living in relationships of her peers. Other women express their aspirations of freedom through travel, sharpening their English speaking ability and vocabulary which increases their potential to be hired by multinational companies and pursue their careers instead of settling for early marriages. Unlike many of the mothers of these women who are housewives, my participants desire to be economically independent, acquire their own flat and travel on their own. Such aspirations mark a shift from the traditional gendered realms where young women as daughters are dependent on their fathers for economic support and their identities are crafted according to the status of the families. A sense of self-confidence and self worth mark their identities and endow them with agency to make independent choices and realise their hopes

### ***Sexuality and images of modernity***

Living-in relationships, an open peer group sub-culture, a modern and progressive work ethic were the key themes in chapter six and seven. As I have discussed earlier the sexual behaviour of my participants indicated how the influences of middle class families intermingled with the new imaginative world characterised by new norms of sexuality. As discussed in the chapter-seven, some of the young women in my study consciously engage with media portrayals of a modern woman as sexually active and liberated. The changes in orientations of some of these young women towards their

own sexuality serve as an important marker of their own being and thus became useful in studying how they realised their *being* in the city and generate new notions of self.

For example, Kiran and Priti appreciate the independence to choose one's own partner or living-in relationships, where one gets to know the person better before actually getting married. The images of a sexually liberated modern woman motivates some of my participants to engage in pre-marital sexual activity which has the potential to change the social meaning of marriage, and a whole range of cultural practices associated with modernity. What is notable is that dating is accepted as a normal feature of city life and it provides a sense of confidence to some of the young women as modern, attractive and up to date. The personal lives of these young women display a celebration of possibilities ushered in by the creation of an imaginative world in the context of globalisation, exposure to American cultural elements in the transnational call centre and the subculture of young people in the city. Thus the new symbols of a modern woman who is sexually attractive become desirable and displace the normative images of an ideal middle class daughter who is a virgin before her marriage, hides her body behind traditional attires or does not date as a marker of her class respectability. These new processes of identification which is part of the modern and global culture than the aspects of the earlier familial habitus of these women marks what Meenakshi Thapan (2001) defines as "re-colonisation". Here the elements of a global culture slowly become part of the habitus of the women, which earlier was based only on their experiences in the family or the community. Through the exposure to new forms of living in a city, or through American films or television serials which the women watch during their training session to learn more about the American ways of life and which enable them to imagine different possibilities of life and act on it. The young women are active agents who interpret the images by themselves and devise new modes of sexual identification.

### ***Arenas of consumption***

The research finds substantial changes in the ways of dressing by the women and their leisure activities. As I discuss in chapter-seven, the consumption practices constitute an important arena, where the gendered identities of the women are constructed as modern women in the city. For example, the emphasis on looking modern and sexy by

highlighting one's feminine curves and cleavages is viewed as a part of their modern persona and thus desirable. In a modern work place, where the influences of American cultural elements pervade through mediated discourses such as movies, television programmes and cultural training programs, a modern dress code is considered as decent and provides a positive self image to the women. The city also shaped the choice of leisure activities of the women. The movements of the women outside of their working women's hostels or paying guest accommodations in late evenings during the weekends are perceived as part of the normal city life.

In the above sections, I argued that the exposure of the women in my study to the new cultural images and symbols generate many new practices summarised broadly as their hopes for individualisation, expression of a new form of sexuality and orientation towards new patterns of consumption. In the following section, I discuss how these practices in turn give rise to changes in their gendered identities.

### **Identity formation among the migrant young women in my study**

One of the key findings of my research suggests that the young women in my study do not simply adopt the meanings presented to them in their city life. The adaptation to the new ways of life evolves in various ways. A process of negotiation marks the way in which the women act upon these images of being modern and progressive women and reconstitute their gendered identities. I use three key conceptualisations to explain this process of identity formation among my participants. These are:

- ✓ Imagination as a social practice (Appadurai, 1997: 4-5).
- ✓ The differentiated nature of gendered identities (McNay 1999)
- ✓ A form of situated reflexivity (Adkins, 2003: 24)

Though the concept of "habitus" is crucial and central to understand the changing gendered identities of the women in my study, I have not discussed it separately. It remains an integral part of all the three discussions that will follow.

