

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

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the situation of women working as information technology (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 sectors. 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 with research conducted by a sole fieldworker with intimate knowledge of the languages and cultures of both India and the UK. The research considered intersectionality and difference and aimed to understand material structures and cultural meanings evident from the research process.

**Findings** – There are significant differences in organisational culture even within MNEs sharing common legislative and policy environments. The IT sector in India offers opportunities for middle- and upper-class women professionals and the cultural – including identity – barriers to working in technical areas often experienced in western countries are not replicated in India. Nevertheless, this has not meant any significant improvements in gendered relations at work and in the Indian society. There are also particular influences of regional, class and caste differences manifested in IT workplaces, contributing to inequality.

**Originality/value** – This paper adds to the understanding of the situation of women in IT sector including within MNEs giving insights into the workings of global capitalist enterprises. The research offers appreciation of the complexity of social differences and whether opening up opportunities for women professionals in India can contribute to the inclusive growth or will maintain the current patterns of inequality.

**Keywords** Gender, Inclusive growth, India, Social inclusion, Cross-national study, Organisational culture, Cross-national research, IT sector, Caste

**Paper type** Research paper

## 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 information technology (IT) organisations in India. The research draws on a cross-national comparative study that focussed on the working practices of multi-national enterprises (MNEs) based in the UK and India. Concentrating on women IT professionals in India, this paper primarily investigates gendered norms and values at work and in the Indian society. We analyse the practices and cultures including how terms, conditions, state and organisational policies were applied within MNEs across borders and internally within the IT companies visited in India.

The IT and IT-enabled services (ITES) sectors, 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 organisational structures (D'Mello, 2010). India's software services outsourcing industry is a



prime example of the globalisation of knowledge work (Upadhyaya, 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 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). Many 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 with foreign-owned businesses perhaps not sharing 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 that although this could mean better opportunities for women in this sector (Mehra and Gammage, 1999). However, the result of economic restructuring and feminisation of employment has been increasing levels of inequality (Perrons, 2010) and women working in this sector have a double challenge 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 work 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, 2008) for detailed studies that offer a grounded analysis of the experiences of women’s lives. Gender matters at work in the IT sector has 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 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 evident of local 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 the issues of the intersectionality of difference and so we considered the structural location of difference following Archer (2004). Further insights into the complex specificity of gender, race, class and caste intersectionality were informed by Brewer *et al.* (2002) and the implications for inclusive growth underpinned by the works of Deshpande (2002, 2013). We return to these topics later.

In considering the contribution of our research, we reflect on the methodological challenges that arise from conducting fieldwork at the high end of IT professional work within MNEs in different regions of India. Value systems embedded in work and patrifocal domestic regimes have been affected, influenced and subject to pressure, shaped by both the increase in women IT professionals in India – working flexible and long hours alongside men and with international clients which represents a significant change in working experiences for women in India. We consider how organisational responsibility for the impact of work on households is “masked” (Mirchandani, 2005). There is also the divergence of multiple working practices such as imperatives to adopt seamless a-cultural and globally standardised systems of work to more autonomous and self-regulatory styles depending on the origins of the “parent” company. Cross-national research studies face methodological challenges (Karahanna *et al.*, 2004) but are of growing importance given the trans-cultural nature of work in MNEs. In terms of using a framework of intersectionality, the idea of the researcher as both an insider and outsider underpinned the research practice. As suggested by Archer (2004), we drew on the work of Brah (1999) and concepts from Urdu of “apna” – one of our own; “ajnabi” – a stranger but with promise of friendship and “ghair” – “walking the tightrope” between being an insider and outsider (Brah, 1999, p. 19). This helped to construct “a non-binarized understanding of identification across ‘difference’” (Brah 1999, p. 4) and also to reflect on the complexities of the relationships experienced in the field.

