

## **A tour of India in one workplace: investigating complex and gendered relations in IT**

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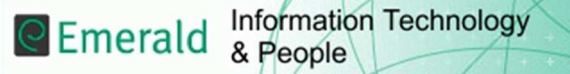
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**A tour of India in one workplace: investigating gendered and complex relations in IT**

**Abstract**

**Purpose:**

This paper investigates the situation of women working as IT professionals in different regions of India within Multi-National Enterprises (MNEs). The research is part of a cross-national study that compared gendered relations in the UK and Indian IT sector. The complex roles that region, class and caste and gendered values and norms have in shaping women’s work and lives in India are discussed.

**Design/methodology/approach:**

The cross-national research assumed common themes as part of a programme of in-depth interviewing and observations during site visits. The ‘safari method’ was adopted by a sole field worker with intimate knowledge of languages and cultures of both India and UK. In-depth interviews and observations were conducted at 5 IT MNEs in 4 cities in India. The research considered notions of intersectionality and difference –how the lived experiences of Indian women are shaped by gender relations and are interconnected with other dynamics like caste and class on regional and cultural differences in India that impact on working in IT MNEs.

**Findings:**

The IT sector in India offers opportunities for middle and upper class women professionals with barriers often experienced by women working in IT in Western countries not replicated in India. Nevertheless this has not meant significant improvements in gendered relations at work or in Indian society at large. The role of women at home and within a patrifocal society shapes their experiences at work. There are significant differences in organisational culture even within MNEs sharing common legislative and policy environments. There are also particular influences of regional, class and caste differences manifest in IT workplaces, contributing to inequality.

**Originality/value:**

This paper adds to the understanding of the situation of women in IT including within MNEs offering insights into the workings of global capitalist enterprises. The research should lead to an appreciation of the complexity of social differences and whether opening up opportunities for women professionals in India can contribute to inclusive growth or will maintain current patterns of inequality.

**Keywords:**

IT, gender, India, caste, cross-national research

## Introduction

This paper analyses the burgeoning complexities and nuances of manifestations of difference in class, caste, regional behaviours and stereotypes that shape the working culture in IT organisations in India. The research is part of a cross-national comparative study that focused on the working practices of multi-national enterprises (MNEs). Concentrating on women IT professionals in India, this paper primarily investigates gendered norms and values at work and in Indian society. We analyse the practices and cultures including how terms, conditions, state and organisational policies were applied within MNEs and their operations in different cities across the world and internally within the IT companies visited.

The Information Technology (IT) and IT-Enabled Services (ITES) sector, which includes the Business Process Outsourcing, (BPO) industry in India, is the 'poster child' of the liberalised Indian economy – portrayed as a glamorous industry closely associated with globalisation and business success. It has been a fast-growing sector with trans-national linkages, employing educated professional classes of workers and characterised by relatively flat and flexible organizational structures (D'Mello, 2010). India's software services outsourcing industry is a prime example of the globalisation of knowledge work (Upadhyay, 2009) and the industry has grown largely because of liberalisation policies that have pushed towards technological modernisation with significant state support (Heeks, 1996). The economic 'liberalisation' of India has meant exposure to global competitiveness and development, leading to India emerging as an important IT outsourcing destination (Gambles et al, 2006).

The caste system of India which has lasted for around 3,500 years, has over the years become one of the most enduring of Indian institutions (Binder and Eswaran, 2015). Some anticipated that as an aspect of traditional culture and ideology, caste would inevitably decline and eventually disappear on its own - in particular as the economy grew and opened up to foreign-owned businesses that perhaps do not share predominant Indian caste and class prejudices (Deshpande, 2013). Yet this has not happened and caste continues to matter in many different ways: as an important aspect of social and economic inequality and as a reality that shapes opportunity structures, status differences and cultural values in contemporary India.

The considerable growth of the IT and ITES sectors in India must also be considered as part of developments of global capitalism. Some argue for example that the IT industry offers a relatively less discriminatory environment compared to other employment sectors in India (Heeks, 1998) and therefore for women in this sector this could mean employment opportunities with better conditions such as higher pay and improved promotion prospects (Mehra and Gammage, 1999). However, the result of economic restructuring and feminization of employment has been increasing levels of inequality (Perrons, 2010) and women working in this sector have a double challenge

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balancing their work and family life in a patrifocal social structure where women are primarily responsible for taking care of the home and children.

Some, however, do highlight the potential for new opportunities for women. Opportunities appear to arise as the global expansion of capitalism has been dependent on a massive influx of women into the workforce thus offering a degree of economic independence from family. It has been argued that IT-enabled work can offer more flexibility in terms of where and when to work and ‘flatter’ organisations can allow more women to be represented in management positions (Howcroft and Richardson, 2008).