### ***Imagination as a social practice***

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the ability of the young women to devise new practices is shaped at the intersection of their familial 'habitus' and the incoming influences in a modern work milieu and an urban world. The conceptualisation of imagination plays a crucial role to explain the interaction between the above two arenas which results in the modification of certain familial dispositions as well as the incorporation of new dispositions into the habitus of the women. I point out that the search for identification and the way imagination is translated into practices by these women in their daily lives takes two opposite forms.

On the one hand, the women through their imagination bring a deep sense of middle class morality into their present lives in the form of desires and memories. It is expressed in the form of being considered as a good daughter by their families. They use their salaries from the call centre to enhance their middle class family status, take care of the education of their siblings and pay for better health care of their parents. It also makes them look for commonalities between their own frame of reference and the images of a modern woman in their current life. Firstly, the aspirations of middle class families to have their daughters work for American companies enhance the class status through increased income. I also illustrate that the imaginations of the young women (themselves) to establish a professional career merges with the images of a modern woman who is progressive in her outlook and acquires respectability through her public persona. Thus the women do not encounter much conflict as they act upon these images of a modern career woman with enhanced class status through their increased incomes. The negative outcomes of engaging in night shift work are traded off with the positive outcomes of the call centre jobs - an attractive salary.

In the second scenario, imagination is adopted in real life practices by the women through processes of reflexivity and negotiation. This is clearly evident in the arena of sexual behaviour. The mediated image of the American/western woman as one, who is sexually liberated, incites deep anxiety and conflict with the embodied traits of the habitus, constructed around the norms of respectability. As the study shows, here the imaginations of the women are shaped to a great extent by their familial, caste and regional backgrounds. Some of my participants establish sexual relations with men,

which challenge certain familial gendered values such as premarital chastity and being a modest and dutiful daughter who does not engage in sex. As I discuss in chapter-five and seven, Gita and Shilpi adopt changes in the dispositions of their habitus and cite the satisfaction of their sexual drive as primary and a part of their modern lives. Appadurai narrates such instances as occasions where imagination "... can move the glacial forces of the habitus into the quickened beat of improvisation..." (Appadurai, 1996: 6).

On the other hand as discussed in chapter-six, Ramani rejects such behaviors as outrageous and as the corrupt practice of western women. There are also women like Priti who strike a middle ground to negotiate her desire to be respectable with that of her sexual urges. Thus the ability of the women to act upon their imagination is influenced by several local and familial factors. Despite the ambivalences in certain areas, the young women show their ability to deal with challenges and gradually .adopt new cultural practices. This power to act positively and engage in creative practices is also due to the fact that these women are young and are more open to changes in their lives. This in turn energizes and stimulates their 'habitus' in accordance to the new environment. As I shall discuss in the subsequent sections, the imaginative capacity of the women also leads to the emergence of reflexivity among these women in several situations to bring about changes in their gendered identities.

### ***The differentiated nature of gendered identities***

The differentiated nature of gendered identities indicates that 'certain aspects of gendered identities are less amenable to self reflection and change than others' (McNay, 1999: 101). While older notions of familial conventions and propriety of behaviour do not seem sufficient any more under multiple cultural influences, certain aspects of their gendered identities still remain central in the identification of process, when the women are presented with new images of a 'modern woman'. Those older notions also act as a frame of reference, when new choices are made, in the way the images are incorporated into the current lives of the women. It displays the agency of the women in constructing their own identities through a process of negotiation between the new images and the deeply entrenched aspects of their identities. The women can be termed as active agents who interpret these images of modernity by

