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Working for a Happy Life in Bangalore: Gender, Generation, and Temporal Liminality in India’s Tech City

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WORKING FOR A HAPPY LIFE IN BANGALORE:
GENDER, GENERATION, AND TEMPORAL LIMINALITY IN INDIA’S TECH CITY

by

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Working For a Happy Life in Bangalore: Gender, Generation, and Temporal Liminality in India’s Tech City written by Rachel C. Fleming
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Working For a Happy Life in Bangalore: Gender, Generation, and Temporal Liminality in India’s Tech City

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Carole McGranahan

ABSTRACT

In Bangalore, women who work in information technology (IT) and other white-collar professions are part of a new generation of middle-class Indian women who expect to work. Beyond previous narratives of work as a “backup” in case a normative married life is not possible, these women now consider work important for their self-confidence and identity. The opportunity to work is also tied to India’s economic liberalization and ideas about what constitutes a good life as compared to the past, including a more expansive social life, more varied knowledge about the world, more gender equality at work and home, and a different kind of marriage. However, from the demands of work putting stress on families and relationships to sexism that seems ever more entrenched, the promise of work often becomes disappointment. At work, women feel exploited, yet when they leave or go part time they experience a painful loss of self. This dissertation draws on fieldwork in Bangalore with middle-class women from three generations to examine the effects of new regimes of work on women’s lives and senses of identity. As elsewhere, global neoliberal reconfigurations of work in Bangalore are both exploitive and essential in constructing the self. However, using a feminist perspective, this project argues that these pressures map onto existing gendered expectations, so when women in Bangalore attempt to construct a happy life their choices are not be as expansive as they had hoped, while the responsibility for failure falls on their shoulders. Using temporality as a way to frame these anxieties, I find that the multiple identities women inhabit in the course of their daily lives have gendered and temporal constraints, creating a state of vulnerability I term “temporal liminality.” These constraints are especially apparent when women combine their kinship identities with those in global capitalist workplaces, in that women must contend with social and personal ideas about the past and future, ideas about life course, and the value and use of their time on a daily basis, questions that bring gendered morality to bear on time itself.

Keywords: anthropology, gender, work, science and technology studies, globalization, time, kinship, South Asia, Bangalore
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and the promise of the future, and to my grandmothers, Ruth Fleming and Polly Puleston,
who represent, for me, the past that is still (always) in the process of becoming.
CAST OF CHARACTERS

Alka, 50, runs a home-based small business, married with two children (Devika’s mother)

Amrita, 33, journalist, married with one child

Anju, 26, works in import/export, single

Anjum, 30, lawyer, married with one child

Asma, 36, high-level manager in an IT company, married with one child

Bhavini, 64, worked in a bank, widowed with one child

Charu, 50, counselor, married with one child (Madhu’s mother)

Deepa, 60, housewife with two children

Dev, 28, male engineer, single with a serious girlfriend

Devika, 26, manager in an IT company, single

Fatima, 33, journalist who works part-time in public relations, married with one child

Gargi, 30, software engineer, married with one child

Gayatri, 32, graphic designer, divorced and single

Gouri, 26, part-time corporate trainer, former manager in an IT company, married

Indrani, 51, co-runs a small public relations firm, married with two children (Jyoti’s mother)

Jyoti, 26, analyst in finance, single

Lakshmi, 26, entry-level producer in television, single

Lalita, 30, works in human resources for an IT company, married with one child

Manju, 29, housewife, previously worked in IT, married with one child

Maya, 22, hairdresser, engaged

Mayuri, 51, housewife with two children (Lakshmi’s mother)

Mrinalini, 23, auditor for an IT company, single

Namya, 37, teacher, former software developer, single

Priyanka, 36, housewife, former sales director in IT, divorced and remarried with one child
Radhika, 70, housewife with two children

Ranjita, 60, housewife with two children

Shanti, 45, journalist, widowed with one child, single

Smriti, 35, works in her family’s business, single with a serious boyfriend

Sunanda, 23, software developer, single

Sunita, 25, software developer, single

Usha, 28, manager in an IT company, single
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Introduction

Usha woke to a loud alarm on her phone, and suddenly remembered she had a call that morning with a manager and team in the US. Cursing, she rolled off her mattress on the floor in a corner of her small apartment in Bangalore and checked her phone. She had ten minutes. Quickly she threw water over her face and shuffled into the kitchen to make coffee. She checked her phone: six minutes. She had barely enough time to get the coffee going. Why did she stay out late last night knowing she had an early call?

Luckily, her only requirement for the call was to listen. The team she managed played a small part in this new project that was experiencing problems. If only her own manager would let her team work on it full time… and speaking of which, she had at least one deadline on a project she could not hope to meet. For the second time this month her manager was breathing down her neck about a deadline. Her team wasn’t lazy, but it was large, diverse, overworked, and short on motivation. She could already imagine how her day would go. She would probably have trouble again from Amit, always complaining that his coworkers were saying bad things about him in Kannada, which he could not understand. At this point, they probably were. She would eventually have to transfer him.

Meanwhile poor Anjali was crying at her desk again yesterday. Everyone knew it was because her new in-laws were upset that she was not yet pregnant and were pressuring her to quit work. Yet no one would talk to her about it because they considered crying at work hopelessly unprofessional. The few women on the team expected Usha, as a female manager, to console Anjali, but was that her job? Would a male manager do that? Add to this a new batch of trainees starting today and reports to fill out that were already late. She also knew she was overdue for a promotion but may be passed over, again, in favor of one of the guys who reminded her boss of himself at a young age. She was too pressurized in this job. What
about her dreams of starting an NGO? She checked the coffee for the second time to see if it was ready. It was slowly, steadily dripping into the cup. Finally.

Opening her laptop to log in, Usha checked her phone again. She had a new SMS from her boyfriend Neel. She should meet him for lunch today, to explain why she had not invited him last night. She just needed some time away… while he was a nice boy and a good work boyfriend, he was casual about everything, including her, and she did not know if he was marriage material. Besides, they had been fighting lately, over small things, but still. Even if he were more serious about things she was not sure she would want to marry him anyway, and certainly not now with everything going on at work. She needed some space.

Thinking about her problems with Neel always led to thoughts of her mother. She had called again last night, begging her to meet a new boy she had found through an arranged marriage website, “perfect for you” she had said. Her mother punctuated her plea by saying her father was drinking more and getting more depressed and it was, of course, all Usha’s fault. Her father had, as usual, declined to get involved, but she knew he was there. She hated when her mother tried to make her feel guilty. She fought hard to buy more time from her parents, yet there was always the nagging feeling that she should get married soon anyway. Many of her friends already had children. But getting married would mean giving up her apartment, her alone time, her independence, probably her job.

Maybe she should just give in and try meeting one of these boys—they might be more compatible after all, and certainly better for her family than Neel, who was from the wrong background in so many ways. But she’d had relationships before, and how can she get to know someone for marriage just like that? And especially after what happened the last time… she’s not sure she wants to get too committed. The phone on her computer rings. Sighing, she connects the headset. “Hello? Usha here.”

***********************
More women around the world are working in white-collar jobs as corporations in the global knowledge economy continue their search for quality, inexpensive labor. Since economic reforms in India in the 1990s opened the country to foreign investment, goods, and media, major cities or “metros” like Bangalore in south India have exploded in population, earnings, and income inequality. Foreign and Indian global corporations have headquarters or major offices in Bangalore, many tied to the information technology (IT) sector, employing hundreds of thousands of people in gleaming office parks and supporting many more secondary jobs. In many ways, Bangalore is symbolic of a “New India” that, since economic liberalization, uses technology to propel the nation forward.

The image of Indian white-collar work in US scholarship and popular imagination is usually located in two stereotypes that fall under the business process outsourcing or BPO sector. The first is the call-center employee who learns American slang and works night shifts, explored in scholarship, popular novels, and movies (Basi 2009; Bhagat 2005; Jeffcoat 2006; Mankekar 2015; Patel 2010; Douglas 1996 [1966]). The second is the Indian who writes code for outsourced back-office work, in India or as a guest worker in the US, taking jobs away from Americans and pejoratively conjured in the colonial terms “cyber-coolie” or “techno-coolie” (Rudrappa 2010; Trivedi 2003). While white-collar work in Bangalore can be exploitive, especially in IT, these BPO sector jobs are only part of the story.

Most of the women I spoke with for this project work in jobs in Bangalore that require a different skill set, have more upward mobility, and generally have a higher status than BPO employees. They mainly work in IT, in diverse fields including software development, marketing, sales, and accounts, although some work in journalism, public relations, graphic design, law, and finance. Like their compatriots in the BPO sector, the women in IT may work night shifts and take calls at odd hours to accommodate global teams, and all are influenced by foreign corporate and cultural norms. However, they tend to be from
a higher class background, and while BPO work has limited advancement opportunities and is often a “stop gap” for women between college and marriage, most of the women in this project—especially those in management—wish to stay in their careers, or to return if they have stopped working, in order to advance to higher levels of responsibility.

As many have argued, global modernity threatens India’s cultural authenticity, which is a gendered narrative. Professional women must negotiate their Indian identity under the looming but never-defined specter of becoming “too westernized,” proving their modernity by participating in the new economy, but also conserving Indian tradition through demonstrating their commitment to marriage and family (Belliappa 2013; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Mankekar 1999; Mukherjee 2008; Oza 2006; Parameswaran 2009; Puri 1999; Radhakrishnan 2011). As opposed to so many left out of India’s recent economic boom, the women in this project have access to white-collar careers that promise economic stability as well as personal and intellectual growth. However, as the first generation of Indian women for whom a career is an assumed part of their identity, they struggle with limitations related to gender ideology, expectations to marry and have a family, and the constraints of neoliberal self-improvement. This project is about their search for a happy life given these hopes and disappointments, as they seek emotional intimacy and a coherent sense of self in a new social landscape.

**Women, work, and the “new” economy**

As is clear from popular articles, bestselling books, and innumerable columns and blogs, the issue of women and work is not just an academic debate. In the US, the much-shared *Atlantic* article “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” by Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) argued that it is impossible for women to have a successful full-time career and a family unless they are wealthy or otherwise exceptional. On the other hand, the tech
industry’s Sheryl Sandberg (2013) calls for women to “lean in” to advance in careers, identifying gender biases that exist in the workplace but are mainly found in women’s own view of themselves which hinder their attaining leadership positions. Meanwhile, in the era of flexible labor and reduced corporate and state benefits, Nancy Fraser (2013) wonders how feminism has been co-opted for a neoliberal message that puts responsibility on individual women rather than on corporations to reform. Sherry Ortner (2014) argues that it is “too soon for postfeminism,” finding patriarchal structures such as extreme hierarchy and gender biases embedded in the corporation. Opinions cast judgment on working mothers, full-time mothers, single women, and women without children in equal measure.

These debates are not new, nor are the classed and raced dimensions of work that give educated, middle-class women the world over the choice to pursue intellectually interesting and/or well-paid work, or to stay home with children. Federal cuts in US programs that support low-income working parents are making it even more difficult for poor women to secure better jobs and quality childcare, while wealthier women weigh paying for childcare that often costs more than they would earn in a job. In India, women rely on networks of family or inexpensive labor to help with childcare and housekeeping. Like middle-class parents, domestic servants in India also want their children to pursue an education and secure an office job, or marry someone who has (Ray and Qayum 2009: 139). It is in part the dream of entering the middle-classes—whether or not those dreams are achievable—that motivates poor people around the world to keep working in dangerous, exploitive jobs.

Technology jobs seem to offer a solution to the issue of “work-life balance” through telecommuting and perks that include onsite daycare. Yet in practice, tech companies overvalue younger workers without family responsibilities and discriminate against employees who take time off for family (Kotkin 2014; Miller 2015b). Recent ethnographic research in a US consulting firm shows that women and men alike leave their jobs because
work demands too much time (Miller 2015a). Meanwhile, in an industry that sees itself as a meritocracy free of traditional forms of hierarchy, gender discrimination in Silicon Valley is rampant (Berdahl et al. 2014; Lapowsky 2014; Miller 2014; Wadhwa and Chideya 2014). The industry has abysmal statistics in terms of gender and racial diversity, as reported in recent reports that shocked the industry: in the biggest tech companies in the US, women make up 25-30% of the workforce, while black and Hispanic employees are in the single digits (Vara 2015). The problem in IT seems to be partly that there are not enough women or minorities with technical skills, but also that the culture is inhospitable.

In the “new” economy that privileges knowledge work, where flexibility and constant work are paramount, negotiating “work-life balance” is not just a matter of logistics, but is a question of personhood in a new kind of workplace. How do women conceive of themselves and their lives? How should they approach decisions and relationships with other people, based on what they know about the past and how they imagine the future? What is their place in the world? Work becomes an important factor in shaping their responses. These questions become especially significant in situations of social change, when older life course models—however they may be imagined—no longer seem to fit. Women in many places are trying to figure out ways to work and be a mother at the same time, yet the way this is happening in Bangalore is not the same as elsewhere. For professional women in Bangalore, linking their situation to conversations in other places can be empowering, but one cannot presume the similarities. A brief discussion of gender in India is thus useful to set the stage for understanding the unique pressures felt and aspirations held by women in this project.

A brief introduction to gender and marriage in India

Indian cultural authenticity is often located in Indian “family values” and, by implication, in Indian women’s respectability and devotion to the family. Pressures on Indian
women vary by individual circumstance, and for the majority of women who are lower class, working outside the home is a necessity. However, acknowledging variation by religion, class, community, location, and individual personalities, there are certain idealized outlines for a respectable woman’s life in India. First, there is an expectation—especially in past generations—that middle and upper class married women will not work outside the home, for cultural and historical reasons (Arondekar 2009; Banerjee 2004; Chatterjee 1990; Sangari and Vaid 1990; Walsh 1995). Women’s roles as wives and mothers are valorized in India across religious and caste communities, as the ideal girl becomes the ideal woman through marriage and childbearing. Women are expected to maintain the family, their own respectability, and cultural traditions by concentrating on the domestic sphere. It is also a matter of patriarchal honor for men to be able to financially maintain a wife and children.

Marriages in India are most often arranged by parents within religious and caste communities. India is roughly 80% Hindu, 14% Muslim, 2% Christian, 2% Sikh, and 2% other religious minorities such as Jain, Buddhist, or other tribal or indigenous designations (Census of India 2001b).1 Almost everyone identifies as part of a defined religious group. Caste is a Hindu convention that subdivides communities that often—but not always—aligns with class status. The Hindu caste system has a complex historical, colonial, and contemporary history (Dirks 2001; Rao 2009). Briefly, caste is historically tied to particular occupations, diet, and practices that relate to ideas of ritual pollution. The British used an understanding of caste based on the varna system from Brahmin Sanskritic texts.2 The Hindi word for caste, however, is jati, which refers to local understandings of the caste system and is infinitely more complex, diverse, and fluid than the varnas, designating local subdivisions

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1 The most recent census in India was taken in 2011, but the results in terms of religious breakdown have not been released. This is possibly due to fears of sectarian violence if there is, as is predicted, an increase in the Muslim population in proportion to the majority Hindu population (Sugden and Seervai 2015).

2 The varna system include brahmins or religious experts at the top of the ritual hierarchy, then kshatriyas or the warrior class, then vaishyas made up of farmers and merchants, then shudras or servants at the bottom. Below this are panchamas or so-called untouchables, now known as dalits, who were outside the caste system altogether and tasked with the most polluting jobs.
of caste that are often associated with professions, specific histories, and local economic
dominance (Wadley 2014b: 119-20). Most jatis fit somewhere in the varna system, which
can be contested, and there are thousands of jatis. There are also myriad divisions among
other religious groups, some of which follow hierarchies similar to caste, and India also has a
significant indigenous or “tribal” population made up of distinct groups that live in
geographically isolated areas and have historically been oppressed. One’s particular religious,
regional, and subcaste designation is commonly referred to as one’s “community.”

Many middle and upper class Indians will say that caste or religion does not matter, as
not engaging in caste or religious politics is part of how the contemporary middle classes
distinguish themselves from the lower classes. In actuality, these divisions matter a great
deal, especially when it comes to arranging marriages. In part because of the importance
placed on religious and caste endogamy, female sexual purity prior to marriage is highly
valued (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994: 5). Young women are monitored by family and
their communities so that even if dating is very discreet and not physically intimate—as is
often the case in India—it can derail a young woman’s plans for an arranged marriage. In
fact, before a couple becomes engaged in an arranged marriage, the families often carry out
some form of investigation into the young people’s conduct and dating history or reputation,
especially for women. Dating and so-called “love marriages” that cross community lines are
becoming more common in India, particularly among the urban middle classes as young
people attend college and work together. However, love marriages are often opposed by
parents and also have class, religious, and caste constraints.

In an arranged marriage, which is the norm in India, parents find a potential match
through extended family or family friends, and increasingly through matrimonial websites. In
a stereotypical middle-class arranged marriage, drawn from the Hindu majority but practiced
in other communities as well, the families—often through an intermediary—exchange the
resumés or “biodata” of the “girl” and “boy,” which lists educational degrees and hobbies or skills. The families usually also exchange photos, with particular attention paid to the attractiveness of the girl, often indexed by the fairness of her complexion. An ideal Indian marriage is “hypergamous,” meaning that the woman should marry a man whose family is higher in wealth and sometimes caste status, while the groom should be older and more educated than the bride. The reasoning is that it takes longer for a man to complete his education, find a steady job, and “settle down,” whereas a woman does not need this time as it is assumed she will have children soon after marriage and not work outside the home.

If the match is acceptable, the parents will arrange a meeting for the families, traditionally at the woman’s family home, as an opportunity for the parents and the “boy” to “see the girl.” The clichéd meeting features a nervous young girl in a dressy yet modest sari, with eyes downcast, bringing tea or snacks to her potential husband and in-laws. She should be possibly too nervous to even look at her prospective groom, indicating her modesty. The couple is then sometimes encouraged to meet by themselves in a separate room for a few minutes, or with a chaperone. Potential spouses may have this one meeting or only see photographs before they are married, although there is great variation in how much contact they have before engagement or marriage. Women are supposed to obey their parents in arranging their marriage, but in practice they often have a say in the decision.

In most of India, the expectation is that women will move in with their husband’s family in the idealized patrilocal joint family, as they are no longer considered part of their natal families. This is one reason given for hypergamous marriage, so a woman will not have to adjust to a lower-class lifestyle. Additionally, a younger bride with less education is often said to more easily “adjust” to life in another family and, importantly, not to expect too much. In popular imagination and in actual fact, a new daughter-in-law often performs household chores, cooking, and other forms of care work for her in-laws, allowing her mother-in-law to
finally relax in her older years. Regardless of actual living arrangements, as family structure has been diverse over time (Kolenda 1968; Lamb 2009), it is important that married women maintain a cordial and submissive relationship with her in-laws who normatively have the authority to determine her major life decisions.

Hypergamous marriage, patrilocal residence, patrilineal inheritance,\(^3\) practices of dowry,\(^4\) and other factors tend to disadvantage women in the marriage market. In story after story in my fieldwork, it seemed that talented and beautiful women were settling for less than ideal men. Because of a real fear of not finding a decent groom, anxiety about marriage is especially intense for Indian women in their twenties, and for their parents, who feel the weight of expectations from extended family and community. After marriage, both men and women feel pressure to smooth over incompatibilities, but wives are especially expected to “adjust.” Leaving a marriage is, for most Indian women, a last resort. Although divorce is becoming more accepted, particularly among higher class urban Indians, it remains the case that men can remarry easily, whereas being a widowed or divorced woman in India can mean a lonely life dependent on male relatives.\(^5\)

Work has thrown these rules into flux for educated women across the middle classes in India. For the women in this project, having the opportunity to work offers more choices in constructing their lives than women had in previous generations, yet their lives are also guided by cultural norms and constraints, and they are proceeding largely without a roadmap. Given new opportunities to participate in white-collar work, this project is about the way

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\(^3\) Indian law allows women to inherit from their parents. However, Srimati Basu (1999) finds that in Delhi, women across class backgrounds find practical and conceptual benefits in owning property, but the possibility of alienating their natal family makes it unlikely for women to demand their legal natal inheritance.

\(^4\) Dowry is the practice of a bride’s family sending money and gifts with their daughter upon marriage. Veena Talwar Oldenburg (2002) argues that this practice was once a way of helping a new couple that altered under colonial impositions of property rights. Dowry is often now demanded by a groom’s family even after marriage, with the very real threat of murdering the bride in such euphemisms as “kitchen fires” if they do not pay.

\(^5\) Women in south India are thought to have greater power in their marriages because of Dravidian kinship traditions that preference cross-cousin marriage, which keeps brides in their natal families, as opposed to north Indian traditions of marrying outside the clan and village (Wilson 2014: 136).
women in Bangalore—from different generations and from lower to upper middle-class backgrounds—conceive of the dilemmas and desires in their lives.

**The feel of a divided city**

Bangalore is a city where, getting a ride home with a friend and her boyfriend well past midnight, three Ferraris roared past our car at the only time the city’s streets were not choked with traffic. It is the same city where migrant laborers live on construction sites under tarps, young people from the city’s slums enroll in English and computer classes, and longtime residents look around the transforming city with an increasing sense of dislocation. It is a city that satisfies some dreams and feeds many more, offering opportunities and connection to imagined lifestyles along with untold disappointments and exploitations.

There is construction everywhere, with old bungalows being torn down for new apartment complexes, new office buildings going up, or roads being widened. Poorer neighborhoods and slums coexist with old bungalows and apartments, and while certain neighborhoods are unquestionably wealthier than others, housing across classes can be found throughout the city. Wealthy residents are increasingly moving to gated communities, yet it is only the gated communities far beyond the urban periphery, enormous self-contained developments built along the new airport road, that most strive to keep urban India at bay. Even gated towers within the city are part of the urban fabric that begins just outside the gates and permeates the boundary, as residents walk around such buildings in the evenings or negotiate a ride from one of the loitering auto rickshaw drivers. Residents, visitors, maids, gardeners, and other service providers come and go constantly.

Older neighborhoods in Bangalore are a dense mix of homes and small businesses. The streets are a lively mix of towering banyans and other spectacular flowering trees shading chai stalls, women running errands and chatting, men hanging out on steps and going about their business, and small local shops, newer chain restaurants or stores depending on
the neighborhood, and private homes and apartments. There are stray dogs, people begging for coins, the occasional wandering cow, street vendors of all kinds, the whine of auto rickshaws, and honking cars everywhere. The air temperature is usually warm but not too hot and slightly humid. It smells of smoke, flowers, garbage, cooking food, and exhaust.

The transition from the street to a high-tech office park could not be more dramatic. To visit an office, one must be invited by a worker, go through a security check and receive a visitor’s badge, then pass through towering gates that separate the office park from the street. The office development is usually cut off from the city by high walls. The exterior spaces of many office parks feel vast and empty, with wide plazas holding few people between buildings made of metal and glass that look very expensive compared to nearby buildings and somehow faceless. The only color is found in the communal lunch places, either cafes outside with snacks and drinks, or more formal restaurants.

These parks are scattered throughout the city, with many in its far eastern suburbs. Entering a corporate building feels cold and there is a sudden lack of vitality, with blank walls of glass or drywall, occasional artwork, air conditioning, and cubicles. Although the workers themselves engage in lively conversation, particularly at mealtimes, and bring photos and other mementos to decorate their workspaces, there is a hush not found in the rest of the noisy city. Office workers adopt a subdued demeanor different from that outside the work setting. Everyone has a badge designating their right to be there. It is not the street.

People are constantly commuting in Bangalore, to and from workplaces and homes scattered all over the city. Most workers take crowded local buses, while the wealthier weave their two-wheelers in and out of traffic, take auto-rickshaws, or drive their own cars. For men, a two-wheeler can mean a motorcycle or “bike” but for women it almost always means a scooter, because one can sit on a scooter with legs in front instead of immodestly straddling a motorcycle. Women in Bangalore can be seen commuting next to each other on their
scooters, *dupattas* or scarves flapping behind them, chatting together in the slow moving traffic as if they were in a café. If workers can afford to hire a car or own their own car they can schedule work calls or send emails during their commute, but driving a car takes perhaps twice as long as commuting on a two-wheeler. Because of safety concerns, technology companies have shuttle systems especially for their female employees if they work late, and because they must stop at each person’s house, it can take hours to get home. Whichever the mode of transport, many hours are lost traversing the city.

The “footpaths” or sidewalks in Bangalore are often blocked by construction debris, garbage, parked cars, or cows, or do not exist at all. Oftentimes people walk on the road and must negotiate with traffic. If a footpath is present, frustrated commuters on two-wheelers tend to use the footpath as a way around stopped traffic. This practice is seen as a sign of a loss of public courtesy as young people’s lives become more hectic. One day I witnessed a particularly memorable scolding of one young man riding his motorbike on the footpath by an older woman walking in the opposite direction, likely a neighborhood resident tired of the growing traffic. As she upbraided him in Kannada, the young man sat on his bike, abashed and unable to escape in front of a rapt audience of stopped commuters.

Navigating Bangalore is a skill in itself, requiring not only an understanding of the basic city outlines but also remembering roads under construction or places to avoid. Residents hold detailed maps in their heads, subject to change depending on frequent alterations in the urban landscape. Hitching a ride home with a friend on her scooter, we took a circuitous route around a construction-clogged section of the city and found ourselves on dirt roads, riding past algae covered lakes or “tanks,” part of the city’s ancient water storage system. Marsh birds wheeled above in almost fresh smelling air. Suddenly we were in a village, and for a moment everything was quiet, the dusty roads disturbed only by a cow and mongrel dogs. Small stone homes surrounded a tall banyan tree whose vines hung down to
the earth. A shrine built at its base was made of a single enormous block of stone and looked very old. Bright red *kumkum* and flowers adorned a time-smoothed Ganesh.

We did not stop to see what the residents were doing. We just passed through, like many searching for alternate routes. Perhaps the villagers were staying indoors because their home had inexplicably become a popular thoroughfare. Just beyond the village we were on paved roads once again, with new buildings made out of brightly painted cheap cement that sprouted seemingly out of nowhere. One advertised a call center. On our way back to more familiar territory, we chatted about how the city seemed to be growing ever faster. Fifteen years ago, my friend said the neighborhood where we both lived was considered the outskirts of the city but had now become central. Meanwhile, as Bangalore continues to expand and absorb villages like this one, rural residents are continuously displaced in one of the many violences of urbanization. They are not part of the New India.

**Bangalore’s divided urban history and becoming India’s tech city**

There is an enduring division between the north and south of the South Asian subcontinent. Northern languages are based on early Sanskrit and Persian, brought in by Aryan invasions and migrations from central Asia beginning around 1500 BCE, while Dravidian language groups in the south represent prior populations (Trautmann 2011: 32-47). The *Vedas*, religious texts written in what is known as the Vedic Age (1500-700 BCE), indicate that early Hinduism formed in north India with the expansion of the Aryan population, and while it came to dominate the ritual lives of existing populations it also incorporated local elements. Vedic texts describe many foundational aspects of Hinduism, including caste, and mention the original inhabitants of these lands only in passing, which Stanley Wolpert notes as “a few references to ‘dark’ (*dasa*) peoples who lived in ‘fortified
cities’ (pur), and had to be ‘subdued’” (Wolpert 2005: 28). However, caste and power became intertwined in its multiplicity of small kingdoms and larger empires (Dirks 1987).

In her aptly titled essay “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?,” Uma Chakravarti (1990) notes that a myth of a Vedic “golden age of Indian womanhood” was taken up by Indian nationalists in the 19th century which fixed the Aryan woman as the model for Indian womanhood writ large. This myth forgets the Vedic dasi or “woman in servitude” (Chakravarti 1990: 28), which referred to women captured and subjugated by the Aryans. Indian nationalists, relying on texts brought to light by British Orientalists who framed Indian history with Brahmanical texts, elaborated the ideal Indian woman as upper-caste, spiritual, suffering, faithful, and heroic while denying the existence of lower-caste women in Vedic times and in the present. The link between the Vedic dasi and south Indian women is somewhat speculative, but she argues that the Aryan, upper-caste Hindu woman from the Vedic Age became the ideal for all Indian women in Indian nationalist ideology.

Vedic texts are also thought to be the origin for the form and function of the ideal (Aryan) Hindu family as a patrilineal “joint” family run by a male householder, whose sons, their wives, and unmarried daughters live in the same household, although this history is complex and the ideas of the joint family and arranged marriage have been shaped by historical factors including colonialism (Majumdar 2009; Oldenburg 2002). North Indian Hindu traditions have encouraged marriage within caste but beyond one’s extended kin group, which often means relocation for women to distant locales. South Indian traditions also idealize the joint family, but have a key difference: many communities preference cross-cousin marriage, a historic logic built into Dravidian kinship terminologies (Trautmann 1981). This means that women can remain close to their natal family, which may allow them more power and status after marriage. There are also matrilineal descent-based traditions
among aristocratic communities in the south (Trautmann 2011: 4-6; 92-3), although this does not necessarily lead to female empowerment (Schneider and Gough 1961).

In the context of this history of regional difference and marginalization, many Bangalore residents are experiencing a social dislocation that is mirrored in the physical and social disruption of a city experiencing rapid growth. Familiar physical landmarks are erased and residents feel their way of life is being altered on an unprecedented scale. Historically, however, the city has been a shifting crossroads for much of its history. Located in the center of the Deccan Plateau in the southeastern corner of the state of Karnataka in south India, Bangalore is near Tamil Nadu to the east and Kerala to the west, with Andhra Pradesh, the new state of Telangana, Maharastra, and Goa to the north. The city has a relatively mild climate, with higher temperatures from March to May, and over ten inches of rain in a month during the subsequent rainy season. Bangalore likely began as an agricultural trading hub around a thousand years ago, near the Cauvery River and the mountainous Western Ghats. While it was established at the meeting of two small rivers, it has historically relied on “tanks” or man-made reservoirs for irrigation.

Bangalore has grown as a divided city (Nair 2005). Bangalore was a regional trading center before Yelahanka chieftain Kempe Gowda established a walled fort city on the site in 1537 (Narasimhaiah 1924). After the British defeated local ruler Tipu Sultan in 1799, the city hosted the largest colonial “cantonment” or military base in south India and grew as a

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6 Naming is political, and as with many Indian cities, Bangalore was officially renamed “Bengaluru” in 2007 by the city government, emphasizing pre-colonial origin claims by Kannada speakers who today represent less than half the city’s population (Nanjappa 2007). I will use the name “Bangalore” in this dissertation, as the new name has not caught on in common parlance. However, in her history of the city, Janaki Nair uses “Bengaluru” to refer to the pre-colonial, Kannada-speaking “old” city in the west and “Bangalore” for the former cantonment and “new” city in the east in which English, Tamil, and other languages dominate (Nair 2005: 26). Claims to a return to pre-colonial times is referenced in the title of a recent collection of writing about the city, “Bengaluru, Bangalore, Bengaluru: Imaginations and their Times” (Pani et al. 2010). The origins of the Kannada name are from an eleventh century legend in which King Veera Ballala became lost while hunting and was saved by an old woman who gave him boiled beans, or benda kaalu in Kannada (“A Note on the Title” in Karnad 2014).

7 The region was alternately controlled in the Classical Age by the Gangas from around 400-1000 CE, the Cholas from around 800-1300 CE, and the Hoysalas from around 1100 to 1300, but it is difficult to know about the early cultural influences in the early city itself (Heitzman 2004: 24).
divided city, with prior residents who spoke Kannada, the local regional language, living in the “old city” in the west, and colonial bureaucrats and employees mainly from other parts of India, especially Tamil Nadu, in the eastern “new city” (Nair 2005: 26). The colonial government on the cantonment side added to the city’s existing palaces and gardens by building parks, cathedrals, shopping districts, tree-lined boulevards, bungalows, English-medium schools, and government buildings, while temples, markets, garden plots, and ancient tanks structured the rest of the city. The city’s growth in the 20th century was led by the city’s foremost champion of modernization, Mokshagundam Visvesvarya (Visvesvaraya 1934). This vision clashed with the rural idealism of Gandhi’s nationalist movement, but after Independence Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru saw Bangalore as a key site of India’s future as a modern nation. His government encouraged industrialization and invested in state-led engineering companies and in science and engineering education (Nair 2006).

The contours of local caste and class politics that formed under colonial rule sharpened after Independence (Srinivas 2001: 97-138). Most bureaucratic posts in the colonial government were held by Brahmins, mainly Tamil-speakers, causing friction with local Mysore Brahmins and middle-class Kannada-speakers or “Kannadigas.” Smriti Srinivas (2001) describes how Kannada language proponents feel embattled as civic space shrinks and people from elsewhere in India move to the city (see also Nair 2000; Raghavendra 2009). Today, most of the technology parks are in the eastern or cantonment side of the city, while most of the older Kannadiga neighborhoods are in the western side of the city. The cultural divide between north and south India has also become an issue as more north Indians have moved into the city. The largest language group in India is Hindi and the national government is located in the Hindi-speaking northern city of Delhi, but the county has twenty-two official languages and over a thousand dialects. Hindi, an Indo-Aryan

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8 The regionally dominant Hindu Kannadiga castes, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, broke from an anti-Brahmin stance to ally with Congress prior to Independence, but have since taken over local politics based on a Hindu nationalist, non-Brahmin, Kannada-language agenda (Heitzman 2004: 40-1).
language, is the dominant vernacular in the north, but south Indians speak many different Dravidian-based languages and English is the preferred second language for the middle and upper classes. \(^9\) North Indians are also thought to look down upon southerners as “backward,” socially conservative, and disconnected from the nation, while south Indians claim a more progressive culture that is global in outlook, better for women and for business, and less obsessed with caste and religious politics or showy displays of wealth (Polgreen 2010).

Bangalore has been greatly affected by the opening of the Indian economy in the 1990s. In response to political and fiscal crises in the 1970s and 80s, the Congress-led Indian government under Indira and then Rajiv Gandhi began shifting the country’s economic policies from a state-controlled model focused on development to a more capitalist model (Gupta 1998). In 1991, the state enacted sweeping economic changes broadly referred to as “economic liberalization,” including opening the Indian economy to increased privatization, foreign capital, and foreign goods and media, as well as reducing taxes and the permit process for running businesses, and letting multinational companies hold a majority stake in their subsidiaries in India (see Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2012; Mankekar 2015: 46-7).

The social and cultural effects of liberalization are still being understood (Fernandes 2006; Khilnani 1998; Mankekar 2015; Oza 2006; Varma 1998). As Akhil Gupta and K. Sivaramakrishnan pose, “Liberalization and decentralization have arguably changed the Indian state more in the last 10 years than in the first 50 years since Independence. But what exactly has changed?” (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2012: 2). In a partial answer, they argue that liberalization has as much to do with changing senses of self as with material change.

One main outcome of economic liberalization has been to create a market in India for

\(^9\) English indexes class status in India and especially in Bangalore, which does not have a dominant Indian language (unlike Hindi in North India). English is the common tongue for those with access better education. As part of its regionalist agenda, the Karnataka state government has mandated that public school be taught in Kannada. Because English is used for business and indicates class status, this disadvantages young people whose parents cannot afford a private English-medium education. Meanwhile many schools prey on nervous parents and advertise that they are “English-medium,” but vary widely in their quality.
foreign and domestic goods, leisure activities, and media, along with an advertising industry that pushes consumption (Lukose 2009; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003). A second outcome is the appearance of multinational companies, many in technology, and home-grown Indian companies that take advantage of India’s emphasis on technical education and globally cheap labor (Heitzman 2004; Nair 2005; Upadhyya and Vasavi 2006). Third, this period in India has witnessed the rise of a Hindu nationalism that is tied to local politics, sectarian violence, class divisions, and consumption (Hansen 1999; Rajagopal 2001).

Consumption, multinational corporations, and sectarianism are all linked to the growing influence of the Indian middle classes, a famously vague category (Deshpande 2003; Fernandes 2006; Jaffrelot and van der Veer 2008; Mazzarella 2005; Varma 1998; see also discussions in Belliappa 2013: 9-12; Lamb 2009: 46-51; Radhakrishnan 2011: 5-9). These developments are also tied to India’s wealthy and well-educated citizens living abroad, known as “non-resident Indians” or NRIs, who have contributed to these trends through economic pressure from abroad and by returning to India, where they are known as “returned” NRIs or RNRIs (Mankekar 2015; Radhakrishnan 2011).

Bangalore is considered the technology capital of India, along with other hubs such as Gurgaon outside Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Chennai to an extent. However, investment from the tech boom has been uneven and the city remains deeply divided. Spurred by post-Independence government investment in aerospace and technology education and companies, notably Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL),

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10 This movement is marked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, riots in Mumbai in 1992-93 and in Gujurat in 2002, and India’s successful nuclear tests in 1998 by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, a Hindu nationalist party that was the first to successfully challenge the Congress Party for state control. The BJP lost to Congress in its infamous “India Shining” Campaign of 2004, in which they miscalculated the appeal of an ascendant Indian middle class for the general population (see Radhakrishnan 2011: 40-42). However, in 2014 the country elected Narendra Modi of the BJP as Prime Minister on a platform of understated fundamentalism and corporate-friendly economic policies. Modi was Chief Minister in Gujurat in 2002 and has been accused of not stopping riots that killed at least 1,000 Muslims (Economist 2014; Sinha and Suppes 1992-2014).
hundreds of IT and BPO companies\textsuperscript{11} have clustered in the city since the mid-1980s (Nair 2000; Saxenian 2002; Srinivas 2002; Vasavi 2008). Indian-owned tech firms Infosys and Wipro and the biotech firm Biocon are headquartered in Bangalore, while local and global technology companies employ hundreds of thousands of people. IT itself is highly exclusive, but has come to signify the rise of the nation in the global community and the dream of upward mobility within India. The IT sector represented 9.5\% of India’s GDP in 2014 with revenues exceeding $130 billion (NASSCOM 2015a). However, the sector employed only around 2.5 million Indians nationwide and perhaps 500,000 in Bangalore in 2009 (NASSCOM 2009; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006), increasing to just 3.3 million nationwide in 2014 due to the global economic slowdown (NASSCOM 2015b). Despite its meritocratic ethos, IT workers are mainly upper class and upper caste. While the industry is roughly one-third female, few women hold upper level positions (NASSCOM 2015b; Upadhya 2007).

Bangalore has transformed from a city of under a million in 1950 to a metropolis of an estimated 9.5 million today (Census of India 2011; Sudhira et al. 2007: 384). People from all over India and the world now live in Bangalore, with many languages spoken in the city in addition to the native Kannada. While English is usually the \textit{lingua franca} for the upper classes, many residents speak three or more languages. According to the 2001 census, the city was roughly 80\% Hindu, 13\% Muslim, 6\% Christian, 1\% Jain, with other groups such as Sikhs or Buddhists making up less than 1\% (Census of India 2001a). In terms of language, according to the 1981 Census, only about 35\% spoke Kannada as a first language, 22\% spoke Tamil, 18\% spoke Telugu, and 12\% spoke Urdu (a language spoken by Muslims in most of Karnataka, Hyderabad, and north India and Pakistan) (Srinivas 2001: 5). Hindi and English are understood in varying degrees, and other regional dialects and Indian languages are used as well. Janaki Nair argues that Kannada’s subordinate status in Bangalore is due to:

\textsuperscript{11} The IT sector refers mainly to software development and services, whereas business process outsourcing (BPO) or ITES refers to back office services and call centers.
An economy within which particular language competences take on value…. The overwhelming dominance of English as an internationally hegemonic language, in the commercial, financial, scientific or IT fields, or the dominance of Hindi and Tamil in the cultural spheres (e.g. TV and cinema) leaves Kannada to its lonely reign over the literary sphere, and within the space of domesticity. (Nair 2000: 4141)

Kannada speakers feel marginalized linguistically, culturally, and spatially.

Urban historians James Heitzman (2004) and Janaki Nair (2005) both identify aspirations by city leaders to become a “global city” on the model of Singapore. Free market champions tend not to acknowledge the state investment the city has received, while IT-driven development is uneven and does not often benefit the poor or minorities (Benjamin 2000, 2001, 2008; Benjamin and Bhuvaneswari 2006; Schenk 2001). Reminders that the city is being remade for a future based on IT are impossible to avoid. Roads are constantly being widened and “flyovers,” or roads elevated above intersections or markets, are being constructed everywhere. Cement columns tower over many parts of the city as a new metro cuts through old areas of the city, although few locals will be able to afford to ride it, and private buses crowd out public buses on the already choked roads. Gated office buildings and gated apartment complexes seem to open every day. The new airport that opened in 2008, which enjoyed unprecedented government subsidies, is about twenty-five miles away from the city. A restricted highway from the airport to the city is under construction as part of a larger plan to remake the area, which has included land grabs from local farmers for the development of massive gated communities (Goldman and Longhofer 2009). Urban and rural development thus signals further insulation of the IT elite from the rest of the region.

A common nostalgic narrative about Bangalore is that it used to be the “Garden City” or the “Pensioner's Paradise.” In the mid-twentieth century, the city became popular for wealthy retirees because of its mild climate, many parks, and sleepy atmosphere. However, in its transition to the “Silicon Valley of India,” many residents argue that the old Bangalore has been lost. Malls, international brand stores and restaurants, supermarkets, high-end spas, and
Chain cafés have become intimately woven into the urban landscape. Nature is increasingly privatized in parks with admission fees or in cultivated green spaces in gated communities. Urban hassles include traffic jams, air pollution, haphazard construction, shady real estate deals, water shortages, and battles over garbage collection and disposal. Indicating public panic about these changes, recent books nostalgically remember days past (Chatterjee 1996; De 2008; Jagadeesh 1999; Jayapal 1997; Norris 1996; Pani et al. 2010). Two recent plays feature young people in the city adrift in new possibilities (Bora 2012; Karnad 2014), while novels set in Bangalore tell of a dystopic urban landscape channels the violent frustrations and capitalist ambitions of lower-class India (Adiga 2008), a city ripe for rumors (K.R. 2010), or a space of social ambiguity for young women (Hasan 2009; Mukherjee 2011).

While living in Bangalore, I scarcely had to mention that I wanted to hear how the city had changed and people jumped right in with stories and opinions. I asked one friend what Bangalore was like when she was growing up, and she said, “It was paradise.” She said she used to play in the street outside her house with no fear of cars, but now she does not dare let her children go out on their own. As I drove through what seemed to be a well-established, dense urban neighborhood, another friend told me about bicycling through fields and playing cricket with his brothers in this very place just twenty years before. An older woman told me that families in Bangalore used to plant a house garden mango and coconut trees, curry leaves, and other herbs and spices. Now, she said, families live in apartments and are losing touch with the natural world because they no longer grow or make their own food. She also spoke of spending hours with her family on the wide steps of the Vidhana Soudha state legislature building, but noted that now the perimeter of the building is fenced off.

Meanwhile, the tradition of elderly Indians walking in the mornings and evenings has altered. One man told me he rarely leaves his house because he is terrified of being hit by a speeding car. Many older residents walk in circles around the base of their gated apartment complexes.
or in crowded parks because there is nowhere to walk in the neighborhoods.

One longtime Kannada-speaking resident feels that Bangalore has been lost with the IT boom, which also devalues Kannadiga culture, saying:

What’s upsetting is that the old Bangalore culture is treated a bit like dirt, including the language. You realize that the IT boom changed us forever. In the initial days we all thought, “Oh wow, Infosys, big corporates and malls.” Now we’re all like, “Oh God, if they were so intelligent about it why didn’t they go to a smaller area outside Bangalore and built that place up? Rather than transform Bangalore.” There is the cultural transformation of the city, the alienation of a lot of people…. Bangalore’s changed, not necessarily for the better. And I miss the old Bangalore hugely.

She says the old Bangalore had a more “homogenous culture,” but the “neighborly feeling” of the city has changed. She feels that “pub city,” one of the one of the newer names for Bangalore, does not fit with “real” Bangalore culture, nor does the commercial feel of so many neighborhoods. She argues that there is much more to the city if one only looks.

Urban spaces are problematic in terms of using the past to understand the present, as they produce endless and eclectic archives (Benjamin 1999). The urban theorist Kevin Lynch (1960) defines “place legibility” as the legibility of the city, as people make mental maps of the city and “read” them through familiar landmarks and layouts. Lynch sees value in “open systems” and in “mystification, labyrinth, or surprise in the environment,” but also argues that, “complete chaos is never pleasurable” (Lynch 1960: 5). More recently, Nancy Munn (2013) identifies the constant tearing down and rebuilding of 19th century New York as characterizing a new capitalism and urban modernity. Memories of Bangalore as legible in the past are also reconstructed, as the city has changed throughout its history. However, narratives of urban change parallel a sense of social worlds also becoming illegible.

Religiosity and “moral policing” in Bangalore

Religiosity is interwoven into the urban and social landscape of Bangalore. As Smriti Srinivas (2002, 2008, 2015) shows, from village temples swallowed by the city to new
temples with massive sculptures of Shiva or Hanuman, from large and small mosques to old and new cathedrals and centers for New Age gurus, Bangalore is far from secular. Main religious festivals include the Kannadiga Karaga ritual procession that winds through city streets; Ganesh Chaturthi in which Ganesh statues are submerged in local bodies of water; Eid, which includes late-night food festivals in Muslim neighborhoods attended by Bangaloreans across communities; and other festivals associated with south Indian Hindu communities such as Onam and Ugadi. Diwali is celebrated with enthusiasm, while Christmas is an important holiday for the many Christians and Catholics in the city and is becoming a broader holiday of consumption and celebration on western models.

Religion is not in the foreground of this project, as most of the participants are part of the contemporary cosmopolitan classes that are often not overtly religious, excepting the older participants and the migrants from Andhra Pradesh. I was also not asking them directly about their religious beliefs or practices, although some told me about attending pujas and temples with family, going to church during difficult times, or praying and fasting especially during Ramadan, depending on their faith. All of them attended family functions that involved religious practices, and religion was always an issue when it came to marriage. In terms of a dominant Hinduism, ideas about gender tied to an authentic Hindu identity are part of the appeal of Hindu fundamentalism among the middle classes in India, yet women hear multifaceted messages about gender ideologies, sexuality, and marriage in religious stories.

Because Bangalore is located in south India, which has a different history of Hindu-Muslim relations than in the north, the city has not experienced the anti-Muslim rioting and sentiment seen elsewhere. However, the city has its own fundamentalist politics that have manifested in so-called “moral policing” by conservative Hindu groups, tied to Kannada-language politics. In 2008, the conservative Hindu nationalist BJP party came to power in Karnataka. Since this time, the government has passed several laws designed to curtail
nightlife. For example, they passed a city-wide 11:30pm curfew, meaning all pubs and clubs must close by this time. The BJP has also drastically raised liquor license fees, causing many pubs to close and the price of drinks to rise sharply. For several months they banned live music and dancing, with a short-lived modified law that required dancing in “couples.” The government has also stationed police on all major roads in the city after 11:30pm, ostensibly to curb drunk driving. While reducing traffic accidents is laudable, the result is perhaps less altruistic, as the police seem to look for expensive cars to pull over, letting the driver go after a not insignificant bribe or “adjustment” has been paid. It is not only young elite Bangaloreans who are targeted, as a middle-class couple in their sixties told me they were driving home from a family function around midnight and were pulled over and, even though they had not touched alcohol, were told to pay a bribe or be officially ticketed and given a court summons. While police extortion in India is nothing remarkable, it is the moral argument about alcohol that fits into recent debates.

In addition, recent incidents of moral policing target middle-class women who are perceived to be “modern” or westernized. In the winter of 2009, members of a radical Hindu fundamentalist group called the Sri Ram Sena (SRS) began a series of physical attacks on women in Western dress in pubs and on the street, in Bangalore and the coastal city of Mangalore, claiming that Indian women are becoming too “westernized.” In the first incident, forty SRS members—mainly lower class young men—went into a pub in the college town of Mangalore during lunchtime and beat up any woman they could find. The attack was filmed by a bystander, and the video widely broadcast on Indian and international television, causing a national uproar. Members of the SRS also carried out select attacks on women in western dress in Bangalore, many in broad daylight. The BJP government’s response was to condemn the attacks but also issue a statement that women should not dress or act “provocatively,” and only detained three of the Mangalore attackers. The SRS then threatened to harass couples on
Valentine’s Day, a favorite target of the Hindu right (Sengupta 2009).