Certainly since the 1940s, governments in India have responded to the gradual increase of women in the workforce and resulting pressures on families and extended family care. This has included limiting working hours, providing crèches and introducing policies such as maternity leave and equal pay provision (Gambles et al, 2006). In India it is interesting to witness the shift in attitude when, after being lobbied by NASSCOM and business organisations, regulations were relaxed with regard to women working at night (Taylor and Bain, 2003; Howcroft and Richardson, 2008).

Our motivations for the paper come from the call for more nuanced research (see Howcroft and Richardson 2000), for detailed studies that offer a grounded analysis of the experiences of women’s lives. Gender matters at work in the IT sector have often focussed on a Western perspective (Gupta, 2015) including concerns of skill shortages and underrepresentation of women. In India many studies have been confined to the BPO sector and concomitant aspects of the labour process. However it is important to consider the context (Arun and Arun, 2002; Arun et al, 2004), including understanding regional differences, the impacts of class and caste relations and the specifics of the gendered social organisation of education, care and the family. Manifestations of national and organisational policies are not necessarily implemented in a uniform way – even in one workplace policies and practices can be shaped by specific cultural values and norms according to local societal expectations.

Women’s participation in the global labour market has increased and IT professions are more prestigious compared to other professions. Women from India have been found to have more positive attitudes towards IT as a career (Adya and Kaiser, 2005), yet we query have things really improved for women in India - are they benefitting? In doing so, we researched MNEs based in the UK and India and wanted to see whether conditions and policies were applied across borders but in particular to note how region, class and caste may impact on gendered experiences in India. Holgate et al (2006) calls for research into working lives that considers not only gender but also issues of the intersectionality of difference. Intersectionality suggests that there is a complexity of social relations and identities as they are lived by both men and women, which should not be simplified into one

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3 aspect of experience (Holgate et al, 2006). The interconnection and dynamics of social relations such  
4 as gender, class and caste as applied to individuals or groups can create a system of discrimination  
5 and disadvantage that overlaps and is interdependent. Social relations are constituted through in-  
6 built linkages and by understanding the complexities involved, the possibilities for positive change  
7 are greater (Pollert, 1996).  
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11 Archer (2004) calls for theorisation of difference in research, understanding the complexity of social  
12 relations and rejecting binary notions that often have recourse to essentialism. In appreciation of  
13 Holgate et al (2006) and Archer (2004) we considered how regional and cultural differences  
14 impacted on working in IT MNEs in cities in India. In terms of using a framework of intersectionality  
15 the idea of the researcher as both an insider and outsider underpinned the research practice. As  
16 suggested by Archer (2004), we drew on the work of Brah (1999) and the cultural concepts from the  
17 language Urdu of 'apna' – one of our own; 'ajnabi' – a stranger but with promise of friendship and  
18 'ghair' – 'walking the tightrope' between being an insider and outsider (Brah, 1999:19). This helped  
19 to construct 'a non-binarized understanding of identification across 'difference'' (Brah 1999:4) and  
20 also enabled reflection on the complexities of the relationships experienced in the field.  
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24 Value systems embedded in work and patrifocal domestic regimes have been affected, influenced  
25 and subject to pressure, shaped by both the increase in women IT professionals in India - working  
26 flexible and long hours alongside men and with international clients - which represents a significant  
27 change in working experiences for women in India. We consider how organisational responsibility  
28 for the impact of work on households is 'masked' (Mirchandani, 2005). There is also the divergence  
29 of multiple working practices such as imperatives to adopt seamless a-cultural and globally  
30 standardised systems of work to more autonomous and self-regulatory styles depending on the  
31 origins of the 'parent' company. Cross-national research studies face methodological challenges  
32 (Karahanna et al, 2004) but are of importance given the trans-cultural nature of work in MNEs. We  
33 consider the implications of this for inclusive growth informed by the work of Deshpande (2002,  
34 2013).  
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38 The paper proceeds with an overview of women in the labour market in India and the various  
39 legislative and policy changes that have been an influence. We consider the reproduction of caste  
40 and class and persisting inequality. Gender matters in IT MNEs and women's participation in the IT  
41 sector in India are then explored. This includes analysis of the global software and IT sector and the  
42 employment of women IT professionals. The safari approach and discussion of cross-national  
43 comparative research and methodological challenges are then discussed. We present our fieldwork  
44 that involved semi-structured interviews and observations in 5 MNEs in 4 cities in India and  
45 considered working practices and the complexities of social difference that shaped experiences. This  
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paper offers insights into the workings of global IT enterprises and considers whether the opportunities opened up for women IT professionals can contribute to inclusive growth or will maintain current patterns of inequality.