themselves. What is important to notice here is that these women actively adapt, replenish and reconfirm their existing imaginary of a middle class woman and a dutiful daughter while trying to be modern. Moreover, a deeply embedded sense of respectability forms the basis of this imaginary and also provides the frame of reference as the women adapt to new images. For example, while the women wear dresses which are considered modern they do not give up their traditional ways of dressing. The women dress in *sareers, salwars or half saris* during festivals, religious functions and while meeting elderly people. Thus, dressing according to the occasion remains the common practice among these women. Several other women in my study are well aware that their new ways of dressing and leisure activities which include taking alcoholic drinks and going out with their boyfriends is acceptable only within the confines of the city life and work context. These new behaviours require adaptation, as soon as they go back to their home towns or when someone from the family visits them in the city. Therefore, the study suggests that the lives of the women in the city which involve new opportunities and freedom of movement or friendships were framed within the cultural and moral expectations of the family.

I have also shown that the way these women work through the tensions is not necessarily an outcome of conscious reflection about varying situations. Rather the pre-reflexive aspects of their identities, as good women from decent families, make them devise various creative practices. Most of the women display this pre-reflexive aspect of their familial gendered identities, as they chose specific places in the city for their leisure activities in the evenings or the late evenings so that they would be perceived as respectable women and different from call girls or prostitutes, *who are the women more likely to be found outside* during these hours. Bourdieu in his seminal work *Distinction* (1984), attributes consumption and life style of an individual as symbolic of his/her social and cultural milieu in which s/he is embedded. In reinforcing a form of consumption where the drive to be respectable continued to govern the practices of the women, the narratives thus demonstrate their embeddedness within middle class family habitus. These women see themselves as modern as they are part of a subculture that is part of a cosmopolitan city and a global world. On the other hand, they also display a general familiarity with the particular gendered norms and

values of their middle class families which also influence their practices in the city. As I discuss the narrative of Priti, it is seen that she is an independent woman who contributes financially to run the household with her partner, works the night shifts and takes decisions on important matters such as buying household gadgets, leisure activities or applying for new jobs. However, she also struggles to fit into the role of a future wife of her present partner Sameer, in which she does all the cooking, spends more time in their rented apartment and keeps her distance from other male colleagues. The tensions in Priti's life are clear as Sameer disapproves of Priti's frequent promotions in the call centre, or when she meets her friends in restaurants or theatres and he dislikes it when Priti would not cook at home out of tiredness. From the experiences of Priti and Sameer and many others in my study, it is clear how the issues of social expectations associated with specific gendered norms and new life style options create a field of ambivalence for these young women. It results from the perception of the women of themselves as modern women, their reluctance to live in a customary way and above all to be recognised as *respectable* in their current lives. Such areas of potential conflict according to Ong (1991), constitute the sites of cultural contestations. These are also the potential grounds in which the women in my study remake what is considered as the core of their middle class identities- respectability. While aspiring for a better career as a modern woman, the imaginative world of the women also contained elements which would safeguard their status as honourable women in spite of adoption of new practices. For example, the pre-reflexive disposition of respectability instilled in Ramani the dream that she could migrate to America only after getting married to someone from her own community arranged by her parents. The complex interplay between certain pre-reflexive aspects of the gendered identities of the women with the future hopes of freedom also indicate that the gendered identities of the women currently located in the city cannot be studied in isolation from the influences of their families, communities, caste, religion and region.

### ***Situated reflexivity***

This concept challenges the assumption of an unproblematic link between the reflexivity of agents and their identity transformation under the influences of de-traditionalizing forces. The position taken by modernization theorists has been

challenged by feminists who advocate for a more cautious approach to the processes of gendered identity transformation.

Based on the narratives of my participants, I reinforce this feminist position where critical reflexivity emerges only in specific areas of life and leads to uneven changes in their gendered identities. For example, the conflicting female roles of being bread winners versus obedient daughters, smart workers (who had to work alongside their male colleagues and participate in parties) versus modest daughters (who resided in a conventional notion of time and place) also create challenges between the dispositions of respectability in a familial sense and such a notion in their urban lives. As Denise Riley puts it, most of the women in my study found themselves reflecting – “but that’s [not] me” (Riley, 1988: 99 *cited in* McCall, 1992: 850) with reference to their earlier dispositions of a daughter which no longer fit into the wider field of imagination and give rise to resistances and new practices. This is also understood as a ‘mismatch between the dispositions acquired in the earlier habitus of the women and the new field of action’ (to use Bourdieu’s terminology) they enter’. It also offers insight into how the post migratory life creates a field of action where the compatibility between the dispositions of the habitus and the requirement of the new socio-cultural milieu displayed disjuncture, and generated potential for a changing notion of respectability for women.