These incidents led to local and national protests, most famously from a group calling themselves the “Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women” founded on Facebook by journalist Nisha Susan and three friends (Thompson 2009). The group had 25,000 members within a few days. Using this site, they launched what they called the “pink chaddi” campaign, which organized mailing hundreds of pink underwear to the SRS on Valentine’s Day from all over the country as a symbol of protest. While this campaign shows the power of the elite classes to organize via the Internet and social networking sites, it is also about how women can channel classed male anger. About the campaign, Susan wrote:

Indian women are aware of our tenuous grip on our rights. We worry that our next move will condemn us: running, sitting in a park, hugging a man, whistling, consensual sex, writing, buying a condom, asking for a share in property, getting a demanding job, leaving a husband. It could be any of these. The rules keep changing. (Susan 2009)

Susan thus explains the precarious position even wealthy urban women feel in terms of rights and public condemnation.

Making “responsible” choices about where, when, and with whom to associate is key for professional women. About her research with call center workers, Reena Patel writes:

Because an overarching safety net (meaning police and local government) is not in place to secure a woman’s right to be out at night, women are compelled to self-police their mobility, and parents are compelled to maintain a watchful eye over them. Should a woman not follow societal expectations of when and where it’s acceptable for her to be, particularly at night, her behavior is coded as risky and she is marked as ‘asking for it’ should she meet with violence. (Patel 2010: 121)

This is not an idle threat; in 2005, twenty-four year old Prathiba Murthy, an employee at a call center in Bangalore, was raped and murdered by the cab driver who was driving her home from her night shift (Sharma 2010). This incident caused deep panic in the city and throughout the BPO and IT industries. Corporations instituted a system of vans to transport workers between home and office, with elaborate rules such as a requirement to have at least one male co-worker in the van until all women are dropped off. However, these regulations
also place responsibility on women, as they must take the van straight home after work or risk not having a safe ride, which adds hours to a normal commute via bus. More wealthy women can afford a trusted driver or their own transportation if they wish to socialize after work, but this is not possible for less affluent employees. Women are even nervous to drive home by themselves or with girl friends late at night, and regularly ask male friends to drop them at home or accompany them in a rickshaw or taxi.

In the wake of nationwide middle-class protests about the December 2012 rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey on a public bus in Delhi, these questions of gender, class, morality, and violence are even more salient. Termed Nirbhaya or “fearless” by the Indian media, Pandey was a medical student, aspiring to the middle classes through education and work. She was out after dark with a male friend, heading home after seeing a western film, when she was attacked. The case sparked national middle-class outrage, yet many Indian feminists have pointed out that other cases involving lower caste women did not have a similar effect (Dutta and Sircar 2013), so these are classed fears about women’s safety. Moral panic in Bangalore signals confusion about Indian identity in fundamentalist movements that at once embrace and reject the knowledge economy, attempting to build a triumphant Indian nation yet restricting women’s mobility within that nation. The forms of this moral panic are also an outcome of the change from a welfare state to a more neoliberal economy linked to global capital, shifting the burden of women’s safety from their male relatives and the state to private companies and onto women themselves. Women and the less affluent are thus blamed for their inability to compete—that is, protect themselves—in this new terrain.

**Getting to Bangalore: Researcher, outsider, fellow traveler**

One morning in Bangalore in early 2012 finds me settling into my apartment in Indiranagar, a fashionable, relatively wealthy area that used to be a suburb and is now
considered a central neighborhood. My would-be roommate, a friend I had made when in Bangalore for preliminary research, had found the apartment for us. Unfortunately, her job shortly transferred her abroad, leaving me on my own. Just that morning, my Nepali maid and cook of only three weeks had almost certainly stolen cash out of a friend’s bag. I had just called her, asking in Hindi about the money, and she had denied it. I felt it was likely she had done it, as it was not the first time that something had disappeared, and I was an easy target.

Yet I knew her husband was a worthless alcoholic, so I did not feel right about firing her. On top of that, I had what felt like a million pieces of paperwork to fill out and offices to visit to set up my new life, none of it straightforward or logical. I had also discovered that the shower in my room was alternately a cold or scalding trickle of water, and until I somehow found a plumber I would take bucket baths like almost everyone else in India. And just that morning, peeking around the corner from the kitchen, I had looked up to see a small, furry face, then long rat tail disappearing back out through the kitchen onto the balcony. Fantastic, I have rats! I missed my husband and our comfortable house in Denver, and the stretch of time suddenly seemed interminable. Why was I here again?

The apartment, despite its rats—who I eventually defeated by sealing all holes into the balcony—and lack of A/C or much in the way of modern convenience, was in a lovely neighborhood. Its windows opened onto palm trees, a mango tree, and a *gulmohar* or flame tree, bright with red blossoms. At night, I could sit on the balcony and watch the moon make its way across the sky behind rustling palm leaves. Overlooking a main road, there was a constant buzz of activity, honking horns, and the puttering whine of auto rickshaws. Next to a Keralan Christian church, there was the incongruous sound of amateur gospel singing in Malayalam to wake me early every Sunday. I had come to Bangalore because it seemed to me the center of economic change in India, and also, perhaps, change for women. Although I knew families in the city and would visit them often over the next year, I chose to live alone.
so I could see and experience life as a young woman in the city working and living separately from family. I could stay out past the curfews set by families for daughters or female guests, and had some semblance of control over my time and space. It made sense. Still, it was lonely. I had intermittent female roommates and visitors from abroad, and other scholars studying in India stayed with me, but only over time did I feel like I fit in somewhere.

This project is my interpretation of the lives of a small group of women living in Bangalore and can only be understood as such. I agree with Dorinne Kondo who argues that, “Experience, and the specificity of my experience—a particular human being who encounters particular others at a particular historical moment and has particular stakes in that interaction—is not opposed to theory; it enact and embodies theory” (Kondo 1990: 24). The particularity of my perspective is what makes this study empirical. My grandmothers were intelligent, driven women who grew up without much money or education, and I wonder what they would have done had they lived now. My mother has a PhD in French literature, but instead of going into academia she lived abroad for a decade, in Ecuador and Nepal, when my father—who has a PhD in hydrology—worked for the United Nations on community-led watershed projects. My mother instead became a photojournalist and published in The New York Times and elsewhere, and I saw how hard she worked to balance her career ambitions with supporting her family. When I was ten, my parents took my sister and me back to Kathmandu, Nepal for several months for my father’s ongoing work. I return in this project to my early interest in South Asia, having decided, mainly by instinct, that Bangalore offered a window into women’s lives in a unique way.

In two summers of preliminary work in Bangalore, I began to see what it might be like to be a young woman surrounded by new messages and opportunities. Coming back for a year of fieldwork, I felt at first lost by the length of my stay and then panicked by its brevity.

12 As Tricia Wang (2013) argues, particular stories are the “thick data” (referencing Clifford Geertz’s “thick description”) that provides the necessary context, meaning, and insight to make sense of quantitative “big data.”
Ethnography is both painfully slow (Marcus 2003) and inexcusably shallow when considering the task of cultural understanding. Each day I spent navigating the city, or conducting an interview, or having a late night conversation revealed a deeper layer of emotional sensitivity and hinted at how many layers I did not yet grasp. I have come to think of ethnography as kora, the Tibetan Buddhist practice of circumambulating a temple or spinning a prayer wheel (McGranahan 2010: 27-33). It is going over the same ground over and over again until it changes, subtly but utterly transformed. Ethnography, for me as for Clifford Geertz (1973a), is about relational meaning: finding a place in the world and meaning in life, by relying on what you know from the past and the people around you.

As a Westerner in India, making interpretations about Indian women’s lives makes me uncomfortable, and rightly so, in large part because of the colonial bias in the history of ethnographic authority and postcolonial dilemmas about the west in Indian feminism (see Mohanty 1988; K. Narayan 1993; U. Narayan 2013 [1989]). I do not attempt to resolve this discomfort but, rather, hope that it makes me a more sensitive ethnographer. I present how the women I worked with conceived of their lives, in their own words as much as possible, albeit making my own conclusions that may or may not fit their experience. As a foreigner, an American of European descent, I stood out but was a common enough sight in other ways, as Bangalore has many non-Indians visiting or living in the city. However, I was an outsider and would always be so. I was not part of the intricate network of caste and background and was ignorant of so many things my Indian friends grew up knowing. Still, I was a woman in my early thirties, married, and in the midst of sorting out my career ambitions and ideas about starting a family. I was in many ways peers with the women in this project, which meant that my friends and “subjects” overlapped (Grindal and Salamone 2006). Instead of finding this awkward, I believe it is appropriate to make real friendships in the field, although I underestimated the discomfort of leaving those friendships.
By studying middle and upper-class lives, I am following Laura Nader’s advice to “study up” (Nader 1972) in order to explore the lives of those with social and economic power. I was from a wealthier class background than some friends and less wealthy than others, although I had the privilege of making my own hours rather than working the punishing hours my friends did. I often picked up the tab for lunch or coffee, or hosted get-togethers and provided food. Regardless of relative class status, however, I never forgot I was a light-skinned foreigner and, thus, linked to a former colonial power. I had privilege because of this, but while I was sometimes seen as a desirable friend, at other times I represented everything wrong with changes in Indian society. Being an American in India is also a unique position, as the US is an economically imperial power and the home base for many tech companies, so my life had some of the mystique associated with America. Further, as English is the language of power and class status in India, some friends were ashamed of what they considered their poor English. However, many used Hindi slang or spoke in south Indian languages if people with similar language backgrounds were present.

Finally, being a woman changed the dynamics of every social situation in Bangalore. Being married allowed me to talk with men about work and relationships somewhat freely, but I mainly focused on getting to know women. Although some women never let me in as a friend, many did. I never felt like an insider, but more and more I felt like a fellow traveler in a gendered space of transition. We were making our way in a confusing city and world, dealing with relationships and life changes and talking together to sort things out. However, I was never completely comfortable and always felt a bit alone. As a student of an unfamiliar culture I always felt like a novice, and no matter how comfortable I became I always felt the disconnect of being an outsider, neither this nor that. I suspect as such it is a position many ethnographers struggle with and enjoy, as a group of self-selecting perpetual students most comfortable with indeterminacy.
Methodology and participants

This project is based on interviews and participant observation conducted in Bangalore, in homes and social spaces in the city, over eleven months in 2012, a time limited by my research grant and visa duration. I interviewed a total of forty-six women, including thirty-four professional women in their twenties and thirties, five women in their forties and fifties who were mothers of younger women I interviewed, and seven women in their sixties and seventies who were unrelated to the other interviewees but from similar class and caste backgrounds. I interviewed several of these women more than once and I had informal conversations and conducted participant observation with many more. I draw on these formal interviews for the quotations and stories I use throughout this project, and on my fieldnotes and memories for other observations. Interviews lasted from sixty to ninety minutes, which I recorded and later transcribed, and most took place in the interviewee’s home, my apartment, or in a café. I met some of these women just once, while others were close friends. I met them through personal connections I had made in preliminary research over two summers in 2009 and 2010, using a “snowball” method in which I asked each person for further contacts. As a result I interviewed friends, coworkers, and family members of other participants. I did not do official workplace research, as I could not obtain the right permissions in time, but I shadowed friends in the workplace on a few occasions for my own contextual understanding.

I lived in Indiranagar and also spent time in Malleshwaram, a middle-class Kannadiga neighborhood, with the older women in this project and the families of some of the younger women I was interviewing. I also became a bit familiar with other areas such as Jayanagar, Koramangala, Bommanahalli, Banashankari, Shivajinagar, Vijayanagar, and Madiwala in the course of my research. I spent much of my time crisscrossing the city to meet women at their homes. There was no overall pattern to where they lived, as this was based on family, proximity to work, and availability of housing. Still, living in Indiranagar gave me a unique
perspective on social life in Bangalore, as it is home to many international brand stores, upscale restaurants, and cosmopolitan music venues that overshadow older middle and lower class communities that exist in close proximity. Some of my friends lived nearby in their own apartments, while others lived there with their families and parents in joint households. In terms of language, Bangalore is complicated. I studied Hindi for three years at the University of Colorado and Kannada during my preliminary work and for some of my main research. Knowledge of these languages was helpful, mainly for cultural understanding. However, because English is a first language for many in the middle to upper classes, and is used as a common language in IT and business in Bangalore, I conducted my research mainly in English. Some of the older women would have been more comfortable speaking their native language and I occasionally used Kannada with them, although some had other first languages. Still, English worked as a field language reasonably well until the last four months of my research, when I began working with a group of urban migrants from Andhra Pradesh. This group of women had studied English in school and had to use it for work, yet their fluency varied and they spoke their native Telugu with each other. While I was able to use English with them, speaking Telugu would have been helpful. Finally, because Indian English differs from American and British English, I will note these instances throughout the text but will strive not to alter quotations, as language is an important component in cultural understanding, even if that language is English.

I wish to ensure confidentiality for the women included in this project, and therefore do not want to identify people too specifically. I have tried to include relevant information as necessary and profile several at length. However, I have changed identifying information, so while they will likely recognize themselves, I intend to protect their identities. Still, an overview of the women represented in this project is useful for understanding its context. South India is culturally distinct from north India, but these differences cannot be generalized
The women I interviewed in the older generations were all south Indian, while for the younger women, twenty-four were south Indian (mainly from Bangalore) and ten were north Indian, although these distinctions blur as families become blended and move more often. The majority of my interviewees identify as Hindu, including all of the older women and twenty-six of the thirty-four younger women. I also interviewed three Muslim women, three Christians or Catholics, one Jain, and one Sikh. Most of my interviewees came from middle to upper class and upper caste backgrounds, if applicable. These demographic biases were not intentional, and reflect the tendency for IT workers to be Hindu, upper class, and upper caste, as these communities have greater access to education and material resources.

In terms of career, twenty-five of the thirty-four younger women I interviewed worked in IT, while the rest worked in finance, journalism, public relations, or graphic design. I interviewed a total of eighteen unmarried women and sixteen married women. As marriage represents an important distinction in this project, I will talk about each group separately. Of the eighteen unmarried women, fourteen were in their early to mid-twenties and planned to marry, including one who was engaged and five with serious boyfriends, while remaining nine were single. I also interviewed four unmarried women in their thirties, and of these, two were not interested in marriage, one was divorced and open to remarriage, and one was widowed and not planning to remarry. All of the unmarried women were working full time, except two who were still in college. Seven of the women lived with their parents because they were from Bangalore, while nine women lived alone or with female roommates, as all but one were from elsewhere in India.

Of the sixteen married women from the younger generation in this project, four had arranged marriages and twelve had love marriages, including one who divorced and

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13 The range of caste and religious backgrounds for women in the project includes: upper caste Kannadiga, Lingayat, Tulu Billava, Tulu Ksaytriya, Konkan Saraswat Brahmin, Reddy, Yadav, Naidu, Bengali Kayar, Bengali Brahmin, Rajput, Nayar, south Indian Muslim, north Indian Muslim, north and south Indian Christians, south Indian Catholic, Jain, and Sikh.
remarried. The arranged marriages were all between Hindus and include three upper-caste Bengali couples and one Nayar couple. One of the love marriages was cross-religious (Hindu-Muslim), and all but one were cross-community, including two Muslim couples and nine Hindu couples. Five are north-south marriages. Four of the married women do not have children, while eleven have one child and one has two children. In terms of residence, four live with their in-laws, one lives with her parents, and eleven live in nuclear families. Of the eleven married women who were working full time, three did not have children and the rest had one child. Four of them kept the same job after having a child, while another four switched to less stressful jobs or returned to work after a break. Finally, five had stopped working, all after having children, and all say they intend to work again when their child is older. I did not interview women in the younger generation who never worked outside the home, and I believe their perspective would have been valuable.

This project is not intended to be a definitive account of life as a professional woman in Bangalore, nor is it a concentrated study of one community. It could be argued that this group is too wide-ranging and privileged to be useful. However, they represent a snapshot of the diversity of women taking part in new career opportunities available to a small but important segment of the Indian population. Working in an urban setting is methodologically confusing, as there are many more contexts, people, and connections than can be identified, much less studied. I am comforted by the observation by James Ferguson about his work in urban Zambia. He felt his fieldwork was unsettling, asking, “What happens to an anthropological understanding in a situation where ‘the natives’ as well as the ethnographer lack a good understanding of what is going on around them?” (Ferguson 1999: 19). Yet this uncertainty helped him question “metanarratives” about urbanization and modernity. Perhaps in the case of women feeling social dislocation and finding new niches of belonging in an urban setting like Bangalore, my own ethnographic confusion was also appropriate.
Listening to stories

In my fieldwork, what I heard from women across generations was how they are both grateful for the opportunities women have now and disappointed by them. This sense of disappointment or loss came through even as women spoke about how lucky they felt. When I got home, I sat with my fieldnotes and interviews for a long time. What do people say in stories? Julie Cruickshank observes:

First...you have to learn what the story says. Then you learn what the story can do when it is engaged as a strategy of communication. Unless we pay attention to why a particular story is selected and told, we understand very little of its meanings. (Cruikshank 1998: 41).

Stories are the foundation for meaning: they tell you about how a person sees their life in the context of the world, what constitutes a good life, and how they understand themselves. In these stories, I began hearing narratives about the past, the future, and tensions about timing in the present. Investigating time and temporality, or our relationship with time, can reveal a great deal about the way we experience the world as particular beings. Further, I argue that one cannot understand temporality itself without understanding its relationship to gender.

In the first chapter, I set the groundwork for understanding temporality as a feminist concern through a history of gender, modernity, and feminism in India. Chapter Two suggests that pursuing a career and challenging gender roles in Bangalore symbolizes progress to a better future, yet the danger of that future is gendered. In Chapter Three, I argue that women in Bangalore justify working by claiming they are better off than women in the past, but struggle with this identity whether or not they stay in the workforce. The focus of Chapter Four is marriage, suggesting it is part of neoliberal narratives of choice and responsibility. In Chapter Five, I outline the limitations of class mobility in Bangalore by examining harassment and the constrained lives of lower middle-class women in Bangalore. Finally, in Chapter Six, I explore narratives of pleasure, intimacy, and friendship, as I see these women actively negotiating temporal tensions through redefining their relationships.
Chapter One

Gender, Modernity, and Feminism in India: Historic Gender Ideologies, Global Work, and the Case for a Gendered Temporality

The imperative we experience as feminists to be critical of how our culture and traditions oppress women conflicts with our desire as members of once colonized cultures to affirm the value of the same culture and traditions. (216)

--Uma Narayan, 2013 [1989], The Project of Feminist Epistemology

What is the work that time does in the creation of the subject?.... The simultaneity of events at the level of phenomenal time that are far apart in physical time make the whole of the past simultaneously available…. Duration then is not simply one of the aspects of subjectivity—it is the very condition of subjectivity. (95-98)

--Veena Das, 2007, Life and Words

How do professional women in Bangalore understand their lives in relation to the past? How do they imagine the future or the course of their lives? How do they feel about the ways they spend their time, especially in relation to others? I approach these questions through a historical, anthropological, and theoretical lens. In order to understand the position of women in contemporary India, it is important to build on an understanding of gender in Indian history, while ethnographic studies show that women’s lives in India have been changing rapidly in the last twenty years due to urbanization, women’s education, and economic liberalization that have brought new opportunities linked to globalization.

The broader field of anthropological studies on women and globalized work has focused on factories, but this study examines white-collar technology work and its particular influence on ideas of modernity, femininity, and neoliberal self-improvement. Finally, building on anthropological, feminist, and postcolonial critiques of the modernity metanarrative and the global technology industry, I suggest that the concept of temporality, and specifically a gendered temporality, is useful in understanding how women in Bangalore experience shifting meaning in their lives.
I. Gender in recent Indian history and the anthropology of South Asia

    Colonial history has shaped Indian feminism in that critiquing patriarchal practices tied to ideas about Indian tradition risks tying feminists too closely to a colonial legacy that also critiqued these traditions. Meanwhile, the anthropology of South Asia complicates these gendered debates through the complexity of lived experience.

Gender in colonial, nationalist, and feminist Indian history

    British colonialism in India is a story of economic exploitation buttressed by claims about Indian culture that devalued that culture and redefined who could represent Indian identity, placing postcolonial feminists in a difficult position between resisting and affirming Indian traditions. Colonial and nationalist debates in India have been articulated through struggles to control women’s bodies and sexuality as symbols of male and/or national honor.

    In an example of a colonial claim to cultural superiority, debates over sati, or the practice of widows committing suicide on their husband’s funeral pyre, provided a forum for male political contention between the colonial state and Indian nationalists. The British colonial government publicized and exaggerated the practice to a horrified British public, then outlawed the practice to prove India’s “barbarity” and need for colonial rule. However, sati was relatively rare, limited mainly to Bengali Brahmins and Rajputs in Rajasthan. Gyatri Spivak famously argued that this debate left no room for women’s voices or agency, arguing

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14 Beginning in 1600, the East India Company (EIC) controlled the lucrative trade route between the Indian subcontinent and England. By 1770 the EIC had used such exploitative tactics to capture wealth in Bengal that it caused a devastating famine, killing an astounding ten million people, a third of the regional population. The British public was scandalized and in 1788, the British Empire took control of the EIC, positioning itself as a protector of the Indian people (Mukherjee 2010). After the failed 1857 Rebellion against the empire, the British framed Indian history as a story of decay from an idealized Vedic past (Dirks 2001: 304; Mukherjee 2010: xxii-xxiii ). Partly because the colonial government altered native forms of knowledge to fit British categories, often for the purposes of revenue collection, they were able to claim there was no indigenous Indian history. Thus through British efforts, “the Indians would receive a history” (Cohn 1996: 54; also see Guha 1997: 160-4). As Nicholas Dirks argues, “...whereas social historians and feminists had to attack the assumptions that great men and great events made history, nationalist historians in India had to start with a more basic point; they had to replace British great men and great events with Indian ones” (Dirks 1990: 26). This is why, despite being the first historiography written completely by Indians, nationalist approaches followed colonial histories.
that “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (2006 [1988]: 33). A similar moral panic surrounded British efforts to outlaw matrilineal inheritance and the occasional polyandry of the Nairs (or Nayars) in south India in the early 19th century (Sinha 2004: 189). According to Lata Mani, the sati debate was a “a modern discourse on tradition” (Mani 1990: 116). Mani argues that the ideal of Indian tradition was reconstituted through this debate, finding women were placed in an ambiguous and powerless position:

For all participants in nineteenth century debates on social reform, women represent embarrassment or potential. And given the discursive construction of women as either abject victims or heroines, they frequently represent both shame and promise. Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. (Mani 1990: 118)

In India, gender has played a key role in the morality of modernity, a potentially dangerous force that must be guided by men and from which women should be protected.

In the Indian nationalist movement, Indian women have alternately been celebrated for their activism and regulated for their sexual respectability, as a measure of their worth to stand for the nation (Sarkar 2009, 2001; S. Ray 2000; Sinha 1996, 2004; Spivak 2006 [1988]). Reformers have often been in the uncomfortable position of advocating internally for women’s rights on issues such as child marriage or widow remarriage, for example, but defending Indian culture and values to the wider world (Sinha 2006). As many scholars have argued, middle-class modernity and respectability in colonial India were negotiated through women’s domesticity and sexuality (Arondekar 2009; Banerjee 2004; Bannerji et al. 2001; Burton 1998; Sangari and Vaid 1990; Walsh 1995, 2004).

In an influential argument, Partha Chatterjee (1989, 1990, 1993) suggests that the nationalist movement in late 19th century Bengal had a dilemma: how were they to form a “modern” nation that did not engage in embarrassingly non-modern practices regarding women, yet prove the superiority of Indian cultural values compared to the immoral west? Chatterjee suggests that in nationalist ideology, men were tasked with participating in the
modern public sphere, while a “new Indian woman” was represented by the upper-class, upper-caste, Hindu Bengali wife or *bhadramahila*, who was held responsible for maintaining Indian spiritual values in the domestic sphere (Chatterjee 1993: 151). Chatterjee argues that in nationalist ideology, this new Indian woman should be educated as long as she attended an indigenous school taught in Bengali that taught housekeeping. These guidelines later gave way to English-language schooling in academic subjects for middle-class women (Bannerji 1991, 2002; Forbes 1999; Kumar 2007). This did not mean the public sphere suddenly opened to women, but rather the domestic sphere was extended beyond the home (Chatterjee 1990: 247). However, critiques of Chatterjee’s argument question whether it leaves any space for women to question patriarchal practices. For example, Himani Bannerji writes:

> It is as though there was no patriarchal oppression of women in India, but rather only a colonial fiction of such oppression…. To adopt a critical posture towards Indian society, and a sympathetic one towards Indian women, would be tantamount to taking the side of the coloniser…. Chatterjee’s own decolonisation proposal does not permit any critique of patriarchy in India. (Bannerji 2000: 911)

In this way, Bannerji pointedly argues that for Chatterjee, women could either critique Indian society or colonialism, but could not critique patriarchy in either case.

While discursively vilifying western practices as immoral, a new middle-class notion of female propriety among nationalists was shaped by colonial distaste for Indian cultural traditions and often attacked Indian women’s cultural practices. Sumanta Banerjee (1990) relates the case of English-educated Bengali *bhadralok*, or sons of wealthy Bengalis, who replaced poems, songs, and theatrical performances (*kathakata*) by women that were part of a common popular culture, yet popular with middle-class women, with cultural forms considered more “cultivated” and less “vulgar.” These performances traditionally had expressed critiques of patriarchy and were humorous, sensuous, bawdy, and firmly part of women’s social domain. However, *kathakata* songs had been criticized by the local colonial leadership, thus embarrassing Bengali men by implying their wives were not respectable.
This move put thousands of singers, dancers, and actresses out of work, often forcing them to turn to prostitution, and erased these songs and art forms from memory. This action also deprived Bengali women of a forum for socializing, a mode of expression and resistance, and a space for different classes and castes to interact. Incidents like this occurred throughout colonial India, in which Indian cultural expression—with its contradictory portrayals of female sexuality—was considered not “respectable” for upper class, upper caste women.

Female sexuality and femininity itself endangered the nationalist movement. Femininity threatens concepts of masculinity in the colonial encounter, seen in British characterizations of the “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali” (Sinha 1995). As Mary Eagleton observes:

Feminine characteristics as marks of inferiority are not unique to women but are often attributed to other oppressed groups. So the racist and the colonizer will see the non-white male as uncivilized but also as child-like and effeminate…. The ‘other’ is sometimes female but always feminine. (Eagleton 2011: 155)

Partha Chatterjee argues that women endangered true (male) independence from colonialism due to the danger of attachment or maya. He writes that, for the 19th century Bengali nationalist playwright Girishchandra Ghosh, the female body is a “sign of man’s bondage in the world…with a fearsome sexuality that lures, ensnares, and imprisons the true self of man,” leading him to become first the “‘slave of his wife, second of money, and third, of the master whom he serves’” (Chatterjee 1993: 62). Here, the master refers to a colonial master.

The movement for national independence in India was also influenced by Gandhi’s views on women and the proper roles of wife and husband. By the 1920s Gandhi had taken up the “women’s question,” and spoke against child marriage, in favor of widow remarriage and women’s education, and for women’s political participation in the movement (Gandhi 1996: 126). However, some have criticized Gandhi for not paying enough attention to women and for advocating patriarchal family structures (Das 2007). In a speech from 1918, Gandhi spoke against the smritis or Brahmin texts that condone child marriage, widow restrictions,
and consider women as *sudra* or servant caste. However, he echoes colonialist history by saying these ideas come from “the period of our degeneration,” and that his intention is to, “…rid Hinduism of its defects and restore it to its pristine glory” (Gandhi 1996: 128). He ties this imagined Hindu past to the women of the great epics:

> The largest part of our effort in promoting the regeneration of women should be directed towards removing those blemishes which are represented in our shastras as the necessary and ingrained characteristics of women. Who will attempt this and how? In my humble opinion, in order to make the attempt we will have to produce women, pure, firm, and self-controlled as Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi. If we do produce them, such modern sisters will receive the same homage from Hindu society as is being paid to the prototypes of yore. (Gandhi 1996: 129)

It is in Gandhi’s autobiography that we gain a sense of his discomfort with female sexuality. The young Gandhi was troubled by what he calls his “carnal desire” (Gandhi 1996 [1927-9]: 9, 24). He writes that he was at first controlling of his wife, but he later realized that, “the wife is not the husband’s bondslave, but his companion and his helpmate, and an equal partner in all his joys and sorrows—as free as the husband to choose her own path” (Gandhi 1996 [1927-9]: 25). However, Gandhi later took a vow of celibacy without consulting his wife, as he saw sexuality as a temptation that threatened the nationalist cause.15

National debates after Independence in 1947 and the chaos of Partition tied female honor to the honor of the new Indian nation. Gandhi argued that Hindu women kidnapped by Muslims during Partition should be “reclaimed” and put back into the care of their father or husband, and vice versa for Muslim women kidnapped by Hindus, regardless of whether they wished to return or would be taken back by their families. As Veena Das argues:

> The figure of the abducted woman allowed the state to construct ‘order’ as…an attribute of the masculine nation so that the counterpart of the social contract becomes the sexual contract in which women as sexual and reproductive beings are placed within the domestic, under the control of the ‘right’ kinds of men. (Das 2007: 19)

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15 Gandhi was indeed so concerned with tempering his own desires that he embarked on a series of “experiments in celibate sexuality” in which he would sleep naked (supposedly chastely) next to two young naked women to test his resolve, sparking criticism that continues to this day (Lal 2000).
The new Indian nation was thus cast as masculine, while the role of women was not just to safeguard cultural traditions within the home, but to *reproduce* the nation through the sexual contract in the proper patriarchal domestic sphere.

Given this history, the vigorous women’s movement in India has been marked by debates over whether feminism is “western” and thus not authentically Indian, or is able to speak for Indian women more generally (M. Chaudhuri 1993; N. Chaudhuri 2005; Forbes 1999; Jayawardena 1995; John 2008b; Ray and Basu 1999; Sarkar and Sarkar 2008). Uma Narayan considers the dilemma for the postcolonial feminist, writing, “The imperative we experience as feminists to be critical of how our culture and traditions oppress women conflicts with our desire as members of once colonized cultures to affirm the value of the same culture and traditions” (Narayan 2013 [1989]: 216). Leading women activists have almost always been upper-caste and upper-class, but there has also been a selective retelling of this history that has left out lower class struggles that have also contributed to the history of women’s rights (Kannabiran and Lalitha 1990). As Chandra Mohanty (1988) argues, women in the “Third World” are not homogenous nor universally oppressed, nor do they necessarily want the same things, much less what western feminists want.

In the India of the 1970s, there were massive protests against the Nehruvian welfare state, economic stagnation, and Indira Gandhi’s Emergency. In this context, the publication of *Towards Equality* (1974), the first major study of women’s status since Independence, presented the shocking results that conditions for women in India had been deteriorating since Independence. This helped found women’s studies departments in universities and women’s activist groups (John 2008a). Since this time, Indian feminists have critiqued western feminists who proposed to “emancipate” Third World women while they also searched for subaltern voices in Indian history (Mohanty 1988; Riley 1988; Spivak 1988,
2006 [1988]), and have questioned conventions of gender, caste, and sexuality (e.g. John and Nair 1998b; Sangari and Vaid 1990; Sunder Rajan 2001a).

Since the 1990s, the terms of feminist debate in India have been altered by economic liberalization, reservations for women in government and public sector jobs, the rise of right-wing Hindu political movements, and recent incidents of gender-based violence and subsequent protests (John 2008a: 12; Ray 1999). Under these new terms, women are seeking protection or redress less from the state and more in economic security through jobs or in political involvement. There is an expanded professional class that includes many women, yet even as the rise of the Indian economy is celebrated, the gap between rich and poor widens. Thus, middle-class Indian women are opening new possibilities in terms of gender roles and life course that go both with and against the grain of social expectations, while poor women must ask different yet parallel questions about aspirations and security.

**Women’s lives in the anthropology of South Asia: Restriction and pushing boundaries**

The anthropological literature on South Asia shows how categories of class, caste, religion, and kinship shape restrictions for women in ways that resonate with historic ideas about gender, yet are also more complex in lived experience than these ideas might indicate. Caste guides ideas about gendered boundaries, as high caste men have historically engaged in (often nonconsensual) sexual relations with lower caste women with no danger to their ritual purity, but a higher caste woman can be irretrievably polluted by sex with a lower caste man (Lamb 2000; Marriott 1968). As Leela Dube observes, “The principles of caste inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society; the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are articulated by gender” (Dube 2003: 242). Brahmin widows in West Bengal, as Sarah Lamb notes, are not allowed to remarry, and aim to “cool” their sexuality, including wearing white, eating rice once a day, and not being allowed to laugh, arguing, “Such cooling and
desiccating of their bodies was tantamount to premature aging” (Lamb 2000: 222). However, these practices differ by family and location, as many widows do not follow ritual restrictions even if it is proscribed by their caste.

In most locations, a gendered division of labor and social restrictions for women are normative. However, rural women in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan resist strict gender roles to an extent, particularly through subversive speech (Raheja and Gold 1994). Many women in South Asia regardless of religious background have lived in official or unofficial sex-segregated purdah (“curtain” in Hindi and Urdu), although their access to public spaces varies widely (Phadke et al. 2011). Sex segregation can actually facilitate cross-community friendships and political alliances, however. In Pakistan, depending on local interpretations of Islamic law and custom, women’s movements in the public sphere tend to be more restricted than in India. Laura Ring (2006) treats an apartment building in Karachi as a new zenana, or women’s quarters, but finds that women form cross-community friendships that keep the male and public sphere more peaceful.

Because of these restrictions, anthropologists have found that Indian women have exerted influence in the family through their sons, reinforcing cultural practices of son preference. M.N. Srinivas, the founder of social anthropology in India, grew up in Mysore, just south of Bangalore, as part of a Brahmin family who owned land in his father’s nearby natal village, where he conducted much of his ethnographic research. His work focuses on

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16 Margery Wolf’s *House of Lim*, about a middle-class family in rural Taiwan, terms the mother-child bond a “uterine” family that can partially oppose patriarchal family hierarchy (Wolf 1968).

17 In the ethnographic literature, mirroring the rural focus in early anthropology, Bangalore and modern-day Karnataka have seen more rural studies in the 1950s to 70s, and more urban studies beginning in the 1970s. Many, including M.N. Srinivas (1976), have studied the influence of urban ties or urban relocation on village systems of caste and hierarchy. Alan Beals’ (1955) study of Namhalli village, south of Bangalore, finds that urban influence caused village headmen to lose power, manufactured goods undercut artisans, and educated village youth entered a cycle of education, rising expectations, and disappointment. Several studies of rural Indians moving to urban areas have found that older forms of exclusion are articulated in new ways, as in Milton Singer’s (1972) study who found that caste-based groups from rural areas clustered together in Madras and performed group identities although their work was no longer caste-specific. Gertrude Woodruffe (1959) found in her study of Adi-Dravida migrants from Tamil Nadu that caste systems and the village panchayat were maintained when relocated to Bangalore. Mark Holmström (1969) meanwhile charted struggles between
caste relations and politics, but also addresses gender and social change (Srinivas 1976, 1987, 1963, 1942, 1955). In *The Remembered Village*, Srinivas notes, “While it was unmanly to be influenced by the wife, it was a virtue to be influenced by the mother” (Srinivas 1976: 141).

However, Srinivas also acknowledges that wives had more influence than their husbands liked to admit, in part due to the Dravidian kinship tradition of cross-cousin marriage which meant it was likely that “his children would marry into his wife’s natal household” (Srinivas 1976: 141), so husbands tried remain on good terms with their wife and her family.  

Ethnographic research demonstrates that women’s lives in practice differ from ideology. However, many forms of discrimination against women in contemporary India, including son preference and poor treatment of wives, especially affect poor and rural women (Wadley 2014a: 256-9). Working for a wage outside the home in domestic or other manual labor is a necessity for most lower class women, but an increase in women’s education and women working in skilled labor have altered the terms of gendered discrimination in the middle classes, and have allowed some class mobility among the lower classes.

II. Gender and work in South Asia and beyond: Morality and global capitalism

Work refers to activities that contribute to human subsistence and to cultural reproduction. As Ann Kingsolver notes, “Humans not only transform material culture

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18 Gender relations in south India are influenced by the practice of “Dravidian” cross-cousin marriage and other marriages within kin groups (Clark-Decès 2014; Trautmann 1981), and by matrilineal and matrilocal traditions, particularly in Kerala in the Nayar (Nair), Tiyyar, Mappilla, and Bunt communities. Nayars also traditionally were open to polyandry, meaning women could marry multiple husbands (Schneider and Gough 1961). While these systems allow women to own property, it is often their male relatives who manage it. However, there is the potential for less abuse of young wives because women do not leave their natal home when they marry. In Bangalore, I met descendents of communities that practice matrilineal inheritance, and felt these traditions gave women more “voice” in family decisions. I also heard about cross-cousin arranged marriages in middle-class families, although I do not know the current extent of these practices. Polyandry and matrilineal inheritance were discouraged by the British as they interfered with inheritance laws, which also motivated widespread colonial transformations to caste identification and dowry in ways that were not beneficial to women (Oldenburg 2002; Sarkar and Sarkar 2008).
through work, but we can also believe ourselves transformed through the work we do” (Kingsolver 1996: 564). These transformations, however, rest on socially produced meanings, and ideas about what counts as “work” matter. Across cultures, women tend to be associated with childrearing and domestic work (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Since the rise of the capitalist nation-state, waged labor is increasingly the type of labor that counts as work. Feminist critiques of labor are framed by the assumption that work means paid work, arguing that women perform “unpaid” domestic labor or a “second shift” when they get home from work (Hochshild 1989). Work outside the home has provided women with opportunities to transform everyday realities and their senses of self. In South Asia, the dilemma for professional women is often framed in terms of maintaining moral respectability while working, but literature on gender and work elsewhere sheds light on conditions of global capitalism that structure labor and produce gendered transformations of the self.

**Gender and work in South Asia: A respectable modernity**

In places undergoing urbanization, anthropologists of South Asia have found that gender roles and aspirations change rapidly for women as they gain access to education. These changes include marrying later, having more choice in a marriage partner, and desiring to work after marriage and even after having children (Ahearn 2001; Seymour and Mukhopadhyay 1994; Seymour 1999; Standing 1991). Susan Seymour and Carol Mukhopadhyay argue that education makes arranging a marriage for a young woman problematic (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994: 12; see also Vatuk 1994). However, women with college degrees are also more likely to work, to find and pursue a love marriage, to challenge the authority of their parents, husband, and in-laws, to contribute to their dowries and thus have more choice in spouse, to have the option to delay or in some cases forgo marriage, or to leave an unhappy marriage (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994: 19-20).
While these may be modest challenges to a system that privileges women’s roles as wives and mothers, they argue, “The emergence of even a small body of highly educated women with lucrative career opportunities…cannot help but have a powerful transforming influence on patrifocal family structure and ideology” (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour 1994: 22). Women’s work from within the home, including arranging marriages and assisting with their husband’s careers, also contributes to the family’s upward mobility (Sharma 1986).

Early studies of women’s changing lives in the Bangalore region include those by Rhoda (Goldstein) Blumberg and Leela Dwaraki (Blumberg and Dwaraki 1980; Goldstein 1972), and by Helen Ullrich (1987a, b, 1994, 2010; also see Ross 1961). Blumberg and Dwaraki surveyed a large group of well-educated, mainly Brahmin women in Bangalore during college and then several years afterward in the 1970s. They found that many women attended college to allow their parents more time to arrange their marriage, but this changed their aspirations and led to resentment after marriage, as many did not work at the request of the husbands and/or in-laws.

Helen Ullrich has worked with Havik Brahmin women in a village 200 miles northwest of Bangalore since 1964. Ullrich (2010) finds that as the village has urbanized, strict patriarchal practices have loosened, which she attributes to increased education before marriage. By the 1990s men were praising assertiveness in their wives, and recently she has seen male relatives supporting women’s work in a wage labor job, while women more frequently say no to marriages chosen by their father (personal communication, Ullrich 20 October 2011). Recently, Yamini Atmavilas (2008) similarly finds that lower-class women working in a factory in Bangalore have new aspirations for love and higher standards for husbands, as well as new female friendships that help them pursue these goals.

In contemporary India, women who aspire to a global, cosmopolitan lifestyle that is modern but also distinctly Indian is a major theme in research on the “new” Indian middle
classes since economic liberalization (Béteille 2003; Fernandes 2006; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003, 2005; Oza 2006; Puri 1999; Varma 1998). These conversations center on women’s sexuality and their role in maintaining the family. A “new liberal Indian woman” emerged in Indian popular culture of the 1990s, who, as Rupal Oza notes, “Blurred boundaries between the good ‘virtuous’ woman and the bad ‘vamp’…. The Indian woman was carefully crafted within public cultural discourses to be modern, representing globalizing India, yet ‘Indian’ by being anchored in ‘core’ values” (Oza 2006: 22). Jyoti Puri, who grew up in upper middle-class Mumbai, similarly observes:

> While it was important we not be too traditional by embodying what were considered retrograde traditions—such as marrying too early or lacking self-ambition altogether—it was equally important that we become neither too modern nor too westernized. At home and in school…the importance of being feminine, of protecting our reputations and our chastities was consistently emphasized. (Puri 1999: x)

Here, sexual purity stands in for but cannot encompass “tradition,” which relates to women’s role in kinship relations. Many in the Indian middle classes today assume that changes in women’s lives, along with western ideas of romance, are discouraging arranged marriages and thus weakening joint or extended families. In addition, companionate marriages are thought to challenge the power of parents and encourage the abandonment of parents in their old age (Cohen 2000). However, ethnographic evidence does not appear to support these trends (Dwyer 2000; Lamb 2009; Uberoi 1993), while the joint family has historically been more of an ideal than a ubiquitous practice (Kolenda 1987).

> In urban middle-class domestic spaces, Indian women are negotiating complex performances of ritual piety, middle-class consumption, career pursuits, and dedication to family, as seen in studies of contemporary Kolkata (Donner 2008), Delhi (Mankekar 1999), Mumbai (Puri 1999), Chennai (Hancock 1999), Madurai (Wilson 2014), and Bangalore (Radhakrishnan 2011). Purnima Mankekar (1999) in particular suggests that anxieties about women and social change came to the fore in the India of the 1990s. In middle-class
households in Delhi, women were watching new “women-oriented” programming created by Doordarshan that promoted women’s education as part of the nationalist cause. However, she notes that the programs also, “Reflected an ambivalence toward the agency of educated women that overlapped with the tension between middle-class viewers’ acknowledgement of the necessity for formal education and their fears that educated women represented a threat to the ‘traditional’ family” (Mankekar 1999: 131).

Among Tamil Brahman housewives, Mary Hancock finds a resonant tension within seemingly “traditional” activities, in that their devotion to ritual activities “took women outside the home and thus outside male surveillance, making them unavailable to attend to husbands and families” (Hancock 1999: 137), and provided a way to channel feelings of desire through their interactions with divine beings. The new demands of globalization can also be reinterpreted through the “traditional” role of motherhood. In Kolkata, Henrike Donner finds that middle-class women evaluate themselves vis-à-vis older generations on the question of “whether or not they were successful as mothers in an era of globalization” (Donner 2008: 32) which requires preparing children for lives in a globalized India.

Economic liberalization in the early 1990s brought many material and perceived changes to India. This includes the perception that the new middle classes are obsessed with material consumption and no longer care about the poor, the civic, or the family, whereas in actuality, they have a profound influence on economic policy and state and civic actions (Fernandes 2006). In her ethnography of lower-caste college students in Kerala, Ritty Lukose (2009) studies today’s youth, whom she terms “liberalization’s children” as a foil to the “midnight’s children” of Indian independence. She argues that to see them simply as defined by mindless consumption does not account for the complex ways that gendered consumption interacts with class and politics. For example, Lukose suggests that romance is, for these college students, a form of “public intimacy” that takes place in spaces of education and
consumption, such as movie theaters or ice cream parlors. Romance both “enables and constrains a young woman’s entry into and experience of a wider public world” (Lukose 2009: 19), but in the end reveals the limits for lower class and caste women in their aspirations of class mobility. Indeed, women with access to material wealth through remittances from relatives in the Gulf are harassed for trying to appear as part of a higher social class and caste despite demure or otherwise “traditional” behavior.19

Recent studies of middle and upper-class Indian women working in IT emphasize how they balance representing “modern” India with upholding respectability by prioritizing family life over career (Belliappa 2013; Clark and Sekher 2007; Fuller and Narasimhan 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008; Radhakrishnan 2009, 2011; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006, 2008). In Smita Radhakrishnan’s (2009, 2011) recent study of women in the IT industry in Bangalore and Silicon Valley, she finds that the idea of the “global Indian” is constructed through gender, in that women who take part in this identity gain self-esteem as they represent the nation’s modernity. However, they feel pressure to uphold a respectable Indian identity through performing a devotion to family life over work, to the detriment of their careers. Jyothsna Belliappa (2013), who also worked with women in IT in Bangalore, suggests that women justify their careers by claiming they are working for their families and not for themselves. In Chennai, women IT workers feel a sense of empowerment from working but, “still give their families higher priority than their work” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008: 203). In fact, Sanjukta Mukherjee (2008) argues that IT work in Bangalore is positioned as empowering for women because it fits normative ideas of femininity, as it is considered flexible and thus compatible with the roles of wife and mother, whether or not this is actually the case.

Women in IT can be compared to the problematic position of female call center workers (Kapur 2010; Nadeem 2011; Patel 2010; Mankekar 2015). Reena Patel’s (2010)

19 Similarly, Filippo and Caroline Osella (2000) argue that in rural Kerala, while economic and social change has come to a lower-caste community because of employment opportunities abroad, these changes do not extend to young people being able to marry for love or women being able to work outside the home.
research shows that female call center workers in Mumbai, despite relatively high earnings, are considered morally suspect because they work outside the home at night, thus transgressing spatial and gendered norms. Patel further finds that women who work in IT characterize women in call centers as less educated, prone to spending money on drinking and smoking, and open to casual dating. However, call center workers are usually from less affluent but solidly middle-class homes, as they need English language skills. Patel suggests that IT women work to distance themselves from call center workers precisely because they are so similar, as IT workers are also vulnerable to being cast as not respectable due to their long hours in mixed-gender workplaces, in an industry intimately connected to the west.

In call centers in Bangalore, Cari Costanzo Kapur (2010) finds that both men and women are rethinking arranged marriages and the prospect of marriage altogether, while enjoying new forms of mixed-gender socializing and courtship. However, Nicole Wilson (2014) observes that a woman who has worked in a “BPO” or call center is questionable in the conservative arranged marriage market of Madurai, Tamil Nadu, noting:

Working overnight automatically calls into question her reputation (read virginity), due to her location in a mixed-gender environment at all hours of the night…. Here, the value of moral integrity is elevated above the material possessions that could be acquired via the additional salary of the potential bride. (Wilson 2014: 140)

The possible gain from working in these industries must thus be weighed against likely damage to one’s reputation and marital future.

Gender and work in anthropology: Labor, the self, and global capitalism

Literature from the anthropology of gender and work speaks to conversations about the self and the value of labor under conditions of neoliberal global capitalism. After the Industrial Revolution, women from the lower and middle classes in Europe and the US began to join industrial workplaces (Tilly and Scott 1987). By the early 1900s, working in jobs connected to the urban economy began to align with women developing a self outside the
roles of wife and mother (Weinbaum et al. 2008). In the US, the debate has been defined in part by links between depression and women not working outside the home (Friedan 1963). In the 1980s, women participated in ever-growing numbers in America’s corporate boom yet also did much more of the housework and childcare than their partners (Hochshild 1989).