**Women in the labour market in India – legislative and policy influence**

The ‘Directive Principles’ of State policy, provided the guidance for India’s future development. This document laid down a number of welfare policies and laws which were mandatory for state and private organizations to abide by. A number of pieces of legislation were passed that have had special implications for women’s participation in the labour market. These five-year legislative and policy plans have encapsulated the directive principles to formulate the national and state policies of the Government. Early plans were ‘gender blind’, thus patrifocal. However the sixth five-year plan period (1980-85) was regarded as a landmark for women’s development. The plan had a chapter on ‘Women and Development’ and adopted a multidisciplinary approach with an emphasis on the health, education and employment of women (Rajadhyaksha and Swati, 2004). Yet women’s participation in formal employment remained low, although their participation in agriculture increased. Despite several laws and new regulations, the requirement of working long hours, discrimination and verbal harassment at work continued and often forced women to leave their jobs.

More recent plans have stressed the strategic importance of inclusive growth, for example the 12<sup>th</sup> plan (up to 2017) is entitled ‘faster, sustainable and more inclusive growth’. Despite global recession and ‘domestic imbalances’ (Deshpande, 2013), there has been aggregate growth recently in the Indian economy. Yet the question remains about what this means for different social groups and whether the new and newly created jobs will lead to widely shared benefits or leave the distribution between regions, states, castes and classes and men and women unchanged (Deshpande, 2013). Joshi (1988) argues how, in spite of progressive legislation dating from 1947 which provided a radical framework for women workers far in advance of the tentative steps of Western countries towards equal rights from the 1960’s onwards, its impact has been limited due to evasion by employers as well as non-enforcement by the State.

**Reproduction of caste, class and persisting inequality in India**

The caste system in India is pervasive and hereditary and largely based on occupation, strictly endogamous and the well-established hierarchy between castes has developed to a point that it still manages to retain importance in the contemporary social organisation. (Binder and Eswaran, 2015). Deshpande (2002) explains how the ancient Varna system corresponded to a rudimentary economy, occupationally based – such as Brahmins as priests and teachers and Vaisyas as traders and



merchants. The Jati system in India is similar but with more complex occupational structures and more rules about how to live. Jati is often indicated by the surname of the person which became significant in our study. Official national data collection in India used only three categories – Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and ‘Others’. However the government introduced a fourth category namely ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBCs). The first ‘backward classes’ commission known as the Kalelkar Commission was set up by presidential order in 1953. The second was led by the parliamentary Mandal in 1978, to identify the ‘socially or educationally backward’ (Ramaiah, 1992). The OBCs identified were the ‘untouchables’ that the government wanted to target for affirmative action (Deshpande, 2002). The Mandal Commission provided special quotas from 1989, in education and jobs for the Scheduled Castes and OBCs. As a result of this, a number of people from lower castes were able to access further education and occupy professional titles. However, higher education still is not an easy option for lower castes and they often stand out as doctors, lawyers, or other professionals because of their surnames. They are therefore more exposed to overt and covert discrimination in the workplace.

The dominant view of thinking about caste was from an evolutionally frame where the underlying assumption was that caste would disappear ‘automatically’ with the dawn of modernization replacing it with ‘modern’ structures based on individual achievement (Jodhka, 2015). In fact the caste system has retained influence in modern times even among educated urban groups (Banerjee et al., 2009) and economic inequalities across caste groups have also witnessed further escalation (Jodhka, 2015). Historically the highest caste in the Indian caste hierarchical system - the Brahmins - had the greatest amount of human capital in terms of education compared to the lower castes like the Shudras. This was precisely why only Brahmins were permitted to teach. In contemporary India, India’s middle class or ‘professionals’ including ‘white collar’ workers are one of the ‘dominant proprietary classes’ based on their possession of human capital in the form of education and skills (Ahmad, 1978; Bardhan, 1994). A recent study in India based on a sample of 1000 companies reported that as many as 92.6% of Indian corporate board members were from two broad clusters of the ‘upper castes’ (mainly Brahmins 44.6% and Vaishyas 46%,) and these two together comprise less than 15% of the Indian population. In contrast, lower castes like the Shudras only comprise 3.5% of these senior positions (Jodhka, 2015). The caste system determines not only the social division of labour but also sexual division as well determining what occupations are acceptable, for example, for women to undertake (Deshpande, 2002). Endogamy is a mechanism therefore to recruit and retain control over women, their labour and sexuality (Deshpande, 2002). Caste and class controlled through endogamy thus reproduces the structure of social inequality persistent in contemporary India.



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Earlier research on corporate hiring in India by Jodhka and Newman (2007) reveals that although hiring managers actively deny any consideration of caste in the process of recruitment, they did agree that questions related to family background were very common. A wide range of studies (e.g. see Jodha, 2015, Binder and Eswaran, 2015) have shown that caste continues to structure social inequality in India in various forms and those at the upper end of the caste hierarchy are far less likely to be present among the economically depressed categories. So issues related to caste and classes are still very much predominant in India, yet there is an accepted norm among the privileged classes to try to render this ‘invisible’ (Roy, 2014).