The migration process not only makes these young women physically mobile, but also involves a subtle shift in the discourses and practices of respectability as a form of symbolic capital. The process of redefining the notion of respectability can be understood as a process of interaction of the locally embedded aspects of the gendered identities, with the new experiences of migration and life in a global city. For example, the women in the new milieu resist the constraints on their sexual activity and notions of premarital chastity as embodied in the familial habitus; they live in with their boyfriends and re-cast respectability in new ways.

## **Conclusion**

As the young women in my study move from a relatively smaller place of residence to a global city, new scopes are created for the way gender is embodied. The earlier

habitus formed in the families of these women, seem to lose some of its sway in their formation of gendered identities of the women. While the notion of respectability as a form of symbolic capital still retains its paramount importance in defining class position, as a bodily disposition it encounters conflicting images and demands to adapt to new situations. For example, most of the women faced situations where they faced dilemmas of how to be respectable. “Am I being decent by being shy or not speaking to my colleagues or even wearing clothes which are looked down upon as outdated?” “What’s wrong if I stay with my future husband before marriage?” “I want to wear what the other young women wear at the work place and look good/ sophisticated”. The new socio-cultural context of living and unfamiliar terrain of gendered values and practices made the women reflect upon certain shared meanings of the habitus and bring in changes to certain embodied gendered dispositions. These challenges also emerged from a ‘lack of fit’ between the characteristics that made the women respectable as daughters or members of a middle class family and a city life where varying images of respectability were available to them.

The complexities of the identities in such situations can be explained around the significance of respectability as a form of symbolic capital which governs the aspirations of the women in a pre-reflexive way. However, the women transformed the ways in which respectability was claimed through their lived experiences in the city and at the work place. The familial habitus of the women thus displayed *continuity* in retaining the paramount importance of *respectability as a form of symbolic capital*. On the other hand, it also displayed *discontinuity by activating innovations*, whenever it encountered a social setting discrepant with the context, where it was acquired. The varying images of heterosexual relations, consumer choices and aspirations of mobility coupled with economic independence created new opportunities for reconfiguring the symbolic capital as a marker of class status.

Moreover, in the context of new experiences of globalising forces, these narratives provide fresh perspectives on the ways in which respectability was embodied by the women and indeed the possibilities that such embodied respectability opened up for transformation in gendered identities of the women. *The gendered identities of these women therefore include aspects of their ‘traditional’ embodied middle class familial*

*habitus, as well as a newer sense of themselves as being modern and progressive.* On the one hand, there is an impulse to glorify their respectability as middle class Indian women while, on the other hand, they pursue certain lifestyles that are interpreted as causing erosion of the so called traditional values. The confusions and the contradictions that become part of the current lives of the young women produce a gendered identity where the women strive to be progressive and modern in an Indian way. In this context a recast or re-imagined respectability becomes a positive self identifier for the young women and a position from which to act.

The general observation that I make here is that in a culturally diverse and complex Indian society, it is important to avoid making overarching generalisations about any straightforward changes in the capabilities of the women to make alterations to their gendered identities. Exposure to new life styles and images are important to initiate changes; but in the absence of a supportive family milieu and other responsive structural environment, the changes shall be transient, context specific and loose their long term rigour. It is therefore essential to be attentive to other familial and structural changes that simulateneously go on. In this sense, the conceptualisation of an enduring habitus and changing gendered practices within the broad societal paradigm by Pierre Bourdieu has been useful in the current project

## **Methodological contributions to research on dynamics of embodiment and gendered identity**

This thesis makes an important contribution to address the paucity of qualitative research on the interrelationship between embodiment through a lived body and gendered identity especially in the Indian context. It explored the impacts of various catalysts of social change such as migration, employment in transnational call centres and a consumption culture on the gendered identities of unmarried young women. The women who participated in this study moved through a variety of cultural experiences such as familial, communal, urban and professional which bring in changes in their gendered identities. As it is shown in the thesis, these varying forms of experiences overlap and inform each other. A sense of respectability that is identified as the core value of the middle class families of the women in my study provides the ground for perceiving, interpreting and reinventing the gendered identities in new circumstances.