The driving question in early feminist anthropology of the 1970s was to ask why male dominance existed across cultures, with the answer lying in women’s lack of participation in the public or productive sphere (Reiter 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). Michelle Rosaldo proposed that women are assigned to the domestic rather than the public sphere in most cultures because of childcare responsibilities, noting, “Men have no single commitment as enduring, time-consuming, and emotionally compelling” as an infant, and thus are, “free to form those broader associations that we call ‘society’” (Rosaldo 1974: 24). Sherry Ortner suggests that women are devalued because they are associated with nature while men are linked to culture, arguing, “It is always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature” (Ortner 1974: 73). However, she argues that this is also a matter of male insecurity, as women are naturally creative while man must be artificially creative, making, “Technology and symbols… relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings” (Ortner 1974: 75). Marxist feminist anthropologists proposed that women lost power under capitalism because men were associated with production and women with reproduction (Edholm et al. 1977). Feminist anthropologists have since complicated these binaries, but the question of women’s work and power remains.

More recently, anthropologists of gender and work have focused on the multiple ways that gender, class, and race intersect to produce forms of discrimination; on the ways femininity is defined by labor practices; and on how women themselves experience participation in global labor markets. Many have pointed out that women have participated in public economic activities such as market transactions and other informal sector work as long
as there have been economies (see Brenner 1998; Clark 2010; Jones 2004; Kistler 2014; Leshkowich 2014). However, studies of women’s entry into formal labor have largely focused on women working in factories connected to global production and free trade zones (e.g. Balakrishnan 2002; Cravey 1998; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Lamphere et al. 1993; Mills 1999; Ong 1987; Rofel 1999; Salzinger 2003; Wolf 1992). In these sites, women are vulnerable to exploitation, as female factory laborers are assumed to have “nimble fingers” and be docile, and thus willing to accept lower wages for detailed, repetitive work. Their marginalization also makes them subject to violence (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 2010) and may lead to acts of weak resistance, such as foot dragging or, as Aihwa Ong (1987) found in a Malaysian factory, feminized spirit possession. In South Asia, Leela Fernandes (1997) finds that for women working in a jute mill in Calcutta in the early 1990s, attempts to unionize are undermined by divisions of class, community, and gender, but women also use work to resist a submissive domesticity at home. In a state-sponsored garment factory in Sri Lanka, Caitrin Lynch (2007) argues that unmarried women must negotiate their respectability as “good girls” as opposed to “juki girls,” the stereotype of female urban factory workers with an immoral reputation, while their obedience and acceptance of low wages are tied to their factory identity as submissive “daughters.”

Migrant care work has also become more sought after as women in wealthy countries and the global middle classes are increasingly participating in work outside the home. Anthropologists have studied women who work as migrant care workers in domestic service, childcare, nursing, and sex work (Constable 1997, 2003; Gamburd 2000; George 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Parreñas 2001). As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild argue:

The lifestyles of the First World are made possible by a global transfer of the services associated with a wife’s traditional role—child care, homemaking, and sex—from poor countries to rich ones…. Today, while still relying on Third World countries for

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20 See Piya Chatterjee (2001) for a resonant argument about gender, class, caste, and difficulties unionizing for tea plantation workers in North Bengal. In this case, women’s political power is further undermined by the industry’s romanticized association of a docile, contented Indian femininity with tea.
agricultural and industrial labor, the wealthy countries also seek to extract something harder to measure and quantify, something that can look very much like love. (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002: 4)

Many female migrant workers have left their own children behind and are subject to conditions of domination, from employers taking passports and various forms of abuse to more subtle forms of control. In the case of Filipina maids in Hong Kong, Nicole Constable (1997) suggests that they are encouraged to discipline themselves for faults found by employers, which offers a form of agency that is ultimately self-destructive. Overall, jobs in globalized labor do not benefit women as much as free-market proponents claim, especially since most of these women come from the lower classes and are already subject to various forms of disenfranchisement (see Gunewardena and Kingsolver 2007).

In white-collar work, intersections of gender, class, and race also structure the perceived (and real) value of labor. Leith Mullings (1988), for example, demonstrates how in the US, AT&T was able to hire African American women at lower wages because wider discrimination reduced their job options (318-9). In major US financial firms, Karen Ho argues that back office workers were overwhelmingly people of color and white women, and were, “Casually dubbed career nine-to-fivers; their work ethic was questioned, as was their smartness, drive, and innovation” (Ho 2009: 17). Referencing Sylvia Yanigasako’s (2002) work on family firms in Italy, Ho argues that in financial firms, family is thought to be external to the formation of capital, which ignores the kinship-like personal connections and sentiments—not to mention exclusions—that facilitate capitalist production (Ho 2009: 13).21

In Japan, where the majority of workers are employed in small to medium-size firms (as opposed to hegemonic ideas of elite companies), women make up an important part of the workforce but are devalued in these firms because they are wives and mothers, and thus thought to be contingent (Kondo 1990). In corporate offices in many global locations, women

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21 Melissa Fisher (2012) also finds that women on Wall Street must cope with a prevailing ethos of a meritocracy whereas the system is biased against women in myriad ways.
are assumed to be good communicators, detail-oriented, and willing to follow orders. In India, if they do not leave after marriage or having children, women are also thought to be more loyal to a company than men.

Another important source of research on the global white-collar workplace comes from ethnographies of science (e.g. Latour and Woolgar 1986; Rabinow 1997; Rapp 1999; Stevens 2013; Traweek 1988) and information technology (e.g. Aneesh 2006; Darrah et al. 2007; English-Lueck 2002). These workers study different phenomena and have different goals, yet operate under similar ideals of objective science for a greater good (that often includes a drive for profit), often without taking into account the gendered and colonial narratives built into the assumptions of their fields and their workplaces (Haraway 1988).

In technology companies, women are in the minority and face gendered assumptions about technology itself. As Francesca Bray writes, in her review of feminist technology studies (FTS), “Men are viewed as having a natural affinity with technology, whereas women supposedly fear or dislike it” (Bray 2007: 38). However, the field of FTS argues that technology and gender coproduce each other (Wajcman 2002, 2004). Categories of skills and technologies, for example, are assigned value in part through gender (Bowker and Star 1999). Lucy Suchman, an anthropologist who works in tech, argues that the gendered myth of the “lone (male) creator of new technology on the one hand, and the passive recipients of new technology on the other…[belies] the lived reality of systems development” (Suchman 1994: 22), a mindset that Suchman argues prevents collaborations between producers and users.

In the global outsourcing of digital work, Carla Freeman (2000, 2007) argues that women with “pink-collar” data-entry jobs in Barbados perform a respectable middle-class femininity through dress, attending church, and being devoted mothers. In particular, Freeman notes that fashioning a self that fits in a multinational digital office differentiates data entry workers from factory workers, and thus these jobs are attractive but do not
necessarily pay more than other sectors. In fact, most of the workers also engage in informal sector enterprises, such the “suitcase trade,” or hand importing clothing from abroad through airline tickets made available through their work and selling it in Barbados, in order to supplement their income and afford fashionable clothing themselves. Freeman writes:

> The data entry operator essentially performs ‘blue-collar’ work, but in place of the dust and fumes of garment and electronics houses, she is situated within a cleaner, cooler ‘white-collar’ setting, and as part of the trade, she is expected (and expects herself) to appear distinctly feminine and ‘professional.’ (Freeman 2000: 252)

Rather than seeing their work just as exploitation, however, Freeman argues that these jobs provide these women a space to develop their sense of self and to become “distinct.”

White-collar work has become more precarious globally, which is changing the dynamic between gender and work. Japanese men are experiencing a crisis of masculinity as they can no longer count on steady white-collar work and a normative married life (Allison 2013). In the US, the experience of layoffs as an expected part of the tech industry encourages workers to accept instability and embrace an individualism that lets employers off the hook (Lane 2011). At the same time, affective or caring skills usually associated with femininity are becoming more valued in white-collar fields (Boris and Parreñas 2010; Hardt 1999; Martin 1987, 1994), although women’s “immaterial labor” is still not valued (Weeks 2007). About affective labor, Carla Freeman argues, “…under systems of neoliberalism at large, the expanding affective economy increasingly looks upon emotional labor as a particular set of skills to be taught and valued” which she finds creates new expectations for emotional connection in home life as well (Freeman 2013: 98). However, just as these “feminine” skills become more normative, she argues that gender tends to be discounted:

> It strikes me that at just the moment that these modes of affective labor are being increasingly called for in the capitalist market, promoted explicitly as skills and not simply assumed (and unremunerated) natural essences, and as more and more men are performing these traditionally feminine skills, social critics are inclined to argue against the relevance of gender. (Freeman 2013: 99)
I argue, with Freeman, that as global capitalism becomes increasingly interconnected, relationship dependent, and volatile, gender is only more relevant as a basis for categorizing and valuing labor, and as a central part of lived experience that orients aspirations and subjectivities. These ideas come together in the idea of temporality, or our multifaceted relationship with time, and specifically in a gendered sense of temporality.

**III. Modernity and temporality in theory: Situating gender**

The idea of modernity has emerged in new subjectivities associated with urban life in European capitalist democracies, yet is based on a colonial narrative of difference that underlies the global capitalist economy. Feminist critiques of modernity argue that women are in an indeterminate position vis-à-vis modernity and question scientific claims to objectivity, while anthropologists argue that modernity is a myth that is fundamentally gendered. The concept of temporality, influenced by narratives of modernity, is particularly useful in understanding gendered subjectivities in Bangalore. I build on the work of feminist anthropologists who seek to understand gender not as a case of “adding women” to analyses, but as understanding powerful ideologies and theories as themselves gendered.

**Modernity as a narrative of a new kind of self, based on colonial difference**

The concept of modernity is most often used to describe totalizing processes and new subjectivities associated with global capitalism. The central tenets of modernity as a concept have roots in the Enlightenment era push toward scientific rationality and universal human rights in Europe and simultaneous colonial projects that denied these rights to the colonized. Beyond a new type of citizenship based on theories (if not practices) of equality, modernity also describes an emotional state of uncertainty and possibility associated with new urban spaces. Charles Baudelaire was one of the first to coin the term “modernity,” which he used
to describe a sense of transitoriness in impressionist art of the time, writing, “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (Baudelaire 1964 [1863]: 13) epitomized by his iconic modern figure the flâneur, a wealthy man in nineteenth century Paris who finds the ephemeral impressionism of the urban crowd intoxicating (Benjamin 1983).

This tendency for people to be mesmerized by the modern urban spectacle and retreat into individual pleasure was critiqued by nineteenth century European social theorists. Karl Marx identified modernity in the European shift from feudalism to capitalism, which brought exploitation, the deception of the working class, and alienation through the commodification process (1972: 335-345, 431-447; 1977: 85-95). For Marx, modernity offered a freedom that was inherently deceptive, writing, “Precisely the slavery of civil society is in appearance the greatest freedom because it is in appearance the perfect independence of the individual” (Marx 1977: 159). Emile Durkheim similarly argued that modernity represented a break from a pre-modern collective consciousness bound by religion and instead structured life through institutions (1984 [1893]). Max Weber found the modern Geist or “spirit” in Calvinist Protestants, whose hard work, frugality, and investment he credits with inventing capitalism in Northern Europe. Yet he argues that capitalism is based on a bureaucratic rationality and materialism that destroys religious spirit such that the “care for external goods” becomes “an iron cage” (Weber 1958 [1904-05]: 181).

Georg Simmel is perhaps the most prescient in his analysis of how capitalist liberal democracies shape urban spaces, anxieties, and aspirations. In The Metropolis and Mental Life (1950 [1903]), Simmel also saw modernity as resulting in greater individual freedom at the expense of relationships and purpose, due to the impersonal transactions of capitalism and overwhelming nature of urban life. As society grows and groups experience less unity, he argues that rules break down and individuals gain freedom. However, they also lose personal
relationships and develop an “aversion” to others as way to protect the self from the overstimulation of metropolitan life, resulting in a “devaluation” of the world and the self (Simmel 1950 [1903]: 415-7). If people are (theoretically) equal under rational liberal democracy, Simmel identifies capitalism as abstraction’s ultimate expression, writing:

All intimate emotional relations between persons are founded in their individuality, whereas in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in itself indifferent…. Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability. (Simmel 1950 [1903]: 411-4)

Due to the abstracting tendencies of the modern state, Simmel argues that “metropolitan man” seeks self worth through individual expression through capitalist consumption and a turning inward to private life and self improvement (Goodstein 2002: 226-7). 22

What I would like to highlight here is the characterization of a “freedom” connected to the condition of modernity—which includes individualization, mobility, and consumption made possible by global capitalism—which actually hides the exploitation and abstraction of capitalism. In a biting comment on class echoed by more recent critiques of cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 1989), Benjamin critiqued Baudelaire’s flâneur who loved the spectacle of the urban crowd, which is mainly made up of the working class. However, due to his class and gender status, the flâneur could move through the crowd without taking on their concerns of day-to-day existence structured by capitalist exploitation (Benjamin 1983: 56). 23

Marshall Berman (1982) describes modernity as containing both possibility and threat in remaking social relations. Drawing on the famous passage from Marx in which “all that is solid melts into air,” (Marx and Engels 1967 [1888]: 83), Berman describes modernity as uniting and also threatening and dislocating, writing:

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22 David Graeber, drawing on Ferguson (1988), argues that Simmel has become the “darling of modern-day free market Neoliberals” (Graeber 2001:33), yet Simmel’s analysis seems far from a celebration of the free market.

23 Both Benjamin and Hannerz describe a figure, in the flâneur and cosmopolitan, that is uncomfortably close to the anthropologist, who can travel and appreciate different cultures while not being subject to local constraints or politics. Anthropologists address this discomfort through political engagement and personal commitment to people in the field; still, I find this discomfort a real and appropriate indication of a global inequality.
To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. (Berman 1982: 15)

Although modernity seems always new, Berman points out that people have been experiencing this feeling of newness for the past five hundred years, and thus it is perhaps this dual sense of possibility and danger itself that most characterizes modernity.

Yet, with others, I argue that underlying these contradictory impulses is a much more powerful tension between ideas of liberation on the one hand, and exploitation and/or the loss of authenticity on the other. The origins of this tension come from the colonial origins of capitalism itself. Foucault is perhaps the most influential critic of the modern state, arguing that those in power use technologies of control that entail new subjectivities (Foucault 1988, 1991, 1995 [1977]). While Foucault and the social theorists above examined the social consequences of modernity, they did not locate these processes in the European colonial project (Stoler 1995). The modern nation-state rests on concepts of rationality, liberal democracy, universal human rights, and the idea of shared national origins and purpose (Anderson 1991 [1983]; Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Gellner 1983; Handler 1988; Hobsbawm 1992). The nation-state may be created by myths of shared origins, but as Partha Chatterjee (1993) notes, it rests on a narrative of evolutionary progress toward “modernity” as typified by western nations. After all, colonial projects—as Edward Said (1978) forcefully argued—exoticize the colonized in order to define the west through its opposite.

Said (1989) also identified anthropology’s historic role in “Orientalism” (see also Asad 1973; Coronil 1996; Trouillot 1991). Nicholas Dirks (2001) argues that “the ethnographic state” in colonial India used knowledge about Indian people and customs to reify categories of caste for purposes of taxation, while Ann Stoler (2002) finds that in Dutch
Indonesia, colonial ethnography helped maintain boundaries between colonies and the metropole through an intimate management of gender, class, race, and sexuality. Nineteenth century anthropology, influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution and the colonial “civilizing mission,” also had a role in framing modernity as a narrative of progress and salvation (Morgan 1877). It is the narrative of potential transformation—the messianic potential for different cultures to be “liberated” by progressing toward modernity—that makes the concept of modernity so powerful and also so destructive (Keane 2007). Modernization theory of the 1950s similarly suggests that societies “develop” along a continuum as they relinquish traditional practices and embrace modern capitalism (Rostow 1960). Anthropologists and others have insightfully critiqued international development as neocolonial, yet “development” remains a powerful global discourse (Escobar 1988, 1995; Ferguson 1994, 2006; Goldman 2005; Gupta 1998; Hausner 2006; Pigg 1992; Scott 1998).

Thus, while the power of modernity rests on appearing to be natural and universal in a way that obscures histories of inequality, this power actually comes from a continued engagement of difference. As William Mazzarella argues:

…if we reexamine the universalizing project of Western modernity…we will see that the story of the virgin birth has been a long and ongoing attempt to deny an actuality of miscegenation. The universalist categories of modernity arose and today continue to be reinvented in an attempt to manage the otherness of the worlds that Europeans confronted. The important point is that locality and difference constitute modernity; they are not subsumed by it…. The notion that the rise of Western modernity was, above all, a matter of the diffusion of universalizing processes and categories is central to both critical and affirmative versions of this story. (Mazzarella 2003: 38-9)

Modernity is thus a narrative that depends on maintaining difference, and therefore has an investment in making sure some people cannot become modern.

Postcolonial critiques from India’s Subaltern Studies Collective have reached similar conclusions about modernity as a narrative of difference in which the colonized constantly strive but can never become modern, resulting in anxieties about temporality (see also du Bois and Edwards 2007 [1903]; Fanon 1952). Partha Chatterjee (1993 [1986]) critiques
Benedict Anderson’s idea of the modular or universal nation, instead arguing that the “rule of colonial difference” ensures postcolonial nations can never “catch up” (5, 16-8). There is a permanent “time lag” for postcolonial nations which never “arrive” at an ever-elusive modernity, as Homi Bhabha argues, and the colonized subject feels partial because the, “…ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite)…becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” (Bhabha 1994: 86).

Colonialism sets up a contradictory temporality. In India, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues that there is both a modern future that the nation should move toward and a future of infinite and chaotic possibilities directed by myriad precolonial histories and traditions. To resolve this ambivalence, Chakrabarty draws on the work of Rabindranath Tagore, suggesting that the nationalist movement separated empirical modernity and the “world,” which aimed to improve the nation through development and is found in Tagore’s prose, from a love of nation or a spiritual “home” found in his poetry (Chakrabarty 2000: 153). This separation was gendered for Tagore, as seen in his novel The Home and the World (see 2005 [1916]).

**Feminist and anthropological critiques of modernity and globalization**

“First wave feminism” built on movements for universal political rights in the 18th century and women’s suffrage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in western Europe and the US. These campaigns were ideologically based on Enlightenment theories of equality, but because the movement argued for treating women as equal citizens and asked for special legal considerations, Joan Scott (1996) suggests that this led to a “paradox” as it is based on an idea of difference which it also sought to invalidate. Feminism’s “second wave” is identified with the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s (di Leonardo 1991). This movement was ideologically inspired in part by Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, which argued that women are constructed as objectified “Others” to a presumed male subject.
Othering is an act of domination that is resisted, as “No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential,” yet Beauvoir argues that women are disunited and thus accept this domination submissively (Beauvoir 2005 [1952]: 29). Feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin theorizes that women’s devaluation is in fact due to their ambiguous status between object and subject, suggesting that women are caught between representing “a certain category of signs” and being a “generator of signs” (Rubin 1975: 201), much like the partial subjectivity identified by postcolonial scholars.

“Third wave” feminism critiqued western assumptions of the universality of women’s needs across class, race, sexuality, and culture (Butler 1999[1989]; Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1984; Mohanty 1988, 2003; Spivak 2006 [1988]; Trinh 1989; Visweswaran 1994; see also Roth 2004). In anthropology, the edited volume Remaking Women (Abu-Lughod 1998) complicated associations of empowerment and women’s entry into the public sphere in the Muslim world, while Saba Mahmood (2005) argues that Muslim women in Cairo chose to align with a patriarchal fundamentalist movement not because they are oppressed, but because they find a sense of political and social purpose in a way that does not adhere to western ideas of feminism or agency.

At the same time, feminist analyses of the nation-state argue that it is “naturalized” in large part through gender, through familial narratives that place women in the position of representing and reproducing the nation (McClintock 1995; Verdery 1994; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). Postcolonial and subaltern feminist critiques assert that nationalism is different in colonized and postcolonial places, as representations of gender and nation occur in relation to the current or former colonial power (Jayawardena 1986; Kandiyoti 1994; Kim-Puri 2005; Mohanty 1988; Spivak 2006 [1988]). As Carole McGranahan argues, in Tibetan nationalism women do not stand for the nation (169), so in the case of a “Miss Tibet” pageant...
in Lhasa staged by the Chinese state, she asks, “For whom is Tibet represented as woman?” (McGranahan 1996: 161).

Further, globalization, a multifaceted term concerned with processes of increased global connections and movements of capital, cultural content, and people across the globe, is tied to modernity in current literature (Hannerz 1989, 1996; Ong and Collier 2005; Tsing 2000, 2005). As flows of information, people and capital become more complex, culture seems to become less attached to place (Castells 1996; Giddens 1990, 1991; Harvey 1990; Massey 2005; Sassen 2007). Anthropologists have wrestled with the relationship between “local” and “global,” many questioning whether culture is still a useful concept (Abu-Lughod 1991; Appadurai 1991; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1995), while others ask whether “local” has become feminized while “global” is masculine (Freeman 2001). Ethnographic approaches to the circulation of cultural production suggest that local culture is not homogenized by globalization (Liechty 2003; Mazzarella 2003), nor does globalization move only from “the west” to elsewhere (Hart 2002). Further, since the 1980s and the policies of Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK, anthropologists have traced increased global inequality to “neoliberal” policies and practices that involve reduced state services, increased state support of corporations, and a focus on privatization, individual consumer choice, and self-improvement (Harvey 2005; Hoffman et al. 2006; Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008). Many critique neoliberalism for valuing people only according to their economic productivity and ability to improve themselves (Biehl 2007; Ong 2006).

Anthropologists have approached modernity as a narrative of global belonging that is locally practiced. The anthropological idea of “alternative modernities” responds to debates about globalization by proposing that modernity and capitalism operate differently everywhere (Abu-Lughod 2000; Gaonkar 2001; Knauff 2002; T. Mitchell 2000; Ong 1999; Rofel 1999) and may be characterized more by disjuncture than homogenization (Appadurai
I draw on recent work in anthropology that addresses modernity as a set of real processes and as a powerful myth that affects people in lived experience. My understanding of modern processes is summarized well by Marilyn Ivy, as:

…urban energies, capitalist structures of life, and mechanical and electrical forms of reproduction… the problem of the nation-state and its correlation with a capitalist colonialism… the emergence of individualism and new modes of interiority… [accompanied by] anxieties of modernity, with its rationalizing technologies, individualizing procedures, and totalizing apparatuses. (Ivy 1995: 4-5, 11)

These anxieties come in part from modernity as a signifying myth that creates a sense of anxiety about status on an imagined modernity scale (Ferguson 1999: 13-14). Modernity is also a moral narrative of purification based on ideas of human separation from and control of nature (Latour 1993), and on its celebration of an emancipated subject formed in the colonial encounter and seen in colonial conversion narratives (Keane 2007).

Further, anthropological analyses find that modernity is relational and practiced in social interaction in ways that are classed and gendered (Liechty 2003). Lisa Rofel (referencing Clifford Geertz) argues that that “modernity exists as a narrated imaginary: it is a story people tell themselves about themselves in relation to others” (Rofel 1999: 13, emphasis added). A sense of expulsion from modernity or of “going backwards” can be felt as extremely painful (Brenner 1998; Ferguson 1999). I also build on James Ferguson’s idea of modernity as performed in practices of social distinction, and embodied as “internalized capabilities of performatve competence and ease that must be achieved, not simply adopted” (Ferguson 1999: 96). To be modern is to perform and embody modernity in the context of local others, although these definitions are seldom clear and never static.

The gender of time: Key themes in temporality theory

Temporality is a key narrative element as people imagine and evaluate their lives, and brings together questions of modernity, globalization, gender, and morality. The idea of
temporality refers, more or less, to the various ways people are engaged in a relationship with
time. Anthropologists have had a long-standing interest in how people in varied cultural
contexts experience time differently, many building on Durkheim’s (2001 [1912]) idea of
“social time” that is qualitatively differentiated by socially meaningful events and rituals.
Bronislaw Malinowski (1927) argued that people in the Trobriand Islands reckoned time in a
functional sense, according to the seasons and gardening activities specific to that
environment. For the Nuer in South Sudan, E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1940, 1939) proposed the
idea of “oecological time” to describe time reckoning driven by local ecologies versus
“structural time,” or generational time shaped by age groups. Clifford Geertz (1973b) was
more concerned with how time shapes personhood, suggesting that in Bali the person is not
defined by a unique temporal biography but by their many relational identities that are
conceived as “types” and thus are not unique, arguing that personhood is “detemporalized.”
Edmund Leach (1961) suggested a theory of ritual time much like Van Gennep’s (1960) rites
of passage, including a separation phase into sacred time, a middle phase when time stands
still or even reverses, and desacralized time when the ritual ends.

These approaches tend to treat cultures as synchronic rather than diachronic. As part
of the postcolonial turn of the 1970s, Johannes Fabian (1983) challenged anthropologists to
recognize how their narrative conventions left the people they wrote about out of historical
time, and thus out of the contemporary world. History itself, as one way of dealing with time,
is about telling a story for a particular purpose in the present that can be seen as tied to a
western sense of linear time. Hayden White argues that historical representation claims to be
an objective, non-judgmental record of real events, yet the process fits events into a narrative
according to an agenda, referencing Lévi-Strauss’s comment that, “‘History’ is never simply
history, but always ‘history-for,’” (White 1978: 56). For Foucault (1977), history is defined
by successive layers of interpretation, constantly replacing one set of rules with another
according to who is in power; thus history creates the idea of “truth” as processual and static, but this truth comes apart when “excavated.” History further differs from memory, in that memories can be social or “collective” in that people communicate through shared memories that can be drawn from personal experience or passed down through generations (Halbwachs 1992: 173), which has profound implications for temporality.

But how can we understand more about the way time and ideas about time are experienced subjectively? In trying to tease apart the difference between rural, cyclical time versus capitalist, linear time, Akhil Gupta speaks about the normalcy of reincarnation stories in India as a counter to a hegemonic notion of industrial time, writing, “I turn the gaze around and investigate the partiality of the self-representations of the West” (Gupta 1992: 191). These differing emphases can also be found in the rhythms of everyday kinship relations in India. As noted by Anand Giridharadas, in a joint family consisting of two brothers and their families living on separate floors of a house in a small city in Punjab, the upstairs family adhered to a linear sense of time in which “Time was to be managed wisely and schedules to be packed,” whereas downstairs, “the family took things day by day,” treating time as something “to be endured, not extracted for profit” (Giridharadas 2011: 214).

Many theoretical approaches to time, including surveys of the anthropology of time (Gell 1992; Munn 1992), have focused on the difference between what philosophers have termed “A-series” and “B-series” time, drawn from a paper by J.M.E. McTaggert (1908). For the purpose of this discussion, B-series time refers to a sense of material time that does not involve human agency or perception; A-series refers to the way that humans experience time and thus is subjective, akin to the difference between quantitative and qualitative evaluation of time. Many philosophers have argued that B-series or material time is the foundation for A-series time; anthropologists tend to follow phenomenological traditions that focus on A-series or subjective perceptions (Hodges 2008).
One approach that I find useful in resolving this binary comes from a renewed interest in the work of Henri-Louis Bergson, mainly his *Matter and Memory* ([1908] 1991), reintroduced to contemporary social theory in Gilles Deleuze’s *Bergsonism* (1991). The heart of Bergson’s theory of time is the idea of *la durée* or duration, which is the idea that time is not a succession of moments but that past, present, and future exist all at once as virtual, actual, and potential, such that people can and do experience multiple temporalities. Elizabeth Grosz (2004) describes Bergson’s concern with “differences in kind,” which are qualitative and are found in memory, versus “differences in degree” that can be divided, measured, and ranked quantitatively, found in matter. Differences in kind are constituted by open systems that are constantly emerging and are thus defined by their potential. Living beings have the capacity to perceive the world and to act on it, causing the innovation that characterizes these open systems. Such choice is temporal in that, according to Grosz, “Freedom…is the capacity to act in concert with one’s past to bring about a future not contained in it” (Grosz 2004: 168). Matt Hodges (2008) has also suggested using Bergson to resolve the difference between B-series and A-series time, writing:

> La durée is abstractly and analogously defined as consisting of concrete, qualitative multiplicities, which divide continuously. These multiplicities in reality comprise the life and matter of the universe, which one can therefore describe as existing in a state of incessant, relational division, ‘flux’, or ‘individuation.’ (Hodges 2008: 410)

For Bergson, duration is multiple because it is endlessly emergent.

Although it still relies at least superficially on dualities, the idea of duration is helpful in understanding temporality as gendered because instead of framing the subjective experience of time as “just” a matter of perception, it treats time itself as *constituted by* qualitative multiplicities. I find this argument similar to that made by Donna Haraway (1988) that there is no such thing as scientific objectivity, which is gendered male, and instead every perspective is subjective and “situated.” Veena Das uses the idea of duration in her work on subjectivity and women’s memories of violence in India by asking:
What is the work that time does in the creation of the subject?.... The simultaneity of events at the level of phenomenal time that are far apart in physical time make the whole of the past simultaneously available.... Is there one duration or are there many?.... Duration then is not simply one of the aspects of subjectivity—it is the very condition of subjectivity. (Das 2007: 95-8)

Using Bergson’s idea of multiple durations, she elaborates an idea of memory as both a continuous existence of images in an individual’s consciousness that can be accessed as needed, and a more selective memory that chooses certain aspects to emphasize. She argues that women dealt with trauma not “in transcendence or in escaping to a different future,” but instead, “in being able to descend into the ordinary by what I would call a temporality of second chances” (Das 2007: 101). In this sense, temporality is an important part of identity and subjectivity, and is also part of how we evaluate and cope with our lives.

Temporality depends on social position and power (Greenhouse 1996). As Steven Caton observes, although Bergson’s duration is, “a matter of quality and thus of consciousness… that is deeply embedded in the self…the analysis does not necessarily help us understand how the consciousness of duration might be different for differently positioned individuals” (Caton 2014: 253). How does one’s temporality differ depending on gender, class, race, caste, sexuality, and global location? Sarah Sharma (2014) finds that political economic formations directly affect how people experience time, as control over time signals privilege. In Congo, James Smith suggests that miners experience “temporal dispossession,” writing, “The dispossession of Congolese from their capacity to produce predictable time is a major feature of their violent and unequal insertion in global capitalism…. They have been dispossessed of the social things through which they might build the future” (Smith 2011: 21). Temporality depends on social conditions even as it shapes subjectivity.

Following Bergson and Das, if we understand temporality to shape subjectivity even as time itself is constituted by subjectivity, then it follows that the above concerns are gendered. In seeking to understand the ways gender structures how we think about time, I
draw on a recent critique by Sherry Ortner (2014), who argues it is “too soon for postfeminism” because of patriarchal structures in institutions of global capitalism. I also build on an older argument about gender and the self from Marilyn Strathern (1990), who proposes that instead of trying to understand a universal male dominance, we should look for the violence embedded in gendered structures of selfhood, interaction, and ideology.

**Conclusions: Gender, theory, ethnography**

Women play a highly ambiguous role in colonial discourse and nationalist history, which position women as needing to be contained by male relatives or by the patriarchal state. Indian feminists have thus been in a contradictory position as they seek to improve women’s rights and also fight neocolonial critiques of Indian culture on the basis of gender. Research on Indian women joining global white-collar work focuses on the moralized balance between tradition and modernity, yet these analyses are limited in that they pay less attention to the interactions between global capitalist structures and gendered ideas of labor and the self. As the modernity narrative is a temporal myth that categorizes people in terms of difference from a “modern” European/Western male, I argue that the idea of gendered temporality is important for understanding the lives of professional women in Bangalore.

Certain theories become more powerful or convincing than others, and this process of evaluation can also be thought of as gendered. For Catherine Lutz (1995), certain concepts gain scholarly value and are given the designation of “theory” through a gendered process that valorizes the masculine and devalues the feminine, thus edging female academics—who also often make their arguments through personal, everyday stories, or take gender as their subject—out of the ranks of “theorists.” This is similar to processes that associate men with culture and women with nature (Ortner 1974), or men with globalization and women with the local (Freeman 2001). These arguments are overly binary and blunt in order to make a point,
yet I am sympathetic to their ideas in part because they give insight into the unequal relationship between ethnography and theory. In this I follow Veena Das (2014) in her inversion of the normative use of philosophical theory in anthropology. Das explains how she uses the work of two philosophers, writing, “For me, it is the concrete events of my fieldwork that clarify the ideas I find in Austin and Cavell…. I found myself attracted to Cavell’s work because his philosophy is able to respond to the pressures from my ethnography” (Das 2014: 280-1). Perhaps ethnography should inform theory, and not the other way around.
Chapter Two


When you lead you’re literally like a man. You’re doing a man’s job, right? You’re earning the same amount or more. So the conflict is much more because women say, ‘I’m equal to you. Why can’t you also pitch in?’.... The minute you have money in your pocket you’re more powerful. So I think this generation of Indian women, my generation, started feeling the power.

--Priyanka, thirty-six, stay-at-home mom and former sales director for a multinational IT company

These women are going by the jet speed and the guys are still in the bullock carts.

--Alka, fifty, housewife with home-based business

Economic liberalization in Bangalore has meant economic opportunity in the form of white-collar jobs and also a dramatic growth in the consumption landscape, from American fast food chains, to malls with international brands, to constant broadcasts of foreign media. The city is a site of dreams and aspirations, for young people in rural India as well as urban residents aspiring to the middle classes, yet the gulf between the middle classes and upper classes and the rest of Bangalore continues to grow. The women I worked with were in the perceived heart of the action, having access to coveted jobs in the global IT industry and to consumer experiences out of reach for the vast majority of Indians. Yet for them, the desired center has moved again, not to the west, but to an imagined future India with more gender equality at home and at work, and new possible identities for women.

Neoliberal India is characterized by privatization and the rising importance of choice, especially for the middle classes, who have a multiplicity of options as opposed to previous Indian generations (Mazzarella 2005; Oza 2006; Varma 1998). While women in Bangalore are framing their desires in keeping with neoliberal aspirations, I find these desires and choices are constrained in ways that temporally displace them to the future. However, the
future in contemporary India is dangerous in part because of the volatility of global capital, as illustrated by layoffs throughout the Indian IT industry in the wake of the global recession of 2008, and by the ever-present threat of global capital to follow cheaper labor elsewhere in the world. Anxieties about economic and social futures are articulated through the morally ambiguous figure of the modern Indian woman, as a symbol of—and threat to—cultural and familial resilience in the context of the latest outside threat to Indian identity.

**Priyanka’s story: Liberalization and new life choices**

Priyanka, thirty-six, recently left her job as a director in the sales department of a multinational IT company and is currently working part-time from home, but expects to return when her daughter is older. She has worked for the past fifteen years, climbing the corporate ladder in jobs associated with the outsourcing boom after liberalization in the 1990s. From a middle-class, upper-caste Hindu family from north India, Priyanka has been divorced and remarried, moved from north to south India, bought her own house when she was single, lived and worked on her own in Bangalore, and lived with her second husband before they married. Her older sister Lila, a housewife who had an arranged marriage and moved abroad in the early 1990s, often tells Priyanka that she has seen India change through her. As Priyanka says, “My sister left India before it started to bloom. With the economy I think people bloom too. I started working in the mid-nineties when the economy opened up. So she saw a lot of changes in me. I became a working woman and independent.” Her sister left an India where Priyanka’s life was unthinkable, much less possible.

Priyanka tracks changes in India through the lives of women in her family. Her grandmother was married at age nine and had no education, while her mother and her aunts went to school but not college and were married by eighteen. Her mother grew up in rural Gujurat, in a joint family of twenty people living in a two-room house with one bathroom.
Priyanka says, “When I hear all this I’m just so distant from them now. It’s impossible to connect to that life, to the way they lived.” She says her mother says “lovely things” about growing up in the house, but Priyanka feels she could never be so selfless to enjoy living in such a situation. When her parents married, her mother moved in with her in-laws in Delhi. Her father’s family was Gujurati but had lived in Delhi for generations, so they spoke Gujurati and Hindi, but her mother spoke only Gujurati, so her mobility in Delhi was limited. Her mother’s life revolved around her husband’s family, as he had several sisters who visited every weekend, and she was responsible for cooking and taking care of them.

Priyanka was raised in a conservative household, but found that things were different for her and her older sister Lila because society was changing so rapidly. She feels that she had a much “freer life” than her sister, saying, “I’m just five years younger but there is a lot of difference. We have a big generation gap.” Her father allowed her to wear jeans while her sister had to wear Indian clothes such as salwar kameez.24 He also did not allow their mother or her sister to wear makeup, but Priyanka’s first job was with an airline, and she says it was expected that she wear makeup. This job gave her confidence, a new look, and her first boyfriend, saying, “That was a real turning point for my life in a certain way. Number one, economically I became independent. I started to put on lipstick…. I got a boyfriend for myself from a different caste.” She was living at home but felt her parents could no longer regulate her life because she had her own money, saying, “The minute you have money in your pocket you’re more powerful. So I think this generation of Indian women, my generation, started feeling the power.”

Priyanka married her boyfriend after five years of dating. Her parents accepted her love marriage because, she says, they realized she would not agree to an arranged marriage. However, her marriage fell apart after another five years. She and her husband had moved in

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24 Salwar kameez refers to a common style of Indian dress for women that includes loose pants, a loose, long tunic top, and a scarf worn with the ends over the back of the shoulders, printed in complementary Indian fabrics. This outfit is considered relatively conservative and especially appropriate for college or work.
with her in-laws to a one-bedroom house in Delhi, so they did not have a room of their own. She says, “We couldn’t develop a relationship between us…. You know, a comaraderie between yourselves.” She says she felt like the children of her in-laws rather than a couple, except that her in-laws would take her husband’s side during arguments. Priyanka found a job in Bangalore so they could move together and “start afresh,” but her husband’s mother pressured him to return. Eventually he moved back and she did not, and they agreed to divorce. She says she was relieved to be able to “run away” from the relationship, which she now realizes was an immature response, but felt she had no guidance in solving marital problems from her parents. She says after the divorce, “I became an adult, because I was living on my own in Bangalore. It was great because I started growing up. I started dealing with things.” She feels that work, although very intense, was crucial to her developing a sense of purpose and independence at this time.

Priyanka has found a sense of personal satisfaction through work, even though the hours have been demanding. Her second job was as a manager in a call center, where she says she learned how to manage recent college graduates. In her next job she directed customer service for a US-based retail firm, where she learned about US corporate norms, saying, “It’s not that they train you but they expect you to behave like that.” She was also assigned a female American mentor who taught her how to coach a team. In her next job, in the sales division of a multinational IT firm, she had to learn how to motivate people without financial incentives but instead by finding what motivated each person. Priyanka feels that managing can be stressful, but says she loved going to work every day to interact with her team. She says, “Work has definitely made a big difference in my life. Not only do you work for yourself, you want to inspire other young women.” She has mentored several women in making the transition from entry-level worker to manager.

In part because of the course her life has taken, Priyanka links the changes in India
since liberalization to changes in relationships. She met her second husband, who is also divorced and upper-caste Hindu but from south India, through her work. She says her husband’s first marriage only lasted “a quarter,” which they joke about because they are both in business and have to do business reports every quarter. His wife, who did not work, left him because he had trouble communicating, as he was too focused on making money, indicating expectations about a communicative marriage. She says she sometimes has to remind him when he is not talking, but feels that they understand each other because they both feel the pressures of work.

While her sister Lila has supported her throughout, she also critiques Priyanka’s generation’s attitude toward marriage. Priyanka says, “A couple of my friends are also divorcees and [Lila] would always say, ‘You guys just give up too easily.’ And I was like, ‘Giving up means what?’” Priyanka argues that if “giving up” means leaving an unhappy marriage, then it is worth it. However, she also questions whether young women today can settle on one man. She explains that through work they start dating, which makes them too picky for marriage because work “exposes so much.” This is the potential downside of economic liberalization, because while it has allowed for the freedom Priyanka has had to shape her life, too few rules—especially for women—can mean a loss of familial stability.

Priyanka is currently staying home to care for her daughter, which shows her own ambivalence about her role in the work of kinship. She explains she feels her daughter needs her when she is young, and that she was not satisfied with leaving her in a daycare or with a nanny, and does not have access to familial help. She says she is taking a “break,” and hopes to return in a few months or a year when her daughter is older. She is redirecting energies into her daughter, who she says is like “another project,” but she misses her work and looks forward to returning. Whether she can return, however, is not at all certain, as it is difficult to regain a high-level position after leaving. She also would want a position with less
responsibility so she has more time for her daughter. These tensions are not resolved, and I see them displaced into a future imagined zone of possibility.

I. Modern women in Bangalore: Popular stereotypes and the ambiguity of “exposure”

Stereotyping women is a way of making them knowable, and therefore controllable, while providing a scapegoat for modern anxieties. The figure of the modern woman has emerged as an important site for understanding modernity as morally dangerous, especially in colonial and postcolonial settings. In the 1920s and 30s, a new type of woman began to emerge in urban centers and in commodity advertisements worldwide, with processes of modernity associated with industrialization, urbanization, and World War I. “The modern girl,” as referred to by the collective historical project “The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group” (Weinbaum et al. 2008), is characterized by an unconcerned sexuality and a nonconformist attitude regarding marriage, and can be traced to a new form of global capitalism and the entry of unmarried women into urban workplaces. The group describes an ambiguous modernity: “Adorned in provocative fashions, in pursuit of romantic love, modern girls appeared to disregard roles of dutiful daughter, wife, and mother” and were “a harbinger of both the possibilities and dangers of modern life” (Weinbaum et al. 2008: 1, 8).

Modern girls were often identified in publications of the time as the frivolous, consumption-obsessed, lower-class daughters of the “New Woman,” a term that referred to upper class first wave feminists. However, historical evidence indicates that so-called modern girls were politically active, while the previous generation’s New Women were also interested in fashion and popular culture (Weinbaum et al. 2008: 9-10). This renaming from “woman” to “girl” in many local versions of the term was thus an attempt by elite society to dismiss and contain this troubling figure, who was positioned uncomfortably in between
childhood and adulthood and not under the control of fathers or husbands. The “modern girl” was also a threat to class boundaries and claims to modernity in changing times:

…a ‘Modern Girl look’…allowed women to disrupt class boundaries and to challenge established gender relations….the Modern Girl threatened male authority, the elite’s privileged claim to ‘being modern,’ and she polluted the elite marriage market… Overall, the Modern Girl’s ‘girlness’ could work to trouble or shore up social conventions and raced and gendered hierarchies. (Weinbaum et al. 2008: 12)

In the United Kingdom, the figure of the “shop girl” became a locus for these anxieties and fantasies. Shop girls were stereotyped as aspiring lower class women who used their sexual attractiveness to sell products and attempt class mobility, perhaps by seducing an upper class man (Sanders 2006). The shop girl also embodies social anxieties about the effects of consumption on morality and class.

However, the modern girl was somewhat different in postcolonial places. The “Modern Girl” group writes, “Whereas anticolonial struggles tended to view the Modern Girl with suspicion, nationalist projects often mobilized the white Modern Girl as a signifier of ‘healthy’ and ‘civilized’ national femininity” (Weinbaum et al. 2008: 17). In India, interpretations of the modern girl were shaped by the politics of colonialism and nationalism, which placed her in an even more troubling position. Priti Ramamurthy (2008) locates a version of the modern girl in Indian cinema of the 1920s and 30s, which depicted the lives of urban women in colleges, workplaces, and in consumption-based lifestyles. These women were often played by Anglo-Indian actresses whose racial impurity both allowed and restricted them to joining “modern” and thus less “respectable” professions, such as acting. However, by the late 1930s Gandhi’s anti-colonial nationalist movement had gained momentum, and these modern girls were replaced by idealized “respectable” Indian women or Bharat nari actresses, who performed an adherence to tradition through Indian dress, enactment of religious rituals, and a submissive demeanor (Ramamurthy 2008: 163).
My approach to the modern woman draws upon Joshua Barker and Johan Lindquist’s approach to modernity in Indonesia through the idea of societal “key figures” as “particular sites that allow access to ideological formations and their contestations” (Barker and Lindquist 2009: 36). I build especially on Carla Jones’s (2009) argument that in urban Indonesia, the career woman (wanita karir) is a figure who represents the aspirations and positively imagined modern future of the nation. Yet she is also deeply worrying, as embodying moral dangers related to modernity, capitalism, and social change, represented by fears of uncontrolled female sexuality and of women choosing work and consumption over caring for family. Jones links this figure to broader anxieties about capitalism, writing:

As a figure whose priorities are questionable, a wanita karir is a problematic individual, a woman whose visibility, mobility, and desires are seen as linking improper femininity to social decay…the wanita karir captures anxieties about the relationship between capitalism and social relations in contemporary Indonesia. While these anxieties are never resolved, they temporarily alight on the bodies of women who are associated with office work and consumption. (Jones 2009: 68)

However, these women are also individuals who actively negotiate these stereotypes as they build their own lives. Jones observes, “Individual wanita karir are not only signs of social anxiety, but reflect consciously on it” (Jones 2009: 68). She finds that such women perform respectability in other ways, such as attending a highly visible mosque several times a week.

**Modern Indian women in popular imagination**

In India, the figure of the independent, working, “modern Indian woman,” related to the “new Indian woman” associated with liberalization in the 1990s, is found in popular media from advertising to fiction and cinema. I use the phrase “modern Indian woman” because that is the phrase I heard most often—I feel that while this figure was “new” in the 1990s, by 2012 she was no longer new but was associated with the English term “modern.” In Bangalore, I heard the English terms “modern woman,” along with “career woman” and less often “working girl,” to refer to this complex figure. For example, one woman explained...
that her friend was unhappily married to a conservative man who would not let her go out with her friends, saying, “I mean she’s a working girl, we went to the same college. So it’s not like someone who’s not as educated.” Here, the phrase “working girl” refers to an educational and class status that does not match her conservative husband’s attitudes. In contrast, men in particular used the phrase “career woman” to indicate a woman who was too devoted to her career, sayings things such as, “She’s a total career woman. She has no interest in marriage.” “Modern woman,” along with the word “modern,” were most commonly used by women and men alike, but were somewhat ambiguous, referring to a woman who held liberal attitudes about dating, working, drinking, smoking, and other questionable and/or empowering behavior. For example, one woman described her friend’s mother-in-law as a “modern woman” because she allowed her daughter-in-law to work and did not expect grandchildren right away. These words are about gender, and they are also about class.

In popular culture, the modern Indian woman has many avatars. In a recent Indian television commercial, the actress Priyanka Chopra promotes diamond jewelry for “the woman of spirit” (Asmi Diamond Jewelry 2010). The camera focuses on earrings, a necklace, and a ring, with the implication that it is not associated with a wedding, but tied to her own initiative and hard work (although perhaps has been bought for her by an admirer). Seen on a film set, she smiles confidently while interacting with a male director, then says to the camera, “I believe that every day’s a test, where I have to prove myself. That destiny, and hard work, they go hand in hand. It doesn’t matter where you come from, as long as you believe in yourself. I believe in me.” Other commercials emphasize women buying scooters and cars and thus buying freedom, as they are not dependent upon a man for transport. Professional women are a relatively new, sought-after consumer demographic in India.

Meanwhile, characters in a new genre of Indian “chick lit” follow familiar plot lines in women-centered fiction of competing pressures to conform to tradition or follow new
opportunities for independence and romance, often through work and living in a city. Like other “global chick lit,” these stories take place in a globalized and cosmopolitan context that directly addresses cultural dilemmas about the west (Ommundsen 2011). In India, these novels often center on Indian cultural dilemmas that involve “traditional” parents and agonies over marriage in the context of new careers and boyfriends (Kala 2007; Madhavan 2008; Subramanian 2010). For example, *Keep the Change* (2010), by Nirupama Subramanian, follows Damayanthi, a Tamil Brahmin woman from conservative Chennai, to a corporate accounting job in Mumbai. As the back cover asks, “Can a good girl ever really have a good time? Can the conservative, curd-rice eating Damayanthi become a cool, corporate babe?” Her provincial nature is indicated here by the fact that she is “curd-rice eating,” a dish associated with south Indian tradition, yet she is obsessed with watching *Sex in the City,* mainly because it feels as far removed from her home as possible. In Mumbai she shares an apartment with a female “size-zero” coworker who is blasé about urban life, she falls for a male coworker who she discovers is also seeing someone else, and she makes her first-ever male friend at work, all while fighting off her mother’s attempts to arrange her marriage. In the end she is ambivalent about how the city and especially the corporate world have changed her, but—as the title indicates—she firmly believes there is no going back.