**IT MNEs and women’s participation in India**

IT companies globally often follow the ‘human resource augmentation’ model of project management in which the revenue generated is directly related to the number of people engaged in the project and the number of projects executed (Baba and Tschang, 2001). Therefore employers’ attitude and control over resources, software labour processes and time allocated to each project becomes crucial (Upadhaya, 2009). In India the IT industry is export-oriented and customer-driven IT companies market their services as quality driven as they aspire to hire only graduates. Employees are expected to work in shifts between 8-10 hours. Since the 2008 recession these shift patterns have worsened to six days a week in highly pressured environments (Taylor and Bain, 2003; Taylor et al, 2014). IT MNEs in India have a culture of very long hours and these are not necessarily conducive for women’s progression and retention in the industry (D’Mello, 2006; Dhar-Bhattacharjee and Takruri-Rizk, 2011). Women are more likely to negotiate their flexible working patterns or provision for time off to undertake caring responsibilities for the family than negotiating salary packages or promotions (D’Mello, 2010). This can lead to different and gendered expectations of women’s work in IT companies in India. Mobility issues related to unexpected travel, participation in informal social networks (Adam et al, 2006) and women’s lower inclination or ability to ‘job-hop’ to take advantage of higher salary negotiations, all place women in an disadvantaged position. There are significant numbers of women taking computer related courses and entering the IT labour market in India especially compared to the UK for example. This reflects an education system and family support that encourages this (Adya and Kaiser, 2005). Yet D’Mello, (2006) shows that IT work in India is not a level playing field for female and male IT workers, rather embodying stereotyped gender norms and traditional gender relations and far from revolutionizing gender relations in India (Gupta, 2015).

The changing economic situation for women in recent years and the urban middle class surge (Gupta, 2015), have paved a way for computing and IT to be seen as an acceptable job for women

with better access to education for this class. However, there are regional variations, for example previous research shows that Kerala is less forward with regard to employing women in IT and women are economically marginalised compared to other parts of India (see Arun et al, 2006). Certainly women entering the IT industry are an urban and middle class phenomenon now. As Gupta (2015) has discussed, for middle class women to work in IT has been welcomed despite the patrifocal structure of Indian society - it makes the women more acceptable to the groom's family and it is considered a safe job for women with comparatively good pay.

In terms of general regional differences, northern India which tends to be more feudal and patriarchal has lower female labour market participation than the southern states of India where women have relatively greater freedoms and a more prominent place in society (Esteve-Volart, 2004).

### Cross national comparative research

The organisation of this research resembles a 'safari' - the term 'safari' refers to a journey or an expedition to observe and record cultural phenomena but with the researcher as almost a professional guide who is familiar with the social context of the observed. The safari method is complementary to a more culturalist approach and focusses upon the political dynamics of contemporary culture and its historical foundations, conflicts and defining traits (Gregory and Milner, 2006). The safari research method which was first used in the 1980's (Hantrais, 1989) was primarily associated with carried out by a single or a team of researchers in more than one country. This method aims to compare particular issues or social phenomena in differing socio-cultural settings and generally achieves this objective by formulating the research problem in a comparative framework. In this research the sole fieldworker had intimate knowledge of the two countries involved including languages, culture and an awareness of the socio-economic context.

Analysis of findings was then conducted through a dialogue between the authors, drawing on their theoretical knowledge and experience of women working in the IT sector in the global economy. Much has been written about the situation of women in IT particularly in advanced economies. As is evident in the literature, the IT culture globally is competitive (e.g. see D'Mello, 2006; Howcroft and Richardson, 2008 and Moore et al, 2008), individualised (e.g. see Belgorodskiy et al, 2012), gender segregated, often offering a chilly climate for women in terms of organisational culture (e.g. see Adam et al, 2006), where women's technical skills are undervalued (e.g. see Woodfield, 2002; Woodfield, 2000). IT workplaces are not always ideal for women's progression and well being in the sense that women often have to 'adjust' and fit into a male dominated work culture (Griffiths et al, 2007, Gupta 2015). In addition, women's experiences in the workplace cannot be abstracted from their role in the family and their unpaid labour in the home (Holgate et al, 2006). In these terms, women's position in the labour market and their experiences of work organisation are largely

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influenced by what they do outside of it (Durbin and Conley 2010). These issues shaped our questioning.

The same interview format and themes were used in the UK to India and back. The lengthy stays in conducting research in each country and the frequent visits allowed familiarisation with the local context and this became a valuable resource at the analytical and comparative stage. Semi-structured in-depth interview questions covered the following topics with IT professionals and people in managerial positions – reasons for entry in the IT profession, working culture and working practices in their organisation, opportunities and obstacles for progression, reasons for attrition and home-work interaction.