The paper proceeds with an overview of women at work in India and the various legislative changes that have been an influence. Region, class, caste and gender matters are then explored. This is followed by a more in-depth look at global software and IT work in India and the employment of women IT professionals. The safari approach and discussion of cross-national comparative research and methodological challenges are then discussed. We draw on the fieldwork that involved interviews and observations in five MNEs in four cities in India. We consider working practices and the complexities of social difference that shape working experiences.

### **Women in the labour market in India**

India adopted its comprehensive Constitution in 1950 after independence from British colonial rule. Through the “Directive Principles” of State policy, it provided the guidance for India’s future development. This document laid down a number of welfare activities which were mandatory for state and private organisations either by legislation or trade practices. A number of pieces of legislation were passed that have a special implication on women’s participation in the labour market. These Five-Year plans have encapsulated the directive principles to formulate the national and state policies of the Government. Early plans were “gender blind”, thus patrifocal, but the sixth Five-Year Plan period (1980-1985) 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 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, requirement for working long hours, discrimination and bantering at work continued and often obliged women to leave their jobs. Patriarchy – a system of male dominance legitimised within the family and the society through superior rights, privileges, authority and power – is strong in India (Basu, 1992). The Indian tradition holds that a woman's place is under the control of her father while she is unmarried, under her husband after her marriage and under her sons if she is a widow. The lineage is carried by the sons, who have specific ceremonial roles including funeral rites for parents. In terms of property law, all property is vested in, exercised through and transferred through patrilineal descent. As Basu (1992) points out that a male is considered a sound investment who compounds family wealth, whereas a female is considered a liability who consumes the wealth without adding to it.

More recent plans have stressed the strategic importance of inclusive growth, for example the 12th plan (up to 2017) is entitled “faster, sustainable and more inclusive growth”. Despite global recession and “domestic imbalances” (Deshpande, 2013, p. 5), 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 1960s onwards, its impact has been limited due to evasion by employers as well as non-enforcement by the state.

D'Mello (2010) points out that although India's path of economic liberalisation does open up channels with the outside world for both men and women, the socio-economic conditions are still not favourable for women. Women workers in India encounter very different conditions from those in most western countries, as there is no system of universal state welfare benefits for periods of unemployment. There are also strong cultural prohibitions still in place in some parts of India against undertaking paid work outside home. The issue is the need to demonstrate men's status as providers and to “protect” women's sexuality and men's honour, from other men (Liddle, 1988).

### **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. National data collection used only three categories – Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and “Others”. A fourth category was then added, namely “Other Backward Classes” (OBCs). These were the “untouchables” that the government wanted to target for affirmative action (Deshpande, 2002). 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 modernisation 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 1,000 companies reported that as many as 92.6 per cent of Indian corporate board members were from two broad clusters of the "upper castes" (mainly Brahmins 44.6 per cent and Vaishyas 46 per cent) and these two together comprise less than 15 per cent of the Indian population. In contrast, lower castes like the Shudras only comprise 3.5 per cent 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 reiterates the structure of social inequality persistent in contemporary India.

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 (see e.g. Jodhka, 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.

The Mandal Commission provided special quotas from 1989, in education and jobs for the so-called Scheduled Castes and OBCs and 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/other professionals directly because of their surnames and are more exposed to overt and covert discrimination in the workplace. So issues related to caste and classes are still very much predominant in India, and 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 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 (Upadhya, 2009). In India, the IT industry is export oriented and customer driven and the IT companies market their services as quality driven as they aspire to hire only graduates.