Recent Indian cinema has also featured “modern women,” who must be shaken out of their singled-minded career focus by the male lead (*Kal Ho Naa Ho* 2003), or are appealingly free-spirited and independent so as to win over a workaholic man (*Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* 2011). Both these films use a mix of Hindi and English, and access aspirations about the west in ways that mirror ideas about the Indian economy at the time; the first, part of the romance with migration to the west in the 1990s, is set in New York with upwardly mobile Indian immigrants. In the second film—made nearly a decade later—wealthy male Indians are taking a vacation in Spain to escape their stressful lives in a liberalized and economically
robust India. Each film’s title also plays with the idea of time in a way that emphasizes their central message of focusing on what “really matters,” which is pointedly not work or making money. The first means “Tomorrow May Be or Not” (translated in English as “Tomorrow May Never Come”) while the second means “Life Does Not Come Around Twice” (translated as “You Only Live Once”). Of course, the idea that one needs to be reminded of love, family, and culture because one is working too hard is a privileged desire, only available to those in the upper classes whose lives are “stressed” by work and excess.

The movie Turning 30!!! (2011), a relatively small-scale Bollywood film, captures the dilemmas of today’s modern Indian woman from her own perspective. Set in Mumbai, the consummate cosmopolitan city, the film’s lead Naina goes through the stereotypical feminized modern nightmare: just before her 30th birthday, her long-time boyfriend dumps her on the night she expects him to propose, and then she loses her job because of office sexism. Her boyfriend leaves her for a woman his parents want him to marry, who is from a wealthy family and expects to be a housewife after marriage—as opposed to Naina who is devoted to her career—yet the new fiancée was raised in London and thus has modern attitudes about sex, making her “modern” yet also immoral. Naina eventually triumphs by relying on her friends and her own determination, successfully prosecuting her old boss and, critically, finding a new boyfriend who is more compatible. She even has the chance to reject her old boyfriend, who tries to win her back. While ending in triumph, the structure of this film shows exactly what the modern Indian woman has to lose. While the loss of her job stung, losing the man she thought she would marry drives this contemporary tragedy.

Finally, the film Band Baaja Baaraat (2010) became a major hit by capturing small-town aspiration. In the film, Shruti, a woman in Jaipur, collaborates as a business partner on a wedding planning business with the male lead Bittoo. Both leads are urban migrants: Shruti is becoming an entrepreneur in the local urban center in order to resist parental pressure to
marry in her smaller hometown; Bittoo is resisting pressure to return home and become an agricultural worker. Their business is their way out, and it becomes an economic success with Indians in the upper classes because they are able to blend Indian “kitsch”—a nod to small-town Indians understanding authentic tradition—with upper-class features, indicating their sophistication. They end up falling in love, but Bittoo doesn’t want to commit, which almost ruins the business and must be resolved by Shruti threatening to have an arranged marriage. This has the desired effect of convincing Bittoo to marry her. The movie ends in a romantic comedy cliché, yet also plays with classed and gendered stereotypes through the vehicle of aspiration. After all, Shruti is a small-town girl who becomes a successful urban businesswoman and marries the man she loves.

While being a figure of aspiration for at least some lower-class women, “modern” women in spaces of consumption in Bangalore also threaten the status of lower-class men. In Bangalore, Nicholas Nisbett (2007) describes how one lower-class young man considered all higher-class women and especially those in white-collar jobs “call girls,” conflating all professional women with call center workers and with prostitution. Nisbett writes:

Karan…moralized against the actions of the kinds of scantily dressed ‘high-class girls’ whom one would see entering the bars, pubs, and clubs of the city centre, telling me that they were all ‘call girls’…playing on the words ‘call girl’ and ‘call centre girl’. When I went with Karan on a date to meet some young women from an elite Bangalore girls’ school…he was quick to dismiss them as ‘dirty girls’ and tell me that the school had a reputation for ‘girls who would have many boyfriends.’ (Nisbett 2007: 944)

While professional women work to perform respectability, in the above narrative, their very presence in “modern” public spaces of consumption sealed Karan’s low opinion of them.

The figure of the modern Indian woman is thought to be found, above all, in public urban spaces. These spaces are, as elsewhere, gendered in particular ways that privilege male socializing (Massey 1994). Women in Bangalore consider mixed-gender friend groups to be safer than women-only groups, especially after dark. However, young women in many cities
are not just socializing with male friends, but are also increasingly occupying public spaces and privatized spaces of consumption. Three upper middle-class women in Mumbai recently published the book *Why Loiter?* (Phadke et al. 2011) that calls for Indian women to be in public spaces and identifies constraints to doing so, inspiring a blog documenting women in public after dark in Indian cities, mainly Mumbai (http://whyloiter.blogspot.com).

Loitering in public, associated with the Indian term “timepass,” which refers to filling time while waiting for something, is still mainly the domain of lower-class young men, many of whom are forced to delay adulthood as they wait to pass exams or find a job before marriage (Jeffrey 2010; Nisbett 2007). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2001b) argues that contemporary “eve teasing” or public harassment of women in urban spaces is a new form of social control that attempts to level class differences through patriarchal power. She writes, “In this case the entry of women into the spaces of public life, in particular the work-place, is a sign of social change that goes by the ambivalent name of ‘modernisation.’” (Sunder Rajan 2001b: 345). She reasons that higher class women feel they must accept the risks of being harassed as part of this new, ambivalently “modern” form of regulation by lower class men who attempt to assert a gendered and sexual power over them.

The opportunity and danger of “exposure”

The contemporary Indian concept of “exposure” captures the potential and anxieties associated with capitalism, modernity, and morality that are articulated through the figure of the modern Indian woman. Rupal Oza describes “exposure” as threatening the purity of the globalizing nation as an anxiety placed on middle-class women, writing:

The figure of the new Indian woman came to occupy a central locus of concern within middle class public debates because the anxiety associated with a globalizing nation-state was displaced onto women’s bodies and practices…. Since women’s subjectivity has historically been framed as vulnerable, pure, and repository of culture, it is primarily toward women that this concern was directed as opposed to men whose encounter with the ‘West’ is not framed in terms of purity…. This ontological
juxtaposition mapped globalization onto women’s bodies and served to demarcate boundaries whereby exposure of women signified exposure of the nation. (Oza 2006: 24)

The phrase “exposure” can mean different things depending on one’s class and gender, especially in the IT workplace where class habitus, or partially unconscious behaviors and cues that signal class background (Bourdieu 1984), matters a great deal.

For IT workers in Tamil Nadu, “exposure” refers to soft skills related to communication and comportment, shaped by travel or experience in multinational companies, that are rooted in class, as argued by Chris Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan (2006). They write, “In middle class conversation in Chennai, ‘exposure’ …mainly denotes the process of enhancing social skills and cultural knowledge through new opportunities, experiences, social contacts and sources of information” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2006: 260). One female IT worker describes the difference in her friend since she arrived from her small hometown through the concept of exposure, saying, “‘There has been a lot of transformation in her personality… [Here at the company] you will be shouted at…. So you will become thick-skinned. You will have the guts to face them [and say] ‘See, I did not commit that mistake.’ That’s what we mean by ‘exposure.’’” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2006: 260).

Although many of the communication skills and behaviors that translate to success in the IT workplace come from a privileged education and upbringing, at least some can be learned through work and urban life, as this narrative of transformation shows.

“Exposure” can be morally ambiguous in a classed way, as Smitha Radhakrishnan (2011) finds among female IT workers in Bangalore. She notes that these women feel IT provides an “ethical exposure” as opposed to other industries such as modeling or marketing in the business world that, as one woman imagines, require women to dress up and use their sexuality to get ahead. However, Radhakrishnan argues that exposure is a fine line that women in IT carefully negotiate through distancing themselves from the immorality of lower
class call center workers and from the west, writing, “Both call center workers and foreign locales provide professional IT women with the outer boundary of ‘exposure’—too much freedom, associated with a deterioration of values that can no longer uphold the family or the nation” (Radhakrishnan 2011: 166-7). The women I worked with in Bangalore used the term “exposure” to describe a sense of expanded knowledge about the world linked to class-based distinction, progressive thinking, consuming media from abroad or living abroad, or meeting different people and learning about different points of view. However, the concept also carries a subtext of moral danger that references negative social changes that have come into India since liberalization, which are associated with globalization and westernization.

Going away from home for college or a professional degree was often described as providing life-altering “exposure.” Gayatri, a graphic designer, explained that while her cousins—with whom she grew up in a joint family—attended local schools, her parents sent her to a private convent school.25 She says, “My school played a huge role in whatever I am today, because studying in a convent makes a big difference. The exposure and the quality of education you get is much better.” This education pointed her toward a design college in a different state, where she says she began questioning gendered assumptions from her upbringing for the first time. Similarly, Asma, a manager in an IT firm, also went away from home for her graduate degree, an experience she credits with opening her up intellectually and socially. She says, “Most of my exposure, my opinions on things, the freedom to speak… Everything I’ve learned there.” Both talk about education as the critical “exposure” that led them to question received ideas and to speak up for themselves, expanding their worldview and confidence in their own opinions.

Exposure can also reference how media has affected women’s lives after

25 Missionaries and colonialism brought Christian and Catholic education to India, which became the schools of choice for the elite. Today, a “convent education” refers to young women attending private, often expensive schools that, most often, are taught in English and are sex-segregated. This type of education is an indication of preparedness, in terms of English ability, scholastic preparation, and class habitus, for elite higher education.
liberalization. For example, Alka, fifty, thinks that education and “exposure, TV and media” helps women across India think more about their rights. She argues that “serials,” or daily soap operas, have made a major difference in rural areas because they feature contemporary topics, saying, “In the beginning it was all about mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, but now they’ve gone ahead. They’re talking about remarriages, divorces, and women’s rights. Even when you go to villages, women are talking differently.” On the other hand, “exposure” can mean a loss of innocence in terms of the way young women behave, influenced by access to media. Priyanka says that because she grew up, “in the days before TV and computers, exposure was less” which also meant that problems with children were “less complicated.” For example, she says when she was young her aunts would discuss the problem of one of their teenage girls wanting to wear nail polish, but now, she says, the problem is that “she’s running away with her boyfriend or something.” For Alka, the fact that serials are discussing women’s rights indicates social improvement for women in rural India, while for Priyanka, “exposure” means that young women are rebelling in morally dangerous ways.

Men having “exposure” is often a way of saying they have a more progressive outlook about gender interaction that is tied to experience abroad, which is a mark of class status or taste. The idea of exposure came up in a conversation between Anju, twenty-six, and her male friend Dev, twenty-eight. Anju argued that some Indian men, like Dev, are “more respectful towards women,” which she says means they are “not judgmental of what the girl has been up to prior to being with them.” She speculates, “I guess it has a lot to do with their exposure.” Dev agreed, saying, “I think it’s exposure. I mean, whatever you’ve been exposed to.” He explains that he and many of his friends have studied in the US, which provided this exposure. Similarly, Deepa, sixty, talked about how her husband studied in the US for graduate school, saying, “I feel it is exposure. Because he’s been abroad…. He’s learned that he should help out in the family. Those things no typical male would do. My father would
never do that. But my husband did.” She thinks that her daughter has problems in her marriage because her son-in-law never lived abroad, so he does not help with cooking or childcare. Deepa says, “He’s a typical male Indian. It’s not his fault. He doesn’t know he’s supposed to do it.” In this way, exposure indicates a masculine realization about gender equality that, in these narratives, can only be learned abroad, otherwise men are unconscious of—and thus, somehow, not be held responsible for—their own ignorance.

The idea of exposure also captures how the expanded life experience associated with the new middle class is particularly ambiguous for women. Fatima, thirty-three and a journalist, uses the idea of exposure to talk about the opportunities and the dangers of leaving home for college in Delhi. She felt that the move would give her the “exposure” she needed to pursue a career, saying, “My brother had moved out for his studies and I really wanted the exposure. So I moved out for my studies too.” In Delhi, Fatima was inspired by one of her brother’s female journalist colleagues, saying, “I used to be very in awe. I would look at her and think, ‘Oh my God, this is what I want to be. I want to come back on my own at night, and get up in the morning, sit with a cup of tea, and have a storyboard and talk about politics.’ I was influenced by her a lot.” She also had roommates for the first time and remembers, “The exposure was totally different. I was living with girls who would have guys over at two or three at night, and they would be drinking…. I had never ever been exposed to something like that.” For Fatima, “exposure” had to do with her education and career, and also living on her own in a new city and seeing women who led morally questionable lives.

Fatima at first narrated the ambivalence of exposure through this archetypal story of leaving home and going to the city. Yet in a later conversation, she locates the freedom and danger wrapped up in the idea by describing changes in gender interaction, saying:

We all are exposed to so much more. I mean how many men did my mother know in her life other than her husband and his friends, who were probably married? And how many men do I know in my life right now? It’s so drastically different…. If I say I’m going out with a guy friend for coffee, I can make my husband understand. But my
mother doesn’t understand. She’s like, “You’re going out to meet a guy, why?”

Exposure is found in women’s changing relationships with men, including mixed-gender friendships. Here, Fatima argues that having male friends is a normal part of her life and also questions whether this is the way her life should look, having no historical precedent.

Exposure is a term that captures ambivalence about economic liberalization, global capitalism, and western influence, especially when associated with the figure of the modern Indian woman. The vulnerability of women when they are “exposed” also relates to sexual vulnerability. This is found in the famous story of Draupadi from the Mahabharata, whose husbands lose her in a dice game, yet her attempted disrobing is thwarted by Krishna, who makes her sari infinitely long. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan makes a parallel between this story and contemporary “eve teasing” or public harassment of women, arguing that the outcome is “irrelevant,” as “it must not blind us to the awareness that the mere withholding of some ‘ultimate’ outrage (e.g., rape) cannot count as ‘salvation’” (Sunder Rajan 2001b: 340). This story reminds women of existing gendered power structures and threats, especially as professional women enter the public sphere. In practice, however, women are challenging stereotypes that define them too narrowly, especially in domestic spaces where they see gender relations in terms of a temporal narrative that speaks to new future possibilities.

II. Gender equality and “progress”: Women moving forward, men staying back

The idea that men should help women with domestic chores and childcare—in other words, with intimate, immaterial, and “unpaid” labor (Hochshild 1989; Weeks 2007)—is becoming more popular for women in Bangalore across the middle classes. For example, Sunita, an unmarried software developer who moved to Bangalore from a rural town, explained to me that she wanted a husband who helped her around the house, saying, “My friends, they told me, ‘My husband is cooking and he’s helping me.’ Every wife is expecting
that.” However, women often complain that men are not pulling their weight. Fuller and Narasimhan (2007) characterize the problem as a “work/life balance” issue, seen in the story of one female IT worker in Chennai:

She complained that her husband did not do his share of household chores, many of which, she joked, have been ‘outsourced,’ so that take-away meals are now routine. She talked about the pressures of combining family life and work and…found herself burdened with the problems familiar to many professional wives and mothers. She spoke especially of her guilt about her son, who had seen so little of her, and because she wanted to spend more time with him, she later resigned from ICS, but now does contract work at home for the company. (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007: 131)

Smitha Radhakrishnan also finds that female IT professionals in Bangalore characterized their lives in terms of “balance,” writing, “To reproduce, and in doing so, reinvent and achieve the good Indian family, professional women must strike a delicate and much-valued ‘balance’…. The reiteration of the word ‘balance’ among my interviewees conveys a sense of careful tightrope walking that reveals the necessarily tricky space these women inhabit” (Radhakrishnan 2011: 147-8). This idea guided choices, she argues, about family, consumption, and behavior, as performing this balance is a form of symbolic capital.

In contrast, I did not find the word “balance” used very often in my fieldwork, although women did talk about their frustrations in giving work and family what they each needed. Instead, I want to suggest that there is something happening in Bangalore beyond the issue of “work/life balance” which instead has to do with the circulation of global discourses about gender equality in conversations about feminism and development. Gender equality is a goal of the global women’s movement and related development projects, but the meanings of “equality” and “gender” are contested and produced through processes of globalization and development in relation to imagined other places (Gunewardena and Kingsolver 2007). In my fieldwork, I heard fewer stories about a search for balance, and more stories about frustration with men, framed temporally by characterizing men as “stuck” in the past while women were “going ahead” to an inevitable, new future that included new kinds of gender relations (albeit
mainly within normative monogamous heterosexuality). In this way, the future becomes an imaginative and creative space to rethink gender roles and women’s identities, if only by identifying what they do not think is equal about the present.

In rural Sweden, Ulrika Dahl (2007) also finds a discourse about “progressive women” who are out-migrating in part to avoid marrying “traditional men.” She argues that this characterization obscures other power dynamics tied to local development discourse, writing, “The progress of the region not only was understood to be a matter of growth and resources but also was intimately linked to relations between men and women and to reproduction…. Such seemingly local understandings of gender were forged in global relations of power” (Dahl 2007:123). Expectations of gender equality in Bangalore are shaped by global development discourses that identify India as a site of gender disparity and global inequality, and task women with empowering India’s future through improving gender equality. Narratives about women who want change and men who do not, framed in terms of gender roles at home, speak to the way gender is produced in a global field.

**Women in Bangalore reconciling expectations of equality with reality**

When talking about how women are disappointed in men today, one woman pointed out, “Even when you read comments from the 1940s they’re like, ‘Oh where have all the decent men gone?’ It’s the same thing. It’s just different expectations surrounding men.” However, I argue that while women may indeed have “always” complained about men, it is important that contemporary complaints are framed by disappointment in a perceived lack of progress toward equality, implying a desired redefinition in how Indian society sees women, and in how women see themselves.

Domestic labor is affordable and ubiquitous in middle-class India, which means that cleaning a home, taking care of children, and even cooking are often tasks performed by
domestic servants. While each family has their own approach to domestic care work, I suggest that this work is still a matter of discussion when it comes to equality between spouses because of the idea that the home and children are primarily a woman’s responsibility. In fact, I believe that women in Bangalore are using the idea of equality in domestic chores as a way to talk about broader forms of gender equality in Indian society. For example, one woman talks about women’s progress as shifting gender hierarchies between wives and husbands, saying, “I don’t look up to my husband. I think of him as an equal. Probably my daughter’s generation will look down on the men, if it follows the same path.” However, many questioned whether men were changing as much as they should.

The women I spoke with seemed particularly disappointed that equal earnings in the workplace did not translate into equality at home. Manju, twenty-nine, a stay-at-home mom who previously worked in IT, says her father helped around the house because he grew up helping his mother. However, Manju is disappointed with her husband, saying, “I think he is genetically blind when it comes to dirt…. We do the same amount of work in a day, so I don’t see why household work needs to be my responsibility. It’s equal.” She goes out with colleagues from her old job once a week and leaves her daughter with her husband, and while she does not see this as “remarkable,” she says her friends are “in awe” about how much her husband does. Similarly, Priyanka feels that equal earnings directly challenge gender roles in a marriage, saying, “When you lead you’re literally like a man. You’re doing a man’s job, right? You’re earning the same amount or more. So the conflict is much more because women say, ‘I’m equal to you. Then what the hell, why can’t you also pitch in?’” She thus thinks that equal earnings mean more conflict in marriages in her generation, including in her own marriage, as she feels she is always asking her husband do to more.

Among the women I interviewed, there is a common impression that men’s gender expectations come from the women they see growing up. One young woman notes, “I think
now a lot of people have grown up seeing a father who is more involved and a mother who works, so I think the expectation [for husbands to help] is more.” Gargi, thirty, is a software engineer who is married with one child. She argues that she is living in “the most hypocritical times” because, she says, “Men have seen their mothers do everything around the house, and believing their husband is a god. Now women are supposed to be working and your income is extremely essential for the family, so you have to work as much as your husband works. But then you have to have time for everything else because husbands have seen mothers do that.”

She is feeling the tension in her own marriage, as she feels her husband unconsciously expects her to do “everything” at home. While her husband will help when asked, she is resentful that she is the “primary caretaker” and has to be the one to ask.

Men are also coming to terms with their own unrealistic expectations for their daughters to have a career and be a homemaker as defined by women of past generations. Smriti, thirty-five, says that her father realized that she had more business acumen than her brother, so he encouraged her to become involved in the family business. However, he also expected her to get married and be a homemaker on the model of his mother. She says she remembers the day that her father told her about these competing expectations, and she stopped him and said, “‘Really? So you think I’m going to achieve the peak of professional success before I’m twenty-eight?’ And he realized, ‘No, that’s not really sensible.’” She feels her father has an “internal conflict” in that he wanted his daughter to be successful professionally, as he has been. However, he grew up with women who devoted their time to keeping kinship bonds strong. His unrealistic hopes for his daughter indicate the conflict that many men encounter as they also map gender roles onto “old” and “new” expectations.

Two women whose daughters work in IT described women as outpacing men in terms of progress toward equality. Alka, fifty, grew up in a city but had an arranged marriage to a wealthy man from a village. He was an educated professional and they moved to Bangalore
after marriage. However, Alka says there was a “little regression” in her marriage because her husband was “less progressive” than her father. She explains that her husband was used to women being like his mother, who stayed home and obeyed her husband. Alka notes that her husband adjusted, saying, “Getting used to me was a little tough for him. But I’m too strong to let anyone restrict me too long.” She thinks things will be easier for the generation of women following her daughter, because the men who are children now will have seen their mothers working. But, she warns, today’s work opportunities for women are “a double-edged sword,” because women are expected to work and also do the housework, arguing that while women in her mother’s generation may not have had respect within their families, they also felt less “pressure.” Alka traces much of the pressure young women today feel to the fact that men are not keeping up with women’s expectations, saying, “These women are going by the jet speed and the guys are still in the bullock carts.” She worries about her daughter, who has seen her father helping around the house but—Alka fears—will likely not find a man who is as helpful or adjusting. While Alka feels that men are the underlying problem, she also indicates that her daughter’s standards are too high.

Mayuri, also in her fifties, blames herself for the inequality in her own marriage. She explains that although her husband is “progressive,” because of her upbringing she does things without thinking, like waking up first to make breakfast or being the one to jump up and answer the door when the doorbell rings. She says, however, that men today want to marry “working women, smarter women,” so will have to do more housework. However, she says, “The women are the ones who are moving ten paces ahead of men. The men are still in the nineteenth century. They prefer the same thing which their fathers [and] grandfathers did. They don’t want to move.” She argues that even men who have lived abroad come back and return to the “same ways,” while women who live abroad form new expectations that they bring back to India. When asked if she thinks men will change, she thinks for a moment, then
says, “They will. Because if the women are persistent, they have no choice.”

Most of the women in their sixties and seventies said they were content with their lives and did not overtly complain about doing the majority of the household work. However, in an instance of a crack in the appearance of contentment, Ranjita, sixty, expressed her frustration with the duties she is expected to carry out. One afternoon, she began telling me about how much she has worked in her life to take care of her husband and family, saying, “Sometimes, Rachel, I get irritated as to why I should do all that. I feel like resting. I feel like having an easy life. Really I’m telling you, some of these are the things which are brought upon our sex. Why do I have to do all this?” She explains that she prefers to eat cereal or bread for breakfast, but each morning she has to make a “proper breakfast” for her husband of *dosa* or *upma*, which is labor intensive. She says she is aging now and her body is sore, and worries that her children will not take care of her when she becomes more infirm, so she tries to go to yoga or walk every day. However, even with the help of a maid, she says it is difficult to do the work she is expected to do. In expressing frustration about the gendered division of labor in her marriage, I believe Ranjita is taking part in these conversations about women’s roles in creating a future, not yet realized, of a more equal marriage. Men also have a sense that they should be changing, but in accordance with global discourses that task women with effecting change, they tend to take a more passive or “unconscious” role that requires prodding by women, as seen below.

**Dev’s story: Realizing his own “past” gendered expectations**

One of the most interesting conversations I remember having about gender roles took place in the evening at a sidewalk café on a busy street in central Bangalore. I was finishing a conversation with Anju, and her friend Dev joined us. He was in graduate school for

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26 Making traditional south Indian breakfast food such as *dosa* and *upma* from scratch takes a lot of time. South Indian cooking is very labor intensive, requiring grinding of spices and coconuts, and pounding lentils and rice into flour. Mixes are available that reduce this labor, but fresh ingredients are necessary for most dishes.
engineering in the US, where he had met and was currently dating an American woman. As noted in his views on “exposure,” which he argued indicated a “progressive” attitude toward women, he says he would never expect his future wife to do housework because he thinks that the idea of women cleaning up after men is part of a past mindset, saying, “I’d better start doing all these things because mom’s generation is gone. When I go home I’ve got to pick up after myself.” He says that his current relationship, however, has led him to reflect on his expectations of women in new ways.

Dev feels that Indian men are spoiled, saying, “Most men in India, whether they like it or not—whether they accept it or not—to some degree are mama’s boys. All of them. In India the moms really call the shots.” Mothers often have more power over their sons than do their wives. He discussed a common debate in India about men wanting a more traditional woman for a wife than they want for a girlfriend. He explains that men are more casual about dating now, but says, “It’s a whole different story when it comes to your wife because you don’t want your wife to be a ‘cool girl’ who would flirt or do something like that. So you want someone conservative. You also want them to get along with your parents.” He explains that men are the most “stressed out” when their wife and mother fight, as they do not want to choose a side, and most will choose the mother’s side. He thinks that conflicts between mothers and daughters-in-law stem from the mother wanting the wife to be like a mother to her son, but says this is “unrealistic.”

Dev admits that he recently caught himself expecting his own American girlfriend to pick up after him when she was visiting his apartment, and had to remind himself that she is not his mother. He says, “We’ve grown with that mindset. It’s hard to break out of that after twenty years.” All the mothers he knows are the same, he explains, saying, “They’re always behind us. They’re always trying to serve us. We are the kings of the house.” His sister, on the other hand, was expected to do more on her own because, she would be expected to move
into her in-law’s house after marriage, and her parents would not want her to shame her family by not doing housework.

He gives an example of his own gendered expectations through a story of how he was sick a few days before. He called his sister immediately, at one o’clock in the morning, and says that she woke up and came over right away to heat up water, bring him medicine, and take care of him. When he told this to his American girlfriend over the phone, he says she became angry and said, “‘Every time you say things like that I feel you’re comparing me to your sister. I can’t be your sister or your mother, okay? I want a real man to take care of himself. Not a sissy who every time he gets sick needs two people to come and tend to him.’”

Dev says he was initially taken aback and was defensive. However, he says he later realized that he was trying to hint to his girlfriend about the kind of wife he expected, and to tell her how things work in India. When he confessed this to his girlfriend, he says she told him to “‘Grow up.’” He somewhat sheepishly admitted that she might be right.

Dev is particularly conscious about his own attitudes, in large part because his American girlfriend brought them into stark relief. Yet he is also playing a scripted role of the “unconscious” man who does not realize his own sexism, leaving the work of equality up to women, who, as Sara Ahmed (2010) notes, become “feminist killjoys” by wanting more than they are given. Arlie Hochschild (1989) identifies the feeling women in Bangalore articulated of being the “primary parent” or the one to ask for “help” from their husbands in her article on the “economy of gratitude.” In US marriages where both partners are working outside the home, Hochschild found that men, who often do more care work than their fathers did, feel that their help is a “gift” requiring gratitude from their wives. However, their wives feel that, “Relative to all she does, relative to what she wants to expect from him, what she feels she deserves, her husband’s contribution seems welcome, but not extra, not a gift. So his gift is ‘mis-received.’ For each partner has perceived this gift from a different cultural prism”
In connecting cultural trends in the US in the 1980s—which can also be seen in contemporary urban India—to the intimate space of the marriage, Hochschild argues that, “...culturally speaking, men lag behind women in their adaptation to the new economic reality. For women, the economy is the changing environment, while for men, women are the changing environment” (Hochschild 1989: 97). The resulting tendency to hold women responsible for their own treatment in the context of economic and social change is no clearer than in the workplace, where the difficulties women experience in resisting falling into negative female stereotypes indicates how they see this gendered temporal “lag” at work.

III. Women at work in Bangalore: Sexism, stereotypes, and challenging gender roles

While the home is perhaps the most intimate space to debate ideas about gender and desired futures, the workplace is a symbolic terrain for forging new futures. New work cultures in white-collar Bangalore cast sexism as no longer acceptable, but ideas about gender are reworked in ways that tend to disadvantage women. The IT industry in Bangalore is roughly 70-75% male (NASSCOM 2015b; Upadhya 2007), but the IT sector is seen as safe and appropriate for middle and upper class women because of its high pay and high prestige. IT companies also have clean, expensive office buildings, a “global” image, multinational corporate norms, a lack of physical labor, and a relatively homogenous upper-class workforce that enforces this respectability (Radhakrishnan 2011). The IT workplace seems to be an ideal place for negotiating women’s rights in Bangalore, and indeed, many women in IT feel that gender equality is encouraged by the corporation. However, I question this assumption.

Sexism in the workplace

Women in entry-level positions in Bangalore white-collar offices are often recognized
for their work but have trouble getting promoted to higher positions, as is the case in white-collar offices elsewhere, yet the way gender and morality are linked is culturally specific and affects women’s advancement. Women in Bangalore do not advance because they quit in larger numbers as they get married and have children, but in addition, are left out of male socializing, and are passed over for opportunities to take on more responsibility. For example, one woman told me that a man who spent time with a manager in the smoking zone at her office was promoted, whereas the manager would not have approved of a woman smoking. Likewise, proportionally less women go for after work drinks, travel for business trips or conferences, or attend team-building events or parties outside the office, because they do not feel comfortable, are not allowed by parents, or have family responsibilities. Having a gender balance on teams is also important for women’s advancement, but this is difficult to achieve because there are more men than women in most IT offices.

Overt sexism in the workplace is often blamed on men’s upbringing, allowing men to avoid responsibility for their own ignorance, although women see this as out of place in the corporate workplace. Devika, a twenty-six-year-old manager in an IT firm, says some men in her office think women should be at home, but says, “It’s not any fault of theirs. It’s just the way they’ve grown up. They see their mother at home, so that’s what they think all women do.” She also notes how these attitudes affect gender interactions in the office, saying, “These men think they should be able to dominate in any relationship because they see it happening at home.” She remembers one colleague who once told a group at lunch, including her, that while he often brought his girlfriend home, if his sister brought a boyfriend home, “He said he’d shoot him.” Devika feels that this kind of attitude is at odds with corporate practices, saying, “He just didn’t know how to talk to women properly. How was he hired into a firm like this? There are plenty of women in the organization. If someone hears you talking like this you will be fired.” By noting that these kinds of comments could get men fired, Devika is
presenting these attitudes as unacceptable in the corporation. However, she did not report her coworker, and to my knowledge, no one was fired, making this a hollow threat.

Stories about men hiring women for their looks or cases of sexual harassment were similarly cast as part of a past work culture that is on its way out. In a conversation with Devika and her friends Jyoti and Gouri one day, I told them about an offensive comment a male acquaintance had made to me. He had said something to the effect that women are only hired into his IT office to be a “pretty face” and that women can get ahead by flirting, which he thought was unfair to the men in the office. I told them I was taken aback by this comment, while Devika and her friends all laughed and shook their heads, agreeing that this attitude is common even though they saw it as hopelessly behind the times, remarking that “some men still think like that.” Gouri, a former manager in an IT firm and currently a part-time corporate trainer, noted that some of the managers at her old firm would only hire good-looking women while others would go to women’s colleges specifically for this purpose, and then would say things openly, such as, “The new girl is so hot.” However, she argued that, “These men won’t be able to get away with that for long,” framing this behavior as temporally short-lived, although it was occurring just a year before.

While sexist views may be overheard in offices in Bangalore, a more concerning issue is sexual harassment by male colleagues, especially bosses. Women in white-collar jobs in Bangalore are protected to an extent by corporate norms and can at least report harassing behavior to a superior or the HR office, or request to be moved to a different team or division. However, there is a history of sexual harassment for working women in India at every level, as elsewhere, and much of it is institutionalized and expected. I cannot know the extent of the problem in offices in Bangalore or how much harassment is reported, so I rely on anecdotal evidence. None of the women I interviewed told me directly that they had been physically harassed at work, but more than one said they had heard stories about other
women or had friends who had been propositioned or groped by a boss, and I can guess that in some cases they were telling a veiled version of a personal story. One woman told me about the practice at her old firm of having “problem men” hold a perfunctory meeting with HR and being shuffled to another division. In more heartening news, I also know of one case of a male manager firing a man because he was harassing the women on his team. Getting fired in India can destroy someone’s career and the livelihood for their extended family, so it is not a decision taken lightly.

Underlying these stories is the ever-present threat of violence towards women in India, as in violence directed toward middle-class, urban women in cases that have made national and international headlines. In the background of these tragedies, however, are the cases of domestic violence, rape of domestic workers and poor and lower caste women, street harassment, and other sexual violence that is not reported or is ignored by authorities. Middle and upper class women are more protected than many others in Bangalore. Yet these women are also on the forefront of shifting the view of women in the workplace from the either being sexualized or seen as wives or mothers, to one that sees them as competent workers, colleagues, and three-dimensional people, so they are vulnerable in other ways.

**Fighting and perpetuating stereotypes**

As women struggled to be judged for their work abilities in the office, I found they criticized other women they see enacting negative female stereotypes, even as this criticism reinforces existing gender stereotypes. For example, women notice when their female colleagues use sexuality to get ahead, a strategy they roundly criticize. Devika, Jyoti, and Gouri talked about the women in their offices who flirted with male bosses, and argued that this strategy is not viable because the work volume is so intense that someone who cannot get the work done will not keep their job, no matter what else they do. Usha, twenty-eight, a
manager in an IT company, also insisted that a woman trying to use her sexuality to get ahead at work is bound to fail. She related the following story about a colleague, saying:

This guy was her boss, and this girl would find small moments where she would touch him. Like if he was wearing a kurta and he’s got the strings flowing down, she would go, ‘That's not the way to do it, I’ll do it for you.’ And he was married with two children. But if that guy changes or if you get a lady manager, what are you going to do? I don’t like this because I’m way too good. I can perform in my job.

Here, Usha dismisses this behavior as ineffective while also establishing her own attitude as capable in her job, thus not needing to resort to such tactics. Yet it is clear that she notices which women in her office are trying this strategy. It is thus important to maintain your reputation in the office among women as well as men in order to be taken seriously.

A woman’s personal life outside of work is not supposed to impact how people see them, but this is also questionable. For example, Devika says her work colleagues would be more accepting of her dating before marriage than would her parents, explaining that she could bring a boyfriend to a work party but never to a family party, saying, “[My coworkers] can say whatever they want to say about me but at the end of it my work is based on my performance at work.” However, Devika also hides her personal life from her coworkers. When she was dating a coworker, only a handful of “good friends” at the office knew. If coworkers are dating they are supposed to inform Human Resources (HR) because of potential conflicts of interest, but most do not unless they intend to marry. While people at the office usually know who is dating, as they notice if certain people have lunch together frequently, for example, it is not openly discussed.

By not enforcing the rule to inform HR, the corporation acknowledges that one’s personal life can affect work life yet also conforms to the way relationships are often handled in Bangalore—they are kept officially secret from authorities, including the corporation and parents, until a couple intends to marry, which protects a woman’s reputation. However, as the stories about women who flirt indicate, coworkers gossip. If a woman dates several
men—especially coworkers, which is likely because this is the place young people often meet—they are talked about negatively. Devika described how workers on teams she manages often begin dating, which can be problematic, especially for the woman. After a breakup, she explains that it is more difficult for women to remain on the team because everyone would know she had dated someone she had not married, so women often move to a new team or division, or leave the company altogether. Lakshmi, twenty-six and working in television, says that she feels much “freer of society’s expectations” than women in previous generations, when she believes all the neighbors would “entertain themselves” by watching when women came home and with whom. However, she qualifies this statement by saying that reputation is still important, especially for future job prospects. She explains, “Say I wanted a job three years down the line. They’re going to say, ‘Oh that’s the girl who we were talking about.’ So maybe I shouldn’t.” In this way, older regulations about women’s behavior and morality are mapped onto the new terrain of the workplace.

The overly emotional woman who brings her personal problems into the office is another stereotype from which women distance themselves. Usha says she has seen many women in her office who have trouble handling work demands because of their family life, especially if they live with their in-laws and do not get along with them. For example, one woman she manages is “cracking under the pressure.” The woman recently gave birth to a daughter, which her in-laws are not happy about. Her mother-in-law claims she is too old to take care of the girl, so the woman takes the baby to a “crèche” or daycare. Her husband is working, but they also need her income in order to support the joint household. The family is orthodox Hindu, and the in-laws insist that the woman buy gold to build her daughter’s dowry. Usha argues, “I think women right now are still tormented by family pressure. They are a lot more inclined to do what their family wants them to do then men are.” Usha describes how this woman is faltering in her job, saying, “She’s been in the same level for the
last four years. She just cannot perform. She comes every day in the morning and she starts crying. She calls her brother and says, ‘Where’s the money? What do I do?’ She’ll be good at her work, but if I send her for an interview she cannot talk, she becomes so nervous.” While Usha is sympathetic, she also feels that bringing one’s problems into work so visibly is unprofessional. The men in the office may be uncomfortable with the situation, but it is the women who feel this type of woman sets a bad example of an “emotional female.”

Thus far, we have seen that in Bangalorean offices men may see women as sexualized or as wives or mothers, while women criticize other women at work for being too sexual, too interested in dating, too emotional, or too public about their problems at home. The situation that most clearly shows the stakes of women’s attempts to establish a work identity, however, is when they become leaders at work. As in other global workplaces, women managers find it especially hard to challenge existing gender ideologies. Gouri, who was a manager at her former IT firm, says that it was hard to lead a team as a woman because the men did not listen to or respect her. Her style was to be tough, whereas another female team leader tried to be nice, but she feels men could not handle either approach and would say they were “just not comfortable with a woman as a leader.” She thinks this attitude comes from past gender roles, as she thinks most of the men in her office feel that, “A woman’s place is as a wife to a husband, and mother to a child,” and that women should work but must balance it with their other responsibilities. She also often heard from male colleagues that they believed women are “too emotional and too unstable” to be in a leadership position.

Devika has managed teams of young men for several years and finds them easier to handle than some of the older men in her office. She explains that the younger men are in their first job out of college and are often living away from home, so she allows them to form strong bonds with each other but maintains her authority by not making friends with them. She says that sometimes one of the men will not follow her direction because they “think
they know better,” and she has learned to quickly make an example of how this strategy sets the whole team back. However, Devika argues that it is easier to deal with younger men whom she outranks than older men who are her bosses, as she finds them “patronizing” and feels they do not take her concerns or opinions seriously. She explains that they expect women to stay in low-level positions and take care of the “details,” but when women start climbing to senior management levels, the high-ranking men become nervous.

Women also reinforce stereotypes of female leaders as overly dominating. One low-level manager in a large IT company says she would rather work for a man than a woman because women managers have to be “too dominating” to be taken seriously, a sentiment I heard across industries, from IT and public relations to finance and journalism. When I asked why, she said, “I think it’s easier to work with the opposite gender. I’ve had two women managers and they were a little too bossy. I think they have to be like that. If they have a lot of male colleagues at their level they have to be really dominating. The guys, though, they [wouldn’t] really interfere and they let you do what you have to do.” A younger woman who was interning with a PR firm while in college saw women competing with each other about looks or male attention. She says she dislikes PR because it is a female-dominated industry, saying, “The only problem with women is that they don’t support their fellow gender, because it’s more about who looks pretty or who can get the guy. And if you’re prettier than your boss she’ll treat you badly because of that.” Although she concedes that men might harass their female underlings, she thinks that men “focus more on the work,” as compared to women who spend time competing with each other.

Perhaps the idea that women in the office can be stereotyped as overly sexual or emotional, while women in leadership positions are criticized for being dominating, feels like the same story that is told in workplaces the world over (Kanter 1993 [1977]). However, I believe this rush to stereotype and subsequent lack of sympathy for the flirt, the dumped girl,
the crying co-worker, and the female boss alike reflects the precarity of professional women’s lives in Bangalore, as they struggle to negotiate old and new expectations that are wrapped up in specifically Indian ideas about kinship and gender roles. The idea that male bosses focus “more on work” while female bosses must be dominating or interfering reminds everyone that men are the unmarked standards in the office, while women must show who they are in relation to this standard.

Conclusions: Gender, the danger of the future, and the limits of neoliberal capitalism

The future is a dangerous place. People tend to use rituals and magic to deal with uncertainty, as these provide reasons for events that science would term happenstance (Evans-Pritchard 1976). I understand moral unease, like that attached to professional women in contemporary Bangalore, as coming from a desire to control a sense of uncertainty amid changes in family life and urban space that is linked to the volatility of global capitalism. These abstract anxieties are often expressed in gendered fears about young people acting immorally, driven by capitalist consumption seen in as media images of wealthy lifestyles and in new sites of consumption such as bars and malls (Stivens 1998, 2000).

The mysterious volatility of capitalism, and especially neoliberal capitalism which relies on individual initiative and merit while obscuring the dynamics of power, accesses fears about women, cultural reproduction, and the future. Professional women in Bangalore seem to have all the choices of the winners in neoliberal global capitalism. They have lives that can only be imagined by the vast majority of Indian women. However, they are feeling frustrated in their ambitions. Changes in Bangalore since economic liberalization, from the availability of multinational jobs, to “exposure,” to new lifestyle options, appear to challenge middle-class gender norms of the male breadwinner and female housewife. Yet within marriages and workplaces alike, traditional gender roles are re-inscribed. Meanwhile, women
who transgress are socially regulated, often by other women. I believe this shows the limits of capitalism and development to deliver on its promises of progress toward equality, and also the limits of neoliberal analyses.

In the end, like the home, the corporate environment is not gender “neutral,” and it is dangerous to claim it is. The women in this chapter know what they do not want to be, as defined by men, but they are nervous to choose what they might want to be. This is not because they are weak or timid, but because the personal stakes are actually quite high, and their choices are more constrained than they would like to believe. At work and at home, the future is treated as in jeopardy, with women responsible for saving or ruining it, as seen in “exposure” narratives and stereotyping. Women are frustrated by lack of progress or change in men’s lives because men do not have the burden to effect change. However, if women are responsible for change in gender equality but do not have a wide range of choices, then their ability to imagine new futures is actually quite limited.

The idea of greater choice relates to the idea of neoliberal choice, which puts pressure on the individual to choose correctly. If we think about temporality, this pressure comes from an idea of the future as dangerous. Yet the future is dangerous in a gendered way, which structures why gendered power dynamics are expressed as a perceived “lag” in the way men are adapting to new economic realities. However, perhaps men are not simply behind women on a linear progress toward equality, but are actually on a different path entirely.
Chapter Three

The Morality of Disappointment: Narratives of Happiness, the Self, and the Past for Working Women in Bangalore

I told my husband, “I would also like to work. I would like to support the family.” He said, “You know, people will laugh. They’ll think, ‘It’s not enough that the son is earning. They’re making even the daughter-in-law work.’ So what will people think of my parents if you go to work?”. Now the change has come. Girls have the liberty to make their own choices, whether it’s their career or their marriage…. But I don’t know if they are really happy. They always seem to be running after something.

--Radhika, sixty-eight, housewife

If you don’t have the means to take care of yourself you are a lesser being. Earnings are important in a marriage. It’s not how much you make, it’s about being able to provide for yourself. That is what gives you self-respect and that is what is going to give you happiness.

--Asma, thirty-six, manager in software development firm

Uma Narayan (1997) credits her mother for her feminist values, which she argues did not come from her education and entry into academia in the west, but rather from observing her mother’s pain. She explains that her mother taught her contradictory messages: to study, to be able to financially support herself, and to be assertive; but also to conform and be silent.

Narayan writes about the generational gulf this created, saying:

[Women of my mother’s generation] were alarmed at our inclination to see careers as not something merely instrumentally valuable in the event that our marriages failed, but as essential elements of fulfilling lives, anxious about the fact that our independence and self-assertiveness seemed to be making women who lacked the compliance, deference, and submissiveness deemed essential in good wives. (Narayan 1997: 399)

Narayan argues that while her mother’s generation valued upholding tradition, expressed in part by a daughter’s conformity to the norms of a middle-class Indian marriage, they did not realize that they often talked about how oppressive and difficult their marriages actually were. When the time came for many of these young women to decide to conform or rebel—a false choice that Narayan argues is defined by colonial legacies—she finds it no surprise that many chose to reject “tradition” and pursue a career instead of marriage.
For middle-class women in Bangalore, careers provide a space to think through ideas about a fulfilling or happy life, and to wrestle with disappointment. What would an anthropology of disappointment look like? How can we understand the idea of expectation that is then disappointed? One way to approach these questions is to think through how we construct what we can expect or hope for, given our particular social location, which is a temporal process that is both active and part of our *habitus*. Yet is disappointment the necessary accompaniment to our neoliberal present because of rising expectations, or is there a way to approach it that does not blame our unrealistic desires? Can we also think about disappointment as an integral and gendered feature of global neoliberal capitalism?

The IT industry in many ways exemplifies neoliberal capitalism in that it harnesses an optimistic technological futurist narrative and features a workplace culture that appears to break down hierarchies and nepotism. However, these narratives obscure practices that encourage overwork, rely on flexible contract work, and place the burden on individuals to compete largely through their class and educational status. Structural inequalities that lead to low gender and minority percentages in IT companies are also glossed over (Vara 2015).

What happens when this optimism and openness is met with the constraints of reality? Lauren Berlant (2011) identifies the disappointment in rising expectations amid growing uncertainties as “cruel optimism,” a condition shaped by gender. From another angle, Sara Ahmed (2010) critiques the idea of happiness as located in the future, arguing that gendered ideas of the good life constrict possible futures. She suggests that women dare to be unhappy as they create new definitions of a meaningful life, and argues that pursuing the idea of “happiness” is at once a mark of privilege and an obstacle to feminism.

Central to these negotiations is the concept of morality, as women in Bangalore ask what it means to be a “good woman” in a shifting social landscape. The idea of “mores” in
anthropology refers to socially regulated customary behavior. Morality is a related concept that encompasses these social rules that designate “appropriate” behavior depending on one’s social position, as enforced by a group or society and internalized, debated, and resisted by individuals. In general, anthropologists have found morality in every aspect of the social, but especially in gender norms. In Bangalore, the discursive space of work has allowed women to redefine the idea of happiness as they reach to the past to evaluate feelings of disappointment and questions about the self. In so doing, they are also questioning the meaning of morality, for themselves as individuals and in society more generally. In an inverse of Raymond William’s “structures of feeling” (1977), perhaps these struggles over morality are a way to understand the “feeling of structure” within sites of neoliberal global labor.

**Gayatri’s story: Establishing a different life path**

The promise of education, a career, and financial independence for a woman in India is illustrated in Gayatri’s story, whose life has taken a very different path than if she had followed her mother’s life course. Gayatri is thirty-two and works as a graphic designer in Bangalore. She is also recently divorced and lives alone in her own apartment. While she may seem like the stereotypical “modern urban woman,” she came from a large, conservative joint family of modest means in north India. Her unexpected life course has been shaped by her education and career, as well as tensions between her and her parents’ aspirations.

Gayatri grew up in Delhi as part of a relatively insular Hindu community that traces its roots to Indian royalty. She explains that her family is conservative and that women in her family followed “purdah,” meaning her mother would cover her face with her sari when interacting with her father-in-law, and that her house was gender segregated with women in

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27 The term “mores” is derived from the Latin word *mos* or customs. The term was first used in the late nineteenth century by social scientist William Sumner, and was taken up in anthropology by Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber (Josephson 2005).

28 I thank Sujata Moorty for this inversion.
the inner part of the house. While her family was extremely proud of their heritage, they were not wealthy. Her father was the oldest of ten, and he supported his siblings on a small salary selling insurance. Of her childhood, Gayatri says, “You had to just understand that you can’t be demanding too many things. It wasn’t a very free and cheerful childhood. But my parents always loved and took care of me.”