The fieldworker of East Indian origin was able to stay with family and friends in the different regions in India where the IT companies were located. Alternatively accommodation was rented in the IT complexes that have been developed for IT professionals to live nearer to MNEs, which was home to many of our interviewees. This also enabled informal contact to be made with IT professionals and their families. Having access to regional local newspapers, regional news and comments via social media and access to local people for further interactions, enabled understanding of the nuances of the complexities of this 24/7 industry and the intersectional perspectives that shape the working practices and underpin the culture of IT organisations in India. One example revealed the level of suicides amongst IT professionals in Bengaluru (also known as Bangalore) – discussed and reported locally in regional newspapers in regional languages but covertly ignored by newspapers published in the English language.

The safari method enabled the capture of emotional and structural difference. Brah (1999) has used Urdu terms to describe this which are relevant to this research too. ‘Ajnabi’ means a stranger, a newcomer not yet known but offering promise of friendship and so on. Maybe such a person has different ways of doing things but does not come across as ‘alien’. Ajnabi offers potential for a person to develop into an ‘apna’ or ‘one of our own’. Lastly there is the term ‘ghair’ – hard to define but between an insider and outsider (Brah, 1999; Archer, 2004). It is not understood by the binary ‘Self’ and ‘Other’, nor an essentialist category but a form of ‘irreducible, opaque difference’ (Brah, 1999). So communities which share common values or attributes can be described as apna or ajnabi but in any community there can be ‘emotional gulfs of difference’ which can be read as ‘ghair’ (Archer, 2004). Brah (1999) illustrates this by her experiences as an Asian researcher interviewing ‘white’ parents in Southall, London in 1976 and feeling ‘acutely ‘othered’ and invisible. So ‘ghair’ can mean alien, different and emotionally both within and without. The researcher ‘on safari’ was often an apna or ajnabi and was perceived as such by others and could understand this position vis-à-vis the people she talked with. At other times lacking embedded and lived experiences of another

region meant relationships were ghair – this was tangible and had to be reflected upon. Sometimes ghair or ajnabi arose from reactions to the researchers' surname representing clear associations with one caste over another.

In India IT professionals and HR managers from 5 organisations were interviewed and 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Of these 5 were with HR professionals. Both men and women were interviewed. The companies have been anonymised to maintain confidentiality - renamed as Comco, Astra, Incas, Xeno and Intega. Of these, Intega is based in India while the remaining are all MNEs having offices in the US, Europe and India. The participants were drawn from a random and diverse age group between 21-65 years that represented different layers in the IT workforces, including management groups. Observations were carried out during site visits. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and were conducted in Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata and Delhi.

The research undertaken – interviews and site observations – aimed to gain an understanding of working as an IT professional in MNEs based in India and to consider how social constructions of gender, caste, class and region shaped economic inequalities in the labour market and in society. The investigation explored working practices and home-work interaction involved. Our focus was to examine difference and the intersectionality of gender, caste and class within the regional contexts, all being indicators of disadvantage. We then turned to analyse the experiences of women IT professionals at work and at home to assess the expansion of opportunities for educated and skilled middle class Indian women to work outside the home. Yet we found that these opportunities are still constrained by the realities of a patrifocal society bound by caste and cultural determinants of what women can and can't do economically and socially. It was inevitable that journeying 'on safari' in different regions of India as an ajnabi, apna or ghair, issues of different cultural experiences would emerge in the conversations and observations made.

We present our findings by firstly discussing working practices in IT MNEs and the complexities of social differences manifest. This is followed by examining the experiences of women IT professionals and their home-work interaction. We then consider issues of class, caste and regional differences that emerged from the study.

### **Working practices in IT MNEs**

Although foreign owned, the Indian operations were managed by Indians drawn from Indian society with its caste-class prejudices. However, as Deshpande (2013) also found, the labour market inequalities in the country of origin mirrored those practiced by Indian firms. Yet from the interviews there were differences in the organizational policies applied to Indian organizations compared to the same companies based in Europe. For instance the same organizations Comco and Incas based in

India and the UK had different policies related to flexible working, home working, maternity and paternity leave, cab facilities for late night transport home for women professionals and private benefits. A HR manager discussed strategy: *"...the HR roles here tend to be limited in terms of strategy because you are after all a subsidiary company of the parent which is usually head quartered somewhere in Europe or US, so very difficult for the leadership team here to change some processes all that dramatically, which you can do if you are in a large Indian IT company like [named a major IT Indian company] or [named another major IT Indian company]."*

So it seems, organizational policies in India differ when the parent organization is based in the US or Europe. But other local factors also contribute to extending certain policies like cab facilities available to all women employees in India, while this is not the case in the UK. Also flexible working including home working was not provided by Intega.

