

**The Struggle to Belong:
Dealing with Diversity in 21st Century Urban Settings**

Amsterdam, 7-9 July 2011

The Bold Step: Negotiating Place, Space and Gender in Urban South India

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Paper presented at the International RC21 conference 2011
Session 22: Reconstructing Gender in Urban Space

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In India, women's non-participation in work outside of the home has been an important distinction that set middle-class families apart from those whose women *had* to work. This has been changing in the last two decades with India's opening to global forces. The rising cost of living, together with greater availability of material, educational, informational and developmental resources has resulted in the entry of more women into employment. But these developments are not without a degree of ambivalence, as the idea of middle class respectability defined in part by women's domesticity persists in many quarters. Some women have been able to circumvent this problem by turning traditional work such as cooking or sewing into small a home-based business. Others have taken what they describe as a "bold step," becoming proprietors of small shops and factories in the public sphere.

Extending to the level of the person Gupta and Ferguson's argument that the local is neither autonomous nor discrete, but instead situated within hierarchical, interconnected spaces,¹ this paper examines the meaning and effects of women's entrepreneurship for individuals, families, and society in Mysore, a medium-sized city in southern India. Through life-story narratives recorded in 1998-99, just as the impact of liberalization was being felt in smaller metropolises, I discuss the ways that transnational discourses, in conjunction with local and personal circumstances, have enabled women to make this unconventional move. I argue that the social ramifications of entrepreneurial practice not only affect the status of individual women, but through their agency in a two-way process, these women are important actors in larger social changes taking place in Indian society as a whole.

During the colonial era, middle-class women bore the burden of keeping Indian traditions within the home so that men could retain their essential India identity as they participated in the public,

¹ Gupta, Akhil and Ferguson, James (1997) *Culture, Power, Place: Excavations in critical anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press.

western world of work.² While many working class and rural women have worked in the agricultural and informal sectors, and a few elite women have worked as teachers and doctors, in general, women's domesticity has been an important distinguishing characteristic for middle-class families, and a status to which the lower classes aspired.

Transformations brought about with globalization and liberalization that began in the late 1980s resulted in many material and social changes that have had significant repercussions for middle class culture. In this changing scenario, women, whose behavior has long been central to middle-class identity, have found themselves having to balance between locally-conceived concepts of tradition and modernity. Postcolonial constructions of middle-class respectability have continued to influence gender expectations. At the same time, India's opening to global forces has increased both material incentives and conceptual tools for exploring new opportunities for self-development. While middle-class women are well-positioned to take advantage of new opportunities, they continue to be viewed as role models for proper female behavior and keepers of tradition. 40 year-old Rohini, who owns a screen printing shop in Mysore, described the predicament of the Indian middle class in this way:

The people who really give importance to...our Indian traditions...are the middle class. Lower-class people...[can't afford] to do [all these] things the way they should be done.. Middle-class people somehow struggle and manage to cope with the ..duties they have to fulfill. ...Higher society people are not so tradition-bound. It's only the middle class who give importance to Indian customs.

Although middle-class girls today are increasingly encouraged to get a college degree and even pursue a career, this has not been the case for their mothers' generation among whom, an "etiquette of public invisibility"³ persists. This paper focuses on a small segment of this generation of middle-class women who entered into entrepreneurship at a time when many did not consider it acceptable. The women in my study owned a variety of small businesses that included garment manufacturing and

² Chatterjee, Partha (1989) "The National Resolution of the Women Question" in Kumkum, Sangai and Vaid, Sudesh (ed.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Delhi: Kali for Women. pp. 233-53.

³ Sharma, Ursula (1980) *Women, Work, and Property in North-West India*. New York: Tavistock Publications.

sales, printing and bookbinding, beauty parlors, landscaping, house waterproofing, desktop publishing, automotive electronics, and restaurant and catering businesses. Most women were between 30 and 50 years old, and were from diverse community and caste backgrounds. Many were the only entrepreneurs in their families, and often the only women among their kin who were other than housewives.