In one conversation, Gayatri told me the remarkable story of her mother’s birth. Her mother was born as one of twin girls to her maternal grandfather’s sister in a village in West Bengal. As girls were seen as a burden in that community, one of the twins was killed and Gaytri’s mother was only saved by an intervention by her grandmother, who happened to be visiting at the time. Her mother was adopted into the family, but because she was a cousin to the other children, her position was insecure as soon as Gaytri’s grandmother passed away. She says her mother did well in school, but in her community it was not appropriate for women to work outside the home after marriage. Her marriage was arranged in haste by relatives, and she married into a family with the right caste background but a far lower financial position. Gayatri’s parents saw each other for the first time on their wedding night, having previously seen photographs. She says the marriage was not happy for a long time, as her father was responsible for his siblings and did not have time for her mother. Gayatri recalls, “She felt very alone. I remember in my childhood seeing her crying because she felt so alone.” Eventually their positions reversed, as her father has come to appreciate all her mother has done, while her mother now openly expresses irritation with him.

In her childhood, Gayatri says her father was “open-minded” when it came to education and pushed her to study as much as her brother, because he wanted her to be better off financially than he had been. However, he also wanted her to have an arranged marriage within their community, setting up a tension that would deeply affect her life. She attended a private convent school, unlike her cousins, which was relatively expensive but, she says,
“transformative” because of the quality of education. This positioned her to attend a rigorous design college in another state, which she says changed her perspective. She remembers, “I think college is when I actually started questioning everything. ‘Why this and why that? Why should I follow this tradition and why shouldn’t I live this way or that way?’ It really taught me to find my own answers.” In college, Gayatri developed new friendships and also met her first boyfriend, who was from different region and caste community. They dated for six years, but broke up because of family pressure on both sides not to marry outside their communities. She still regrets the breakup and thought about trying to convince him to defy their families at the time, but says she could not disobey her father and had to let him go.

Soon after, her father found a potential groom within her caste community, and she says she was under such pressure that she agreed to get engaged without meeting him first. However, at their first meeting, she says she realized she could not marry him. Although her parents worried that a broken engagement would make it hard to arrange another, they broke off the engagement. She met other men her parents found but says that none of them “clicked,” so she remained single. By the time Gayatri was twenty-nine, she was living at home in Delhi, working as a graphic designer, and had started “chatting” online with another designer who lived in Bangalore. Her parents asked if she would consider marrying him, as they realized she would not agree to an arranged marriage. He came to visit and her parents met and liked him, although he was south Indian and culturally distant from her community. His parents were also anxious he should marry. Suddenly, she says, they were engaged, which she felt was too soon. They married when she was thirty and she moved into her in-laws’ house in Bangalore. However, she says, “Within two months I realized that it was a mistake. We hurried in too much. But in India girls are brought up with the idea of marriage being very sacred and whoever the husband is you have to adjust. That’s your husband and that’s it. You have to accept, and how well you can accept is in your hands.”
Gayatri never told me exactly what the nature of the problem was and I did not press her, but she hinted that it had to do with drinking and mental and perhaps physical abuse. She did not tell anyone, however, explaining that her mother is a heart patient and she did not want to worry her. She did not even tell her friends, because she was afraid they would tell her parents. At a wedding, however, her mother noticed something was wrong and began questioning her, and when she did not say anything her mother questioned her husband and then, she says, “Everything came out.” She said her parents tried to convince her husband to alter his behavior. When he did not, Gayatri moved into her own apartment in Bangalore and asked for a divorce. She says she could only do this because she was working; otherwise she would have had to move back in with her parents in Delhi, which she says would have been difficult. She emphasizes how important her job was for her mental state at this time, as she could confide in coworkers and could use work to take her mind off the divorce.

Gayatri emphasizes what a difficult decision it was for her to leave her husband, as she had believed that marriage was for life. She says it was actually her parents who convinced her to leave, which took her by surprise. She says, “Coming from a very orthodox background, and then letting me marry somebody completely out of caste, and then letting me separate out of it… I still can’t believe it.” She says although divorce carries a stigma in Indian society, it is becoming more common. She used to think the reason people divorced was because people were not tolerant, and that with patience and tolerance a relationship would work. However, she says that this attitude is what made her stay for two and a half years in an unhappy marriage, and her parents are actually angry she was in it so long. Her expectation that her parents would not approve of divorce and her surprise at their support indicates her view of linear generational change and also subverts it. However, their reaction also proves to her that the growing valuation of women, especially as compared to the past, is more pervasive than even she had thought. Her father now questions his insistence on an
arranged marriage, which has shaken his belief in his caste community itself.

Gayatri regrets certain things about her life and wishes she had found a satisfying marriage. She works late and is hesitant to socialize too much, in accordance with her modest upbringing and because of her continuing recovery from the divorce. However, she says she does not regret her education, career, move to Bangalore, or her divorce. She loves her work and is happy she could follow her passion for design, which is still seen as an unconventional career in India. She thinks that work allows women to leave a bad marriage because they are financially independent, but moreover because they realize their worth, saying, “I think women were confined to a much smaller circle previously. Now, having the education that I’ve had, I was competing with guys and I came out better than them. That gave me confidence and also changed my perspective on relationships.” She still hopes for a good marriage and children, but wants the relationship to be satisfying on her terms.

**I. The ambivalence of work, and the work of happiness**

In stories like Gayatri’s, we can directly see some of the differences in her life as compared to her mother or other women in her family because of her education and career path. She was able to become a professional, to marry someone of her choice, to divorce, and to support herself. She has pursued her career passion, lives on her own in a new city, and moreover feels that she has learned more and gained more confidence than she could have otherwise. She feels losses as well—the loss of her joint and extended family, social acceptance through arranged marriage, and a normative married life, at least at present. Yet she also gained the knowledge that her parents supported her far beyond what she had expected. Her life has not progressed in a linear fashion along an imagined march of modernity; it is full of what she might see as regressions or unexpected turns. Yet the way she tells her story makes narrative sense, in that the stories she tells about her mother’s life,
as compared to hers, show that she feels the opportunities she has had to study and work have
given her more power and, in many ways, a happier life. Yet the idea of happiness is a
difficult one in Bangalore, especially for women.

In analyzing happiness and narratives of the past in Bangalore, I build on Arjun
Appadurai’s (2004) insight that the capacity to aspire—to link present actions to future
goals—is a privilege of the globally wealthy, while the poor have few channels for this kind
of future-oriented action. In the southern Indian state of Kerala, for example, the sense of
once being a “model for development” haunts present discourses, as the state faces high rates
of unemployment, an economy driven by remittances from workers in the Gulf, rising
violence against women, and a high suicide rate. Aspiration shaped by past expectations is
part of the disappointment Keralan youth experience, but Jocelyn Lim Chua (2014) suggests
that the recent increase in suicides is also because suicide is a way out of debt accrued in
pursuit of “the good life,” and thus indicates aspiration instead of despair.

Happiness is a relational term, as a measure of comparison with global and local
contemporaries and with ideas about the past and future. As Sara Ahmed writes:

The history of happiness can be thought of as a history of associations. In wishing for
happiness we wish to be associated with happiness, which means to be associated
with its associations. The very promise that happiness is what you get for having the
right associations might be how we are directed toward certain things. Happiness
shapes what coheres as a world. (Ahmed 2010: 2)

Building on Ahmed, I argue that even for privileged women in Bangalore, gender affects the
capacity to aspire along particular channels, while ideas about happiness are complex and
somewhat contradictory. Work brings up more existential questions about the self and
happiness that are narrated through ideas about the past. Speaking with women from different
generations, I began to hear them thinking through the idea of happiness itself through
temporal comparisons, especially in terms of kinship. As one woman remarked, “I think my
father says that, ‘Freedom is a fearful wish for the Indian woman, because you have freedom
but you have relationships,’” meaning kinship relationships. These ideas relate to a wider discourse about modernity and the individual in India.

**Individualism, women and work, and happiness: An ambivalent debate**

There is a healthy and historic discussion about individualism and modernity, and whether this is a western concept (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Dumont 1970; Giddens 1991) and/or a gendered concept (Strathern 1990). In India, discussions of caste foreground debates about western individualism and Indian communalism (Dumont 1970; Marriott 1955, 1968; Srinivas 1987, 1963). In *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970), Louis Dumont argued that caste is the basis for understanding Indian society and sets up an opposition between India and the west, arguing that Indian ideology is based on hierarchy and communalism based on caste, as opposed to western ideology based on equality between individuals.

Responses to Dumont drove much of the anthropological debate about India in the 1970s and 80s, in large part through criticism (Béteille 1969, 1991; Cohn 1987[1980]; Dirks 2001; Marriott 1968; Raheja 1988). Nicholas Dirks (2001), for example, argues that far from being inherent in the Indian psyche, caste was reified by the colonial project to categorize and control local populations. Today, caste, like sectarianism, has become a symbol of “tradition” that holds India back from modernity. Dirks captures this dilemma in a quotation by Jaharlal Nehru in his *Discovery of India*, who writes:

> The conflict is between two approaches to the problem of organization, which are diametrically opposed to each other: the old Hindu conception of the group being the basic unit of organization, and the excessive individualism of the west, emphasizing the individual above the group. (Nehru in Dirks 2001: 3-4)

This sentiment is a version of the dilemma of Indian feminism, in that a focus on the individual—especially for a woman—might be construed as western and thus immoral.

These discussions underlie a social discourse in India about contemporary women becoming too “individual” and less devoted to family as compared to the past. In her
ethnographic study of women working in IT in Bangalore, Jyothsna Belliappa (2013)
critiques this assertion directly by arguing that because women feel they are working for their families and not in spite of them, they are not becoming overly individualistic. Smita Radhakrishnan (2011) also finds that Indian women working in IT in Bangalore perform devotion to family over career as part of demonstrating their cultural authenticity and respectability grounded in an avoidance of appearing “selfish.” In popular media, Shilpa Phadke et al. assert that “good” working women must prioritize family, writing:

In the marriage stakes, professional careers are all well and good so long as women realize that these are always secondary to their primary roles as wives as mothers. The women who don’t acknowledge this often get represented as hard-nosed and inevitably headed for the divorce courts. (Phadke et al. 2011: 135)

In my fieldwork, I also found that young women feel external and internal pressure to prioritize their families over their careers. However, I also hear them redefining what it means to have a happy life beyond a choice between work and family. They are, in a sense, trying to rework the terms of the debate.

Firstly, by arguing for an expanded idea of the self through work, I heard women suggesting that a woman’s identity is partial or less valuable if it derives only from her role in the family. Amrita, a thirty-three-year-old journalist who is married with a young daughter, feels that unlike her mother, her sense of self comes in large part from her career. She links economic independence to confidence and a “separate life” beyond the home and the family as compared specifically to her mother’s generation, saying:

Financial independence, for one, has given so much confidence to women. In my generation marriage and home is not the be-all and end-all of our existence. We have our own interests. We have our own friends that we hang out with. We are married, but we have our separate lives. For my mother’s generation, even though they were liberal and educated, their focus was the family. Their identity was tied up with the family, with their husband and their children. Whereas for me I think my identity… I mean, now as a mother of course that’s very important to me. But as a journalist or just as an independent woman, that’s also very important to me.

While Amrita is careful to say that being a mother is an important part of her identity, she
emphasizes that she sees herself as a separate person from her family, with a life that includes her own interests, friends, and work-based identity. She defines this identity by contrasting her life to that of her mother, whose identity she sees as shaped by her kinship position.

While some women feel it was still socially acceptable for women to expect their husbands to support them, most of the women I spoke with feel it is becoming increasingly unacceptable for women to be “just a housewife,” socially and—more importantly—to themselves. Jyoti, twenty-six and working in finance, remarked that in previous generations, if a middle-class woman worked, this indicated that her husband could not provide for her. She says, “In those times women who worked were also seen as women who needed to work.” However, Jyoti narrates how this has changed, saying:

Something I’m noticing more and more is that women feel kind of embarrassed to be housewives. So they may have a sort of ‘face-saving’ job as a volunteer for an NGO or they make chocolates or something, just so they can say that they are doing something. Or they might help with the family business, just so they don’t get branded as a ‘housewife.’

Having a “face-saving” job to avoid being “branded” as a housewife indicates that women feel they might appear less important or as less of a person if they were not working.

Secondly, I heard women reformulating ideas about what it means to be happy through work. The concept of “duty” looms over these discussions, as this is the way obligations as members of a family and society are typically talked about in India. This includes a duty to obey their parents—especially when it comes to marriage—and to support their family according to understood gender roles. However, younger women differentiate their lives from past generations by saying they are seeking happiness in addition to, and not instead of, duty to the family. Anjum, thirty, a lawyer, links happiness to consumption and wanting “more” from life than previous generations, saying:

Our parents’ generation was quite happy saying, “We do our duty by our parents, by our in-laws, by our children, and that’s it. And if life gives us any happiness along the way then we’re grateful for that.” But we want to be materially happy. We want to have enough money to do all the things that we want. We want to travel. We always
want a new thrill. That sounds a little shallow. But we want a lot more out of life. I think we also do our duty but we also expect to be happy.

Consumption and living beyond duty, enabled by working and earning, is tied to living a more expansive life than in the past. A key element of this new desired life is a search for happiness beyond the family, through material consumption and activities like travel that allow pleasure and self-development.

Young women often characterized women in past generations as living under a kind of false consciousness, in that they believed they were happy because they were told they should be happy with what they had. One woman describes her mother’s generation as different than her own by saying, “My mom somehow learned to deaden her questioning mind. She talks about how satisfied she is. But they’ve been conditioned that this is the role they’re supposed to play.” This woman further speculates that her mother wanted to have a career and is not actually satisfied with her life as a housewife, but that she was expected to give the appearance of being satisfied. Clearly, her daughter is suspicious of this claim. Through stories about older women being only devoted to family and pretending to be happy, younger women thus portray themselves as uniquely capable of being “truly” happy, thus redefining happiness to include a sense of self beyond the family.

**Work and happiness in generational perspective: A warning from older women**

While this situation may seem straightforward, as the younger generation claims they are happier as a way to justify their choices, stories from older women show this debate in a more nuanced way. On the one hand, they narrate regret they did not “become more” through study and work, yet they also question—in a way that is, for the most part, more empathetic than judgmental—whether today’s women are really happy because their expectations are bound to be unmet. The seven women I interviewed who are in their sixties and seventies came from a group of friends in an older, Kannada-speaking neighborhood on the west side
of the city. They come from middle-class, upper-caste south Indian Hindu families and have lived in Bangalore for decades. They grew up before middle-class women commonly started working and have seen the change with their own eyes. All of these women had arranged marriages, and two of the seven worked—one as a teacher and one in a bank, professions considered respectable for middle-class women of this generation—while the other five were housewives. All expressed regret about not having the opportunities available now, while simultaneously voicing concerns about contemporary women.

One of these women grew up in a family where she and her sisters were not allowed to go to college because her father was afraid they might become “overeducated” for their in-laws, meaning they might not be willing to stay home and take care of their in-laws while their husbands went to work. When she married and moved to Bangalore she lived next to a new bank, and the manager offered to hire her as a trainee, as many young, married women were doing at the time. However, she needed her father-in-law’s permission to take the job. When she asked her father-in-law, she says he replied, “Don’t you get enough food? Don’t you get two meals? Why do you have to go to work?” With a sigh, she says, “So that was the end of it.” These regrets speak to frustrations about her potential life course.

Another speaks about how she felt she never “became something,” implying that she values an identity beyond her role as a wife and mother, but also worries about women today. She says that when she was growing up, “Marriage was the ultimate goal. Until you found somebody—I mean, until they found somebody for you—we didn’t even think of working.” She reflects, “I would have worked outside also. I wanted to become something. I wanted to learn swimming. I also wanted to learn cycling. I wanted to learn driving. But I never ended up doing anything. I don’t blame my parents, but the times were like that.” She sees women working as the biggest shift for the younger generation. However, she worries about women’s happiness because of their raised expectations, saying, “They earn a lot more. But I don’t
know if they’re happier than we were. Maybe we were happier with less.” She feels that life is more “hectic” because most Indian women now work both outside and inside the home, and are responsible for raising children, which she does not think is fair. She reiterates, “I don’t know whether they really are happy. I feel that most of them get burned out much before their time.” Although she does not think this is fair, she also indicates that young women’s unhappiness is their fault because they want too much.

In an idea that came up again and again, older women worry that working women have destabilized marriage and the joint family because they have become “selfish,” which is a negative way of saying they want a separate sense of self. When asked how women working has affected Indian society, one woman says:

Completely. Break up of joint family. Women became more independent. They don’t want a joint family. They became more selfish. The marriage system is not as strong as our marriage system. We used to say, ‘Our husband is our life.’ Now, they say, ‘I am earning the same salary as you, why should I respect you?’

In this reading, earning makes women “selfish” by rejecting a joint family and the implied obligations to obey and care for her husband and in-laws. The power dynamics between husbands and wives are also upset, leading to conflict.

However, some older women see benefits in new emphases on companionate marriages. One explains that when she was a young bride she thought “only about family” and spent time with her extended family, but sees it as an improvement that women now spend time with their husbands and can “talk freely” with them. In this way, she agrees with younger women about the importance of cultivating a sense of self beyond the family, although within the context of the conjugal relationship. However, this sense of self has limits, especially for unmarried women who are, as she puts it, “too carefree” and do not “think for the future.” When I ask what she means by this, she says she is concerned about women who are “too bold” with men before marriage, explaining that premarital sex or dating could ruin their chance to have a stable family.
Two women now in their early fifties, who both have unmarried, working daughters, articulate the deepest sense of ambivalence about work, as they strongly valorize the internal benefits of work for women yet are concerned about their daughters finding happiness. Alka, who runs a small business out of her home with a friend, says she wanted to “do more than just take care of the house,” indicating she has been influenced by the idea that middle-class women should be more than just housewives. However, she also says that because her children were “important” to her, she did not want a job outside the home, revealing some of the ambivalence of her generation. She talks about how working transformed her confidence in an embodied and gendered way, saying:

> Once you start earning your own money everybody else’s attitude towards you changes. One hundred percent. I’m a housewife most of the time. But since I’m working and since I’m earning my own money my body image is different. My confidence level is different. So automatically the other person changes his attitude towards you.

Here, the imagined person whose attitude changes is a man, such that for her, work means a shift in gender hierarchy. However, she is also very worried about her daughter’s marriage. Her daughter Devika is in her mid-twenties and a successful manager in an IT firm. Alka is concerned that Devika works too hard and has too many expectations, and thus will not make the compromises she believes are necessary in a happy marriage.

Mayuri, a mother with two unmarried working daughters, similarly believes in education and financial independence for women, saying, “If you have education you have everything. You have your independence. You have your confidence. Only if you have your own money.” She thinks that the power dynamics in marriage are changing, or at least women are trying to change them, because they are working. She explains:

> Now the girls are putting their foot down. They say, “This is what I want to do and you knew it when you got married.” I see that the girls are more confident. They will not take any nonsense because they are working. When you’re financially independent, nobody can touch you.

She thus argues that not only can women insist on working after marriage, but also do not
have to put up with “nonsense”—implying negative treatment—from their husbands.

However, she worries that women today may be better off materially, but not emotionally, saying, “We were more content with what we had,” explaining that women now are so used to buying new things that they are “never satisfied.” In his book on contemporary India, the Indian-American author Anand Giridharadas writes:

Observing the young women around me in today’s India, living with this grueling inner war, I found myself wondering if they were happier than Ammamma in 1942. Their freedoms were incomparably greater…. But the border between old and new was never cleanly drawn in India, and in many cases the freedoms of these women had come at the cost of great confusion. The old had not completely vanished; the new had not fully settled in. These women lingered in the badlands in between, liberated and anxious, no longer certain of what they were supposed to be. (Giridharadas 2011: 185)

He observes that young women in urban India desire to be different than their mothers and crave new forms of stimulation in relationships, while also wanting stability.

This concern that Indian women today want “too much” and are “not satisfied” is a moral judgment linked to historic concerns about female sexuality being uncontrolled and dangerous (John and Nair 1998b) and to related concerns about familial instability. A woman searching for happiness as an individual, beyond one’s duty to the family, can be read as immoral. Moral systems are a window into gendered power dynamics. Social regulation of women who “want too much” also has the effect of silencing women who might claim a right to material resources to which they may be legally entitled. Srimati Basu (1999) finds that married women from varied class backgrounds in Delhi did not ask their natal families for property to which they were entitled because:

Despite the benefits for themselves and their families that they could visualize, the fear of being turned into the *haklenewali* [the greedy shrew], the social stigma of being grasping and greedy, and worse of all, the apprehension of losing the symbolic space of love represented by the natal family often made women decline natal property in favor of a dubious dependence on marital and affinal resources. (Basu 1999: 223)

Some of the narratives of ambivalence from older women in Bangalore take the tone of moral
judgment, but I also hear a warning about expectations that can only lead to disappointment. The context for this disappointment is a system of gendered power dynamics that mean it has been historically difficult for women to gain power in a marital relationship. Younger women, while aware they may be disappointed, are attempting to change these dynamics and by cultivating an identity beyond their family as part of their very self-definition, reaching to the past to justify their choices.

Radhika’s story: Selfishness and the “bad daughter-in-law”

The stakes for women of appearing selfish and too individualistic are illustrated in Radhika’s narrative, whose view of her daughter-in-law is a way of narrating her own frustration with her marriage, her in-laws, her life as a housewife, and her loneliness as she grows older. Perhaps through these concerns, she is also articulating concerns about new ideas about the self, and a warning about the limits to what women can imagine.

Radhika, seventy, is from an upper-caste Tamil family that has lived in rural Karnataka for generations. She completed 12th standard but married two months before her final exams. Radhika asked her in-laws if she could finish her degree after having her first child, but her mother-in-law said it was “ridiculous.” She says she also wanted to work after marriage, but her husband worried about his family’s reputation. She remembers, “He said, ‘You know, people will laugh. They’ll think, ‘It’s not enough that the son is earning. They’re making even the daughter-in-law work.’ So what will people think of my parents if you go to work?’” Fifteen years later, when her children were grown, she finished her degree and has volunteered as a tutor for developmentally challenged children for the past twenty years.

Radhika’s father was seventy when she was just nineteen, so he was “desperate” to

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29 The Indian educational system mirrors that of the US, but replaces “grade” with “standard.” Thus, 12th standard is the age equivalent of 12th grade. India, however, uses a “10+2+3” structure, in which students have ten years of primary education, two years of secondary education (often termed “plus two”) in which they specialize in a subject and take college entrance exams, and three years of college education. Completing one’s “graduation” normatively refers to completing primary and secondary education.
get her married before he passed away. He arranged a marriage for her to a man who was ten years older and from a large, much less wealthy family in the same small town. She did not meet her husband before marriage and says that moving into her husband’s joint family was a shock. However, she says she was not expected to have trouble “adjusting,” which is the word used in India to describe a woman’s responsibility to “adjust” to her husband’s family after marriage. She remembers her parents telling her, “‘Your husband’s family will be your family, so you should forget us.’” She lived with her in-laws for six years and had two children before moving with her husband to Bangalore. While she says her mother-in-law was a “sweet person,” she also notes that she withheld spending money “even to make a phone call to my parents,” and while she describes her in-laws as “nice people,” she also says they demanded a large dowry and kept asking for more after she married.

While she struggled with her mother-in-law, Radhika judges her own daughter-in-law for her materialism and perceived lack of family values. Radhika’s son and daughter-in-law were coworkers and had a love marriage. They moved in with Radhika and her husband after marriage, in the tradition of the Indian joint family, but this did not go well. Radhika’s daughter-in-law had a high position in a financial firm and Radhika narrates how she cared for her grandchildren when they were babies so her daughter-in-law could keep working. She says, “I really pampered her. I used to make the child stay with me in the night. Four o’clock I would set the alarm, boil the milk and cool it, so his mother didn’t get disturbed. She was the only woman partner in India. A big pressure job.” However, her daughter-in-law quit her job after becoming a partner because of the pressure. Radhika says she did not spend more time with her children, but instead went traveling “by herself,” meaning with friends instead of with her family. Rather than saying this was irresponsible, Radhika instead says this was a “waste of money,” linking wasting money is to a degeneration of family values.

Radhika then explains that she and her husband ended up moving out of their own
house because they could not get along with their daughter-in-law. She acknowledges that her husband could have been hard to live with, and that she kept running the house as she had for years, but says she asked for her daughter-in-law’s input and says they could not negotiate. Then she says her daughter-in-law started doing “insulting things,” such as not saying goodbye when she left the house, or not eating Radhika’s food and instead asking the maid to cook, or not sitting with her at a music concert they both attended. She feels that the current generation is selfish and not able to deal with aging parents, saying:

As you grow older, you change. When we were growing up we were told to expect and accept all these changes. But today the present generation does not have the patience. At their best they are self-centered, at worst they are selfish…. You want to be treated as a human being, not like a piece of old furniture. Even when they include you they’re not including you in their lives. It is very very hurting. Humiliating.

Radhika and her husband moved to a smaller house in a different part of the city. She says only the friends she has made in her new neighborhood can relate to her pain of growing older and feeling ignored.

Although Radhika describes Bangalore as the most “modern” place in India because of the freedoms women have, she doubts if women use these freedoms properly. Because husbands and wives are “constantly running,” she argues that families today are “more disjointed family than joint family.” She feels this has resulted in her personal experience of living away from her son, a situation she blames on her daughter-in-law. Her anger comes, in part, from the loneliness she feels living in her old age away from family, a non-normative but growing phenomenon for the elderly Indian middle classes. As Sarah Lamb describes, a “broken family” in India refers not to a situation of divorce, but to “joint families that have fractured into nuclear units” (Lamb 2009: 22). Anxieties thus cluster more around concerns over elder care than childrearing. Lamb writes:

The problem regarding working women is not so much that work makes a woman unable to provide care for her parents or parents-in-law in her home, but rather that she (because of the independence and agency she derives from employment) will be less likely to agree to serving her parents-in-law. (Lamb 2009: 22)
Radhika ties this situation to the idea of women having too much choice, saying, “Now the change has come. Girls have the liberty to make their own choices, whether it’s their career or their marriage…. But I don’t know if they are really happy. They always seem to be running after something.” For Radhika, more choices have created less happiness.

II. Imagining the self through the past: New narratives of work and confidence

Articulating generational change is an important way people fit their lives into temporal narratives that have coherence. Tracing how middle-class women from different generations in Bangalore talk about happiness, the self, and changes that have occurred because women are working begins to show the ways they define themselves generationally.

Building the self through generational perspective

In anthropology, the concept of generation has been approached through age-sets or cohorts based on age, phase of life, and often gender (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), as opposed to generations that are shaped by historical events (Mannheim 2011 [1927]). Pierre Bourdieu argues that generations see things differently because their habitus, or learning from family and wider society, was formed in different social contexts, such that “different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable” means that “one group [experiences] as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa” (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]: 78; in Lamb 2009: 14).

Differentiating generations in our own families is a key way we construct our sense of self. Jennifer Cole (2010) has used the concept of generation to study gender and social change in Madagascar. Cole sees generational change less as a “mechanical, unreflective matter of one cohort replacing another,” and more as, “a highly imaginative undertaking in which people’s desire to be good and valued, their culturally shaped dilemmas, and their
visions for the future meet the broader forces of history and culture in unpredictable, uneven ways” (Cole 2010: xxi). In her ethnography of three generations of women working in a Chinese silk factory, Lisa Rofel notes that although “cohort analysis” has been important in anthropology, her emphasis is less on how a cohort forms due to a single historical event, but on, “the reformation of cohorts as they live through diverse historical periods” (Rofel 1999: 22). Generation is about the future as much as the past; Carolyn Kay Steedman (1986) compares her life to that of her working-class mother in England, and in doing so asks what it means to be a “good woman” going forward. Louise Lamphere (2001, 2007) further argues that tracing the perspectives of three generations of Navajo women helped her overcome analyses that placed Navajos as “stuck” between tradition and modernity.

In her ethnography of elderly middle-class Indians in Kolkata, Sarah Lamb (2009) examines a prevailing discourse in India about children abandoning their parents to old age homes, which is seen as a sign of degenerative westernization that characterizes how generations and Indian society has changed. Lamb argues that through this debate, older Indians are asking themselves, “Are we participating, for better and/or for worse, in some sort of shared, global modernizing project? Are we taking on the culture of the Americans or of the West?” (Lamb 2009: 11). She argues that older generations are not static but change their viewpoints over time and contribute actively to shaping the present. Lamb (2015) further suggests that the concept of generation should not be accepted as straightforward cultural transmission or a one-way path toward a more modern future, writing:

The category of generation can be fruitfully exploded to explore problems of current critical interest to the discipline – pertaining to the ways people envision and experience social change, how family moral systems and forms of elder care are fashioned under changing cultural and historical circumstances, and the ways diverse power structures, voices, and identities make up particular cultural worlds. (Lamb 2015: 856)

Here, I build on approaches that analyze how people envision different generations in order to understand their own views of social change and themselves.
Narratives of work: Cautionary tales, regrets, and the self

In Bangalore, the past is very much about the present, particularly when it comes to how young women describe the meaning of work in their lives. As young professional women in Bangalore told me about what work means to them, I began to notice a subtle difference in the way they framed their narratives. Many started out talking about work as protection or insurance in case of disaster—meaning marital disaster—which they often referred to as “standing on your own two feet” and illustrated using cautionary family stories. However, as they continued talking or in later conversations, they began describing how work affected their sense of self and confidence, also invoking stories about their grandmothers or mothers who wished they had worked, or talking about how much they enjoyed their work. In this shift, I see a desire to first appear more “respectable” by claiming work is just insurance in case a normative married life did not work out, while other meanings—self confidence and pleasure—emerge later. Both claims are supported through family stories, as a way of using temporal progression to justify their choices.

Narratives that framed work as protection or a kind of insurance for women were often told through stories about actual disasters that had befallen women in their families and resulting shifts in the attitudes of male relatives, illustrating gendered power within families and also the possibility of change. For example, one woman described how both her aunts’ husbands cheated on them for decades, but they could not leave because they did not work. She says that this experience led her grandfather to realize that, “It was a big mistake not having his daughters standing on their own feet and being self-sufficient,” and he decided that from then on all the young women in the family would study and work. Another woman told me about her aunt, who suffered through a decade of a dangerous, physically abusive marriage but stayed because she did not work, while another talked about an aunt who had an
early broken engagement and had to live resentfully with her parents as a spinster, providing a cautionary tale to the entire family about women not working.

Gouri saw her mother go through this experience firsthand. Gouri’s father passed away when she was eight years old, and her mother was left with three small daughters. Gouri says her mother was relatively lucky, because her husband had made her a silent partner in his business, so she did not lose it to his family. She also owned their house and was able to rent out two floors. However, her mother did not know how to run the business so it lost money for several years, and she had to be careful with money to afford private English-medium school tuition for her daughters. Gouri and her sisters now work in white-collar jobs, encouraged by their mother. Gouri says:

I think her main objective once my dad passed away was to get us all educated so we could stand on our own feet and be independent. She also feels that it would have helped if she had done more study. She would say, “You need to study and be able to take care of yourself because you don’t know how life will change.”

This reiterates that, for women, uncertainty in life means uncertainty in marriage, positioning work as a fall back option.

Because of women’s historic dependence on men, being a widow or a divorced woman in India is to evoke pity and informal and formal social avoidance as a symbol of bad luck (Lamb 2000). I interviewed two widowed women, both of whom emphasized how their work was a tremendous help financially and emotionally. Bhavini, sixty-four, moved to Bangalore after marriage, but her husband died when her son was just four. She says she could have moved back to her husband’s parents’ house, but they lived in a small town and the educational opportunities for her son were better in Bangalore. Her husband had worked in a bank, and the bank gave her a position as compensation. Bhavini began working for the first time in her life, and although she says she was unhappy at first, she eventually enjoyed the job and made her closest friends there. Instead of depending on relatives, work provided her with financial security, a social life, and an identity she would not have had otherwise.
Likewise, work can help rebuild a woman’s identity after losing her husband. Shanti, forty-five, worked in journalism in her early twenties. After an arranged marriage she stopped working and moved to north India for her husband’s job, where she was a housewife for ten years. However, when her daughter was six years old, her husband died in an accident. She moved back to Bangalore to live with her parents and says she immediately began searching for work, saying, “It was therapy. The first thing I did when my husband’s ceremonies were over was look for a job.” She was able to rely on her parents for room and board and childcare, and says that while she did not need to financially support herself immediately, work gave her “a sense of a life again.” She has resisted remarrying partly because she feels her career would come second and she might have to quit, saying, “I really don’t want to return to that life.” She feels it has been especially important for her daughter to see her not as a widow, but as a working, independent woman.

Several women also told me that working was an opportunity their mothers did not have and always wanted, so they felt they had a responsibility to work. There is an often-unsaid implication that their mothers were not satisfied with the lives they had led, although some mothers made this regret very clear. For example, Priyanka says that her mother always regretted not working and pushed her to work. Her mother is from Gujurat and speaks Gujurati, but moved to Delhi after marriage and never learned Hindi, so she has trouble getting around the city. Priyanka says:

[My mother] thinks working gives women emotional strength. She says that the confidence level a working woman exudes, in contrast to a woman just in the house, is very different. It’s not self-esteem, but confidence in going out in the world and talking to strangers, and traveling alone.

This distinction between confidence and self-esteem is important because working means more than having self-worth, as it also allows a woman to feel comfortable interacting in the world beyond the home. The idea that working can allow a woman to move around a city alone is also a statement about gender norms in India. A woman in the city “alone” implies
she is not under the control of male relatives, which can be a sign of questionable morality, but is now commonplace during daylight hours because women are commuting to work. Work thus alters the gendered landscape of the city.

The option to work can also alter gender dynamics at home, especially in the case of a difficult marriage. Lalita, a thirty-year-old human resources executive, told me about her college friend who is in an unhappy marriage. She says her friend was at the top of their college class, but came from an orthodox Hindu family and had an arranged marriage to into a restrictive joint family from the same caste. Daughters-in-law conventionally need permission from their in-laws to study or work after marriage. Her friend was recently able to convince her in-laws to let her study for a masters degree in nutrition and she now works for a hospital as a dietician. Lalita argues that work has changed her friend’s life, saying, “I can see her much happier working because she has access to things that she would otherwise have to ask [for]. And they live in a joint family, so she has more time for herself. I used to see her being very depressed and now I see she is a lot more confident.”

Beyond money, working allowed Lalita’s friend to have an expanded social circle and worldview that has the potential to change power dynamics at home. Lalita says, “It gives you a lot of confidence when you’re working outside…. That really helps women because they are home in different ways.” The idea that women are “home in different ways” because of work is key to understanding the promise of work to change historically structured social positions, such as that of the daughter-in-law, or at least change the terms of negotiation.

When speaking with a couple that was divorcing in a Bombay courthouse, Anand Giridharadas found a similar language of confidence tied to women who work. He quotes the husband, who said, “There have always been problems…but today women have started working. Today they feel that, if I am working, I have some kind of self-respect, and I am not going to be treated like a doormat. Our parents would have compromised. My mother would
have carried the relationship on and tried to pacify my dad”” (Giridharadas 2011: 197).

Stories about friends who work as a way to escape oppressive in-laws or about a mother who felt unable to negotiate a city alone are more common than stories about enjoying work for itself. There were cases, however, where women admitted this to me. For example, Priyanka, Lalita, Gouri, and Shanti all eventually told me about how much they enjoyed their jobs. Many of these admissions, however, came with qualifications: the hours were long, and they felt guilty about spending time away from their families. I now turn to how, in practice, professional women in Bangalore have negotiated the difficulties of staying in a job and, perhaps most poignantly, the difficulties of leaving.

III. Pressure to quit, pressure to stay: The expectations and disappointments of work

For all its caché, the technology industry is exploitive of its workers in every global location. In Silicon Valley, work pervades social life and can be all-consuming (Darrah et al. 2007; English-Lueck 2002). Contemporary white-collar job security depends on how many hours one can spend working, in a culture characterized by flexibility, contingency, and insecurity (Weeks 2007, 2011). This culture of overwork has become part of global IT workplaces as well, including in India (Upadhya and Vasavi 2008). IT companies embrace a “new” workplace ethos of creativity and fun enhancing productivity, along with less hierarchy, so we find ping-pong tables and open-plan offices in California and in Bangalore. Providing for worker needs onsite, from dry cleaning to meals, means that people spend more time working. These perks mask the reliance in the US IT sector on guest workers, who accept lower pay and worse working conditions to stay in the country. In Bangalore, IT and other white-collar offices have upscale cafés and restaurants onsite, provide “global” feeling office environments, and have team building events such as rafting, bowling, concerts, and corporate parties. They also provide opportunities to work abroad, albeit usually for short,
intense stints. Along with these perks, because the salaries are relatively high and competition
for these jobs is intense, expectations for one’s dedication to work are also high.

Work deeply shapes how people experience temporality. Industrial capitalism
reworked ideas about time as being segmented and measured for efficient production
(Thompson 1967). More recently, anthropologists who work for technology corporations
have found that new practices associated with globalization and digital work may actually
disturb the timeframes of corporate work. For example, Brigitte Jordan argues:

Time is a fundamental symbolic category for understanding the orderliness of
corporate life…. In business, time is organized according to recurring units such as
business quarters or production cycles…. Work is almost always framed in terms of
time…. It is interesting to note that the new communication possibilities provided by
the Internet and the global distribution of team members disturb and disrupt many of
those established patterns. (Jordan 2013: 16-7)

Perhaps this disruption is due in part to the blending of work and family life that occurs with
increased remote work with people in different time zones, along with gulfs of culture and
experience that make communication about project timelines challenging. From another
perspective, digital work also allows for flexibility and working from many locations, which
facilitates creating an identity that more closely matches the dematerialized, non-place-based
nature of contemporary capitalist networks (Gluesing 2008).

Work in global outsourcing deeply affects Indian workers’ experiences of
temporality, aspiration, and subjectivity. In his ethnography on call center and other workers
in the outsourcing economy in Gurgaon, a suburb of Delhi, Shehzad Nadeem starts with the
question, “Would you rather have high hopes and have them routinely dashed, or have low
expectations and rarely be disappointed?” (Nadeem 2011: 1). He describes the work itself as
tedious, with little appreciation from foreign clients, long hours, and carefully monitored
work time. He argues that these jobs encourage expectations of global membership while
creating neocolonial subjectivities of mimicry and subservience, especially but not just for
call center workers, as workers remake themselves for western clients by appearing to be like
them as they perform their grunt work. However, these workers have little chance of advancement in the industry, so this type of work structures disappointed hopes.

Indian call centers in particular are sites of affective labor and new subjectivities that have parallels in the IT workplace. On the one hand, call center workers’ particular form of affective labor entails managing American customer’s racist anger at having to speak with someone in India who is thought to be responsible for taking American jobs, distancing them from customers even as they must emotionally engage them (Mirchandani 2012). On the other hand, call center workers can experience alienation from their own family and personal life, as they are encouraged to be culturally “neutral” and are often on an opposite schedule from their intimates, and thus experience a form of “social death” (Aneesh 2015). This situation can result in a contradictory social alienation. Kalindi Vora suggests:

As a result of the tension between the structure of call center work and the structure of the rest of Indian society, agents most often lose access to the means of meeting their immediate affective needs in their everyday lives yet are expected to continue to produce affect on the job. (Vora 2010: 42)

Call center workers in Bangalore experience “scrambled temporalities” shaped by night shifts (Mankekar and Gupta 2016: 16), which affects body clocks and menstrual cycles and makes it impossible to participate in social life except with their coworkers, even as their time at work is minutely monitored. Workers in IT and other knowledge-industry professions are not usually working night shifts, but the demands of the job, including working with teams in multiple time zones, alienates workers from their immediate social lives even as they form emotional connections with coworkers who may or may not be physically present.

Affective labor in sites of global outsourcing is part of a worker’s relationship with their work, their clients, and themselves. Immaterial labor produced in the new postmodern economy, according to Michael Hardt, is constituted by “a service, knowledge, or communication” (Hardt 1999: 94). Part of this immaterial labor includes knowledge economy services that encompass much of the labor performed in digital outsourcing; the other part, he
argues, includes the affective labor of “human contact and interaction” (Hardt 1999: 95).

However, it is not so simple to disentangle these aspects. As Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2010) argue, treating “intimate labor” as a new feature of the global economy:

…denies the separation of home from work, work from labor, and productive from nonproductive labor that has characterized capitalist globalization…. [Intimate labor] represents work assumed to be the unpaid responsibility of women, and, consequently, is usually considered to be a non-market activity or activity of low economic value that should be done by lower classes or racial outsiders. (Boris and Parreñas 2010: 2)

Perhaps affective labor is the feminized and thus devalued side of Hardt’s “service, knowledge, and communication”? Yet this kind of labor makes the self and the body into integrated sites of production that must be flexible and self-managed in order to maximize potential, as Emily Martin (1994) reminds us. Labor and its temporalities are fundamentally gendered, in terms of who is thought to be “best suited” to particular types of work, how work is valued, and how gender is produced through particular forms of labor.

**The rhythms and isolations of technology work in Bangalore**

I observed first-hand that work in IT in Bangalore affects day-to-day senses of temporality. The expectation to be constantly available means that workers check their smartphones constantly and carry their computers to social gatherings, oftentimes logging in from deafeningly noisy pubs to chat with their global team members or taking calls in their car outside parties. Working in an industry that is global and carrying out outsourced tasks means that workers are on US or European time zones, many working night shifts or at least odd hours that intrude into the evening and night. Work in this industry is also volatile, and there is high turnover in any company. Many firms do not have enough space for their flexible workforce, so they ask employees to work from home certain days a week and share desk spaces in the office. A software tester described the common practice in IT of keeping potential employees “on the bench,” which epitomizes the exploitation of flexible labor. She
told me about her friend who had completed a three-month unpaid training course with a major IT firm, and was now waiting “on the bench” for a project to surface. Every morning and evening the “bench” workers were required to come to the office and sign in, but there is no work. Instead they constitute a contingent workforce without jobs or salaries.

Priyanka, who managed teams in call centers for almost a decade, describes how she was so focused on work before she remarried that she felt she “went crazy.” She describes how working the night shift made her body sick, saying that the hours made the stress—often referred to in India as feeling “pressurized”—much worse. She says:

When you work in the night your body clock is sick, so everything is pressurizing for you. Everything is irritating for you. I think the night shift makes you crazy. You have a 200-member team and you’re developing them. You’re developing the business, there’s metrics and numbers. You’ll be spending eighteen, nineteen hours at work and you wouldn’t realize. My only passion was work.

After a few years she says she decided to quit, but her boss convinced her just to take some time off. She meant to take six months off, but after only two months she said she wanted to return because she did not feel she had a focus in life other than work.

Even when workers are on day shifts, as are most IT employees, the culture of constant work not only damages mental and physical health but also takes a toll on important relationships. In one late-night conversation with Devika, Jyoti, Gouri, and Anju, the discussion turned to work hours. Devika, a manager in a multinational IT firm, complained that her manager made her work too hard. Earlier that night, her sister performed with her dance company in their first major performance. Devika had asked the week before for permission to leave “early” at 6pm. However, there was an issue that workers at the New York office could not resolve on their own, so at the last minute, her manager asked her to be on a call with New York until 7:30pm. She came in halfway through the show, while the rest of us had arrived on time. Devika feels this happens far too often in her firm. To make her point, she told a story about an employee who was in the hospital while his grandmother was
“literally on her deathbed.” She says this person’s manager called them and “apologized,” but asked them to log in from the hospital for a call. In an outraged tone, she repeated, “From the hospital!” She remarked that often employees at the main offices abroad do not know how to do various tasks because they rely on the Indian offices to do them, but she does not feel that they value the time of Indian employees. While white-collar work may be exploitive everywhere, there are neocolonial aspects of exploitation in locations of outsourced labor.

Devika admitted in a later conversation that she enjoys her job despite the long hours, saying, “I’ve enjoyed every bit of the work that I’ve done. It’s been very challenging and very very time-consuming. Do I enjoy doing it? Definitely.” She says she finds she particularly enjoys managing teams of people to solve large issues, as she likes finding out where certain people excel and using them in a strategy she can design. However, she says she often has twelve to fifteen hour days and finds she has little energy for family and friends. Sometimes after a “crazy week,” she says her mother wants her to go shopping, but she says that all she wants to do is relax at home and “watch TV mindlessly.” On the weekends she tries to meet up with her childhood friends, and although she says it is easier to cancel on friends than family, she realized that if she kept canceling on them she would lose touch. She also argues that commuting in Bangalore takes time away from relationships, saying, “Travel is a big problem in Bangalore, because you’re traveling a long distance. It takes one and a half hours just to get back and go in the morning.” Her married female colleagues, especially those with children, find the work hours and the commute too much.

Anju, who works for an import/export company, talks about the new work culture by comparing women her age to women her mother’s age, saying she believes that her mother’s generation was more “patient, tolerant, and docile,” while because of work stress, her generation is more “aggressive, competitive, and less adjusting.” She explains that when she first started working she used to give more priority to her work than to her boyfriend, saying,
“I couldn’t see anything beyond my work because I was into it all the time.” Her boyfriend had to threaten to break up with her to get her to change her priorities. Similarly, when Gouri began her job in IT, she says it was a shock to suddenly be at work ten hours a day. She began with night shifts, which she says she “hated,” and after a few weeks moved to an 11am to 11pm shift. Still, she often worked sixteen to eighteen hours in a row supporting the London office. She says, “My social life, it was not there for two years. I didn’t meet my boyfriend. I slept half of Saturday. Sunday was for family, and my friends were in office.” She tried to see her friends on the weekends because she was too tired to socialize during the week. After marriage, Gouri moved to a part-time job in corporate training.

The new culture of work can affect relationships intimately. Usha is a manager in an IT company, and from her observations over the years, she identifies three main ways that work in IT can negatively affect working couples, all of which can be seen as temporal challenges. First, she explains, they might not have the same shift, meaning they may only see each other on the weekend, even if they live in the same house. Second, if the couple works together at the same company, they might feel “too much togetherness.” Third is the likelihood of being in a long-distance relationship because of work transfers. For example, her friend, who recently had a baby, is working in Bangalore and living in a paying guesthouse or “PG” while her parents take care of her baby in another state and her husband is working in Dubai. She characterizes her friend as in a state of anxious waiting, saying:

She’s waiting for her husband’s contract to get over so he can come down. She needs him emotionally and he’s not there. Neither does she want to quit the job because she needs the money. So she went to work until the eighth month [of pregnancy], then went back to Punjab deliver the baby, and she’s left the baby there and she’s come back to work.

Even when working couples have the same hours and spend time together, they often feel so drained that connecting is difficult. Priyanka recently left her high-level position in IT sales because she wants to spend more time with her daughter. She says that in the evenings, her
husband comes home and just wants to turn on the TV and not talk about anything. She feels it is better that she is not also coming home with that energy, saying that she is glad her daughter is not “impacted by the craziness.” About work in Bangalore, she says, “They pay you well. But it takes it out of you.”

The pain of leaving work: Lost futures and temporal “breaks”

The hours in IT and other white-collar professions in Bangalore are exploitive for everyone. The pressure to earn, often to financially support their family, is very stressful for men in Bangalore. However, women also feel pressure to earn, in addition to caring for family. It is this tension, between succeeding in work and with family, that makes it more likely for women to take a part-time position, work from home, or leave work.

Of the sixteen young married women I interviewed, who all were working full-time at one point, seven were still working after marriage (four with one child), four were working part-time (three with one child), and five had stopped working (all with one child). Thus, over half the group had stopped working full-time, and having a child appears to tip the scales. None of the women had more than one child, and several told me that they planned to go back to work and felt they could not do so with two children. The following narratives articulate how it feels to stop working or to work part-time after working full time, showing how work is considered part of the self, as is the obligation to care for family.