Another senior HR manager who worked in the UK and India said, *"... multinationals are all about standardization and making things consistent across the globe. So they don't want too many variations. And traditionally European companies tend to be more devolved, they are more empowering. So they believe that within the overarching major policies you are free to do what you want which is suitable for your country. But the American companies expect greater standardization, for example if you take a thing like performance management systems (PMS), I don't think anybody in India working in an MNE can alter the basic structure of the PMS."*

Awareness of certain policies like paternity leave and equal pay reviews, seemed low in India and in general the awareness of policies was considerably low. When asked about awareness of policies in his organization, Ravi, explained, *"I'm not sure about equal pay reviews, I think it's there. We have a lot of policies, but I'm not sure exactly what they are."*

The Indian IT industry is known for the very long working hours – a typical working day consists of 10 hours or more work per day. One HR professional who worked in the UK and India explained the reason for the long hour's culture, *"One of the major reasons for this pattern of overwork or long hours of work is because the 'man-days' required for a project are routinely underestimated when making bids, to keep the cost estimate down. This in turn does put a pressure on the engineers to work much longer hours."* To motivate employees to work these long hours, subjective methods of control are crucial and for a software engineer who leaves work early (i.e. on time) is perceived as not pulling their weight in the team and is subjected to peer pressure. This is a key issue for women as they are often accused of putting in fewer hours because they may leave office earlier than their male colleagues to attend to domestic responsibilities (Upadhyaya, 2009, D'Mello 2006). In this context, Salini, explained, *"Although in theory we can come to the office late, if we stayed late the previous night, everyone is usually in the office by 9.00 or 10 a.m anyway even though you still need*

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*to be in the office till 9.00 or 10 p.m.*". Sometimes, in order to keep their visibility and presence in the organization, women are forced to stay back and put in longer hours to compete with the majority of their male colleagues, as staying late is taken as a sign of dedication and software engineers believe that this practice will enhance their chances of a good performance rating or promotion. The long hours often put up by many IT professionals in India may suggest they engage in 'self-subordination' as a trade-off to satisfy their desires to move up the career ladder in an uncertain industry stricken by global forces where 'hire and fire' is the norm - rather than complaining about the structural factors behind long hours (Upadhy, 2009).

Belgorodiskiy et al (2012) shows that non-transparent pay and reward systems and salary secrets in the IT sector exacerbate inequality and discrimination. A HR manager however asserted "*There is no discrimination. Because she's a woman we pay her less, no way...*". Meenal agreed, "*We have a very straightforward salary structure. There is no provision of a man getting paid more than a woman doing the same job. They are paid equal.*" However job segregation and a concentration of men in managerial positions means that effectively there is a gender pay gap.

Employees were not allowed to discuss their salaries with other employees. In some of the organizations in India, we were forbidden from asking any direct questions relating to their employees' salaries or bonuses. Given this 'salary secret' context, it was also difficult for both men and women to compare and assess any salary differences between them or to agree to a pay packet which reflected their position within the organization. There was some evidence of a pay gap in India related to factors like an employee's previous salary and position, the reputation of the University from where the candidate applied; demand of the specifications of a particular role, and an individual's negotiating powers. In this competitive culture of individualism, IT professionals often pursue their own goals over their colleagues and although comparing salaries is not encouraged to be discussed publicly; often when colleagues find out about it, their only remaining option happens to be the 'exit' option.

The previously buoyant labour market in India provided a source of empowerment to the IT professionals as they felt they could always find another job if the current one did not work out well and this was an important reason for the high rate of employee turnover, which is perceived to be a major problem for the industry (Upadhy,2009). However post 2008 recession, the diminished growth rates of this sector as reported by NASSCOM (2009, 2010) and profound insecurities generated by redundancies, retrenchments as a result of the economic downturn in the West, meant stricter control and surveillance, intensification of work, increased hours and growth in job insecurity (Taylor et al, 2014). This has wider repercussions for women with domestic and primary care responsibilities as this has meant a curtail in benefits, for example cuts in transport provision



for late night shifts and dismissals for 'poor performers' and employees not committed to a 24/7 regime.

### Experiences of women IT professionals at work and home

Compared to India, the UK offers much better support and legislation to working families. A major dissimilarity between men and women both in India and the UK is that women shape their working lives around competing domestic demands, e.g. childcare and household work. Flexible working was popular and all the participants seemed familiar with it. However, many women from India explained that part-time work was not available in their organization. Part-time work was clearly seen as a threat with the expectation that the employee would be unreliable and therefore it remained as an area 'not ventured'. When we enquired whether part-time policies were available in the organization, Meenal, an IT professional at Intega from India mentioned, *"I do not know anyone who has come back part-time after maternity leave. They either left because their husbands were relocated or didn't come back."* Avantika, an IT professional at Incas from India explained, *"I've not seen anyone working part-time. Although I did have the option to come back part-time I didn't take it up, because that's not the norm here."*