In addition, I have presented an argument for focusing on the varying impacts of migration and American cultural elements on differential aspects of gendered identities of the women. It is suggested in the study that gendered identities of these women may not be perceived as cohesive wholes, with some aspects being more deeply ingrained than the others. This results in uneven changes in gendered identities under the impact of forces of modernity. The present study which takes an approach that foregrounds practices, agency and contextual realities, thus allows for a nuanced understanding of the gendered selves in the face of change.

My study involves a triangulation, where participant observation is complemented by short structured interviews and long narrative interviews with the participants spread over various sessions. I had adopted these methods to capture the unique experiences and practices of each of the participant than looking for overarching generalisations.

I also incorporated a variety of writing methods and modes of representation such as ethnodrama, autoethnographic reflections into the thesis. These strategies helped me

to present the real voices of the participants to a variety of audiences in an easily accessible manner.

Thus overall, the thesis contributes to the existing sociological theory, by developing a methodology to study gendered identities against a backdrop of transitioning culture and migration. I have done so by thinking with Bourdieu (1977, 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) about 'embodiment, dispositions and practices' and extending Lois McNay's conceptualisation of 'situated reflexivity' (1999, 2000) and the notion of 'imagination as a social practice' by Arjun Appadurai (1997, 2000) to a qualitative study on migration, social change and gendered identity. Based on the above, I offer a new conceptual framework for analysis that has been used in the present study for generating new knowledge about the ways, that impacts of migration and western cultural elements generate possibilities of agency and gendered identity change in the lives of young women in my study. This framework emphasises that it is imperative to understand the structural elements that leads to early experiences of embodiment before we proceed to study the aspects of change. The thesis also provides an example of how gendered practices in a different socio-cultural environment might lead to dis-embodiment and re-embodiment with reflexivity and creative practices. The strength of my framework is that it prioritises the social context, practices of the agents and a dynamic process of embodiment in construction of gendered identities.

As I have shown, 'embodiment and formation of gendered identity' has been an important area of study in both sociological and feminist literature, but only a few scholars have explored the relationship between dynamics of embodiment, migration and changing nature of female employment especially in the Indian context. Moreover, the local-global nexus that is found in the transnational call centre as a basis of identity formation has not existed before. Thus the thesis is distinctive in that it provides the first attempt to define what sociology of migration and cultural change might look like with 'embodiment through a lived female body' and gendered identity as the central objects of study.

## **Future Directions**

The time I spent in the field was not sufficient to observe the lives of the women when they left the transnational call centres. During the field trip, I spent most of my time with the young women in the city and at their work place in the transnational call centres. Observing the lives of their women in their families and at their native places when they paid a visit during the holidays was also not possible. Future research in the area could explore these aspects to address the gaps present in the current project. Moreover, looking at the lives of the women after they get married and leave the industry shall bring more insight into the long term impacts of the employment in transnational call centres on the gendered identities of the women.

Further, I have not taken into account, the impact of other socio-cultural factors such as religion or caste on migration and various facets of embodiment and gendered identities. Future researchers could do so by looking at the ways these factors bring in differences in the impact of call centre employment and migration. For example, it may be explored whether young women from Hindu families who work in call centres undergo a varying process of change when compared with women from Christian families.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix One: Flyers inviting participation

### Changing culture and gendered identities –A study among the female employees at call centres in Bangalore

#### Invitation to participate in valuable research

You and your friends are invited to participate in one-to one interviews organised by Swati Mishra. She is researcher doing her PhD in Massey University in New Zealand. Her study is about on *cultural changes in Bangalore and lives of young women.*

Are you single?