At the turn of the 21st century, Mysore was increasingly feeling the effects of India's great liberalization project. But despite its proximity to bustling, cosmopolitan Bangalore, Mysore is by comparison conservative. Men are considered the breadwinners, "good" women are expected to confine their activities primarily to the household, and many fear that it would reflect negatively on the family if a wife or daughter were to take up remunerative work. Due to the non-traditional nature of their occupations and activities, such as dealing with the public and moving around unaccompanied, many of the women encountered resistance, at least initially, from members of their local society and sometimes from their own families.

35-year-old Fatima, who sells cosmetics from her home, described how the conservatism of the middle classes in Mysore affects many women who want to start a business:

In middle class families there are a lot of restrictions. ...They'll always think, 'What will others think, ... If we do like this what will others think?' They care for others more than for themselves. That is a major problem with middle class. The upper class...[and] lower class people, they don't care [what other people think].. This middle class only, they have these inhibitions. 'What will others think. If my daughter is doing business, ...what will people say?' That is the mentality.

While greater integration with the world economy helped India's economy to grow, it also caused increases in the prices of food, housing, and medical care. During this same period, there was a growing international focus on the problems of women in the developing world. Numerous national and international conferences were held on the status of women, and among the recommendations generated, economic development was seen as key. In response to internal and external critiques, there has been a growing effort on the part of the Indian central government to empower women through

both employment and entrepreneurship. About half of the women in my study participated in various development programs specifically for women entrepreneurs.

39-year-old Hema, who is from an upper-middle-class background, had never dreamed of being an entrepreneur, or of even working at all after marriage. But a combination of a change in the family's financial situation, together with a desire, as many other women also expressed, to do something more than being "only a housewife," Hema was motivated to take advantage of an entrepreneurial training program and start a restaurant:

... Earlier I was just a housewife. I didn't have any ideas of going out anywhere and working or something like that. I thought what my husband earns was more than enough for me. ... But ...the government also encourages women a lot in India. ... So I took that Woman Entrepreneurship Development program training. ...Then after that I started in the restaurant industry.

Hema related how the training course and experience of entrepreneurship had given her confidence and increased social efficacy in the public realm, as well as greater decision-making power in domestic affairs.:

See, earlier I didn't have the confidence. Not even the confidence to talk to you like this, and sit for hours together and talk. ... it made me more confident. To speak in public, how to approach people, how to talk to officials, how to talk to the customers.

...Earlier you used to just hear what he has to say. Now, you are more confident. Your exposure is there, so you think, and you talk, and you discuss, before you take decisions. Earlier whatever his decision was my decision. Now you question the decision.

It has been observed that, while neoliberal globalization may be viewed as an attempt on the part of governments to put the onus of social responsibility on individuals and NGOs, it may also empower

individuals to change the system itself in unforeseen ways.⁴ Ganguly-Scrase's research among middle-class women in Bengal noted that "...globalizing processes work in contradictory ways... While new forms of inequality result from economic reforms, there may be other opportunities for greater independence."⁵ The women in my study are a case in point.

36-year-old Shakeela, who has a home-based interior decorating business talked about how entrepreneurship had affected her life:

I have become more confident, and I am happy that I am self-dependent, I'm not dependent on [my in-laws] for everything. No I'm not dependent on anyone, so I can do whatever I like, ...Previously I had to ask my husband for money. And if he didn't give, it would be quite embarrassing. Many times he wouldn't give. So I would get upset. So now I don't have that problem. I don't have to ask or beg for money. I have my own money. So there are fewer misunderstandings.

This desire for greater control over their lives was a primary motivation for many women in my study.

As elsewhere, the social and economic changes brought about by globalization has enabled upward mobility for some but intensified financial hardships for many. The rising cost of living, increased availability and desire for foreign consumer items, and the increased competition to provide university educations for both male and female children, have provided impetus for some middle class families to allow women to work. Along with material incentives, people's attitudes towards working women are changing. 40 year-old Lalita, who owns a gift and clothing shop, described the generational difference and the influence of the media:

It's a different rule for the wife, and a different rule for the daughter. She is another generation. They might have not let the wife go out of the house, but when it comes to your daughter, you are giving her the

⁴ Sharma, Aradhana, "Crossbreeding Institutions, Breeding Struggle: Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Governmentality, and State (Re)Formation in India" *Cultural Anthropology* 21: 60-95.