The culture of long hours was piling on the stress and there was always a constant juggle between home responsibilities or work responsibilities. Avantika, mentioned that her experience of working in the IT industry has taught her many things of which the most important was that she could now distinguish between stretch and stress - *"...there is a difference between stretch and stress. Stretch will be possible if the atmosphere is very conducive for women employees and they don't mind stretching themselves in work. Stress is very, very hazardous."*

It is important to look beyond the labour market and not separate work from other economic interactions such as intra household resources and the 'care economy' (Brewer et al, 2002). Gender, caste and class relations need to be considered to understand how identities and experiences are shaped. The influence of work and family conflict varies for male and female employees and result in different decisions about leaving work (Panteli and Pen, 2010). In India women's attrition in the IT industry is linked to marriage and caring responsibilities whereas men's attrition is linked to better career opportunities.

When some of the Indian IT companies were visited during field work back in 2009, the IT companies offered an array of five-star luxury facilities within the office premises such as in-house gyms, cinemas, health centres, international food courts, Japanese style gardens, cricket, football, table tennis and basketball grounds. But there were no crèche and childcare centres - it was in the plan but was not yet implemented. It seemed that all the requirements for a man's 'essential' were implemented first and the rest remained "in the plan". However, during a second visit in 2010, there



was an onsite crèche. Many women like Salini, an IT professional at Comco didn't think of this as a viable option for her child and she explained, *"...my concern was that he has to travel with me, we know the struggle of travelling in Bengaluru, why should he struggle? If it's one or two kilometres, then okay, but not if I'm travelling 20-30 kilometres."*

Further interviews with women provide evidence of the experience of the 'social costs' that these women went through at different levels of their career progression. Preeti, an IT professional at Astra from India explained, *"...most of the women whom I meet feel they are always guilty of not taking care of children. ...I have spoken to people who are very, very career- oriented women ... somewhere they will say I wish I am at home and my daughter comes back. So that guilt is always there'.* This feeling of guilt was not visible in conversation with the men.

When asked about the main challenges for women to progress in a technical role, she said women often do not speak up in public forums even when they are knowledgeable and added, *"But they [men] give that extra mile on showcasing their talent, I feel only 10% of the women folk do that, not many of them, but they are very good at their job and what is demanded from them they are able to deliver impeccably ...If you see in a pyramid structure how many get promoted every cycle, not more than 10%."* Adam et al (2006) discussed how women were sometimes excluded from technical areas and represented a challenge to 'masculine skills' equated with technical work. Woodfield (2002) also presents research from the UK where men are more likely to be described as 'techies' with a discourse that women lack technical competence. However, from our study these barriers to working in technical areas often experienced in Western countries were not replicated in India.

### **Class, caste and regional differences in the study**

During discussions of organisational culture, on several occasions covert and overt differences leading to inequalities were evident related to class, caste and regional differences. Differences according to class and caste were often revealed when employees were observed in an informal setting, for example in the cafeteria in Chennai. The cafeteria was congested with men and women from various age groups who queued to grab a seat and many had brought home-cooked food and were sharing it. It emerged that while some people were sharing food very generously, they refrained from sharing it with all at the same table. It was evident some employees distanced themselves from sitting too close to one another even though it was clear they knew each other. There was an acceptable demarcation of food sharing and when asked about this one employee replied *'... they are from a lower caste.'* Although sharing home-cooked food was a popular practice here, food was only shared with people from similar or higher caste and thus withheld from others from the lower caste. From observations of employees in informal settings in the cafeteria in

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Bengaluru, Kolkata and Delhi, food sharing was common, yet caste discrimination seemed more obvious in Chennai than the other cities in India.

On some occasions the fieldwork felt like a tour of India in one workplace with underlying tensions, and social inequalities that contribute to a gendered segregating working life. In a conversation with Mamta, an IT professional at Comco, she revealed there were different work cultures in each of the floors in her organization in Bengaluru. She explained how she struggled to cope with her colleagues when she was based in the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, where the majority of the people working in the project were from North India, mainly New Delhi. She said that she wanted to change her project so that she could come and work on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor where the majority of the colleagues were either from South or East India. The colleagues on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor were loud, extrovert and always ready to ‘show off’ whether it was a branded T-shirt, designer sunglasses, a new phone or even as simple as completing a task and proving their competence compared to others on the floor. While the work culture on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor varied significantly – to her it was a lot calmer, a lot less competitive, and it did not seem like a culture where people would ‘show off’. Although a stereotype, this is a commonly held view of North versus South Indian traits and these were also evident in behavioural differences observed between staff on different floors but within the same organization and building. Regional variations were also noted in our research for example respondents from Chennai seemed much more interested in discussing caste compared to Kolkata. The researcher for example was questioned many times in Chennai about her surname and the possible related castes she may belong to. Visits to other cities didn't rouse such acute interest in caste status.