In India, a major factor that allows women to carry on with careers after marriage and children is the availability of affordable nannies, daycare, maids, and grandparents or other relatives who help with childcare and housework.\(^30\) However, despite this help, the women I spoke with in Bangalore felt pressure to personally care for their children. Hemangi, twenty-

30 Susan Seymour (1999) has identified a common strategy for sharing child care in joint families in the North Indian town where she has conducted fieldwork for decades, termed “multiple-caretaking” or “multiple child care,” which involves sharing child care duties among members of an extended family, thus relieving the burden on individual mothers. While most of the women I spoke with in Bangalore relied on their parents or in-laws for help with child care for varied lengths of time, sharing child care in a joint family was not a common practice.
eight, an architect who is working part-time and taking care of her two-year-old daughter, lives far away from family. She does not like leaving her daughter with the maid, who she says is neglectful, and also feels she cannot leave her daughter with her husband. She explains that the one night she went out with her friends since her daughter was born, her husband asked her to come back home. She remembers, “I was petrified at that time because [the baby] was in a very bad mood and just crying and crying. In two hours time I had to come back. My husband was saying, ‘She’s crying too much I cannot handle her.’” Even though her husband supports her working, Hemangi feels she cannot work because she does not have reliable childcare, a problem exacerbated by her husband.

Women in Bangalore who had stopped working often told me they were “taking a break” while their children were little, but being able to return to work in the same position is unlikely. Manju, twenty-nine, worked in IT for years but is currently not working so she can take care of her daughter. She says that in her mother’s generation women found teaching jobs if they worked at all, while the few women who worked in corporate jobs did so at “a low level.” She says when she was growing up, however, “Nothing was off the table for us…I’m lucky to belong to a time where you can do anything.” In the past generation, for example, she says people would never have “taken a career break” or changed fields, but says that now people do these things without a second thought. Significantly, she cites this discourse of expanded choice in her own decision to “take a break” from work, saying, “I’ve taken a two-year break and I plan to get back to work only next year.” Manju uses the optimism of the present moment in which “you can do anything” to argue that she can reenter her career at any time. However, this is actually quite difficult, because it is challenging to find a new position after a break and to negotiate the hours, as single women and men typically can work longer than can married women with children.

Quitting work is often a source of intense regret. As Devika relates, the transition for
a working woman after marriage can be difficult because they often move in with their in-laws and have new chores. She says, “These [women] find it so hard to manage the family. Get up in the morning and cook for everyone, then come to work and give it your best shot. Then go back home again, cook dinner, get everything set and still be as fresh as possible for the family.” She says a lot of women in her firm quit after marriage, which she says is a major loss for the firm because they have invested in them. She also feels women regret it, saying, “The women lose out because after a while they look back and think, ‘I could have had something there.’ And then they don’t. That could be sad for them.” One of Devika’s close friends recently married and her husband convinced her to quit a demanding IT job. Now, however, her friend tells Devika that she is bored at home and also very lonely.

A sudden change from working to staying home can be difficult. Beyond no longer earning money, it is an abrupt shift to no longer interact in a workplace setting. Fatima, a journalist who works mainly in public relations, quit her job when she had a child but says that she needed to go back to work, to have time for herself. She says:

[When I stopped working] it just drove me mad. I wanted to get back to work. I mean, it was great having a child. But I needed that time to myself, to have adult conversation. So I have realized that even if I don’t spend a penny of what I earn I still need to be working. I still need to have someplace to go to every day.

Her old firm would not hire her part time, so Fatima works for a new company where she works from home and goes in twice a week. She says would like a full-time job when her child is older, and does not want a second child, because, she says, “I could not have a life of my own if I had another one.” Fatima only admitted she wanted “time to herself” and “a life of her own” after I had known her for some time, and noted she felt guilty saying it out loud.

Flexible work schedules or working from home are not necessarily the solution for women who want to compromise. Priyanka started working part-time from home after her daughter was born. She says, “I started missing the money first. And then the social aspect of going to work every day, getting ready every morning and going to work and meeting a
group of people. I’ve always led teams and a team gives you a lot of energy to work. I hate it, being at home to work.” She argues that it is important for women to be present in the office so that they can be part of team projects and decisions, and finds that women who work from home are likely to be forgotten and as a result will not advance. Pia, thirty-one, is a computer programmer and worked from home for a year after her son was born. She argues that if you are working from home, people at the office take you for granted even if you do good work, saying, “I think your expectations are high. But even if you work hard I think visibility is less.” Further, she argues that working from an office is actually more relaxing saying, “You have leisure time. You go out for tea or coffee and you sit and relax, just sitting. At home when you get those breaks you finish up your household work. So you’re not exactly sitting and relaxing or taking time off.” Working from home can mean a constant double shift.

I understand the pain of leaving work in Bangalore as similar to the sensation of “going backwards” in terms of the progress of modernity (Ferguson 1999). Leaving work is, for these women, tied to their ideas about their role in social progress, yet it is also personal and embodied. Their enjoyment of work has to do with day-to-day temporality—the feeling of being away from domestic tasks and the excitement of demanding work—as well as their perceived generational location. However, they also experience the speeded up temporality of contemporary work culture, which encourages workers to be immersed in simultaneous multiple temporalities through technological mediation. When women leave they often feel they have chosen to focus on relationships, just as they chose their career. However, I see their choices as constrained. Leaving work can mean a painful loss of identity, with unrealistic expectations of reentering the workforce, but instead of holding their companies responsible, women blame themselves. These constraints can be seen in Asma’s narrative, a woman who has chosen to keep working in a high-level position, and in Pia’s narrative, a woman who has taken a less demanding and more flexible position.
Asma’s story: Resisting yet internalizing the pressure to be a homemaker

Asma, a thirty-six-year-old high-level manager in an IT firm, credits her mother and grandmother with encouraging her to go so far in her field. She says that neither of her grandmothers worked, but her maternal grandmother was well read and “broad-minded” despite getting little education, and made sure her children were well-educated. Her mother studied economics in college and won a prestigious scholarship to continue her studies abroad. Instead of taking the scholarship, however, her mother got married because her family thought that studying abroad as a single woman would ruin her chances to marry and would be shameful for the extended family. Asma says, “She was chosen for that scholarship. But she didn’t go because everybody discouraged her from going abroad. You know, ‘Oh no, get married,’ and things like that.” To this day, she says her mother regrets that decision. Her mother taught economics in a small college, but Asma feels “she could have done much more. She wanted to do a Ph.D.” Instead, her mother devoted herself to managing the family finances and encouraging her daughters in school.

She feels strongly that women who are not working are less happy than women who work. For example, Asma’s colleague’s in-laws are urging her to quit because they believe the stress is preventing her from getting pregnant. Asma is encouraging her to stay, narrating:

This girl, she was one of the star performers. She had a lot of spunk when she joined. Then she got married. Then I could see her…under a lot of pressure from family. Recently she told me that, ‘I want to quit because I’m not getting pregnant…. My family tells me that I’d be less stressed if I don’t come to office.’ I told her, ‘You can’t even imagine the amount of stress that would be there if you’re not at work.’ When you sit at home, your in-laws expect you to cook. Your husband expects you to warm the dinner. You’re not an equal anymore. A lot of expectations change. Then you know what stress is.

Asma argues that working from home is not a solution, and is in fact destructive to a woman’s career and self-esteem. She says that her best friend, who works from home, is regularly skipped over for promotions. Her friend is frustrated because she is given very basic
work instead of the challenging work she had in the office, saying:

Everybody says that it’s a great thing that is happened for women, but I feel that it’s a huge blow on self-respect. I have seen a lot of women who work from home in Bangalore, and I’ve not seen a single woman who’s happy with this option. Never. There’s no respect from your kids who see you at home the whole day. They take you for granted. Your husband takes you for granted. And you’re frustrated with the low quality of the job as well as not meeting people.

Thus, staying home—even when working—still puts women in the position of being the “taken-for-granted” caretaker for the family.

In Asma’s company, her male colleagues habitually schedule late meetings, because, she explains, they have someone at home and do not have to rush back. There are prejudices against women as well in recruitment, as her colleagues argue against hiring a woman because they assume she’ll get married and leave. Asma has seen many women drop out of the workplace, arguing that working hours were more fixed in the previous generation, but now because of laptops or mobile phones, work is constant. She says, “Now the working hours never end, so one person has to take that step whereby he or she is sacrificing. And in the Indian context it is very rarely the male.”

Despite the difficulties, Asma links work to self-esteem for women, and to finding happiness in marriage. She says, “If you don’t have the means to take care of yourself you are a lesser being. Earnings are important in a marriage. It’s not how much you make, it’s about being able to provide for yourself. That is what gives you self-respect and that is what is going to give you happiness.” Echoing sentiments about work allowing women an identity outside the family, Asma separates happiness in a marriage from happiness as an individual, with work making the critical difference. She feels her job is a point of stress in her relationship with her daughter and her husband, worrying she does not have enough time for her daughter or for homemaking, and is concerned that her husband’s ego is hurt because she makes more money than him. However, she talks about a close friend who gave up her career when she married. Asma says her friend has a “happier marriage” than her own, and that her
friend’s daughter sees a more “calm, settled, stable house.” However, she asks, “The question is, how happy is she? As a person. I feel she’s very unhappy.”

Asma does wrestle with guilt for not being a homemaker like her mother, saying, “I’m not free of guilt.” She feels that today the situation has changed since her mother’s generation, but she struggles to articulate the difference, saying:

I would definitely say the expectations as to what I should do at home are considerably less. I wouldn’t say it’s not there. It’s definitely there, but if I compare it with the pressures that my mom had I would say it’s lesser. As to homemaking. The pressure is always there, so it’s not said, that’s the difference…. Let me correct myself. It is not that the expectations are not there now, as compared to what it was then. I think the expectations are the same. But in today’s generation, the pressures are what I put on myself.

Asma has trouble putting her finger on the change in expectations for women. I hear her articulating the idea that she feels the same expectations to do what her mother did for her. Yet Asma has internalized these pressures, so if she fails, she has no one to blame but herself.

Pia’s story: Encouragement to “go ahead” and pressure to “step back”

Pia, thirty-one, was a high-level programmer for a major IT firm for several years but moved to a smaller firm so she could spend more time with her son. Pia feels a responsibility to succeed because her parents worked hard for her education. Her father was transferred often for his job, so her mother raised Pia and her two sisters and brother essentially alone for over ten years so they could remain in one place. She says, “I’ve seen them sacrificing for our education and upbringing. We were brought up thinking that we have to reach that position. They don’t want us to just drop out of the battle after all this hard work and sacrifice.” She says her father treated her like a son in terms of career expectations, saying, “I remember my father saying, ‘I have four sons.’ He was the one who pushed me to work!” Her mother also encouraged her because of her “unfulfilled dreams” of education and a career.

Despite her parents’ encouragement, Pia says her parents’ generation and especially
her in-laws do not understand the demanding nature of her work in IT. She says:

In ‘IT world,’ we have a job which is not fixed. It’s not a nine-to-five job. It demands more from us. I remember working late nights, or working over the weekends. Eight hours call with a client and stuff like that. But because my husband is also in IT he understands and that’s why he was okay with it.

She remembers her mother-in-law calling her at midnight one night when she was on a work call. She says her mother-in-law was shocked, and her husband was the one who defended her, by explaining to his mother that in the IT field, “this is how it works.”

However, Pia describes the emotional toll her job took on her relationship with her son. She had accepted a high-level position when she learned she was pregnant, and had help from her mother and a maid, but her workdays were often ten hours long. She says:

There was a period when my kid was more close to my husband because he used to see him more often at home. And it used to make me feel so guilty. I remember myself crying a lot of times. Once I came back from office, and my kid was playing and he was not ready to come to me. And there was a domestic help there and he just went to her and she pacified him. I felt, like, what a terrible mom I am.

After two years she moved to a smaller firm for greater flexibility and has put off having a second child because of work. However, she says she misses the intensity of managing a competent team on interesting projects that she had in her previous job.

Pia’s husband stayed in his job, even though she had the higher position. She feels that men can keep working after marriage and children, whereas this is more difficult for women. She struggles to describe where these pressures originate, saying:

Being a woman we have certain obligations, we have expectations. I mean, our own priorities, which we cannot leave. So it’s actually difficult. People say it’s better to go into a teaching job where you have a real nine-to-five, where you leave office and you don’t bring any tension back to your home. It’s not the same in IT world, you carry your work from office to home. You’re expected… you cannot switch off your phone.

By identifying the “obligations” she feels women have to children and the family, then calling them “our own priorities,” she is taking personal responsibility for them instead of feeling they are placed upon her. However, she talks about these demands as something that women “cannot leave,” implying they are not in fact a choice.
Conclusions: The morality of temporality

The women in this chapter credit their work with encouraging them to pursue happiness as an individual defined by more than their role in the family. However, women across generations worry that more choices—in terms of spouse, family life, career, and consumption—are immoral. While older women understand that young women may be setting themselves up for disappointment, younger women define the self through the ways work differentiates them from women in the past, as they struggle with questions of morality.

Narratives about the past are marshaled in order to situate oneself temporally and to define generations through comparison, while they also put one’s life into a coherent story that resolves in an implied conclusion. In stories of work as offering insurance or confidence, I hear a timidity to claim pleasure in work. I believe these women are trying to articulate an ambivalence that is part of performing morality. As Hochschild notes, of an American woman who made more than her husband, instead of her salary being received as a gift to her husband—as it would have been from a husband to a wife—instead, “[She] made up for out-earning her husband (and breaking the cultural rule) by working a double day,” doing most of the housework and rarely asking for help (Hochschild 1989: 105). Thus, instead of “anger and resentment,” the more common emotional responses when challenging gender ideology are actually “apology and gratitude” (Hochschild 1989: 105). These emotions shift responsibility from outside forces onto the self. The resolution to these contradictions implied in narratives from Bangalore is that work allows women a sense of self that makes “true” happiness possible, and thus situates them as making temporal progress.

In practice, however, the situation is not so clear. Women working in IT experience a disjunctive temporality, which demands they participate in multiple global time-space interactions that do not match the temporalities of home, family, and imagined traditions.
These pressures combine with feelings of guilt that mean women often leave the workforce with the intention to go back, which appears to be their choice, but the burden is on them to fail both at work and at home. Because of their ideas about the past, guided by the beliefs of their elders, they worry it is immoral to want something beyond contributing to their family, so they work hard to define what it is about happiness that they value. They also position work as allowing them protection and confidence that women in the past needed and did not have, in part to justify their (possibly immoral) choice to work.

The pain of leaving work is therefore, I think, about the morality of temporality itself, or how temporal choices can betray what is right or appropriate according to the past, and can also disappoint potential futures. Anthropologists have long found that morality, which refers to social rules of acceptable behavior, guides social life and is articulated through gender roles and norms (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986; Mahmood 2005; Mead 2001 [1930]; Strathern 1990). More recently, the case has been made for an anthropology of morality and ethics as fields of study in their own right (Faubion 2001, 2011; Howell 1997; Laidlaw 2002; Robbins 2012; Zigon 2007). Morality and ethics are different concepts, and Michael Lambek argues that an “anthropology of ethics” is focused more on “action” and “the good” in contrast to morality, which is focused more on “propriety” and “the right” (Lambek 2010: 9), so ethics allows for more creativity and freedom in action as opposed to simply following social rules. Morality may even be a limiting term, as Didier Fassin contends, arguing instead for a “moral anthropology” because:

…what the word ‘morality’ designates is too narrow for the object of our inquiry. There is no necessity in confining moral anthropology to local configurations of norms, values, and emotions: the domain under study and the issues that are raised go far beyond local moralities; they include but exceed them. (Fassin 2012: 5)

In these views, it seems morality is a rigid system with little room for change, serving as a straw man to be held against moral or ethical behavior that is individually creative.

As to the necessity of anthropology to understand moral or ethical behavior, I agree
with these authors. Yet I also find that morality in Bangalore is not static, but is precisely the subject of negotiation for women in Bangalore as they try to define what it means to have a meaningful life. They do this in large part through their ideological and actual relationship with work, and through their ideas about time. As they live within and try to redefine their own local moralities—which come from ideas about gender and the past, from their participation in global work, from the urban society around them, and from their own ideas about gender and the future—morality itself becomes a space for defining the self.

Contemporary labor regimes and these dynamic and conflicting moralities structure hopes and disappointments, and thus shape what I have referred to as “feelings of structure.” Raymond Williams develops his idea of “structures of feeling” throughout his body of work but perhaps most saliently in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), where he writes that they are “social experiences in solution, as distinct from other social, semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and immediately available” (Williams 1977: 133-4). For Williams, structures of feeling thus are a set of felt emotions that exist in relation to other, “more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’” (Williams 1977: 132).

Feelings of structure, on the other hand, are emotional responses to assemblages of capitalism and morality, for example. These feelings, like disappointment, seem to be the result of individual life circumstances and personalities, and they are to an extent. However, they are also structured in that raised expectations of greater choices in life, the desire to be “happy,” and questions about the gendered morality of wanting more combine in Bangalore to encourage particular feelings. An anthropology of disappointment must thus attend to the structures that seem to offer greater choice while restraining options, and to their temporality. To further explore the powerful narrative of choice in contemporary Bangalore, and how gendered expectations are negotiated in the most intimate of decisions, I now turn to perhaps the central looming temporal question for Indian women: marriage.
Chapter Four

Marriage and Negotiating the Problem of Choice:
Desire, Pressure, and Temporal Liminality

I think financial independence has changed a lot of the equations within marriage. Women don’t need the husband to support them for money. [They marry] because they want to. They think that a marriage is good for them and they want to be in it.

--Leela, thirty-five, journalist, married

They’re asking every single day, “What is happening with her? Why does she not want to get married?” It’s almost like I have some terminal illness and that’s why I don't want to get married. They just cannot accept the fact that someone at the age of twenty-six doesn’t want to settle down…. The thing is put into your head that after twenty-seven or twenty-eight max, if you don’t get married you will never find a good person for yourself.

--Devika, twenty-six, IT manager, single

For professional women in Bangalore, the struggle to define the self publicly and internally comes together when considering marriage. For this group of women, marriage has become part of the neoliberal narrative of greater choice and also greater individual responsibility. Marriage also epitomizes the dilemmas of gendered temporality because past, future, and present are at stake. Getting married is a normative feature of Indian life for men and women; overwhelmingly, the choice for most young Indians is not whether to get married, but when. Even with some leeway to stay single—an option that remains less stigmatized for men than for women—marriage looms over young women’s lives.

Many western feminist scholars have viewed marriage as primarily an economic institution that has not benefited women and thus should be rejected (e.g. Firestone 1971; Millett 1969; Rich 1976). However, marriage in many places is essential to full social acceptance as an adult in a kinship group, especially for women, and refusing marriage is not the basis for feminist action (see Abu-Lughod 1998; Mahmood 2005). In India as elsewhere, choice in marriage is guided by class and family background. In a patriarchal society whose
kinship rules have been structured by arranged marriage within religious and caste communities,\textsuperscript{31} marriage has been less of a choice for women than for men, and less for young people than for their parents and elders.

Srimati Basu (2015) argues that marriage in India should be viewed not as an alliance between equals, but within a context of gendered and intersectional inequality. She asserts that gender roles in marriage are socially and legally structured, writing:

Either one can access the benefits of being within a marriage through ‘good behavior,’ however troubled that marriage might be, or one can claim ‘good behavior’ in courts or mediation to access alimony (substantial or not) in lieu of long-term support through marriage. These narrow formulas leave no room for the desires of men and women, sexual or otherwise, that disturb this scheme. (Basu 2015: 216)

Marriage in India is more diverse than many imagine (see Basu and Ramberg 2015), yet certain ideas—such as marriage being the basis of economic survival for women which entails specific gendered responsibilities—form the basis for envisioning “alternatives.”

I argue that marriage has been “neoliberalized” in India, in that it has been folded into the rhetoric of young people having more choice, in marriage and in other aspects of life, since economic liberalization (Clark-Decès 2014; Lukose 2009). However, these choices are more constrained than professional women in Bangalore would like to believe. Tied to gendered ideas about consumption and desire, marriage comes to symbolize temporal anxieties about making the right decisions about a life course. Ultimately, I introduce the idea of “temporal liminality” as a way to characterize how this unexpectedly restricted choice is experienced, as a feeling of temporal contradiction or stasis. But, first things first: What is the significance of choosing marriage in contemporary Bangalore?

\textbf{Smriti’s story: Love marriage as a generational battleground}

Fighting for a love marriage can be a symbolic way the current generation

\textsuperscript{31} While arranged marriage and the joint family are held up as markers of “tradition,” Rochona Majumdar (2009) argues that the particular form these ideals take today was established in part by the new middle-class in colonial Bengal as the arranged marriage market became commoditized and modernized.
differentiates itself from the previous generation. Smriti, thirty-five and working in her
family business, links the 1990s arrival of foreign media to shifts in attitudes toward dating.
In the mid-1990s she was in high school and says, “That was the advent of satellite
television. A lot of things changed in India around that time.” She says that her brother, seven
years older, is “a lot more conservative,” explaining that if he were dating someone in high
school everyone assumed they would get married, and if they broke up it was seen as a major
tragedy. By the time Smriti got to high school, she says that relationships and breakups were
much less serious. For her brother, she feels that dating and marrying someone from a
different community was considered “trailblazing,” whereas for her generation, dating
different people before marriage was the new frontier.

When Smriti was in high school, her cousin announced that she wanted to marry her
college boyfriend, and as Smriti says, “All hell broke loose.” The boy her cousin wanted to
marry was not from their south Indian upper caste community and although Smriti thinks he
was relatively high caste, she remembers that he was shorter, younger, and most importantly,
less wealthy than her cousin. Her parents only found out about the relationship because they
were pressuring her cousin to have an arranged marriage. Smriti says, “Her mom flipped out
and roped in my dad’s support. My dad felt like he had to be the head of the family and take a
stand because my cousin’s father, he just went into a shell and stopped reacting.” Smriti’s
father tried to mediate between the cousin and her parents, but eventually he supported the
cousin’s parents. Smriti recalls, “There was big drama. [The boyfriend’s] family was called
and there were threats thrown around, full-on ‘filmy style.’”

Smriti describes how “her generation” decided to break with the older generation and
support their cousin, saying, “All of us, the younger generation boycotted the older
generation. I stopped speaking to my parents. For some time it was very dramatic.” Smriti

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32 Here, “filmy-style” refers to an overly dramatic and emotional scene that could be found in a Bollywood
film, which are full of stories pitting young, romantic lovers against disapproving parents.
says among her cousins there was a “generational code of honor” in that they would hide their dating relationships from their parents and cover for each other, while letting their parents know they supported their cousin’s wishes. Then one day, her father told her that her cousin had agreed to an arranged marriage. Smriti says, “This came as a big shock…because she hadn’t told us. My family was still waving the flag of, like, ‘Right to choose.’ But she had gone and agreed to marry some guy, and we were still championing the cause. So yeah…she gave in.” Smriti’s cousin now claims it was good that she agreed to the arranged marriage, has children with her husband, and says she is happy. However, Smriti feels that her “spirit of rebellion” was broken, saying, “I feel like it was a defining moment for how her life would be. Whether you completely just conform, which is what she’s doing. She is now one hundred percent being her mother.”

Having a choice in marriage is a way, especially for women, to forge a new identity not based on their parents’ life. In an era when more women are working and searching for a new identity, having this kind of choice has political significance. “Giving in” can mean a loss of identity, particularly in the eyes of one’s contemporaries and peers, while providing greater societal acceptance.

I. Marriage as choice: Romance, generational differentiation, and a warning

Arranged marriage within religious and caste communities is the norm in most of India, but so-called “love marriages” are increasingly common, especially among middle-class, urban Indians. The surging popularity of romance and dreams of love in contemporary South Asia are tied up in ideas about consumption and westernization, and to women’s education and literacy (Ahearn 2001). While most Indians have arranged marriages, fighting for a love marriage as grounds for generational rebellion inspires young people and drives many popular dramas, especially in film. Romance and courting are charged topics in India
and debates are played out in part on Bollywood screens that idealize romantic love, linked to consumption, yet also valorize patriarchal family obedience (Dwyer 2000; Mankekar 2015). Stories of star-crossed lovers have been popular in Indian history, but the recent surge of movies about defying parents to marry across community lines is part of the contemporary trend of “romanticizing romance” that, in many ways, defines the current generation of young, aspiring Indians. Beyond the romance of fighting for love, I read reframing marriage as a choice as part of this generation’s desire to define themselves by the idea that they have choices that their parents—and the India of past generations—did not.

**New narratives of choice and desire in career, consumption, and marriage**

The idea of choice emerges as a main theme when talking about how life has changed for young Indians since economic liberalization. When asked what the main difference is for women from the past generation, one unmarried software developer says, “We have so many choices right now. It could be choosing a career or it could be anything, social life or friends. You have so many choices.” Educated young people can make a great deal more money in a variety of careers than was possible in past generations. Among my own friends, one man left a career in graphic design for a career as a musician, while a woman left a job in IT to pursue a career in photography. Alka, in her fifties, said she had recently heard that one of her daughter’s male friends gave up a career in medicine to become a writer. She says, “The traditional part of me says, ‘Wow, I can’t believe he gave that up.’ The other half of me is saying, ‘Good for him.’” She believes that parents are increasingly allowing young people to “follow their dreams” rather than making them “follow a pattern,” showing how some contemporary middle-class parents also value not conforming.

Along with expanded career options, women in Bangalore associate the idea of newly found independence with the choice to consume personal beauty products. A major critique
of the contemporary Indian middle classes is that its primary mode of identity expression is through consumption instead of collective politics. As one woman notes, about Indian teenagers, “The material angle that has taken over in India is very disturbing.” Women across generations expressed their concerns that young people today are living beyond their means and never feel they make enough money, as opposed to older Indians who saved and budgeted. When discussing the trajectory of Indian society, young people being obsessed with material goods is often referenced as an indication of social degeneration, and I am sympathetic to critiques of political apathy among the Indian middle classes.

However, I also see consumption as a way women display a symbolic independence connected with work. Lalita, thirty, who works in human resources for an IT company, says that for her, working meant she could buy beauty items for herself rather than relying on her father. She says, “For me my financial independence means a lot. Even when I was in college, my father would send me money and I would never buy things like nail paint or fancy conditioners. I did once I started working, because it was my money and I could spend it the way I wanted.” Similarly, Priyanka talks about female cousin who recently moved to the US on a H1B spousal visa and was not allowed to work (see Bhatt 2011). Priyanka says that because her cousin was previously working in India, she became extremely depressed. Priyanka explains, “If you work for three or four years and you’re independent, it suddenly gets very difficult to stay at home and be dependent on your husband. Even if you have to buy a lipstick you have to go and ask your husband. It must be very frustrating.”

In this case, I do not think that women spending money on beauty products reflects a culturally impoverished condition of having to express one’s identity through consumption. Instead, taking a feminist perspective that looks at how consumption is gendered, the issue seems to be more about expressing independence from male surveillance or control. This is another way “choice” is being used: in addition to choosing one’s career, women can also
now make consumer choices without the approval of male relatives. Further, the women quoted above focus on beauty products—“nail paint,” “fancy conditioner,” and “lipstick”—which is symbolically significant. These are items that are not necessary for the family and can be characterized as individual luxuries. Because they enhance female attractiveness, they are items of questionable morality as they reference a woman’s desire to feel attractive. They also reference “progressive thinking” about women’s ability to make choices, including about romance or marriage. Of course, consumption of “westernized” products can indicate questionable morality. As Carla Jones finds in Indonesia, Muslim women who worked in urban factories or as domestic workers abroad and returned to villages wearing “jeans or Nike tennis shoes” were seen as having “inadequate control over their appetites or lack of moderation… including the sexual arena” (Jones 2003: 198). Likewise, consumption in Bangalore is closely tied to fears of women’s uncontrolled (read uncontrollable) sexuality.

The idea of choice is at heart about desire, which is a dangerous thing for a woman. Desire in the Kamasutra, as argued by Kumkum Roy, is regulated by gender, writing, “One is either capable of experiencing desire or being an object of desire, a man or a woman, powerful or powerless” (Roy 1998: 56). The hegemonic idea that women’s sexual energy must be contained within marriage is found in narratives about consumption. For example, outward signs of being married—such as the gold necklace or mangalsutra (also called a thaali in south India) that married Hindu women typically wear—can allow women more access to public spaces of consumption (Phadke et al. 2011: 34).

Women’s personal consumption such as buying clothing or going out to bars or restaurants are seen by many in India as morally dangerous and as lower-class expressions of desire, as opposed to consumption that contributes to the family (Nisbett 2007: 944; Radhakrishnan 2011: 160-1). Smitha Radhakrishnan finds that female IT workers in Bangalore see spending money on big-ticket items for the home as morally appropriate, as
opposed to spending on themselves (Radhakrishnan 2011: 160-1). Some IT workers even linked personal spending to morally questionable behavior associated with call center workers. Radhakrishnan writes, “Here, we see a glimpse of a moral panic over the actions of call center workers, who are seen as young and immature…. What sends [this IT worker] into a panic is not their salaries per se…but the fact that she views them spending their money outside the purview of family control” (Radhakrishnan 2011: 162).

Narratives of gendered immorality are folded into class distinctions based on consumption and ideas about money and temporality, in that saving or buying for the home implies helping the family’s future, while spending on oneself is a momentary pleasure with no future benefit. This discourse also circulates as a form of class regulation in employer’s comments about domestic servants. Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum find that middle-class employers in Kolkata are nostalgic about the values of servants in years past, arguing:

The younger generation of employers perceives as well a temporal change in servant desire…. The feeling is that servants’ scarce resources should be spent on something uplifting, like education, not on makeup and clothes that can only cause confusion and consternation by enabling servant girls and women to acquire a middle-class appearance. (Ray and Qayum 2009: 157)

Gendered consumption that places a woman in a higher class than she is supposed to be able to claim is seen as immoral, and thus these comments are a form of class regulation.

As women are earning their own money, they are not only able to buy products of their choice, but also see marriage as a personal choice, as they see themselves as no longer financially dependent upon men, whether or not this is actually the case. Like consuming certain products, I argue that choosing marriage has become a symbol for young women of their independence from male relatives in a way that differentiates them from past generations. As marriage becomes a matter of desire, it is also a symbol of a search for happiness through personal choice. Leela, thirty-five and married, argues, “I think financial independence has changed a lot of the equations within marriage. Women don’t need the
husband to support them for money. [They marry] because they want to. They think that a marriage is good for them and they want to be in it.” Marriage has thus become something that women desire but do not need. Similarly, Lakshmi, twenty-six and single, argues that marriage is no longer an obligation for women, saying, “Before…you have your father take care of you, then it’s your husband’s duty to take care of you, and then your son’s duty. But now that women are more financially independent and more stable I’m able to say that I don’t want to [marry] until I want to do that.” While marriage may be seen a choice rather than an “obligation,” both women indicate that the choice is less whether but rather when to marry, framing the choice as temporal rather than absolute.

Love marriage and “modern” arranged marriage: Performing choice

The idea of marriage as a choice is powerful. Here, I show how women in Bangalore valorized their love marriages through stories about how they fought their parents for their choice. Perhaps even more significantly, I found that women who had arranged marriages reframed them as a choice. Of the women I interviewed, twelve of the sixteen married younger women had love marriages, two of the four women in the middle generation had arranged marriages, and all seven of the oldest generation had arranged marriages. Meanwhile, all of the forty-five women I interviewed said that their grandparents had arranged marriages within their communities, as did the majority of their parents. The greater number of love marriages among younger women reflects a rise in love marriages in middle-class, urban India in the past three generations.

Among the group of younger married women I interviewed, all but one of the twelve love marriages were across communities. Many of these women felt that their love

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33 Two love marriages were cross religious (Hindu-Muslim) and five are between people from north India and south India. In terms of caste, two Brahmins married other Brahmins (from different parts of the country and from different subcastes), while two marriages are Brahmins married to other high but not Brahmin castes. The rest come from various non-Brahmin castes and communities but generally are between people who are both
marriages worked because of their differences. For example, one woman who is Hindu and married a Muslim man says that she was intrigued by her husband’s difference, saying, “We were pretty much on the same wavelength. I also found it interesting that he came from a different background and I wanted to know more.” Another woman who married across communities says, “I really think that it couldn’t have gone any better if it was an arranged marriage within the same community because I love to understand things from different cultures.” Despite her father’s warnings that they would not be compatible, she says that being from different communities is a major reason she and her husband get along.

Fighting for a love marriage is part of the mythic courtship history of some couples. At least four women told me about fighting reluctant parents for their choice of spouse by “living in” or living together while unmarried, or threatening to do so. One woman moved in with her now-husband near his parents’ house in Bangalore, and rather than have the neighbors notice, his parents—who had vehemently opposed the marriage—quickly encouraged them to marry. Another woman described how her mother-in-law felt it would be scandalous if her husband did not marry within his local community, saying, “My mother-in-law was worried about what people would say because I was not from [his community] so they couldn’t make it look arranged. People would get to know it’s a love marriage, which was very embarrassing for them.” However, she and her now-husband merely threatened to start living together, and his parents agreed to the marriage.

If a woman had an arranged marriage, I found that she repositioned it as a “modern arranged marriage,” which describes the practice of prospective spouses being introduced by their parents but having a long time to get to know each other and decide about the marriage, thus making it appear more like their own choice. One young woman felt that this type of marriage is better than older forms of arranged marriage because, she says, “In a modern

from relatively high or dominant caste backgrounds, which represent the majority of the well-educated, white-collar urban workforce in India.
arranged marriage, two people can get to know each other as people and not just a list of attributes.” For example, in the case of her friend, she says his parents put him in touch with “the girl,” and he then emailed and called her for four months before meeting. She says, “At any point either of them could say no. So they’re being set up by their families, which makes it technically arranged. But it’s a lot less scary.” In fact, if there is not much contact before an arranged marriage, it can be a source of concern to the current generation. One woman describes how her friend recently got engaged but did not speak to her fiancé for six months. The woman was concerned her friend and the fiancé did not know each other well enough to marry, and she and two other friends insisted the friend contact the fiancé. Because of this intervention the couple began talking and are reportedly “happy about each other,” which was a major relief to the friend group.

The desire to do things differently, even within an arranged marriage, can indicate a different attitude towards gender relations than in the past. Priyanka explains that her sister Lila had an arranged marriage to an engineer who had worked in the US. Priyanka speculates that because of his experience abroad and his “open” personality, he insisted that they not have the traditional meeting, where, she says, “The girl comes out with a tray of tea and all that. He was like, ‘No way, I’m not going to meet someone like that. It’s so disgusting.’” He instead wanted to meet Lila at a restaurant by herself, which scandalized her family. She explains this difference in generational terms, saying:

My grandfather thought life is going to be just the same the way it was for his daughters. But [Lila] was different, she was a graduate, she did her graduation in botany and teacher’s training so she could do a job. And then my brother-in-law is a much more open person and really wanted to change. That’s why he said, “If you want me to marry someone I’m going to meet her in a restaurant. By myself.” And it was unthinkable for my dad and my grandfather.

Lila and her husband did meet for the first time in a restaurant, unchaperoned, and they decided to marry. By insisting on meeting alone, I believe this story shows an effort to portray marriage as a choice between individuals and not between families, affirming their
personal choice to marry in part through their opposition to Lila’s male elders.

Another story positions one woman’s arranged marriage in opposition to “typical arranged marriages” because it is framed as based on romance and mutual understanding. Gargi, thirty and a software programmer, had an arranged marriage within her Hindu subcaste when she was twenty-six. She says her marriage was “not a typical arranged marriage” because she and her husband had a year to talk after their parents introduced them. She remembers several meetings with potential grooms found by her parents, describing how they asked “interview questions” aimed to test her morality, such as whether she drank or smoked. However, her parents put her in touch with her future husband just as her job sent her to the UK for six months. She says that even though they had not met, it was a relief to talk with him because, she says, “He talked to me like a person.” She describes how he planned trips for her in the UK, saying, “He would call me early in the morning to say, ‘You have a train to catch because you’re going to such and such a place.’” They met when she returned home in a traditional meeting of the families at her house. She recalls that they agreed to the marriage even before their parents had a chance to agree.

Finding a life partner is a challenge everywhere, and arranged marriage is a particular solution that works well on many levels, especially for a life with closely-knit extended families and in a society that places a high value on knowing one’s social location. However, with an increased valorization of personal choice tied to new values about romance and happiness, middle-class Indians are also narrating their own personal stories of finding happiness within the arranged marriage system, in part by reframing it as a choice.

**Generational perspectives: Consumption and a warning about too much choice**

One young woman articulates a typical attitude about arranged marriage in the past, saying, “I don’t think it was an option in those days to have another type of marriage…. It
wasn’t really a choice for people of that generation, my parents’ generation. It was just a natural progression. You spend some years studying and then…your parents look for a bride or groom and you get married.” Older generations of women talk about how they did not feel like they had much choice in who they married, and certainly not in whether they married.

All seven of the older women I interviewed, all in their sixties and seventies and upper-caste Hindu, had arranged marriages within their caste communities. In these marriages, having an astrologer match horoscopes was important, as was finding a groom several years older than the bride and having the families agree. None of the women objected to their family’s choice.

For example, one woman says that during the traditional family meeting she did not know which of several young men was the “boy” in question, but since the families agreed to the match, she says she “didn’t say anything.”

Another older woman related the story of an elopement that served as a cautionary tale against love marriage for the young people in her family. When she was a teenager, her cousin, whose father was an army officer, eloped with one of her father’s junior officers. She says that everyone thought the father would go “insane,” because the daughter was, “Very good-looking, very well-behaved, and he had all the extra trust and love for that child. It was too big a shock for him.” Largely as a matter of pride, her cousin’s father did not allow her mother to visit their daughter for four years, and he also did not speak to her, but he relented after the mother pleaded with him. Luckily, the marriage turned out well, but the woman thinks her cousin was too young to make such a rash decision.

Younger and older women alike warn about the dangers of women, especially working women, having “too much choice,” which they blame for a weakening commitment to marriage. Deepa, sixty, says, “When you marry somebody you don’t know. You never know if the marriage is going to work out. You have to work at it.” She worries that her daughter, who had a love marriage, is less willing to work on her marriage because she has a
career and feels competitive with her husband, rather than letting him be protective of her.

Anandi, seventy-one, argues that women working has destabilized marriage, saying:

Values have degenerated. At the drop of the hat they’ll say, “I’m just leaving my husband and going.” There’s no adjustment. I think boys are more adjusting nowadays than girls. Really! Because girls are becoming independent, they have money. And the parental support is also there, it’s not like olden days. Then, if the girl came home [got divorced] after marriage, it was a disgrace. But now [parents] say, “Okay you can’t get along with your husband. Okay come on [come home].”

Anandi voices a common opinion from this generation that because women are financially independent, they are no longer willing to “adjust” to their husbands or in-laws, while parents today will support their daughter’s decision to leave a marriage rather than adjust. This indicates a fear that if women change their traditional role as the ones who “adjust” to difficult or unfamiliar circumstances, then marriage and families may fall apart.

Some younger women have similar concerns about women and choice, which is displaced onto women from a slightly lower class. Priyanka, despite the range of choices in her life, managed young women in a call center in Bangalore and worries that they are “too indulgent” because they have “too many clothes, too much money in their hands.” Linking consumption to dating, she explains that when women are working they date their coworkers, and this raises expectations and makes them too picky, saying, “It just exposes so much. You know, ‘I’ve had four varieties of jam. If this variety is not there, why can’t it be there? I know that four varieties exist even though one is here.’ So that is taking its toll on relationships, definitely.” Priyanka sees women earning money, at least in call centers, resulting in a lack of stability in relationships, because if women have too many options they might have unrealistic expectations and be disappointed. But because having too much choice also feels immoral, women feel pressure to make the “right” choice at the “right” time.

**Devika’s story: Negotiating the pressure to marry “in time”**

The unmarried women I spoke with in Bangalore felt they had more choice in terms
of who they might marry, but did not feel they had the choice to refuse marriage, and were
under intense pressure to marry by their mid to late twenties. Devika, twenty-six, grew up in
Bangalore and works as a manager for a multinational IT firm, a job that requires long days
at the office. She lives at home, as does her younger sister. Her parents had an arranged
marriage and would like her to consider one, but she is not interested. She thinks that women
from older generations “caved” to their family’s demands to marry and did not have a career,
so are trapped in their marriages, saying, “I do see that they are so frustrated…. Most of them
are housewives so they don’t know where to go after this. Even if they were going to separate
or get divorced, they’ve known no life other than just being a housewife.”

Devika’s parents would like her to get married before the year is over, but she does
not feel ready, saying, “God knows what kind of pressures I’m going through right now!”
Her parents began asking her a few years ago to start meeting boys they selected for a
possible arranged marriage, because they knew from talking to their friends how long it can
take to find a groom that way. She told her parents, however, that she would like to wait at
least two more years, and feels she is buying one year at a time. She explains that her parents
are under pressure themselves from the extended family, saying:

They keep telling me about how the aunts and the grandparents and everyone are
waiting, they’re asking every single day, “What is happening with her, why does she
not want to get married? What is wrong with her?” It’s almost like I have some
terminal illness and that’s why I don’t want to get married…. They just cannot accept
the fact that someone at the age of twenty-six doesn’t want to settle down…. Things
are changing but it’s tough, especially when you’re one person against an army of
parents and aunties and uncles.

She is the oldest of her generation in her extended family, so she is supposed to get married
first as an example to her cousins, and it would be embarrassing if any of them were to marry
before her. However, she enjoys her work and does not feel ready for the changes marriage
could bring. Her last serious boyfriend was a coworker, and although they are still friends,
neither was ready for marriage at the time, so they broke up.
Devika explains that she is wary of arranged marriage because she has dated, and so has high expectations for a relationship. She says she believed at one time that her parents would choose the right person for her, but now she worries about whether she and an arranged husband would get along, saying, “When you are seeing someone you don’t even know whether you want to be with them. In an arranged marriage, you don’t get to know much. There is also the family pressure, so you’re not yourself with them until you’re living a life with them. But then it’s too late.” She worries about men who are charming in front of the families but horrible in private, or how it would be difficult to discuss things like intimacy with your families there. Devika argues that if a woman has not dated before having an arranged marriage, “the exposure is still relatively less” and she may be able to “adjust” more easily. However, she argues that if a woman has dated before, “you have a lot more expectations” about your husband.

Devika is fighting temporal pressure, explaining that women in India have an idea that marriage after one’s late twenties is impossible. She says, “The thing is put into your head that after twenty-seven or twenty-eight max, if you don’t get married you will never find a good person for yourself. It’s almost like you’re going to end up with the most pathetic person in the world.” She explains how some women she knows, who are in their mid-twenties, are dating men who themselves would rather marry in their late twenties, and the women cannot wait that long. Devika says family pressure is intense and many women “give in” to an arranged marriage for the sake of their parents’ happiness. However, Devika argues that even if the parents are happy for two or three months around the time of the wedding, “You have to live with that person for your whole life.”

In contemporary Bangalore, I found that the narrative of expanded choices as compared to the past has had a profound impact on the way young people think about marriage and relationships. Marriage may have been repositioned as a choice rather than a
social obligation, but women still feel social and familial pressure, as in Devika’s narrative, to marry before it is “too late.” In Bangalore, this combination of marriage as both a choice and an expected part of the life course results in a “neoliberalizing” of marriage that places responsibility on the individual rather than the family or society, and is gendered so that responsibility falls primarily on the woman. This is articulated in pressure on women to choose a good person to marry, and to choose them “in time.”

II. The limits of choice: Reputation and the challenge of being single

Even if too much choice might be a dangerous departure from the past, women in Bangalore still want choices in marriage. However, I argue that their choices are more limited than they would like to believe. While dating is becoming more common, women still must work to protect their reputations in a way that men do not, which restricts their choices. Further, men seem to resolve temporal contradictions by wanting a “modern” girlfriend but a “traditional” wife, a choice largely not available to women. Finally, even with new lifestyle options, being single is not a comfortable position for women in Bangalore. This restriction of choice is an example of hegemony, or what Sherry Ortner describes as the limits of agency. She writes, “While all social actors are assumed to ‘have’ agency, the idea of actors as always being engaged with others…make[s] it virtually impossible to imagine that the agent is free, or is an unfettered individual” (Ortner 2006: 130). These relationships are enmeshed in power dynamics, including gender ideologies and gendered practices.

Dating, “open secrets,” and the continued importance of reputation for women

Coed education, women working more frequently, and urbanization mean that young men and women in India are interacting more than in the past, leading to more relationships before marriage. Many middle-class parents today are more accepting of dating, while
romantic love and a companionate relationship is becoming more of an ideal. However, I find that women still must protect their reputation by keeping dating relationships officially secret from their parents and coworkers, and sometimes from their close friends.

For the young women I interviewed, dating was often an “open secret” between them and their parents—that is, something that everyone knew about, but no one would discuss. In one story, when Smriti was in high school, her boyfriend came to her house to pick her up for lunch. She says that when she told her parents, they unexpectedly became very upset and would not allow her to go. She says:

Later I learned that the problem was that I shouldn’t be telling them that I was going out to lunch with this boy on his motorbike. Because then they feel that, “We’ll have to say something in return, and prevent you from doing that, because a good parent wouldn’t allow that, right?” But if they didn’t know then we do our own thing, they do their own thing, and we’re good.

She explains that parents in India are particularly adept at looking the other way, saying, “Parents are very good at not looking at what they don’t want to look at. Especially in India. They won’t even admit to themselves…. Even if you said it out loud, ‘I might just not hear you.’ Selective hearing.” However, if the situation becomes public parents feel they must act because their reputation as good parents is at stake.

Other women described high school and college relationships that their parents knew about, but as long as it was not discussed directly, they did not forbid it. This is in part because arranging a marriage can be difficult, so many parents hope their daughter will find a husband on their own. The danger is if the relationship does not work out and it becomes publicly known that she had dated, which could endanger her future chances for marriage. One woman in her mid-thirties says that when she was growing up in Bangalore, dating “was very much frowned upon, nobody approved of it. If your parents got to know it was a huge

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34 The idea of the open secret is familiar to anthropologists through Michael Taussig’s notion of the “public secret,” which he defines as, “…that which is generally known but cannot be spoken” (Taussig 1999: 50). I use the term “open secret” because it is drawn from my fieldwork, as the term used by Devika to describe this situation in the workplace. Additionally, in contrast to Taussig, I am less concerned with public discourse and more with what is permissible to openly acknowledge within a group of intimates.
huge huge problem.” Another woman said her mother pretended not to notice her college boyfriend, but would give her vague warnings, such as, “‘Be careful what you’re doing’ or ‘Think about your future.’” Women also usually go out with girl friends or in large mixed-gender friend groups rather than just with a boyfriend—at least when their parents can see them—so it is easier for parents to ignore a relationship. However, one woman was surprised about her parents’ reaction to meeting her boyfriend. She said she “very innocently” brought her college boyfriend home one day, and her parents insisted they get married or break up. As neither felt ready for marriage, they ended the relationship. As Jyoti explains, “It’s almost as if [parents] were to know, or express that they know, they would be approving it and they don’t want to do that. So if they don’t [acknowledge it], they can ignore it.”

Beyond keeping a relationship secret from parents, I have also noticed a practice of dating secretly within a friend group until the point when the couple decides to get married. Although there are public couples in friend groups, many relationships are kept under wraps. A few close friends may know, but the couple may insist they are not dating, or may admit that they used to date but say they do not any longer. They may be concerned about objections from their parents, or are waiting for something such as finding a job or gaining a promotion, or they may not be sure about marriage and are thus keeping the relationship hidden. One woman who met her husband in college says that while they were just friends at first, when they realized they wanted to date they decided not to tell their friend group. Since the group was very close, their friends were quite upset when they found out. She says they kept it secret partly because they did not want the group to feel “awkward,” but also because of the possibility it might not work out, which could have affected arranging her marriage. While dating is becoming more common, protecting a woman’s reputation is still important because of the possibility of an arranged marriage.

Work relationships are also often open secrets, a term I take from Devika. She
describes dating her ex-boyfriend, who was a work colleague, saying:

In my case everyone was like, “Are you seeing this guy?” And I’m like “No, I don’t know.” I was too scared to say anything because what if my managers got to know and then you have to go and report it. And I’m like, “I don’t even know where this is going. Why should I report it?” There are a lot of people who are seeing each other but they just don’t say that much about it. It’s like an open secret actually, because people see them together. They know it but they’re just not saying it.

Because Devika did not know where her relationship was “going,” meaning whether it was heading toward marriage, she did not want it to become public. She argues that she kept it hidden because she did not want to report it to her managers. However, I think this has more to do with protecting her reputation beyond the workplace than with company policy.