Are you working in a call centre?

Are you within the age group of 20-25?

Are you willing to help?

If your answer to all these questions are yes then,

Swati would love to hear from you

Your opinions, ideas and experiences....to enrich and understand the society and culture in present times.

Please contact her in the following address:

## **Appendix Two: Semi- structured questionnaire**

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Date of interview –

Time-

Interviewee Name-

1. How many people live in your family? How many males? How many females?
2. How long have you been working in Bangalore? \_\_\_\_\_ Years
3. Have you been outside Bangalore within past one year? Yes No
4. If yes, what was the purpose of leaving the last time you left Bangalore?
5. For work For family reasons With friends
6. Where were you born?
7. In which month and year you were born?
8. How many siblings (brothers and sisters) do you have?
9. How many brothers? How many sisters?
10. What's your religion?
11. How many days in a week you usually attend church/mosque/temple related activities, if at all? Days
12. How important is religion in your life?
13. Somewhat important Not at all important important Very important
14. What's the highest level of school/college that you have finished?
15. Are you currently enrolled in any college/course?

### **Themes**

- Puberty
- Dating
- Studies
- Festivals at home
- Relationship with parents
- Aspiration for a career
- Friendship at work
- Team parties

## **Appendix Three: Letter to managers/heads of the international call centre**

### **Changing culture and gendered identities -A study among the female employees at call centres in Bangalore**

Dear Sir/ Madam,

I would like to introduce myself before I explain the purpose of writing to you. I am a PhD student at Massey University, New Zealand. I am interested in doing my research in the area of information technology revolution in India and the associated socio-cultural changes. For this purpose I have decided to work in Bangalore which is the most popular destination of foreign multinational companies in India. As a resident of Bangalore for some time, I have witnessed the rapid changes occurring in the lifestyle and culture of the city. The fast pace in which the city has moved in terms of its infrastructural development, material affluence and lifestyle of the younger population made me interested in undertaking this project. I would like to work with the young women who are employed in call centres and who are experiencing changes in various facets of their lives as being the part of a very glamorous and westernized work setting in the city. This work will contribute towards bringing to the surface numerous issues emerging in the lives of the younger generation with regard to lifestyle, values, leisure activities and their identities, in the face of cultural changes in the city. It might also be beneficial from an organisational point of view to find the issues that affect the personal and work lives of the employees and improve the human relations policy of the organisation.

1. In your capacity as the manager / head of the organisation I am seeking two things. Firstly your permission to carry out this research in your organisation for a month of any duration agreeable to you.
2. Secondly I would like you to participate in the research through an informal interview.

Research in the organisation here means that I shall be present in the work setting of the centre and observe the activities of the employee. I would also like to observe some of the training sessions that are organized for the employees. I may also converse with them informally during the breaks in the common room. With your assistance I would like to choose a public place in the centre, from where I can do my observation without affecting the working process of the centre. In relation to the second part I would like to interview you about the structure and function of the organisation, the training sessions and the formal team building activities that are carried on in the organisation. The interview will take approximately one hour. With your permission I would also like to record the interviews so that they can be transcribed and analysed at a later date.

The information gathered in your call centre will be analysed to provide a general background of the call centre, the prevailing work culture and information about how the female employees participate in various activities and training sessions. I want to reassure you at the outset that any information you provide will be confidential to me as a researcher. The person who will transcribe the interviews will also be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. I shall keep the audio recordings and transcriptions in a safe place in my office at Massey University. On the completion of the project the audio recordings will be destroyed but I shall keep copies of transcripts in a secure place. I shall be the only person who ever has access to them along with my supervisors. Results of the study will be sent to everyone who participated in the study. I shall be present in Bangalore during the month of February and March to carry out my research. If you give me the permission to be in your organisation for the purpose, then we can fix a time to meet and talk further about the project.