⁵ Ganguly-Scrase, Ruchira (2002) "Renegotiating Boundaries: Self Perception and Public Debate on

education, you know, she goes out, for a job, work. So you can see that the mentality has changed. The same person who was against his wife, it's something different with his daughter. Because the environment has changed. The world has changed. There is a lot of difference in outlook. They're watching a lot of different programs on TV. The husband and wife have been watching. And there are lots of changes.

Thus, in addition to the “economic push” that encourages expansion of women’s roles, globalization also provides a certain “imaginative pull.” Arjun Appadurai has argued that electronic media are “resources for experiments with self-making,” that enable “more persons in more parts of the world [to] consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before.”⁶ The so-called, satellite invasion into Indian broadcasting in 1991 facilitated an influx of international news, serials, movies, and advertising. Although none of the women in my study embraced uncritically western ways in total, there were nonetheless aspects of transnational discourses regarding gender equity and independence that served as encouragement for their aspirations.

The effects of India’s changing social and economic scenario on middle-class women can best be illustrated with the story of 32 year-old Priya, who in 1999 was living with her husband and two young children in a 14-member extended family household. Priya’s formal education had ended with high school, but she subsequently learned to speak eight languages including English, and had a long-held desire to do something more with her life than being only a housewife. However, this aspiration did not jibe with her in-laws’ ideas about appropriate behavior for women in their family. In the course of her narrative, Priya described the influence of transnational discourses:

If I want to buy a sari, anything, I have to ask my husband. So this I hate, because I see television, I see papers, I see movies. The lady should be independent. Of course, if she is married, [people say] she should not be independent. Why do they think like that? It's not good.

Globalization and Gender Equality in India” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 8(4): 58-100.

⁶ Appadurai, Arjun (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press pp. 3, 53.

A financial crisis in the family resulted in her husband's acquiescence to Priya's long-held desire to earn money. Her in-laws would not allow her to pursue outside work, so Priya decided to teach handicrafts at home. She had learned through various media that *mehendi* (henna tattoos) had become a popular fad in the west, so her husband sent foreign women customers from his jewelry shop. They encouraged Priya and her desires for independence:

I want to be independent. Even my daughter, I want to make her independent. Because, marriage is not everything. And being in somebody's hand, that is not a life I think. ..My mother had seven children. She is uneducated. My father never used to give money to her. At that time, I know how she suffered. So I don't want to be like that.

Priya's mother-in-law, however, did not approve, arguing that no women in the family had ever worked for money and that it was highly inappropriate. But as Priya's income grew her in-laws' criticisms diminished, and her sisters-in-law and others in the neighborhood were inspired by her example:

Before they said, no, it is not good. ...Afterwards, when I started earning money, they saw that it was good, and they started respecting me. They said, 'ah, she did it. I also want to do this.' ...I think this is a lesson for them.

...What I am doing is very good for ladies in India. They should come, and they should learn, and they should do something. ...Simply sitting wasting time is not good. They can earn and become independent.

...I have seen so many girls now are saying, 'yeah, you are doing very good business, even I want to do this.' I'll tell them, yeah, do it.

...Outside also they respect me. ... They say to their children, 'look, that lady she is earning money, and she is doing her own business. You also can do this.'

This desire for independence, the encouragement from the transnational flow of people and ideas, and the transformation of not only Priya's life, but of those around her, were themes echoed in many

women's narratives. Because an important element of Indian middle-class identity has been the domesticity of its women, their increasing participation in the public domain represents a significant challenge to long-held conceptions of women's social roles and spaces, and ultimately to definitions of what constitutes Indian middle-class culture. Although the majority of the women in my study did not think of themselves or their activities in terms of feminist activism, they were nonetheless effective agents in the two-way process of changes occurring on multiple interconnected local and global levels.