Employees are expected to work in shifts between eight and ten hours and since the 2008 recession these shift patterns have worsened – to six days a week in a highly pressured environment (Taylor and Bain, 2003; Taylor *et al.*, 2014). Different gendered expectations are reproduced in the organisation in the form of availability for work, for instance, 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). IT companies in India have a very long hours' culture and these are not necessarily conducive for women's progression and retention in the industry (D'Mello, 2006; Dhar-Bhattacharjee and Takruri-Rizk, 2011). Mobility issues related to unexpected travel, participation in informal social networks (Adam *et al.*, 2006) and women's less inclination or ability to "job-hop" taking 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 far from 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 from 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 the other parts of India (see Arun, Heeks and Morgan, 2006). Certainly, women entering the IT industry are an urban and middle class phenomenon now (Gupta, 2015). In terms of general regional differences, North Indian states tending to be more feudal and patriarchal has a 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 journey or an expedition to observe and record cultural phenomena but with the researcher as almost a professional guide being 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 1980s (Hantrais, 1989) was primarily denoted to research 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 case, the sole fieldworker had intimate knowledge of the two countries involved including language, culture and an awareness of the socio-economic issues. In addressing this, we explained how the researchers provided a special balance of “insiderism” and “outsiderism” (Chamberlayne and King, 1996) to bring out the nuances of the different complexities that shape the working culture of IT organisations in India.

The 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. 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. 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 and reasons for attrition.

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. 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 outline 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 something that was covertly ignored by newspapers published in the English language. The safari method enabled 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, p. 19). 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 all, IT professionals and HR managers from seven organisations were interviewed and 43 interviews were conducted, 24 in India and 19 in the UK. Of these ten were HR professionals, five from each country. Both men and women were interviewed and the companies have been anonymised to maintain confidentiality – renamed as Comco, Astra, Incas, Xeno, Intega, Absco and Melco. Of these, Intega is local organisation based in India while Melco and Absco are the organisations based in Europe and the remaining are all MNEs having offices in USA, Europe and India. This paper focusses on India where the participants – both men and women employees and HR professionals – were drawn from a random and diverse age group between 21 and 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 an hour and half and were conducted in Bengaluru, Chennai, Kolkata and Delhi.

The research undertaken – interviews and site observations – aimed to gain 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 the society. The investigation explored working practices and how these compared to the country of ownership of the IT companies 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 these opportunities are still constrained by the realities of a patrifocal society bound by caste and cultural determinants of what women can and cannot do economically and socially. Inevitable by journeying “on safari” in different regions of India as an ajnabi, apna or ghair, the issues of difference in culture and experiences were evident through the conversations and observation made.

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

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 (see, e.g. D’Mello, 2006; Howcroft and Richardson, 2008 and Moore *et al.*, 2008), individualised (e.g. see Belgorodskiy *et al.*, 2012), sex segregated, gendered and 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 (see e.g. Woodfield, 2000, 2002). 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).

Although foreign owned, the Indian operations were managed by Indians drawn from the 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 organisational policies applied to Indian organisations compared to the same companies based in Europe. For instance, the same organisations Comco and Incas based in India and the UK, respectively 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, organisational policies in India differ when the parent organisation is based in the USA 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, you know, 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 MNC can alter the basic structure of the PMS”.

Awareness of certain policies like paternity leave, 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 organisation, 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 ten 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 (Upadhya, 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 to be in the office till 9.00 or 10 p.m.”. Sometimes, in order to keep their visibility and presence in the organisation, 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. Neetu, an IT Professional at Xeno who was about five months pregnant when interviewed, explained, “[...] now since I am carrying I will be coming only by 10 o’clock. Ten to seven I will be working, sometimes I will go early also. They [employers] don’t mind, if work is done that’s all. They [employers] don’t mind.



Some days as I told if any, last week we had some urgent deliveries so that days and all we had to stay till 8 o'clock. But guys they will staying till 12 o'clock but I will not be staying". 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).

Employment relations throughout India are individualised with regards to pay and with the lack of presence of a trade union in the IT sector in India, the salaries are agreed bilaterally between the employer and the employee and often signed with a confidentiality contract between the two. Belgorodskiy *et al.* (2012) show 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 we make. 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 organisations 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 organisation. There was some evidence of a pay gap in India related to the 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 organisation. Part-time work was clearly seen as a threat for the employee's stability and therefore it remained as an area "not ventured". When we enquired whether part-time policies were available in the organisation, Meenal, an IT Professional at Intega from India mentioned, "Yes, probably there are. I'm not sure. There are lots of policies. 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".