Yours sincerely

Swati Mishra

## **Appendix Four: Information sheet for the managers/heads of international call centres**

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### **Changing culture and gendered identities -A study among the female employees at call centres in Bangalore India**

My name is Swati Mishra and I am a PhD candidate in the Sociology programme at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. Dr Allanah Ryan and Dr Sita Venkateswar are supervising my PhD research, and our contact details can be found at the end of this sheet.

I invite you to participate in my research. In your capacity as the head of the centre I would like to seek your permission for me to be in your centre for a period of one month in order to observe the work lives of the employees, some of the training sessions and general work environment of the centre. I may talk to some of the employees during their breaks, in the common room. As an introduction I would like your permission to present an informal seminar at a convenient time (during breaks or any other time as decided by you) at the centre to make the employees aware of the reason of my presence in the centre and nature and purpose of my research.

In addition I would like also like to interview you informally about the structure and function of the call centre, the nature of the training programmes and the general work culture of the centre. This interview will be for approximately one hour.

#### **What is the study about?**

The information technology sector in India has attracted a lot of attention in the post-liberalisation period. Bangalore has been one of the preferred destinations for the foreign multinational information technology companies. In the past few years there have been rapid changes in the culture and lifestyle of the city, mostly resulting from the information technology revolution. As a resident of Bangalore for some time, I

have been fascinated by the changes in the city life and its culture. Now, as a researcher, I would like to look at the whole process more closely in my study.

I have chosen to work with young women in call centres for the following reasons.

As a part of the information technology revolution, call centres have generated a lot of interest at present for creating large scale employment opportunities especially for young women, offering attractive salary packages and creating a different work environment. While call centres create opportunities for young women, at the same time it includes some challenges to them in terms of the unconventional working hours, work in a setting where values and norms are different from the ones assimilated in the family, meeting targets and giving more time to work to become successful. In this situation the issue of development of new coping strategies and changes in personality (in terms of adopting a new dress code, or changing accent) come up in order to adjust to the new situation and its demands. This process of change is my broad area of interest with the following objectives:

- I shall explore the work culture and environment of the call centres and examine whether or not it create opportunities for cultural change in the lives of the female employees.
- I shall observe the day to day working lives of the women in the centre. I shall look into aspects of how they participate in the training and other team building sessions.
- What kind of leisure activities they undertake during the breaks (like what TV programme they watch or choice of music or kind of food they prefer etc.)

### **How the information will be used?**

The information gathered in your call centre will be analysed to provide a general background of the call centre and the prevailing work culture and how the female employees participate in various activities and training sessions. Any information you provide will be confidential to me as a researcher. The person transcribing the interviews will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. I will use data collected during this research to produce a PhD thesis and other academic works (such as journal articles, book chapters and conference presentation). During my fieldtrips I

will store all recorded material (including recordings and transcripts) at a secured place in my residence. After the fieldtrips I will store all recorded material in a secure location in New Zealand. You will be offered copies of transcripts of your interview. I shall share the result of my observation with all the employees through an informal seminar arranged at a convenient time. This will be done after I complete my observation period in your centre. If you do not want your organisation to be identified in my research, you may choose another name to use. I shall be available during the month of February and March in Bangalore to conduct interviews with you and observations in your centre with your permissions. During this period I shall also be available to talk to you and other employees about my progress. When I have finished my thesis you can have access to an electronic copy my thesis.

### **What are your rights as a potential participant in this research?**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question
- withdraw your permission to continue with my observation in the organisation
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission for its use
- review and edit any of your discussion transcripts stored
- you also have the right to ask for the audiotape to be turned off at any time during the discussion
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded

### **What will happen to the data on the completion of the project?**

On the completion of the project with your permission I shall keep the copies of the transcripts and audio recordings at a secured place. I shall be the only person along with my supervisor who will ever have access to them.

### **Contact details:**

If you have any concerns about the research, please contact me or my supervisors at the address, provided below.