Devika says that the double standard of women being shamed for dating while men are not makes her “blood boil,” saying, “Guys can get away with whatever they want to and still be considered a gem of a person. But if a girl does the same thing she is branded everything that’s wrong in the world.” She believes that dating should be equally open to men and women. However, she herself hides her personal life from her parents and from everyone besides close friends. She says, “If I have dated more than two or three guys it’s considered… A lot of people wouldn’t look at it very nicely.” She says that she struggles with this, saying that she is not sure why this “morality thing” is passed on from generation to generation. She would like “do things differently,” including dating openly, but is afraid of upsetting her parents. At the same time she says she wants to “have a life,” meaning having relationships, so she is struggling to find a middle ground.

**Male hypocrisy: “Modern” girlfriends and “traditional” wives**

The seeming contradiction between the past and future in terms of relationships that women in Bangalore experience is often resolved by men by choosing two different women for their girlfriend and wife, a choice that women do not have in the same way. Men the world over, including in India, have historically had a greater ability to have a wife (or wives)
and mistresses who fulfill different roles. Indrani, fifty-one and Jyoti’s mother, illustrates an example in the remarkable story of how her paternal grandfather had two wives. She says her grandfather was “strangely westernized” because he worked for the British colonial government. He had an arranged marriage within his upper caste Hindu community to a traditional and “uneducated” woman. He later fell in love with another woman from the same community who was educated and worked as an inspector for schools. Indrani says, “I loved her dearly too. She had a fabulous sense of humor. And she was very sweet person.”

When her grandfather decided to marry this woman as well, they asked permission from the first wife. However, Indrani points out that the first wife came from a poor family and had five children at this point, so she could not refuse. Indrani says her grandfather would sit with his second wife “discussing Tennyson” while his first wife would cook for them or would bring coffee up to them in their bedroom in the mornings. Indrani describes the second wife as “a total modern woman,” saying, “She would tell stories, she would joke, she smoked, she drank…. My grandfather would go visit her in the evenings, just to chat, and we’d all be joking and laughing and singing together.” However, she says she felt increasingly bad for the first wife, saying, “It was like kicking a stray dog, you know? Because this uneducated woman who loved everybody so much… She was so sweet and so helpless.” She says that while the two women were “friendly with each other” and the children did not think it was strange growing up, they all began to question it later.

Many women I spoke with had stories of what I term male hypocrisy, in that men have different criteria for women friends and girlfriends versus wives. Samosapedia, an online dictionary of South Asian slang started by men working in IT in Chennai, attempts to resolve the issue in their 2011 entry on a perfect, yet rare woman described as “Traditional with Modern Outlook.” The authors define this phrase as follows:

Usually refers to a woman representing the ideal catch for the contemporary Indian male. Ahh the good fortune of finding Seethalakshmi (alias Lexi)! She speaks the
vernacular, she toasts the coconut before putting it in the *keerai kootu* [traditional Tamil dish], touches periamma’s [aunty’s] feet at all family functions, and knows how to sport a 9-yard [sari] in the 40°C swelter of Chennai. But in the privacy of youthful company she knocks back the Old Monk Rum and Thumbs Up [Indian cola] as she explains how Kegels enhance the female orgasm. Woof!

They describe here a woman who knows the local language and proper ritual interactions with family while effortlessly wearing Indian clothing when appropriate, but when hanging out with her boyfriend or husband’s friends, she drinks alcohol and feels comfortable with an active sex life. They present the following exchange as an example:

Kumar: I say, that Bhagyavati looks quite the *paavum* [traditional] type, why is a US return like you trying to *put kai* [get together with] there?

Suneel: Pressure *machaan* [man], what to do? So truce with the folks, traditional with modern outlook!  

Here, a friend questions why a “US return,” a term for someone who has lived in the US and is perhaps now more “modern,” would want to be with a woman who seems traditional. His friend replies that he is responding to “pressure,” which means pressure to marry, so in the interests of a compromise with his parents he is choosing a woman who blends tradition and modernity. However, in this exchange, even his friend feels the woman in question is too conservative for the friend group, with no Old Monk Rum or Kegels in sight. In fact, as I argue below, this prospective bride is probably quite a bit more on the “traditional” than “modern” side. Women also may look for different things in a boyfriend versus a husband, but in a place where dating without the possibility of marriage risks a woman’s reputation and future marriage prospects, women do not necessarily have this choice.  

Devika, Gouri, Lakshmi, and Anju, who are childhood friends, all had stories of men having different standards for female friends and girlfriends versus wives. Lakshmi, who is single, feels that women want a nice man, as “they always have,” but she argues that today

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women do have more choice. However, she feels that men want a “fun” girlfriend who can “hang out” with their friends, but want a wife who is like their mother, in that she, “takes care of the house and children is devoted to her husband to matter what.” She worries, “They want their girlfriends to be a certain way but they want their wives to be of a completely different mold. Or even if you transition from girlfriend to wife with the same guy they’ll want certain changes to happen,” such as wearing more conservative clothing and no longer expressing opinions in public.

Indian men seem to have the choice to date but not marry a woman who is “too modern,” while women do not often have these choices. Gouri, who had a love marriage, argues that it is not fair that men can date “whoever they want and still marry a great wife,” saying that women who date are not seen as “marriage material.” She feels that men are temporally out of step when it comes to marriage, saying:

I know a lot of guys have gone out with women but when it comes to marrying them they say, “Oh her, I can’t take home.” They’ll marry someone who their parents look up [arrange], who’s very proper, who isn’t that modern, because she’s suitable to come to his house and live with his parents…. They expect them to be traditional when times have changed so much.

She also worries that men who marry their girlfriends impose new rules after marriage, which most women accept, although she exempts her own husband from this charge. By arguing that men want a traditional wife “when times have changed so much,” Gouri indicates that she feels men’s expectations are retrograde. This temporal contradiction maps onto ideas about gender and the public and private sphere, as the men she describes seem to expect contemporary ideas about gender to stay outside their home.

At times, this attitude can be out of step with friend groups. Devika tells the story of a guy friend who would not let his girlfriend come to parties with him. She says, “It was like she was on a leash…. If we had a birthday party at someone’s house he would come along and I’d ask, ‘Oh, where’s your girlfriend?’ He’d say, ‘Oh, she’s sitting in the car.’” Instead of
admitting that he did not want her to attend parties, he told the friend group that his girlfriend was not “comfortable” going out. She says, “Nobody ever saw her. It was on the day of the wedding when we saw her. And after that we haven’t seen her at all.” Devika thought maybe he did not want his girlfriend to know he had female friends, but explains that even his best male friends met her for the first time on their wedding day. They now have a child and so the friend group never sees his wife, but the friend continues to socialize and takes holidays with his male friends. This man has separated his social life outside the home from his marriage instead of integrating his wife into his social life. Devika feels that this attitude does not fit temporally with attitudes in the rest of the friend group.

While being “too modern” might prevent a woman from finding a husband, being “too traditional” can also be a problem, showing that men are also confused about what they want. For example, Anju’s cousin’s husband left her for an old girlfriend. She says that the marriage was never consummated and the husband now says he was forced into it, but her cousin blamed herself because she is overweight and feels unattractive. While Anju blames the husband, she also feels that her cousin was raised to be a traditional housewife in a way that is not appropriate for modern marriage. She explains that her cousin’s parents restricted her growing up so that her social life revolved around her parents, and they encouraged her to wear traditional Indian clothes and to not worry about her figure or makeup.

Anju feels that the cousin was temporally out of step, saying her parents raised her in the way women were raised a generation before. Anju says, of the husband, “I guess he wanted a modern yet traditional girl. And she was more traditional than modern. The balance was not right for him.” After the divorce, her cousin’s parents also blamed her for not learning to dress in a more modern way and for not losing weight. It seems that Anju’s cousin is caught in a particularly painful temporal contradiction, as her parents’ ideas of what was appropriate clashed with other societal expectations. In this story, no one points out that the
husband did not want an arranged marriage at all and may have rejected any wife his parents chose. Many men might have been happier with a more traditional wife, yet her parents blamed her—and she blamed herself—for appearing “too traditional.”

**Usha’s story: Empowered, disillusioned, and choosing to be single**

A few of the women I spoke with said it was their choice to remain single. Usha, twenty-seven, is single partly because she chooses not to fit the “traditional” wife mold. However, she did try at one time to do so and did not succeed. Usha is from Mumbai and, in her words, grew up in “progressive” Hindu family. She is tall and her angular and oversized features, combined with her large personality, often intimidate people. She is most comfortable in jeans and T-shirts but often wears Indian clothes to work. She manages a large team in product development for an IT company, a position she finds stressful, saying she would like to quit and start her own business or NGO. She has many friends, and recently was dating a coworker but not very seriously. She feels disappointed with men and admits to me that she may enjoy her life more overall if she stays single, but knows that in her family and in India generally, it is not acceptable to be a single woman over the age of thirty.

Usha’s father’s family owns several shops in Mumbai. Usha’s grandmothers both did not study past the 8th standard and were married in their teens. Although her mother and her mother’s twenty female first cousins all completed their graduation and some went to college, none of them worked outside the home. She says it was not that they were forbidden to work, but she says, “They didn’t know what it was to work. They thought that life was only to study and then get married.” Her mother completed a college degree and wished she had worked, so she encouraged Usha to do so. A large IT firm in Bangalore recruited Usha in her last year of college, and she has worked there for the last eight years.

After a few years in Bangalore, she began dating one of her co-workers. He was from
a different caste community and she says this did not matter to her parents. His parents, however, were not sure about her, not as much because of her background but because she worked full time, had a more senior position in the company than he did, and has an outgoing, assertive personality. As she put it, “His mom didn’t like my free and open nature. I didn’t wear the clothes she wanted me to wear. I talked too much and laughed too much. She didn’t like that I was working.” She talked with her boyfriend about getting married, and he was hesitant. She says she even tried to conform to his idea of a “traditional Indian girl,” wearing Indian clothes and learning how to cook the food he liked. However, in the end he broke up with her to marry a more “traditional girl” chosen by his mother.

Usha was devastated at the time, but says she feels fortunate now, explaining, “He couldn’t handle me. I want too much out of life. He wouldn’t have kept up.” She is lonely sometimes, but for now she says she is happily single. However, she worries that most of the men she would like to date, men who are “liberal minded and adventurous,” still pursue the “quiet pretty girls.” She thinks her ex-boyfriend is like the majority of Indian men, in that they say they want a blend but actually want a wife who is more traditional than modern. She explains, “What they want is a homely [home loving]36 wife who drives a car, like that’s a factor of being modern. Partially working, if they’re not working that’s okay, it doesn’t matter. Speaks English, well-educated, hangs out…looks good. I think that’s enough.” Thus, men want women with some “modern” attributes who are not “too modern.”

III. Temporal anxieties: The pressure to choose a well-timed life

As marriage has become folded into the narrative of greater choice in contemporary

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36 Rather than referring to a person having an ugly or plain appearance, as in American or British English, in India “homely” invariably refers to a woman and indicates her dedication and love for the home. In matrimonial advertisements, the term is shorthand for a woman’s respectability through a presumed focus on the home and family as a wife, implying that she will not work outside the home after marriage. While the term creates much amusement among foreigners reading such advertisements in Indian newspapers, it also reflects the importance of particular gendered qualities for women on the marriage market.
Bangalore, it has also become more precarious, as it is recast as a personal choice rather than an obligation. Thus, the stakes for failure also become personal, as a reflection on an individual rather than the responsibility of a family or society, and this responsibility is gendered. As marriage is positioned as a choice, the risks also become apparent. The new options of love marriage and divorce produce new anxieties about past and future, and there are also continued questions about arranged marriage. The temporality of one’s own life course thus becomes a source of anxiety as women “postpone” and “rush” into marriage.

**Concerns about the future: The risk of love marriage and the fear of divorce**

While a love marriage offers women in Bangalore new options in terms of a marriage partner, it can also leave women with less support than in an arranged marriage if there are problems, and thus can be seen as risky. Parental approval remains crucial for marriage in Bangalore, and many women gave up possible futures and narrate regrets about ending relationships because their parents disapproved. Likewise, divorce is now an option, but it is seen as an option of last resort and remains stigmatized in Bangalore, especially for women. There is a strong fear of risk in marital futures, whether choosing parental support over a potentially happy but risky love marriage, or contemplating the option of divorce.

I often heard the sentiment that if one has an arranged marriage, one can ask parents for help or at least blame them if it does not work, while if one has a love marriage, you’re “on your own.” Lakshmi told me that she does not want an arranged marriage, but if she had one she could at least blame her mother if something went wrong because it had not been her choice. She says in an arranged marriage, “You’d be on your best behavior for weeks, but it’s a marriage and there’s a lot more at stake. So you do it. So at least I would do it for as long as I could. And…if something doesn’t work out then I’d be prone to blame my mom, saying, ‘You wanted this and I’m in this situation. I didn’t choose to be here.’ So I think the choice
matters.” Parental support can make a big difference in a marriage, as couples without that support are financially and emotionally more alone. Jyoti says, “In India, family approval is huge,” noting that the support of the extended family also matters. Families seem to be more accepting of cross-community marriages. One woman talked about how she was the first to marry outside her caste five years earlier and her community was scandalized, but since that time there have been several cross-community marriages and it has become normalized. Another older woman noted that people her age have to be less judgmental about love marriages and divorces because they are happening in every family.

While love marriages might be becoming more normal, when parents did not approve of their daughter marrying a boyfriend, many of the women I spoke with ended the relationship and now regret that decision. One woman had a serious boyfriend in college, but he was Catholic and she is Hindu. Both sets of parents opposed the relationship, especially her father. She ended the relationship, but now regrets not trying harder to change her father’s mind, saying, “Maybe if I’d fought harder he might have…. But [my father] pushed me into [breaking up]. So it was a really ugly few months. I would have given anything at that point to have some support from anyone in my family. But it was one-hundred percent ‘This is wrong, it’s not going to work.’” She feels it was a good relationship, saying that her boyfriend’s mother had “brought him up well,” teaching him how to shop for groceries and cook and to be sensitive, and she feels she connected with him emotionally.

Anju, who is twenty-six and single, also ended a relationship with her boyfriend of eight years because he was from a different religious background and her father did not approve. She regrets that decision, as she has not found anyone she likes who would be acceptable to her father, and says even her father is now relenting. When her father found out she was dating her boyfriend, she says he was very angry and told her that, “Girls from good families don’t behave like this.” However, because her cousin’s recent arranged marriage
ended in divorce, her parents have seen how hard it is to find a suitable groom through an arranged marriage. She says her father now claims that as long as she is happy and her husband loves her, he would be fine even if her husband were, “Greek or German.” However, even though she had a good relationship with her ex-boyfriend, she does not want to think about getting back together with him, as his parents would still disapprove. Thus, while there is more room to choose a love marriage, the need for parental approval also may result in early relationships not working out, and in new temporal anxieties about regret.

While divorce is more accepted in Bangalore than in the past, it looms as a major source of anxiety about the future when it comes to choice in marriage. Part of this anxiety comes from the history of divorce in South Asia, which legally and ritually has made more allowances for men to divorce and remarry than women (Sen 1998). Divorce is normatively considered justified in extreme situations despite the law allowing couples to divorce based on irreconcilable differences, which couples must convince judges about (Basu 2015: 118-120). However, as one married woman in her thirties explains, relationship problems are different for middle-class couples “today.” Previously, she says, problems were, “The basic issues like child care, beating, or infidelity.” But now, for middle-class urban couples, problems come from “intellectual issues” and “not being on the same wavelength, or the chemistry is not there.” While she acknowledges that in previous generations there were also bad marriages, the difference now is that people want “more from life” than before, so they are more easily dissatisfied with a marriage. However, she notes that most couples still avoid divorce. She says that among people her age, couples will only divorce if there are major problems, describing a couple she knows who have separate bedrooms and barely speak but do not want to separate because of the public shame.

There is also more pressure today on marriage to provide happiness for women, and older women talk about having lower expectations. Alka says she is not sure how to define
“happiness” in marriage, saying that she and most of her friends are “happy” because they did not expect marriage to be “everything.” She says they and their spouses are:

Happy in the sense that they’ve adjusted very well. They’ve given each other space, which is what I call happiness. I don’t know what happiness is. I feel as long as you’re able to do what you want to do without rubbing each other the wrong way, that’s it. Other people expect marriages to be everything. But I never had too many expectations.

She explains that one of her friends says she wants a separation, but Alka feels this is due to her own depression and not “real problems” in the marriage. She contrasts this friend with her cousins, who she says have “really big issues in their marriages,” such as the husband drinking, not working, or not bringing money home. She says her friend, in contrast, has no health or money problems, and the husband is not an alcoholic, so Alka says of her friend, “These are problems of her own making.” She thinks problems of “he said this, she said that” are not “real issues,” but admits she may be old-fashioned to think this way, signaling a generational divide about what constitute “real problems” in a marriage.

There is a common perception about rising divorces in India that is anecdotally borne out among my interviewees, who talk about having many friends who have been divorced, although I only interviewed two women who were divorced. While women tended to say divorce is still stigmatized, I heard many more stories about bad marriages and the need for divorce than about a divorced woman being discriminated against. For example, one woman said she knows seven or eight close friends who are divorced for “the usual reasons” of growing apart or realizing they were different people. She thinks this is good, saying, “It’s much better, rather than sticking together and trying to make it work.” She points out that arranged marriages can be unhappy too, telling the story of a cousin who recently confided in her that she did not get along with her spouse, but they have remained married. The women I interviewed were generally empathetic about divorces they knew about personally, saying that their parents would not understand contemporary problems of incompatibility in a
marriage, or told stories of unhappy marriages where they wished people had divorced or how it was a relief when they did. This empathy runs counter to the fear single women expressed about making the wrong choice and being responsible for a future divorce.

Partly, this contradiction may be because Indian society may not be as understanding. Because of social expectations to be part of a couple, many women are afraid to go through with a divorce. One married woman thinks that even though divorce is now an option, it is still not socially acceptable in India, which she contrasts to her imagined idea of the US. In the past generation, she says that women in India were not working so had few options other than marriage, while men also had few options because they also had arranged marriages and had to work in one of the few jobs available. However, she says now:

In our generation the problem is we have so many options. In your society [indicating me] it’s not that big a social stigma to divorce a person and get married to another person. But it is a real stigma in India…. A lot of the girls around me are not happy with their marriages. They want to make a choice. But how many are actually going and executing it is a question. Big question mark. They’re still in the thinking phase. Because parents would never be able to accept it.

At least in part because of the rapid shift in attitudes about marriage, it seems that there is also confusion about one’s options in an unhappy marriage.

While the women I spoke with were generally empathetic about individual divorces, the rise in divorces because of “rash decisions” represents a frightening prospect for unmarried women. Lakshmi values her own happiness in marriage and is wary of making an uninformed choice. None of her friend’s parents were divorced, and she still remembers the one girl in school whose parents were divorced, whereas now there are many divorces among people her age. In her parents’ generation, she says unless there was some kind of abuse, women were taught to, “Put up with everything. Stand by your husband no matter what.” However, now she says that women now realize marriage is not just about their parents’ happiness, but that, “you also matter.” Unfortunately, she says that due to parental pressure, many women are making “rash decisions” and getting married too quickly, then realizing
they are unhappy and need to divorce. Lakshmi is worried that many of her friends are jumping into marriage without first discussing important matters. A lack of compatibility is one of her main concerns when thinking about marriage, and she is hesitant about marriage because she does not want a divorce in her future.

**Nira’s story: Temporal questions about arranged marriage**

Arranged marriage can also be a source of anxiety and seeming temporal incompatibility. Nira, twenty-four and working for an advertising firm, says she grew up with “progressive” parents except that they want her to have an arranged marriage within her relatively small Christian community. Of her twelve married cousins between the ages of twenty and forty, she says three have had love marriages and the rest were arranged. She says, “My parents… Only when it comes to marriage, they’re conservative. Apart from that they let me do anything and everything I want.” She went to a private coed school in Bangalore where she and her friends were all dating. She had a boyfriend for three years in college, who she broke up with because she felt they were incompatible and not because her parents asked her to end it. In fact, in school and college her parents did not oppose her dating, but now she says they want to arrange her marriage. She says this feels out of step with her friends, saying, “Around me everybody’s parents are fine with [love marriages].”

A few months ago Nira’s parents found a match for her, and because of family pressure she was engaged within a few months. However, just a few weeks before we talked, she and the man mutually agreed to call off the engagement. She says, “We both decided that everything was just going too fast for us, because he just started working and I’m not ready. I just got so pressured and suffocated…. So we just decided to put everything on hold and see how it goes.” She says this makes things awkward for her parents, who had told the whole family, including those who live abroad, about the marriage and now have to tell the family
not to come. She also argues that women are held responsible for a broken engagement, so it could affect her future marriage prospects, saying, “My society is really small. Everyone likes to know what’s happening. So it’s going to be really difficult for me to arrange another marriage because the girl always gets blamed if a relationship doesn’t work.” She feels nervous about pursuing other options besides the man to whom she was briefly engaged, and talks about how she hopes things might work out with him.

Although Nira has given herself more time to make a decision, she still feels pressure to choose someone in her community, and to do it soon. It would work out best for her if she decides to marry the man her parents chose, so she may overlook compatibility or other issues. Yet she feels contradictory impulses—related to ideas about past and future, and traditional and progressive values—from her parents and her friends. Above all, she feels pressure to make a decision that will be acceptable, and to make it within the correct timing.

**Timing it right: Postponing and rushing into marriage**

While new marriage options seem to also be producing new temporal anxieties, being married in India is important, especially for a woman, to being accepted as a full person. Fatima, thirty-three and married, says, “In India it is so important to be a couple. It’s so important to be married. Everyone asks you, ‘Oh, shadi nahi?’ [Hindi for ‘Not married?’] So everyone keeps asking you. So it’s just so important to have a partner.” She says when you are married, people will then ask if you have children and if not why not, or if you have one child when will you have a second, or how the kids are doing in school, saying, “People are always interested in what is happening in someone else’s life.” Still, the first basic step to social acceptance as an adult in India is to be married.

While marriage has been reframed as a matter of desire and choice, young women are still under pressure to marry, although—like the pressure to be a good homemaker—the
source of that pressure appears, to them, to be internal. Charu, fifty-one, had a cross-community love marriage, as did her daughter Madhu. She says her daughter’s generation is, “Wary of arranged marriage. If they haven’t found anyone when they’re thirty there’s a lot of peer pressure and parental pressure to get married. Also internal pressure of their own. I mean not pressure, desire. But they are still very against the idea of an arranged marriage.” Here, Charu identifies the main tension in reframing marriage as choice, which is the pressure for women to marry by the age of thirty. At first she says this is “peer pressure and parental pressure,” then restates it as “internal pressure,” which she then reframes as “desire.”

Recasting external pressure as something one wants is a way of reclaiming agency over a decision one may not actually have control over. While educated women in urban India in particular have more agency in their marriages as compared to other women in India or to women in the past, the choices are more constricted than many women expect.

The fear of having problems or missing out on happiness in a marriage, combined with the pressure to marry before it’s “too late,” seems to be putting young women in Bangalore in a bind, as they are hesitant to marry early or settle for a less-than-perfect relationship. It appears it is symbolically important for the younger generation in India, at least among the urban upper middle classes, to be able to say one chose one’s marriage even if it was arranged. However, because marriage is a high-stakes game in India—especially for women—there are serious consequences for a bad choice. For this reason, many women postpone marriage or worry their dating relationship will not work as a marriage, then suddenly find themselves in their late twenties and—as many have described—panicking and hastily deciding to marry, whether in an arranged marriage or to someone they are dating but may not know well, with unknown consequences.

Recasting marriage as a choice rather than a financial or social obligation thus puts pressure on women who delay marriage or leave an unhappy marriage, as being a single
woman over thirty in India is still not socially acceptable. Gouri, who recently married her
longtime boyfriend, talks about the social effects of this contradiction on women she knows.
Gouri says that from the age of eighteen, her girl friends started thinking about meeting their
“ideal man” and settling down, explaining that women want to get into a serious relationship
early because the social consequences of not finding someone are high. Among women she
knows, if a woman has not found the right person by age twenty-five, they might consider an
arranged marriage. She argues that many women feel old at that point, saying, “You just give
up hope and say, ‘Let my parents do it for me.’” Gouri sees many women in their mid-
twenties panicking about getting married and impulsively opting for arranged marriages.

Their fears are not unfounded. Gouri’s older sister’s friends who are single and in
their late twenties are under intense pressure from their parents to marry, but are getting
offers from men who are forty and divorced twice—in other words, not ideal matches. She
says that these women are all working and successful, but have had previous relationships
that have not worked out. Gouri says her sister, who married at twenty-three, used to regret
getting married so early, but now she says she feels lucky, telling Gouri, “‘You have no idea
what these girls are going through.’” Gouri empathizes with the women, saying, “You’ve
grown up thinking that you’re not going to have an arranged marriage and you’re going to
meet someone, because these women are all quite outgoing. And then it doesn’t happen and
you have to settle for an arranged marriage. It becomes difficult to accept.” While pressure
for women to marry starts in their early twenties, Gouri argues that, “men can always find
someone.” Thus, women who have careers and have dated have high expectations for a
marriage, yet may not actually have many options. There is also pressure on women to make
a dating relationship turn into marriage, even if there are problems.

Nandini, a twenty-seven-year-old software engineer, says that she and her friends
would prefer a love marriage but explains that their dating relationships have not worked out.
She says the breakups have happened for various reasons, saying, “Either the guy wasn’t ready at that point of time, or things didn’t work out in terms of their compatibility.” She herself has dated two coworkers, but in the first relationship the man was too possessive, and in the second the man traveled for work too much and she found she was the jealous one. She is also wary of arranged marriages, in part because her friend recently had a last-minute arranged marriage that is not going well. Nandini explains that her friend had recently broken up with a boyfriend and agreed to an arranged marriage without meeting the man, as he lived abroad. Her friend moved abroad with her new husband, and recently told Nandini that after a year of marriage, while her husband was a “good friend,” they had not yet started having a physical relationship. Her friend said she suspects it has to do with past trauma, but her husband will not talk about it. Nandini is disturbed by her friend’s story, and says if she has an arranged marriage, she wants time to get to know the person. I assumed she meant several months, but when I ask, she says, “I would ask for some time. At least a month’s time, two month’s time, how much ever time they can give me. The longer the better.” This indicates that her parents would allow just a few weeks for her to decide on a match.

Nandini is in a difficult situation: she is discouraged about dating, but she has seen evidence of arranged marriages that are even more disastrous. As she is in her late twenties, I can only describe her attitude toward marriage as hesitant and resigned. The option of arranged marriage can provide a way forward from a difficult breakup, but last minute marriages are risky, and regret is always hovering nearby. I find an unlikely parallel in the work of Kalpana Ram (2013), who describes women in rural Tamil Nadu that are visited by ghosts because they are disturbed by regret and are channeling women who had unfulfilled lives. Stories of relationships that did not work out or of unhappy marriages are ghosts of a less corporeal nature, but haunting nonetheless. When I ask Nandini if she would consider not marrying, she smiles and responds, “Of course I will get married. I have to. I don’t want
to be alone.” By quickly reframing obligation as desire, time becomes one of her ghosts.

**Conclusions: Theorizing temporal liminality**

Marriage as a personal choice is clearly an important narrative for young women in Bangalore, but it is also linked to ideas of desire and consumption as immoral. Consumption has a temporal dimension as well, as women spending on themselves is seen as not investing in the future—meaning the family—whereas women themselves connect this type of spending to a redefinition of women’s roles in kinship structures. As part of a narrative of choice that has neoliberal overtones, marriage translates into individual responsibility on women to make the “right” choice within a certain timeframe. Women’s choices are part of a gendered moral system that is also about temporal decisions, which becomes evident as they try to shift the parameters. This temporal pressure comes in part from contradictions between ideas of being “too traditional” or “too modern,” while men do not face the same set of issues. Meanwhile, new options for marriage—be it love marriage, modern arranged marriage, or divorce—seem to only increase the pressure on women to make the “right” decision with the “right” timing, leading to regret, postponing, and rushing into marriage.

As a way to think through the anxiety and disappointment I hear in these stories, I would like to introduce the idea of “temporal liminality,” which I understand as a feeling of suspension between a lost past and a desired future, experienced in the present as the sense of not progressing along a normative or desired life course and thus being “out of time.” Based on Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) idea of the transition phase during a rite of passage, Victor Turner describes a state of liminality as a temporary period of being outside social classification and thus socially invisible as well as potentially polluting (Turner 1970 [1967]: 96-7). Morality is rooted in value systems often linked to religious beliefs, which serve as culturally specific guides for “correct” behavior and social classification (Douglas 1996
Value systems come from ideological categories that separate people and things as belonging in or excluded from particular categorizations. The concept of value is thus both moral and evaluative, and power is in many ways defined by the ability to set standards of evaluation and categorization (Graeber 2001).

Modernity is generally understood as a universal system of human measurement, yet it is a system of evaluation defined by those in power. Modernity in classic social theory is gendered, raced, and classed, with the wealthy white male as its standard and abstract universal. There cannot be a female, non-white, or lower-class version of Baudelaire’s flâneur wandering the urban crowd (d'Souza and McDonough 2006). Even as certain older hierarchies and practices break apart under modernity, gendered, colonial, and class hierarchies remain policed through morality. Mary Douglas (1996 [1966]), an inspiration for Turner, considers gender and morality in her theory of purity and impurity in religious systems, with the impure and dangerous identified as something that does not fall easily into culturally understood categories, including women acting contrary to understood gender roles. Women without children or powerful women are seen as anomalies, dangerous, or witches (Rosaldo 1974: 31-5). Transgressing boundaries of categorization is similar to being in a liminal state, and can be especially difficult for people who are already marginal.

Rites of passage assume reincorporation into a group after separation and the liminal period of marginality and danger. Outside of transition ceremonies where liminality is prescribed, this state can threaten social categorization and thus social recognition. While rites of passage are temporal in structure, they are time-limited and therefore only dangerous or uncomfortable before the new social status has been achieved. However, I understand temporal liminality as particularly stressful because it feels like a temporary transition state but persists for an unknown period of time and perhaps forever. One resolution is found in marriage, yet this is also a risky strategy for dealing with the feeling of temporal liminality.
Other scales of temporality structure the unpredictability of this liminal state, including contradictory ideas about the past and future, and confusion about the life course itself.

Temporal liminality can also be generative and not just constraining. For professional women in Bangalore, marriage is a symbolic category that collects and sharpens these temporal anxieties such that concerns about the past and future, and about gender and morality, cluster into a felt urgency about timing and personal choice. Yet they also use this sense of urgency to envision new combinations of life that include work, friends, and various romantic partners, as this condition pushes women to consider new options rather than follow established paths. These questions articulate differently depending on class, and for lower middle-class professional women in Bangalore, these concerns are similar but rooted in different contexts, and are felt in even more desperately urgent ways.
Chapter Five

Class, Clothing, and Harassment:
Lower Middle-class Women in IT Navigating Temporal Liminality

The modern kind of woman who wants to make a good impression, she would prefer to wear western formals [rather] than wearing something Indian. Some girls prefer wearing salwars only…. You would not approach her to go out for a drink…. For me…it’s not like I’m totally on the modern side…. Since I have to be with my parents, I’m maintaining a balance.

--Nandini, twenty-seven, software engineer

Previously, a woman didn’t have respect. She was only dedicated to her family. But nowadays they think that, “Yes, women can do everything, just like a guy.” That change I really like a lot. I feel really good being independent in Bangalore…. The city culture, I feel if you know how to use it, it is the right culture. But if you misuse it, it spoils your life. Individuality is always good, but over individuality is never good.

--Namya, thirty-seven, teacher and former computer coder

The contradictions and dangers of modernity in India are negotiated through class distinctions, which are mediated and performed through gender and in ideas about being “middle class.” For much of the 20th century, anthropologists did not focus on the middle classes, instead studying so-called “pre-capitalist” societies and, since the 1950s, studying the impacts of global capitalism in indigenous, tribal, and village contexts (Lewis 1959; Redfield 1953; Wolf 1982), while Marxist anthropological work has generally assumed two classes (Roseberry 1997). However, the field has increasingly drawn on theorists who understood class relations more subtly (Bourdieu 1977 [1972], 1984; Foucault 1995 [1977]; Gramsci 1988), as well approaches to class as a lived experience (Thompson 1978) and a new focus on “white collar” work (Mills 1951). Sherry Ortner (2003, 1991) finds that almost everyone in the US identifies as “middle class” despite anxiety about class status.

Recent anthropological approaches identify the “new” or “global” middle classes as people who have white-collar service jobs and global consumer tastes, as opposed to the “old” middle classes who were landowners or government workers. In India, these “new”
middle classes are seen as obsessed with consumption, politically apathetic, and distanced from civil society (Mazzarella 2003, 2005; Varma 1998). In my approach to class I follow Mark Liechty (2003), who treats the idea of middle class in Nepal as a process instead of a specific population. He proposes that the “middle” is in between ideas of traditional and modern, which is a precarious, morally charged, and lived social category. Liechty observes:

To be middle-class in Kathmandu is to participate in a social and cultural dialogue about what it means to be a “modern Nepali”…they must be willing to walk the fine—and socially unstable—line of “middleness” that cuts not only between the poor and the rich but also through the categories of “tradition” and “modernity” that a global development ideology associates with this social dichotomy. In Kathmandu the middle class are those people struggling to rescue a socially valid “traditional” Nepali morality from its associations with the provincial vulgarity of the urban poor, while at the same time attempting to define a “suitably” modern-but-still-Nepali lifestyle of moral and material restraint distinct from what they view as corrupt elite lifestyles of foreignness and consumer excess. (Liechty 2003: 61)

In India, William Mazzarella (2003) defines a similar balancing in the advertising agencies of a newly liberalized nation. In the 1990s, these agencies captured a desire for a global modernity among the Indian middle classes that was also distinctly Indian, referencing just the “right” amount of tradition and modernity. This analysis does not, however, address the important role gender plays in mediating class through these ideas.  

In ethnographic research on women and globalization, gender has emerged as a central category in theorizing and performing “being middle class” as people grapple with modernity and globalization through local negotiations over morality (e.g. Abu-Lughod 2000; Ahearn 2001; Adrian 2003; Brenner 1998; Constable 1997; Freeman 2000; Jones 2010; Lynch 2007; Mankekar 1999; Mills 1999; Ong 1987; Rofel 1999). In the US, the loss of manufacturing jobs means more jobs in the service sector that require middle-class

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37 In other work, Mazzarella (2010) does look at gender through an episode of moral panic among the Indian middle classes over dance bars in Mumbai, where women wearing full saris dance rather tamely to Bollywood hits and are showered by mainly male spectators with small rupee notes, but are not necessarily sex workers. Before being shut down, these bars were frequented by foreign tourists and lower and middle-class Indians alike. Mazzarella argues that these spaces offended the Indian middle classes because they are uncomfortably liminal and overlapping, as they are not modern upscale bar, nor are they safely contained spaces of traditional culture or family values. In this way, tensions between tradition and modernity were reconciled through physical as well as ideological separation. However, he does not address the way these separate spaces are gendered.
manners and subordinate attitudes that clash with the masculinity of working-class men (Bourgois 1995). In sites of outsourced labor there is a preference for hiring women, as articulated by Aihwa Ong (1987) in factories in Malaysia and Carla Freeman (2000) in data entry centers in Barbados, because of assumptions that women have “nimble fingers,” better attention to detail, are good communicators, or are subordinate. Women working in these new service jobs may be afforded more independence in terms of family decision-making. However, they also acquire new ideas about lifestyle that can cause conflict with their families and make it difficult to fit into traditional marriage markets. In addition, these jobs often cast doubt on their morality or respectability because they work outside the home and do not fit neatly into traditional social categories (Balakrishnan 2002; Freeman 2007; Gunewardena and Kingsolver 2007; Lamphere et al. 1993).

In India, middle-class “modern” women can serve as a foil for disenfranchised lower-class men, whose portrayal of these women as immoral indicates a struggle to mediate their own class-based discomfort (Nisbett 2007). Class, consumption, and gender interact in contemporary India such that, as Ritty Lukose argues, “The upper-middle-class ‘modern’ girl who is now understood to be more aggressively public and sexual intersects with the production of new forms of commodified, lower-caste and lower-class masculinity in ways that marginalize lower-class and lower-caste forms of femininity” (Lukose 2009: 18). While I do not focus on lower-class or lower-caste women here, I do argue that lower middle-class professional women in Bangalore experience temporal liminality in different and more acutely painful ways than wealthier women because of the way morality and ideas about tradition and modernity are classed.

Men, and lower-class men in particular, also experience temporal liminality, mainly due to gendered expectations of earning to support a family combined with unpredictable employment. In the ethnographic literature, the condition of “waiting” without jobs or
productive lives, and indeed the ethnography of “boredom” and deferred futures, has been cast as masculine (Jeffrey 2010; Newell 2012; Weiss 2009). In north India, Craig Jeffrey (2010) describes the practice of “timepass,” an English phrase used in India to refer to filling time while waiting for something, among young lower-class men as they wait for jobs they may never receive, thus deferring marriage and a normative life and being drawn instead into forms of political activism. In a similar but more acute case, James Smith (2011) describes how male Congolese miners experience “temporal dispossession” such that they cannot plan for any kind of future, much less a normative or desired future. The idea of precarity, used by Anne Allison to describe contemporary Japan, is also useful for understanding neoliberal capitalism and fading middle class dreams, as young people who can no longer expect a job or stable family feel “out of place, out of sorts, disconnected” (Allison 2013: 14).

Men I knew in Bangalore, who mainly worked in IT, were indeed anxious, especially after the global recession in 2008 resulted in layoffs and more flexible—and thus tenuous—work. An anthropologist friend who was studying lower-class men taking English courses in Bangalore spoke about their aspirations and frustrations in getting a job, while those who managed to get jobs, mainly in call centers, were not the carefree middle-class partiers of popular stereotypes but were instead constantly worried about job security and saving money. In these ways, temporal liminality that is gendered male has more to do with dreams of stable employment and the ability to support a family, which may be deferred as long as jobs are unpredictable or unavailable. Women in Bangalore also experienced difficulties finding a job and were laid off, yet their concerns centered more on whether they should stay in disappointing or stressful jobs, or rely on a husband to support them financially.

Gender is a dialogue and always in conversation, so women are affected by what men are experiencing and vice versa, even as they negotiate gendered ideas about what can or

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38 I thank Carla Jones for this insight.
should be desired. While jobs in IT or call centers seem to offer class mobility, I argue here that this mobility is limited. Further, lower middle-class women are subject to more regulation by men through shame and harassment, especially if they are seen to “overstep” class boundaries. Perhaps the categories of “tradition” and “modernity” are less about the past and future, and are actually more about class? In these contexts, gender shapes what people think of as a normative life course, even if they seek alternatives to it. What is there to do if an expected life is not available, especially in the context of precarious employment? What constraints and disappointments must one accept, given the promises of the neoliberal global economy, and how is this disappointment gendered and classed?

**Maya’s story: The liminal spaces of the less wealthy in Bangalore**

Most of the women I worked with in Bangalore have had educational and career opportunities that are out of reach for the vast majority of Indian women, even those from the lower middle classes who live in Bangalore. As an educated foreigner, married yet working on my own in India, I was even more of an anomaly. My friendship with Maya reveals these gulfs of class and life experience most starkly. Her story shows how things are changing even for women with fewer options. Yet Maya, who works in an upscale salon, sees “modern” lifestyles every day but cannot really participate in them.

Maya is in her early twenties and from a south Indian Christian family. She lives with her parents and two older brothers in a lower middle-class apartment complex on the outskirts of Bangalore. I became friends with Maya over the many months I lived in the city, but she was technically my employee and our lives were very different. She was a hairdresser in a salon in my neighborhood, and I met her the first time I went there for a haircut. I began to go back just to talk with her, engaging her for pedicures and other treatments, as she had no time to meet and talk outside of work. It takes her over an hour on the bus each way to get
to work, where she spends eight to ten hours a day. She wears a salwar kameez outfit on the bus, a mark of respectability among the other lower middle-class commuters, and then changes into jeans and a T-shirt for her more westernized workplace.

When I asked about her family, she often spoke of crises. One time, she said she was so busy lately because one of her brothers was in the hospital because he tried to commit suicide with rat poison. He’d been unhappy, she explained, but no one knows why he did it. She told me that he barely survived, and since then has devoted himself more to his faith. This brother was not married and was having trouble finding a job, which is the likely reason for his depression. Another time, she said her other brother had been in an accident and severed a nerve on his foot some years before, and his leg had just become much worse, and was turning blue and seemed to be paralyzed. She explained that he was currently in the hospital, and she’d been on the phone with her mother about it, and was worried about what his wife and children would do. This brother had a job in a factory, but because of his condition would not be able to work, putting more of a burden on Maya and her father, an electrician, as the only earners in the family.

When I asked her about what she does on the weekends, or after work, she told me that she does “nothing,” a response that shows me how she values different ways to spend time. Her family does not employ a maid, so as the only daughter she cleans the house and does chores, activities that constitute “doing nothing.” During the week she says she gets up early and does not get home until 9pm, so in the evenings she just watches TV or talks to her work friends on her mobile phone. She did not go to an academic college, but went to an aesthetician training college because a friend of hers told her that cutting hair was a good job. She says she likes meeting people and enjoys making them look nice, but is primarily grateful that her job is stable. Her only friends are at work because that is the only place she goes other than home. She often remarks to me how men can do “anything,” but women are
restricted because they have to take care of the house and children, which she thinks is unfair.

In a later visit, on her birthday, she told me that one of the men at work had just given her the watch she was wearing, indicating that they were dating. She pointed him out and then said not to look at him, as no one else knew. Later, I stole a glance and saw a tall, handsome young man who also works as one of the hairdressers. I was worried at the time that he was taking advantage of her, and that she was risking her reputation by dating someone who would not marry her. However, at my last visit, since I was leaving, she revealed to me that they had just become engaged, saying that no one at the salon knew yet. When I asked if her fiancé was from her community, she smiled and laughed a little, and whispered, “No, he’s Muslim.” I asked what her parents thought, and she said, “When I told my mom, she gave me some slaps, and yelled at me. Then he came to see my parents, and said he would take good care of me. Then they were ok.” I asked how long they had been seeing each other, and she said it had been going on for the past two years, in secret, saying they spent time together at the Café Coffee Day nearby. Their relationship was probably an “open secret” at the salon, something that everyone knew about but did not discuss.

After marriage, Maya says she will move in with her fiancé’s family and will stop working. She says she must leave her job because she will be responsible for taking care of her fiancé’s brother’s two children, because his brother’s wife passed away. I asked if she wanted to keep working, and she immediately responded, “No, I will take care of the kids.” She was silent for a minute, however, and then qualified this response, saying that she will “miss working a lot,” because she likes having a place where she can do what she wants, and she likes earning money. After another pause, she says she will also miss her friends.

She doesn’t know how to keep in touch with me. She is not on Facebook, nor does she seem to use the internet. I gave her my card with my email address, but she looked unsure about how to contact me that way and said she will ask her fiancé about it. I fear I’ll lose
touch with her completely unless I call her mobile, although she keeps changing her mobile number. As I’m leaving, she pulls me aside, and says she’ll miss me “so much,” because I’m the only one who “talks to her this way.” I tell her I will miss her too, which is true.

Our paths crossed for a few months because of a space—the salon—that allows people from different class backgrounds to interact. While most middle and upper-class Indian homes provide a space of interaction between employers and domestic servants (Ray and Qayum 2009), the space of the salon is very different. Salon workers are removed from the social category of a domestic servant, as they are trained as professionals and earn in an often-upscale environment. They may engage in small talk with clients and have professional status such that class boundaries feel blurred. Perhaps because of the lifestyles she had seen through her work in the salon, Maya had a sense that gender roles should change, or at least felt it was unfair that women are responsible for the home and children. Yet she was prepared to take on these duties after marriage, perhaps exchanging the freedom she found at work for a stable married life.

While many lower class women in Bangalore must work in difficult jobs after marriage and may dream of being a housewife, Maya enjoys her job in part because it is relatively high-status, at least in the service sector. However, she has risen in class status enough to marry into a family that apparently does not need her income and may in fact perform its middle-class status by having her not work. For higher class women, having a career after marriage is part of how they display their modernity, yet many middle-class Indians hold traditional gender role ideals that conform to their idea of being middle class. To be middle class for Maya perhaps means not working after marriage, yet she also does not want to lose the freedom and expanded social world she has gained through work.
I. Class in Bangalore: The illusion of mobility

Lower middle-class women in Bangalore are working in a range of professions, from the service industry, to call centers, to IT. They are part of the new lifestyles available under liberalization to varying degrees. In India class and caste are intertwined, and caste has historically guided employment and thus class status. India’s version of affirmative action is found in caste-based “reservations,” or the setting aside of roughly half the seats in state-run universities and government jobs for people from lower-caste, tribal, and other minority groups.39 Twenty-five years after these laws were adopted, some of the lower-caste children of those who have benefited from reservations have been able to attend high quality English-medium schools, have secured middle-class jobs, and have been able to “pass.” However, there is rampant harassment of lower-caste students in colleges and workplaces, and unspoken caste-based discrimination in hiring practices. Reservations disrupt established routes to employment through kinship and caste connections, but are resented by those who believe in merit-based competition. The private sector has no reservations.

Despite these laws, class and caste boundaries are actually quite difficult to cross, especially into the IT workplace. As Carol Upadhya (2007) finds, the IT sector is based on an ideology of “merit” and claims to employ a cross-section of Indian workers, but in actuality—based on a sample of IT professionals in Bangalore—it is socioeconomically homogenous. Upadhya writes, “Data from our study and several others suggest that most software engineers come from middle class, educated families,” while “80 per cent of their fathers had graduate degrees or above,” and the majority were Hindu and upper caste (Upadhya 2007: 1863-4). Because hiring and promotions are based on perceived “fit” with cosmopolitan corporate cultures, people without the proper cultural capital are filtered out.

39 The 1980 Mandal Commission’s recommendations, passed in 1989 by V.P. Singh’s government, added a 27% reservation for members of “Other Backward Castes” to existing reservations of 22.5% for “Scheduled Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes,” sparking violent protests among higher castes and led to Singh stepping down. However, the subsequent administration retained these reservations and added another 10% for poor members of the upper castes and non-Hindus (Rao 2009: 172).
Here I suggest that class mobility is limited in IT workplaces in Bangalore by English language skills and class-based cultural capital, signaled especially for women through dress.

**Good English: The limitations of class mobility in Bangalore**

In contemporary Bangalore, speaking “good English” is the most immediate indication of class status, a legacy of British colonialism and American economic imperialism that has established English as the global language of business. English is required to work in IT and other white-collar professions, including call centers. “English-medium” schools and English tutoring centers for adults have proliferated in recent years. However, because of fears from the local Kannadiga population about being eclipsed, Karnataka’s government has mandated that all government schools teach in Kannada, prompting concern about Bangalore’s future dominance in the IT and BPO sectors (Patel 2010: 46). Kavita, a woman I interviewed who has taught in a private school for twenty years, describes how this situation has created a market for poor-quality English-medium schools that prey upon lower class parents who do not speak English themselves. For example, her plumber sent his daughter to a school that teaches in poor English, so the daughter did not learn English, nor did she learn the concepts that she would learn better in her native Kannada. English, however, is important in south India because there are so many vernacular languages, whereas Hindi provides a common tongue in much of north India.

Not speaking “good English” can be acutely painful, while speaking well can open many doors. One older woman from Mumbai attended a Marathi-medium school through 10th standard but moved to an English-medium “pre-university” school for the next two years. She contrasts her education to convent schools taught in English, saying, “English poetry was torture. We just wouldn’t understand a word of it. You could almost draw a line, the girls who were convent-educated and the girls from Marathi-medium schools who had no
vocabulary in English. That complex I still have even today… Those days, speaking good English was like, ‘You are smart.’” In contrast, a younger woman described how she was an average student in her convent school in Bangalore but a “standout” in college because of her English speaking ability.