The long-hour culture was piling on the stress and there was always a constant juggle between home responsibilities or work responsibilities. 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”. 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 what 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, p. 8). Reproduction and family economy needs to be considered within gender, caste and class 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. As Gupta (2015) has discussed for middle-class women to work in IT has been welcomed despite the patrifocal structure of the Indian society – it makes the women more acceptable to the groom’s family and it is considered a safe job for women too with comparatively good pay.

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 implemented yet. It seemed that all the requirements for a man’s “essentials” were implemented first and the rest remained “in the plan”. However, during a second visit in 2010, there was an onsite crèche. However, many women like Salini, an IT Professional at Comco did not think of this as a viable option for her child and she explained, “[...] No, because I used to travel from there to here, I have to carry my son in the traffic again from there [...] he has to travel, unnecessarily the smoke, [...] at least more than that people at home are much better than depending on the people outside. If mother-in-law was not there, maybe I would’ve opted, but my concern was that he has to travel with me, we know the struggle of travelling in Bengaluru, why should he also struggle? If it’s one or two kilometres, then it’s okay, but not if I’m travelling 20-30 kilometres”.

Further interviews with women gives evidence of the experience “social costs” that these women went through at different levels of their career progression. Preeti, an IT Professional at Astra from India explained, “I think bottom of every Indian women that’s there but some people have the luxury of staying at home, some people want to make a career and they just subdue that thought or most of the women whom I meet feel they are always guilty of not taking care of children. So I always – sometimes this thought comes to everybody, you know, whomever 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%”. However, the barriers to working in technical areas often experienced in Western countries (see, e.g. Adam *et al.*, 2006; Woodfield, 2002) 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 cooked food from home 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 “well, they are from a lower caste”. Although home food sharing was a popular practice here, food was only shared with people from similar or higher caste and thus restricted to others from the lower caste. Following this experience, observations were made of employees in informal settings in the cafeteria in Bengaluru, Kolkata and Delhi. Food sharing was common in all these places, yet, caste discrimination seemed more obvious in Chennai than the other parts 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 organisation in Bengaluru. She explained how she struggled to cope with her colleagues when she was based in the fourth floor, where 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 second floor where the majority of the colleagues were either from South or East India. The colleagues on the fourth 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. Whereas the work culture on the second floor varied significantly – to her it was a lot calmer, a lot less competitive and no “showing off” culture. Although a stereotype, this is a commonly held view of North vs South Indian traits and these were also evident in behavioural differences observed between staff on different floors but within the same organisation 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 did not 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 organisational 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 conceptualised 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 as shaping social relations. These women from the lowest caste were noted to be the most vulnerable, having less power than the ones from the higher caste even though working in the same organisation. As Meyerson and Scully (1995) suggested that some individuals do not easily fit in the dominant cultures of their organisations 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.

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).

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 responses to organisational lobbying – such as from NASSCOM – to liberalise the economy, this is where regards to the impact of long hours working coupled with caring responsibilities is limited. In these terms, organisations 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 the 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 organisations. 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 organisation. 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 structural locations of difference (Archer, 2004). Arundhati Roy's (2014) book on *Annihilation of Caste* talks about how India continues to be hobbled by systemic inequality and raises issues related to caste and class which are still very much predominant in India, and the accepted norm among the privileged classes to invisibilise this. Women's lives in India are shaped by the intertwining of gender, caste and class within specific regional and religious 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 (Holgate *et al.*, 2006, p. 314). 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 *anjabi*, *apna* and *ghair* in different regions and circumstances in India. Social relations are constituted through in-built linkages and by understanding the complexities involved, the possibilities for positive change is greater (Pollert, 1996).

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 already 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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