### **Project Contacts**

If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors at the following address:

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Dr Allanah Ryan  
Sociology Programme.  
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Massey University  
Palmerston North  
New Zealand  
Email address A.M.Ryan @massey.ac.nz

## **Appendix Five: Information sheet for participants**

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### **Changing culture and gendered identities -A study among the female employees at call centres in Bangalore**

My name is Swati Mishra and I am a PhD candidate in sociology programme at Massey University, Palmerston north, New Zealand. Dr Allanah Ryan and Dr Sita Venkateswar are supervising my PhD, and our contact details can be found at the end of this sheet. In your capacity as female employees in the call centres I would like to invite you to participate in an informal interview. The interview will be about your experiences in life as a woman. Our discussion will include as to whether or how your present job in the city has affected your life. We may talk about your views about your works, work culture, your preferences and relationship with colleagues and how your life influences your views and practices. I may ask questions about personal life, your experiences of growing up as a girl in the family, school experiences, your sexual desires and relationships, and how these relationships and your conceptions of marriage in the future. The questions can also be related to your background such as where you lived and what you did before coming to work. The interviews will take approximately two hours at one sitting and I would like to have two or three interviews with you. It will take the form of a conversation between us. I will like to record the interviews so that it may be transcribed at a later date. After the interviews are over when I am back at New Zealand, I shall keep in touch with you through e-mail, phone or letter.

### **What the study is about?**

The information technology sector in India has attracted considerable attention in recent years. Bangalore has been the most preferable destination for multinational information technology companies. The city has been witnessing rapid changes in the life style and culture of the inhabitants owing to the IT revolution. As a part of this

revolution call centres have generated a lot of interest for creating large scale employment opportunities for young women, offering them attractive salaries and creating a different work environment.

In addition to these opportunities the sector also presents challenges to them in terms of unconventional work hours, high job demand in terms of meeting targets, few holidays and expectations of the family. For example family expectations with respect to marriage and high job demand in terms of meeting targets, giving more time to the job, career prospects and working night shifts may come into conflict with each other. Similarly living in the city creates new opportunities which are attractive for young people. (for example new dress codes for the younger generation, choice of music, availability of western fast food centres, glamorous shopping malls, more dating opportunities and independence to lead personal and sexual lives). These opportunities may encourage life styles which are different from their ways of living at home.

Against this backdrop I shall look into the following in my study:

- Creation of new opportunities and challenges in the lives of young women as result of their employment in the call centres
- Their exposure to new ideas and values in the work setting and present lifestyle in the city.
- I shall explore how these new forces are negotiated or create conflicts with their family values and expectations

This will be done by interviewing young women such as yourself, about your personal experiences of young women with respect to their growing up in the family, work lives and sexual relationships.

### **Participant Recruitment**

My research participants are young women such as yourself who work in call centres and live away from their families in Bangalore. I shall seek the participants based on their willingness and interest to participate in my research.

## **Project Procedures**

I shall use data collected during this research to produce a PhD thesis and other academic works (such as conference, presentations, journal articles and book chapters). During my fieldtrips I shall store all recorded material (including audio recordings) with me where I stay. After the fieldtrips I shall store all recorded material in a secure location in New Zealand. You will be offered copies of your recorded discussion(s). During my six months visit to Bangalore in 2007 (June-November) I shall be available to talk with you about my progress. On a continuous basis I can share my research finding with you if you so wish. When I have finished my thesis I shall offer you access to the electronic copy of my thesis.

## **Your Rights:**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study at any time;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name and image will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- review and edit any discussion transcripts;
- decline to have your discussion transcripts stored
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded

You also have the right to ask for the audiotape to be turned off at any time during the discussion.

## **What will happen to the data on the completion of the project?**

On the completion of the project the audio recordings will be destroyed and I shall keep the copies of transcription at a secured place. I will be the only person who ever have access to them. Results of the study will be offered to everyone who participated in the study and reports will be sent on request.

**Support Process:**

If you have any concerns about the research, please contact me in the address as provided below.

## **Project Contacts**

If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisors at the following addresses:

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### Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application \_\_\_/\_\_\_ (insert application number). If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Professor John O'Neill,

Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone 06 350 5799 x 8635, email [humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz).

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