**Conclusion**

Caste and class is and remains the bed rock of social inequality in India and the safari method helped us to identify the different regional cultures that shaped the organizational norms and the striking inequalities based on caste, class and gender. Some scholars like (Chakravarti, 1993) note that caste as a dimension of inequality has been conceptualized as ‘Brahminical patriarchy’ which shaped the ideology of the upper caste and continues to be the underpinnings of the beliefs and practices extant today. The example of the ‘canteen experience’ that the researchers faced reveals the forms and extent of oppression faced by women from lower castes. These women from the lowest caste were noted for being the most vulnerable, having less power than the ones from the higher caste even though working in the same organization. As Meyerson and Scully (1995) suggested some individuals do not easily fit in the dominant cultures of their organizations or professions. Hence they constantly manage the tension between personal and professional identities that are at odds with one another. While some individuals cope with this tension by leaving mainstream employment, others consciously or subconsciously, silence their complaints. Men from

disadvantaged castes working in IT MNEs in India may also experience such tensions but as part of a patrifocal society we noted more acute expression of the stress involved for women at work in India. Our experience shows these social relations of caste, class and gender are manifested in the exercise of overt, sometimes covert power, created and maintained by men and women from the higher caste. Social honour, power, and privilege maintained by the people from the higher castes and class through social deference are evident even in contemporary Indian workplaces (see also Subramaniam, 2006). Arundhati Roy's book (Roy 2014) on 'Annihilation of Caste' talks about how India continues to be afflicted by systemic inequality and raises issues related to caste and class which are still very much predominant in India.

Middle class women from urban regions in India are encouraged to study Computer Science at University and families generally welcome their entry into the IT workplace. Compared to the UK, there is not the stark underrepresentation of women IT professionals or the antipathy from women or men to regarding women as skilled, technical and competent. However in a patrifocal society issues soon arise over care of children and domestic responsibilities that are regarded as the individual woman's concern. Like the UK, this leads to job segregation at work with women disappearing as you go up the hierarchy and taking on roles that involve less travel and mobility in general. So despite legislative and policy changes to allow women to work and organizational lobbying - such as from NASSCOM - to liberalize the economy, benefits for women are limited. The regime of long hours for those with caring responsibilities impacts on the opportunities available for women at work in India. In these terms organizations show culpable neglect and women bear the brunt of any effects on their working and home lives. The influx of women into the IT sector clearly has not revolutionized Indian society (Gupta, 2015).

Where does this leave the inclusive growth strategy of the latest five-year plan? The Indian economy within global capitalism has followed a more market led rather than government led patterns towards global integration. Inclusive growth requires state intervention and if this is constrained then this suggests potentially higher growth but with distribution between groups unchanged (Deshpande, 2013). In modelling different potential outcomes, Esteve-Volart (2004) shows that exclusion of women from the workforce leads to lower per capita GDP and thus holds back economic growth, whilst reducing opportunities - such as barriers to women moving into management positions - distorts the distribution of talent.

We reflected on the methodological challenges that we faced while conducting fieldwork in the high end IT sector in different regions in India to highlight the cultural aspects of the diversity of Indian culture within IT organizations. This amalgamation of different cultures and sub-cultures, value systems and the competitive culture of the IT sector in India pose challenges for understanding work

and organization. The safari method here not only helped us to understand the culture of the different places in India, but also helped us to see the complexities and intersectionality within the Indian work cultures and how this might lead to segregation in IT projects, which otherwise would have been difficult for someone who was not familiar with the regional cultures in India. This method coupled with reflections of ajnabi, apna and ghair – stranger, one of our own and in-between insider and outsider - enabled consideration of difference within diverse regions (Archer, 2004).

We have shown how women's lives in India are shaped by the intertwining of gender, caste and class relations within specific regional contexts and thus a focus on difference is important to fully capture day-to-day experiences and the structural realities of inequality which a gender only focus would lack. Holgate et al (2006) suggest that understanding people at work benefits from greater engagement with gender and also difference which has been an important aim of this research. They also call for deployment of feminist influenced methodologies (2006). In this research this has meant consideration of intersectionality and the dynamics of power relations, difference and intersecting identities. It has meant looking in depth at structures and their cultural meanings and reflecting on the role of the researcher as ajnabi, apna and ghair in different regions and circumstances in India. The research has therefore provided a special balance of 'insiderism' and 'outsideism' (Chamberlayne and King, 1996) to draw out the nuances of the different complexities that shape the working culture of IT organisations.

The economic downturn in the West and the post global financial crisis have made it harder for women in India to cope in a 24/7 industry where the existing structural barriers and austerity measures create an extra layer to the challenges of an ever-demanding workplace. We would encourage further research to look at the effect of stress and overt and covert discrimination on women and people from less privileged classes and castes in the IT sector in India.

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