Spoken English ability can also subvert economic class status. One young woman described a wealthy ex-boyfriend from college who she broke up with because she felt he was not intelligent, because, she says, “He just couldn’t speak properly. He would never want to speak in English.” On the other hand, learning English can provide opportunities to cross class boundaries, as in the case of one woman’s college friend. Ameena, a twenty-eight-year-old manager in a mid-sized IT firm, attended a conservative rural college where the students spoke mainly the local vernacular, but she and her friends, although their parents were from the same regional background, spoke mainly English because many had grown up in the Persian Gulf. Her friend was from a conservative area and family near the college, but decided to be part of her friend group because he thought they were “open-minded.” She described how he improved his English through spending time with the group, remarking, “He’s a total exception. We don’t know where he came from. I guess his ideas about life went more with ours.” He managed to alter his own class status and subsequently worked in call centers in Bangalore because of his English abilities.

Despite the dominance of English, I also heard expressions of regret about not knowing Indian languages. One young woman regrets that her daughter will only know English because she and her husband speak different Indian languages, which they do not use with their daughter. Another Kannada-speaking woman worries that because young people in Bangalore no longer speak Kannada, they are growing up without “roots” because, she says, “English is not the language of the mind or an instinctive language, or a language of the heart.” One woman who works in IT and has linguistically mixed parents claims she does not
speak any Indian language well, saying, “People consider it shameful. But for me, language is a means of communication, so as long as I get my work done it’s cool. Everywhere I’ve been, friends, family, everyone I’ve known has always spoken English. I’m comfortable with it.” In this way, she justifies not speaking an Indian language by linking English to “getting work done,” a signal that she is part of a privileged professional sector.

English is also gendered, illustrated in the story about a woman who grew up in Bangalore and spoke English at home, but married into a rural family that spoke Kannada. She remembers being ridiculed by the women in the family for acting “pretentiously” and “showing off” when she spoke English. While the men in the family spoke English in the living room, the women spoke Kannada in the kitchen, and she remembers, “I’d sit like this dumb moron because I couldn’t speak Kannada at that time.” In this way, English can also be gendered as not appropriate for women.

**Class in the IT workplace**

Crossing class boundaries can be quite difficult for young people who have gained entry to educational or work opportunities through affirmative action or other programs aimed to increase diversity. One woman I interviewed works for an NGO that sends young women from lower income families to college. She says the women find going to college with wealthier classmates a major “culture shock,” and explains that they tend to find each other and hang out in their own groups, saying, “They wouldn’t really mix around with the others because they probably don’t feel equal or part of the larger group.” However, she notes that they are motivated to work and marry into educated families, thereby “moving up the social ladder,” so they try to find white-collar jobs after college that will allow them mobility.

Coming from a different class background in a white-collar workplace in Bangalore is difficult socially and professionally. While there is some class diversity in corporate
workplaces, there is perhaps more diversity in terms of gender, age, and regional and religious background. From my observations, class firstly limits who enters these workplaces, and secondly, creates divisions within it. For those from the lower middle classes that speak more often in their vernacular languages instead of English, managers will often try to make teams from people who speak the same language, limiting cross-community friendships for workers who do not speak “good English.” In turn, workers with fluent English make friends with each other, perhaps across community lines but not necessarily across classes, unless someone has moved up through improving their English and “passing.”

Devika describes her large IT firm as diverse in terms of age, life stage, and background to an extent, saying, “In college, all my friends…were the same age, we all had the same kind of thinking. But when I came to work, I was exposed to people who were married, had kids, were from different religions, different backgrounds. You also have a lot of expats,” meaning people from outside India. However, her workplace is less diverse in terms of class, which maps onto categories of caste. Class and caste diversity is encouraged by companies through special programs to bring young people from lower caste and small town backgrounds for internships, but this does not seem to truly integrate the workplace. Devika notes that in these programs, the interns must eventually meet corporate standards, saying, “Once you’ve given them the buffer, after a while you cannot keep doing that because at the end of it business requirements are there. So if they’re still not too good, we would advise them to look for something different.” Lower class workers may not be up to standards in terms of preparation and work ability, and also in terms of class cues that are folded into professional life and perceptions of ability.

**Trying on clothes and lifestyles: Classed boundaries for women call center workers**

Even for women with English language skills that work in call centers, there seem to
be limits on class mobility. I did not interview call center workers, but I worked extensively with Priyanka, who managed call centers for several years. From a higher class status than most of her employees, she describes most of these women as being from lower middle-class families who had migrated alone to the city from other states in south India. Most lived together in women’s hostels or paying guesthouses known as “PGs,” while some were locals and lived with their parents. She said these women made a lot of money relative to their parents, but explains how night shifts would take their toll, saying, “It’s very good money for very minimal education. But I would say after one and a half years maximum people would start falling sick.” At this point, she says most of the women would try to stay in the job for as long as possible until they got married, or would try to move up in the company and change to a daytime shift if they were not ready for marriage.

Priyanka talks about class aspirations and limits by talking about clothing. For women in the call center, she argues, financial independence meant spending money on fashionable clothing. After living what she calls “restrictive lives” that revolved around school, home, and their parents, having disposable income means that both the women and men would go to a popular shopping street in Bangalore at the end of the month when they received their paychecks, and says the women would also discuss shopping at work. Clothing in Bangalorean workplaces is an important marker of class status and also social attitude. Priyanka describes the women living with their parents as dressed differently than those living at hostels or PGs. If living at home, she says that many parents would allow their daughters the freedom to have a job but would restrict them otherwise, so they would mainly wear salwar kameez sets to work. The women living elsewhere would more often wear jeans, pants, skirts, T-shirts, or more dressy “tops,” but would not wear western-style office clothing, an indication of the limits on their class mobility.

However, Priyanka says she could wear “western formals,” such as skirt suits or
slacks and pumps, because she was a manager (and, although she did not say this, from a higher class background than her employees). Priyanka says, “I would be nicely groomed, and I would get a compliment from the girls, like, ‘Wow, western clothes. Manager, hmm?’” Her clothing indicated her status in the office, which was implicitly linked to class status. However, Priyanka explained that while they may ascend to team managers or day shifts, almost none of the lower-class employees—women or men—became high-level managers, as these were drawn from a “more educated” pool that had advanced degrees, and a higher class background. She also describes how it was difficult for entry-level call center workers to work their way up and cross into the IT sector as business managers, as Priyanka had, except for those who had a higher educational and class background and were in the call center as a “stop-gap” to make money while studying or applying for better jobs.

Here, clothes and consumption signal some pushing of class boundaries, mainly through playing with the categories of traditional and modern, but they end up reinscribing the limits of class mobility. For aspiring women in a fashion-centered personal development course in urban Indonesia, Carla Jones notes, “[The women] did acquire techniques of display that equipped them to perform their femininity competitively, sometimes even above their material class position, but such performances could, on occasion, also reveal the borders of gender and class identities” (Jones 2003: 189). I now turn to these borders, as seen in the gendered regulation of class through moral shaming.

II. Traditional and modern women: Class and gendered moral regulation

Harassment of women in India happens across classes, but is classed in particular ways. Middle class women have many privileges in Indian society, but these do not necessarily extend to moving safely in public spaces (Phadke et al. 2011: viii). However, the idea of harassing or shaming a woman in public can have different registers. It may occur
between strangers on the street, but also refers to questioning the morality of a woman in different kinds of spaces, such as at college or among family. More “private” harassment, such as that occurring in a home or workplace out of public view, links to gender-based shame about body and dress that a woman also feels in more public ways. Women I spoke with were concerned about a culture of victim blaming and about a perceived rise in harassment of middle-class women in Bangalore, especially by lower-class men. I also found that class is negotiated more subtly through women and men defining gendered categories of “traditional” and “modern,” which help regulate class-appropriate behavior and serve as guides for disciplining women who transgress.

Regulating women’s behavior through harassment and shame

Several women talked about how they became ashamed of their bodies and were told to regulate their behavior as they became adolescents, many through incidents of harassment or public “eve teasing” that they felt were their fault. For example, Anju talks about how, when she turned eleven, the women in her family started telling her to cover her body more, saying, “‘You’re a woman now, so you should do womanly things. Now you cannot dress this way.’” Anju remembers that she began to feel badly that she was a woman, saying that she started to hunch in T-shirts, and that her mother began choosing clothes for her. One time, she says she was out cycling in Bangalore with friends, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. She was standing next to her bike, and a man walked past her and grabbed her breast. She says she ran home crying and told her mother what happened. Just then her father and uncle returned home, and when they heard, they went out again and caught the man. They took him to the police station where the police beat him, which shows their relative class status and power. The next day, however, Anju says her mother told her that she should not wear shorts outside the house. Anju felt it was her fault, saying, “That was one incident which influenced
me as a woman. I started getting conscious about my body. Since then I started wearing
clothes that were baggy.” Later, in her own house, her brother’s tutor touched her breast, but
she says she never told her parents because she was afraid it would, “Be my fault again.”

Despite incidents of harassment in Bangalore, women from north India confirmed the
commonly held opinion that the public harassment of women is worse in the north, although
they feel it is becoming more common in Bangalore. One woman argued that in Delhi, “You
need to be aggressive and constantly on your guard, as men comment or try to touch you,
even on the road.” Another feels that Indian women cannot wear western clothes in her
grandfather’s hometown of Varanasi, a place where the presence of western tourists has
shaped cultures of harassment, because, “Men will not see you as a ‘good girl’ and will give
you looks.” Finally, a woman from Calcutta says that while she felt safer there than in Delhi,
men still would comment and make her uncomfortable, noting that they were, “A certain
class of guys. Certain slum kind of guys.” She recalls being harassed by a lower-class group
of men during Durga Puja, the main festival in Calcutta that brings enormous crowds into the
streets, saying, “People say [women] ask for it with the clothes they’re wearing. Rubbish, I
was in a sari. I was decently dressed.”

Other women talked about a perceived increase in harassment in Bangalore as the
fault of lower-class male migrants. Shanti, who moved from Delhi to Bangalore, recalls being
groped on buses as a young girl in Delhi, even next to her mother. She says, “When you’re a
child, you don’t know what to say. You don’t know how to deal with it, so you just kind of
push it aside and pretend it doesn’t happen.” She says she used to feel guilty and never told
her parents. At first when she moved to Bangalore she was taken aback by more respectful
attitudes towards women, recalling that she was worried she was no longer attractive, saying,
“Nobody looks at you. You can walk through a group of people, expecting somebody will
touch you, and nobody does. So for a minute there I thought, ‘Hey what happened, did
something happen to me, did I change?’ And then I realized no, it’s just that people [men] are decent here.” However, Shanti worries that Bangalore is getting worse for women because of men who have moved in from “outside” and have brought in a “rowdiness” that is not “originally Bangalore,” signaling the lower-class, rural status of these imagined harassers. She thinks that migrant men are prone to harass women because they have freedom from community surveillance for the first time, arguing they are, “Much more assertive and aggressive, because they’ve left their home and come to a new city,” whereas in their hometown they were “bounded by so many relatives.”

However, some women argue that harassment and victim blaming happen across classes, just in different ways. Devika, for example, explains that a recent incident of moral policing in Bangalore involved the local police—who are drawn from the lower classes—targeting upper middle-class women who were attending a party at a rented farmhouse outside the city. She explains that they did not have alcohol, but were in a coed friend group, and the police raided the party and physically beat some of the women. She feels this is hypocritical, saying, “The cops going and thrashing women just because they were out at night, they were partying. And [the police are] allowed to do it themselves. There’s so many hypocritical statements being made about these things. It’s somewhere in the upbringing itself. Right from the start, you’ve been told that women are certain way, men are certain way.” By talking about “upbringing,” Devika is talking about class, implying that the police held certain attitudes about gender because of their lower class background. However, she also argues that higher class men might regulate women through restrictions while a lower-class man could be more open-minded, saying, “I know of extremely well-off women who are not allowed to do anything…. I mean it’s across, it’s not class driven. There could be a below-poverty-line guy who would be open and broad-minded and would allow his women to go and work. At the same time there could be a very narrow-minded super rich person who
will not allow his women to do anything. So it’s just gender driven.” However, class mediates how and why women are regulated, as illustrated in Ameena’s story.

Ameena’s story: Class and gendered moral harassment

Ameena is twenty-eight and from a Muslim family from south India, but grew up in the Persian Gulf in a mixed Indian diaspora community, which was less conservative than the local culture and, in fact, less so than much of India. She met her husband, who has a similar background, in college and they have one child. She works as a manager for a software company in Bangalore. Her parents sent her to high school in India because they wanted to move back, and believed she needed to understand Indian culture before they did so. She then attended a conservative Muslim engineering college in a relatively rural area, where she was stigmatized for speaking mainly in English instead of the vernacular language and for making friends with some of her male classmates. While, in this context, sexism can be justified through contemporary conservative Islamic norms regarding women, her story also shows how women who display class-based cues that men deem threatening and thus “inappropriate” can be disciplined through moral harassment.

In college, Ameena wanted to study computer programming, which is very competitive in India and based on exam results. She did not get admission in Bangalore, and because her parents are from another southern state, they found her a place in a relatively new Muslim engineering college in a rural area. She says she was nervous about fitting in, coming from the Gulf, but says, “Once I got there I realized that I should have bigger fears…. I really wasn’t exposed to this kind of narrow-mindedness, and so much hatred towards being able to speak in English.” She says that most of the professors and students were from the local area, and most of them spoke in the local dialect. She did not understand this dialect well, but they used it even in lecture, although the college was supposed to be “English medium.” She says
she was scared to tell anyone that she was from Bangalore. Many of the senior boys made fun of her imperfect language skills, and would say bad things about her that her friends later told her she was lucky she did not understand. However, she also did not want to tell her parents, because she did not want them to spend more money so she could move to another college. She says that even though she had never been to a coed school, she was comfortable talking with men, unlike most of the women at the college. She made friends with a mixed-gender group drawn from different class years that also spoke mainly in English.

She was harassed by male classmates and by professors alike. One time, she says the campus manager—an administrator—yelled at her for shaking hands with a male classmate. The professors marked her exams down because she was seen talking with men in class, as she discovered over time. She says, “I didn’t believe it in the beginning because I said, ‘That’s bizarre, I should be judged purely on my answer papers or whatever I’m writing on my test, not on the way I behave,’” but she found her grade included a section for “participation” that always received a low grade.

Her class had fourteen girls and forty-five boys. In class she learned that the girls were not supposed to sit on the same bench as the boys, much less talk to them. At one point, in class, the boys sent her a note asking what her rate was that night, implying she was a prostitute. She says she usually she ignored that kind of thing, but that day she says she finally “had enough” and brought the note to the professor. He read it and was shocked, and made the boys apologize publicly. She says this stopped them doing that again, but says, “It didn’t really make things better for me.” They would make gunshot sounds when she walked into the classroom, and she did not know until later that in the local language, the word for gunshot was also slang for a prostitute. She says they spread untrue rumors about her, remembering, “They would say, ‘She was with this guy and so and so place, and she was with that guy at so and so place,’ mostly things like that.”
She wore a headscarf in college, as was expected of the women, and if the scarf fell down to your shoulders, she says, “They’d come up to you and say, ‘Cover your head.’” Despite this pious attitude, she discovered hypocrisies in their behavior. For example, one of the men who harassed her about her headscarf saw her name written in Arabic on a necklace around her neck and asked what it said, and she was surprised he could not read Arabic. She says, “He was Muslim and he’s supposed to know. I mean the way he’s asking me to cover my head, I would assume that he’s the kind of guy who would know how to read the Koran.” She also knew many of the men drank alcohol, which Muslims are not supposed to do, but she was sure they would make a “big scene” if they found a woman drinking.

These men also believed women were not supposed to talk back to men, and Ameena was the only woman who would stand up to them. For example, they organized class tours to places they wanted to go, assuming that the women would not get permission from their parents to go. Ameena would point out that the women had not been asked, but the other women did not speak up. She says she was even more disturbed that the other girls went along with it. Ameena says that the way to deal with her non-complacency was to try to ruin her reputation, which was a real threat for many women in the college, explaining:

Actually, it sort of does work because right out of college you’re marriage material in the community. So the first thing they’re going to do for a background check is to ask the college people, “What kind of girl is this? How was she in college? How does she behave?” If they spread rumors about you, that’s what they’re going to hear. And they wouldn’t want to have a relationship with that kind of a girl.

Because of this threat, she speculates that most of the other women were scared to act differently. However, she was confident that her parents or potential in-laws would not believe her classmates over her, saying, “I know what I am. My friends know who I am. The people who matter to me, my parents, know who I am. They are not going to believe some third person going and telling them, ‘Your daughter’s like this, your daughter’s like that.’”

Ameena says that her friends were the only way she got through college. She was part
of the only mixed-gender friend group in the college, with other people who had also grown up in the Gulf or were from bigger cities, and thus were mainly from higher class backgrounds than the other students. The group became known as the “English medium gang” among the other students. She says her friends had, “Seen a lot and had been exposed to being around a lot of people. Not just stuck in their nutshell.” However, she says they were not all from wealthier families or had open-minded parents, because several—especially the women—were afraid their parents would find out about their friends and would not approve. Her male friends helped her deal with the harassment by using humor, saying, “These guys used to make a big joke of it, and it didn’t seem such a big deal anymore.” She notes that her reputation suffered because she had a mixed-gender friend group and spoke English, whereas the men’s reputations did not.

Ameena is one of nicest people I know, and I cannot imagine anyone treating her like her classmates did in college. She met her husband as part of the group, although they kept their relationship secret—even from their friends—until after college when they became engaged. Because she did not have an arranged marriage and did not marry within that local community, she was not as vulnerable to the threats to her reputation in the same way the other women in the college would have been. Her class status helped her transcend the harassment, making it something painful to be endured, yet not necessarily a threat to her future life. Yet, it was the class cues she displayed—speaking English, knowing about the world beyond the local region, speaking back to the men, and making friends with men—that were so threatening to her harassers. A woman “out of place” is thus disciplined through moral harassment, whereas men are perhaps more able to change their class status.

“Traditional” and “modern”: Gender, class, and the politics of going out

It is in examining attempts to define categories of “traditional” and “modern” that
reveals how these ideas are less about a radical break between an old and new India, and more about negotiating class position. Class defines appropriate behavior for women, especially in practices of “going out” at night with friends. While ideas about behavior are shifting somewhat, especially for upper middle-class women, women who transgress or seek to behave “above their station” are often disciplined by those close to them.

For my interlocutors in Bangalore, definitions of the words “traditional” and “modern” often describe a stark division between types of women with little room in the middle, at least conceptually. While describing social attitudes, this division has a strong class correlation. Aarti, twenty, an upper middle-class college student in Bangalore, says her “conservative” classmates are, “Not open to drinking. They’re not open to partying. They’re not open to anything actually which is remotely fun.” Most of her classmates are from Bangalore and speak in their native Kannada or Tamil, while Aarti has grown up speaking English. She does not think there is anything in the middle of these positions, saying, “I don’t know how you can be traditional and open at the same time.” When I ask Aarti what “open” means to her, she says it means, “Just being more modern. If they are open to going out and drinking. If they just have a very liberal way of thinking, in the way they see life, in the way they see people, and the way they see experiences…. You’re okay with everything.”

Aarti criticizes double standards that judge women for casual dating, drawing a difference between “traditional, conservative” India and “liberal, open” India in terms of gender. She thinks that women are more “levelheaded” than men about relationships because of harsher societal judgment for women who “hook up” without having a relationship, as men are never judged and called “sluts.” She says, “There’s this huge contrast in India. It’s such a huge divide between traditional/conservative and liberal/open.” Aarti thinks that even though she thinks young people in India are changing, she argues that, “The traditional way is still dominant.” Upper class women have less to lose by drinking, partying, and dating before
marriage, while lower middle-class women must worry more about their reputations.

There is more middle ground between “traditional” and “modern” when women describe their own position. Nandini, a software engineer and team leader, explains these terms through women on the team she supervises. According to Nandini:

The modern kind of woman who wants to make a good impression would prefer to wear western formals [rather] than wearing something Indian. Some girls prefer wearing salwars only…. You might think that she’s very homely and she’s a little reserved… If she’s wearing a lot of gold and she’s wearing flowers and all that… You would not approach her to go out for a drink.

These descriptions are classed, in that “modern” women can wear western clothes and drink alcohol, and are perhaps more ambitious. “Traditional” women, on the other hand, are “homely” (home loving) and “reserved,” wear Indian clothing and other things typical of “traditional” women in Bangalore such as jasmine flowers in their hair, and do not “go out.”

Nandini further argues that women who live with their family are, “Very traditional. They don’t even know what’s happening in the outside world. They’re restricted. They go home and they come to work and they go straight back home. Absolutely no social life.” On the other hand, women who live without family are, “Living alone and can party. On the weekend she hangs out with guy friends or girl friends.” However, because Nandini lives with her parents but is from a relatively high middle-class background, she describes herself as somewhere between these extremes, saying, “For me it would be mixed. I’m kind of homely and I also socialize when I have to. But I’m not on one side. It’s not like I’m totally on the modern side. I’m kind of keeping a balance right now. Since I have to be with my parents, I’m maintaining a balance.” As with many dichotomies, these categories are blurred in practice, as people place themselves in relation to others.

In the above examples, “going out” means going out after dark to pubs or bars where men and alcohol are present, and is a marked practice for women in Bangalore that helps define class-appropriate behavior. Upper-class women are more able to “go out” without
damaging their reputation, but with new money from IT and BPO jobs, middle-class women play a delicate game between managing their reputation and fitting in socially. The most upscale clubs in Bangalore are expensive, charging a hefty cover that may be applied to overpriced drinks inside. Devika describes drinking in the parking lot before going into one club to avoid buying drinks, saying, “Even if you don’t pay a cover, you’re going to spend a bomb in there anyway.”

Going out in Bangalore has become more upscale since the late 1990s and 2000s. One woman, now in her late twenties, remembers Brigade Road, one of the main shopping streets in the city, as the place to go to “be seen” at that time, or she went to “dingy pubs” or pool parlors as there were, as yet, no malls. In contrast, her college-aged sister is used to getting dressed up and going to “lounge bars.” She says, “Now if you go to the pubs, the kids are always dressed to the nines, no? [My sister] wouldn’t be caught dead in some of the places I used to go to.” Fitting in with friends can be uncomfortable for women with less money, as described by a college student who often chooses not to go out with her friends, saying, “They drink. All the time. In the most expensive places. It’s about four grand [Rs. 4,000 or about $80] for three people…. I see people around me throwing money like it’s absolutely nothing.” She worries her friends are wasting their parents’ money, and claims the moral high ground by arguing that she understands the value of money because of her lower class status.

Gender, class, and morality overlap in ways that can discipline a woman for acting “too modern,” which is another way of saying she is acting above the class status deemed appropriate by her family or wider society. Usha tells the story of her aunt, which illustrates how a family can sanction women who try to become too “westernized” and overstep class boundaries. She says that in her family, “If any woman tries to be a rebel and tries to accept the new culture, or tries to be westernized, they would be talking about them.” Usha describes her aunt, who lives in a city near Bangalore, as “completely uneducated” and not
wealthy or particularly good looking, but because her horoscope matched well with her uncle’s, she married into Usha’s more wealthy family. Usha says she quickly had three children and then devoted herself to “looking good and making friends.” Usha says her aunt never used to wear western clothes, but now wears “brand name” jeans and other designer clothes. She also now “leaves her hair,” meaning she wears her hair loose and not in the traditional braid, and sometimes forgoes the *bindi*, or red forehead dot, and the *mangalsutra*, or gold necklace, that indicate a married Hindu woman. Usha says, “Sometimes she just takes them off and tries to wear something more fancy. So that’s become a big issue.” Usha thinks that other women in the family are jealous that the aunt is uneducated and acting “above her background,” so they accuse her of adopting “another culture.”

Recently, Usha’s aunt inadvertently ended her daughter’s engagement, which many women in the family feel was just punishment for her behavior. The aunt’s daughter was supposed to marry a distant relative in Bangalore, and the rest of the family had approved of the match. The aunt, her daughter, and her family visited Bangalore to settle the match, and the families went out to dinner at an expensive restaurant. The aunt ordered a glass of wine and encouraged her daughter to also order a drink—a major transgression—and the other family ended the engagement because they did not feel this was appropriate.

Usha says her family drinks, but explains that it “looked bad” that the daughter and mother would drink openly, saying, “[My relatives] don’t even believe drinking is a taboo. But it’s really bad this thing happened. The moment that [the boy] came to know this woman drinks and so does her mother, then he decided, ‘I don’t think she should have hidden this from me, that she liked drinking.’” Usha says that her aunt was “clueless” and did not do this on purpose, but just wanted to appear “fancy” because her friends order drinks when they go out. Now, Usha predicts that arranging another marriage will be difficult because “the cat is

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40 Hairstyle, for women, is a marked symbol in India of modernity and morality. A woman wearing her hair loose, also termed “open,” or cutting her hair short signals a “modern” attitude that is often seen as immoral.
out of the bag.” Trying to fit in socially with a higher class, signaled by “western” behavior such as wearing jeans and drinking alcohol, was morally taboo in this woman’s family context, and she was disciplined at the expense of her daughter. Because of harassment and more subtle moral regulation that involves classed ideas about tradition and modernity, class boundaries are difficult to change. Because she was seen to be “faking” her upper class ways within her family, she had no chance of passing.

III. Temporal liminality for migrant IT workers: “City culture” and the pain of stasis

Moving to Bangalore from smaller towns to work in entry-level IT jobs can present a particularly stark experience of temporal liminality for lower middle-class women. Like the dilemmas for other women in this project, these choices are framed in temporal terms that contrast “old” and “new” attitudes. Like other temporal contrasts, the “new” changes are presented as having both positive and negative outcomes that result in pressure on young women to choose correctly in timing an uncertain future. Yet here the stakes are different than for higher class women, as temporal liminality may mean a choice between a married life with children on the one hand, and working in Bangalore on the other, with little opportunity for formulating a life course that includes both. For these migrants, their sense of liminality is also spatial, as they no longer feel they fit in their hometowns yet also feel out of place in the city. The result is a sense of being suspended in time, waiting to find a “good” husband and to start a family, and to progress in jobs that allow little upward mobility. Because of the way class mediates access to new life options in Bangalore, I suggest that the expectations and disappointments for lower middle-class women structure a particularly acute experience of gendered temporal liminality.
Sunita’s story: Feeling temporally stalled, and the unfulfilled promises of IT

Sunita, twenty-five, moved to Bangalore three years ago from a small town in the nearby state of Andhra Pradesh for a job in entry-level software development. She lives in a women’s hostel with about forty other unmarried women, all Hindu, from the same region, and working mainly in IT. Sunita is small, reserved, and quietly confident. She wears *salwar kameez* sets with long *dupattas* every day, along with glass bangles, gold earrings, and her long hair in a tight black braid. She is more handsome than traditionally pretty but has a beautiful smile, although it took a while before she really began to smile when we spoke. She makes clucking noises to express frustration, rearranges her scarf continually, and likes to sit cross-legged on her bed in the hostel. She does not open up immediately, but gets excited when she talks about movies or friends, or when she is frustrated by her work. Her English is not as polished as that of Indians in the wealthier classes in Bangalore, and she speaks with her friends and many of her work colleagues in her native Telugu.

I met Sunita through one of her coworkers, and spent many evenings and one overnight with her and her friends Sunanda, Mrinalini, and Namya at their hostel in the last few months of my fieldwork. I also accompanied them on weekend trips to local shopping areas and to various Hindu temples in the city. I first arranged to meet Sunita at a small south Indian restaurant near her work for lunch. We texted back and forth to establish a place and time to meet, and when she finally saw me she confessed she was surprised, because she had thought I was Indian. She later told me I was the first foreigner she had met, and that if she had known she would have taken me to a more western place to eat such as McDonald’s, where she never goes. About a week later I visited her hostel in Mariwalla, a neighborhood known for women’s hostels, which is a typical Bangalorean urban mishmash. Sunita quietly led me from the mall where we met across a main road and “flyover,” or section of road elevated over a main intersection, on a fifteen-minute walk to the hostel. We passed small
shops that sold clothes, flowers, meat, and tall bamboo ladders, and I saw several Hindu temples. There were Muslims living in the neighborhood, evident from their dress, but I saw no mosques in the immediate area. We headed down a small lane with cows, dogs, and goats roaming, and some poor families out washing clothes. Sunita remarked that it was like a village, and seemed a little embarrassed. She stays in a tiny room in the hostel with three other women, single beds placed flush with each other so they take up almost the entire room.

Sunita works long hours at a mid-sized software company in another part of the city. While she normally takes the local bus to work, if she works late she says she takes the company shuttle home. Her normal bus commute is about forty minutes to an hour, but the shuttle can take two or three hours because they must stop at everyone’s home. When she is not traveling to her parents’ house for a visit, she spends her time outside work with her roommates and other female friends from the hostel, shopping in local markets or malls or visiting Hindu temples and collecting money for her friend Namya’s hometown temple. When in the hostel, Sunita and her friends watch Telugu “serials” (soap operas) or singing competitions on the hostel television as they eat together in the outdoor car park. When in their room, they watch Bollywood or Telugu movies on one of the laptops they bring home from work, message friends on their phones, and chat over tea and shared snacks.

Sunita is from a village of about three hundred houses that she says is nine hours by bus from Bangalore. Her grandfathers were farmers and her father is a rice merchant, while her grandmothers and her mother are housewives. All of her grandparents and her parents had arranged marriages within her community, which is a local Hindu dominant caste, and she thinks they have been happy. She grew up in a joint family with her paternal grandparents, parents, and two older brothers. One brother is now married, lives in the house with her parents and grandmother, and works with her father. Her other brother has an MBA degree but is working in the Telugu film industry in Hyderabad, which she views as a waste of his
degree. Because she had high marks in math in school, Sunita says she became interested in computer programming. She attended a local college and then earned a Masters in Computer Applications (MCA) degree in a small city near her home, and was then recruited by a software firm in Bangalore. She says out of at least forty people her age from her village, only she and one other girl are in cities and working, along with perhaps five boys. She told me with quiet pride about how, when she goes home, everyone gives her “good respect,” and that people in her village tell the young girls to be like her.

While her mother wanted her to get married after high school, Sunita’s father was the one who encouraged her to study further and to take the job in Bangalore. She says, “My father told [my mother] ‘No, she has to study, she has to stand on her own legs.’ It’s because of my father’s encouragement only.” She feels that education for women is necessary because of the uncertainty of arranged marriage, saying, “Maybe we will get a good guy, but we don’t know our future. Some guys I have seen, they beat their wives. Some guys, they don’t take anything seriously, they will roam and they don’t care about family. So ladies should know how to handle it. For that education is needed.” She says that if she earns her own money, she will also be protected in case something happens to her future husband. Further, she believes that men today want to marry women who work, because she thinks they want their wives to know more about the world in order to educate their children.

Sunita feels that she has changed since she moved to the city. She likes Bangalore because she says that because people speak so many different languages that people’s origins and caste are not as clear as they were in the village. When asked about the difference between Bangalore and her hometown, Sunita says that “city culture” is “more bold,” while “village culture” means that people pay more attention to propriety. She explains that in the village she could not talk to a boy, saying, “It’s a totally different culture. If you are talking to some boy, they say it’s bad character.” While everyone in her village and even the nearby
town knows her and her family, in the city she has much more freedom. She thinks that when people move to cities, “Their mindset changes. Their behavior changes.” To her, “boldness” means that people—especially women—are not afraid to interact with many different people, which is positive in a qualified way. She says, “We need it. We should be bold. But we should not only be bold, we should also be good. Good human beings.” She does not think “being bold” is negative necessarily but cautions that one should also have good values.

Sunita is ambivalent about what kind of interaction with men is appropriate. She feels that mixed-gender friendships are fine, especially in large groups. However, she cautions that women and men should not “roam together” if they do not intend to marry, because, “It’s better to think about the future.” Sunita is especially ambivalent about interacting with men in her office. In one conversation, at first she says, “In office I will be friendly with [men], maybe ‘Hi hi, bye bye.’ I don’t make any friendship with guys,” explaining she is from a “village culture” where “ladies should not talk much with guys.” However, she is aware that because of her education and job she is supposed to be more open-minded, and says, “I’m educated…. So if ladies are talking with gents, I don’t think it’s bad. We can talk but we should have limits.”

While Sunita says she can speak with men but cannot be friends or go on outings with them, she admits she goes on picnics, to temples, or to the mall with a group of female friends that occasionally includes male friends or relatives. In addition, she allows that she has a “joking relationship” with her male colleagues, as she is one of three women on a team of ten, saying her male coworkers make, “Simple jokes. The work environment is really nice.” They also have monthly team outings to celebrate birthdays, most often going out to lunch and once going bowling. While she says she never goes to pubs, she sounds a bit curious, saying she would go just to see what it is like. However, she quickly says she would only go with her future husband, saying “We don’t have a good of opinion on pubs,” so her
husband would provide “security.” She says that none of her women friends know about pubs because they also come from villages, saying she does not have any “city culture” friends.

In her postgraduate degree, Sunita had friends from many castes, and says, “We don’t have caste, not in software.” Yet she and her friends in the hostel want arranged marriages within their caste communities. They also do not often socialize across large caste differences, and they tell cautionary tales about inter-caste marriages. They were more comfortable talking about their caste than the wealthier women in the rest of this study, which makes sense, as caste is a more everyday part of their lives and it is not necessarily “in bad taste” to talk about caste. They have somewhat caste-diverse friend groups from college and work, but they live in a hostel where all of the women are from Andhra Pradesh, speak Telugu, and are mainly upper caste. They explain the homogeneity of their hostel by cuisine, saying that they needed to live somewhere that served familiar food from their region.

Although most of the women in the hostel were not Brahmin, many were vegetarian, and everyone had to agree to eat vegetarian food within the hostel, which signals a preference for upper-caste, Hindu residents. They did say there were a few lower caste women in the hostel who had gone to college through the reservation system and had joined software firms, so they were allowed to live in the hostel as long as they agreed to eat the food. Despite this homogenous living situation, they also felt that because there are not caste-based reservations in IT, caste was not much of a factor at work.

Wanting an arranged marriage within caste has made it difficult for Sunita to find a husband, which is the most intense point of stress in her life. Sunita says that although parents now can be “convinced” about love marriages, her parents want her to have an arranged marriage and she agrees that she would get along better with someone from the same background. However, her parents are having difficulty arranging a match for her in part because of high expectations for a groom. She says, “We need so many things,”
explaining that she and her parents want a groom who works in software as well, lives in Bangalore, is from the same caste, is from a good family, and is “good looking.” When I ask about what she would like her marriage to be like, Sunita says she would like to keep working, but perhaps as a programming teacher in a college which would allow more time for family. She feels women must work now because of the cost of living, saying, “Before in India you would see less ladies working. Nowadays most of them are working, in our generation. In future generations almost everyone will work, otherwise it’s difficult to survive.” She also thinks a husband should help around the house with cooking and children, and says, “Every wife is expecting that.”

However, Sunita is twenty-five, and her parents have already been searching for an acceptable arranged marriage for three years with no success. In recent communication I found out that, three years later, Sunita remains single and is working in the same software firm, after numerous attempts to arrange a marriage have not worked out. She has also not been promoted in her job, in part because lower middle-class Indians with imperfect English tend not to become managers, and there is a bias in many firms against giving young women responsibility because they are expected to leave when they marry. Further, she works in outsourcing, which means she is globally removed from many of the central conversations that drive her work, so workplace frustrations can only be endured and not altered.

“City culture,” morality, and the discomfort of not fitting in

Two of Sunita’s roommates, Sunanda and Mrinalini, narrate their ambivalence about the changes they have experienced after moving to the city. They do not feel they fit either at home or in the city, narrating a spatially liminal position by attempting to outline their position on morality. Sunanda, twenty-three, is from a small city and from a relatively high goldsmithing caste. Her father worked as a goldsmith, while her mother is a housewife. Her
father passed away a few years ago, so she is responsible for taking care of her mother and her younger sister. She earned her MCA degree and has been working in software development in Bangalore for about a year. She stresses that her female friends do not want to be housewives “staying idle” and that they all want to “see the culture of cities.” Sunanda feels that it is positive that women are working, so that they can, she says, “Live their lives and not depend on others,” which she qualifies by saying, “If they are thinking in positive way and believe in morals and ethics.” I ask if she feels she is different since moving to the city, and she says, “Yeah, I’ve learned a lot, seriously! Before I didn’t know anything. After I came into cities, only then I learned. Like [about] girls, how they can behave, how they can talk with many [people].” She says she has become more comfortable interacting with people she does not know, at work and in public, but she is concerned about other young women.

Sunanda worries about the freedom women have now, saying, “What happens is they completely destroy their lives. Completely.” By this, she explains that this means they have relationships that do not lead to marriage and ruin their chances for a future arranged marriage, which she folds into a larger lesson for women’s values. For example, she says women in the city lie to their parents about going out or about having boyfriends, which she sees as a mark of immorality that comes with living “individual lives.” However, she is ambivalent about whether the changes are all negative, saying, “Here their thinking is, ‘It’s a city culture. We are matured girls with matured minds, so we think for ourselves. No one can give suggestions.’ It is ok, good only. If we think somewhat good, it is good only.” Often using percentages to explain ideas, she qualifies this to say, “It is 30% good, but 70% it is not good. It changes their entire life.” Sunanda believes that women who move to cities become less obedient, saying, “Once they come to Bangalore, they will completely change. Once they come back home they say, ‘If you free the bird, how can it not fly?’”

Sunanda is concerned with maintaining her own moral respectability at work. She
believes that having male friends is acceptable, but a “boyfriend” is a different matter. She feels women should only speak “emotionally” with female friends or family, saying, “I’ll not share everything [with] boys. Just ‘Hi, how are you? How you are doing, how is your job, how are your parents? Anything personal I never share with boys. Girls I will share.” She does have male friends from college and work with whom she exchanges text messages, but she insists she is not interested in dating. Sunanda wants an arranged marriage and is saving money for her dowry,\(^1\) which her caste requires. She says that in the past everyone had arranged marriages, but now she says “70% of young people are in love.” However, she argues that most of these people will not marry the person they love, but instead, “Here in ‘city culture,’ it’s just for timepass.” This indicates that women also can practice “timepass,” or passing the time while waiting for something—in this case, marriage. Sunanda is just twenty-three and does want to marry yet, but says she wants her husband to have a “good job” and moreover, should have, “Totally good character. No drinking or smoking. Helping to others. Won’t irritate me or hurt other people.” She says she wants to work after marriage and after children, “until my death,” saying, “I like working.” Although she does not feel pressure yet to marry, and is as yet unconcerned about ensuring a good match, I worry about her finding a man to match her expectations.

Mrinalini, also twenty-three, articulates a definitive break between “old” attitudes in the village that contrast with “new” attitudes and behavior in the city, and the changes she herself has experienced in the year she has lived in Bangalore. Mrinalini is from a village of

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\(^1\) Dowry, or the giving of wealth from a bride’s family to her groom’s family, is an essential and routine part of marriage for most women in India despite its being outlawed by the state. Dowry has changed greatly in the past two centuries in part due to colonial laws, transforming from the practice of a bride’s family giving her portable wealth in the form of jewelry, to ensure her survival in case of disaster, to a required material transfer of cash, gold jewelry, and other valuables that can bankrupt a woman’s family or endanger her life if her family is unable to pay, even after marriage (Oldenburg 2002). However, in middle to upper-class urban society, it is seen as “bad taste” to speak openly of dowry, even though there may be an unspoken expectation of “gifts,” from washing machines to cars, given by the bride’s family at the time of the wedding. Because it is not appropriate to speak about it among these classes, dowry does not emerge in most of the marriage narratives in this project, with the exception of these urban migrants for whom dowry is an open and ongoing concern. Lower middle-class women who work before marriage often do so in order to provide for their own dowries.
just forty houses and is from a local dominant caste family. She has a quiet demeanor and is more hesitant about speaking in English. Her paternal grandfather was a rice farmer and her grandmother grew groundnuts, while her maternal grandfather did woodworking and her other grandmother made lunches for agricultural workers. Her parents are both from villages, and her father runs a travel booking business while her mother is a housewife. She has an accounting degree and works in outsourced auditing, while her brother is also in Bangalore and works as a software tester.

Mrinalini says that in her village she could not talk to boys publicly, but in the city she says, “Here there is no problem, you can go outside with somebody, with friends enjoying some time. That’s the thing that really changed.” She says when people move to cities, “Their mindset changes. Their behavior also changes.” She describes the “village mindset” by telling the story of her widowed aunt, who was married at thirteen and “came back,” or returned home, because her husband passed away after only two months. She says at that time a second marriage was not allowed, so her aunt lived her whole life in the family house in the village, never working outside the home, and Mrinalini’s father continues to support her financially. She says her aunt will never remarry because of her upbringing, saying, “That’s the village. They are born and brought up like that only. They can’t change that mindset.” In contrast, she says she believes widows should remarry and work.

Mrinalini says she has changed in the year since coming to Bangalore. At first she locates this change in the fact that she sometimes wears jeans and western style tops around the hostel, and not just the salwar kameez outfits she wears to work. She reflects, however, that the main changes have been in her thinking, saying she is, “Thinking more, about the future, my job, security, and that I can do something with money.” She has also changed her mind about women talking to men, saying, “Previously, I would say, ‘Why you are talking to boys?’ But now it’s common thing. We are friends with boys. What’s wrong with that?”
Mrinalini specifies that she would like to marry someone who is also working in IT and living in Bangalore, saying, “I’m not living in a small place. I’m living in cities only. All that changes.” She also wants a husband who has “good character,” especially because one of her sisters—who had an arranged marriage—is unhappy because her husband is continuing a previous relationship with an old girlfriend. She says she wants a husband who has not had previous girlfriends and is “caring,” someone who listens to his parents first and “after that only gives preference for me, for what I want.” She thinks love matches are “good,” but qualifies this by saying that it should be within caste for parental acceptance, without which she does not think a marriage can be happy. Her parents are searching for a groom, but she feels she has a say, explaining, “It’s marriage, so they are not taking ‘hurry-burry’ decisions. It depends upon me only. I have choice.” Mrinalini believes that after marriage her husband will support her, but she wants to keep working after marriage “just for timepass,” indicating that work has become part of her expected social and intellectual life. As for Sunita and Sunanda, I am hopeful but not optimistic that Mrinalini’s expectations can be met.

Namy’s story: Choosing to be single as one approach to temporal liminality

Namya, thirty-seven, offers an alternative to the above as-yet-unrealized dreams to blend a working life in Bangalore with marriage and family. Namya is Sunita’s close friend, who I met and talked with many times at the hostel. She is unmarried by choice, used to live in the hostel herself, and used to work in IT. She now works as a teacher and tutor, which she feels is her true calling, and lives in her own apartment. She is from a Brahmin family and grew up in a city of about a million people in Andhra Pradesh. Both her grandfathers were rural landlords and panchayat heads (village leaders), while her father is a development officer for the government and her mother is a housewife.

Namya says she would have married in her early twenties, but instead began working
in software. By the age of twenty-five, she says she had met so many people that she was worried she would not get along with a future husband. Instead, she decided to devote herself to a “spiritual path” instead of marrying.\footnote{Although less publicized than male ascetics, becoming an ascetic is an acceptable alternative path to having a family for women as well as men in India (Denton 2004). This practice is to be distinguished from the sensationalized history of devadasis or jogatis, women who ritually married deities and served as important spiritual practitioners and accomplished dancers and ritual artists. Since the colonial period these women have been cast as immoral and deprived of social and financial resources, and are still marginalized (Ramberg 2014).} She now teaches and raises money for the temple in her hometown, which is dedicated to a local goddess and is in the care of her family. She says her parents tried to argue with her decision not to marry, but because they were afraid she would not speak to them again if they tried to force her to marry, they eventually relented. I do not doubt her religious devotion, as I spent long sessions talking with her about the goddess and accompanied her and women from the hostel to local temples on several fundraising missions. However, I also came to understand that, given her class and religious background, her devotion is a socially appropriate way to stay single and maintain her independence. It is also the way she resolves the dilemma of temporal liminality, which her friends experience as contradictions in new expectations about marriage and work.

Namya says she has enjoyed moving to Bangalore because she has much more freedom than in her hometown. Because her father was a prominent citizen she could not socialize publicly, saying, “If I go and have a pani puri [an Indian snack] on the road, he wouldn’t like it because someone will say, ‘Your daughter is having pani puri on the road,’” indicating immoral character. She has grown to prefer the company of working women because she feels they are independent, saying “I’m not a girl who always wants my mom, my dad, or my friend with me. I can do anything I want myself.” She asserts that work has made a difference for women in terms of increasing their independence and respect within their families, saying, “Previously, a woman didn’t have respect. She was only dedicated to her family. But nowadays they think, ‘Yes, women can do everything, just like a guy.’ That change I really like a lot. I feel really good being independent in Bangalore.”
However, like the women above, Namya worries that women can misuse “city
culture.” She says that after women come to the “lonely life” in the city, some girls have
“passion” and will date men, but if they do not get married, “They will spoil their life. I have
seen a few of my girl friends in such a way.” Based on her own experience, Namya warns of
the dangers of working for women, as they might become too independent to adjust to
marriage. Namya’s grandmother married at fourteen, and mother at sixteen. She says it is
now possible for women to marry as late as thirty, but thinks the right age for women to
marry is eighteen to twenty-one, because, she says, by twenty-five a woman becomes “very
individual” and will have trouble adjusting to her in-laws. She says, somewhat ambiguously,
“Individuality is always good, but over individuality is never good.”

Like the other women living in the hostel, Namya appreciates the freedoms she has in
Bangalore. However, the dangers of living in the city and not being supervised are real,
especially for women who are not yet married. Beyond the danger of getting involved with a
man and being hurt, even spending too much time with male friends could get back to their
caste communities at home and affect their chances of arranging a marriage. The city changes
women in more subtle ways, however. Beyond becoming disobedient and dating, a woman
might become too independent to fit into the life she may have after marriage. Yet if these
women feel they do not fit in the past or present, in the village or the city, can they find
happiness? While they talk about these as dangers for other women they have seen, they are
also talking about their concerns for themselves.

Conclusions: Temporality, class, and the “feeling of structure”

In these stories about Maya, Ameena, Sunita, Namya, and the others, my purpose has
been to show the articulations of class, gender, and morality, and how working in new
industries like IT is not necessarily helping women find their way despite offering access to
new forms of capital and knowledge. Expectations and disappointment have a moral component that is specific to intersections of gender and class. According to your social location, how do you know what you can and cannot expect? How do expectations or disappointments express frustration or critique of norms and inequalities? These feelings are moral and also political.

Some women in this project feel they are losing the emotional closeness that women in the past found in kinship networks, while others indefinitely defer dreams of future career success. Others feel pressure to reconcile temporal contradictions through correctly timing their marriage. Sunita, however, is experiencing temporality as the pain of feeling temporally suspended. She is proud of being among the few women from her village to work in IT in Bangalore, yet this success has prevented her from fulfilling her other dream of marrying and having a family. Here, time appears out of joint—she may feel she has moved forward through her job, yet her personal life is stalled and perhaps even going backwards. In a time when so many women are told that education and work in a global industry like IT will give them better lives, we must question the results. These jobs help them financially and with power dynamics at home, and can offer professional and intellectual satisfaction. But in these stories I also hear a frustration with gendered temporal disjunctures shaped by cultures of overwork in locations of outsourcing where neoliberal fantasies are powerful.

Temporality and class interact in painful ways in the globalized world. Daily temporality and control over one’s time depends on class (Sharma 2014). In India, class and caste determine control over one’s time and body (Ray and Qayum 2009). It is important to see temporality as gendered as well as classed, because this structures emotions. Here, temporality provides a way to understand the “feeling of structure” within a site of global labor. But is there also pleasure to be found in contemporary Bangalore? I now turn to this question, as women negotiate temporal liminality by reconfiguring intimacy.
Chapter Six

Love, Sex, and Friendship:
New Possibilities for Pleasure, Intimacy, and Belonging in Bangalore

I think it’s this generation...It’s just so free nowadays. There are no boundaries, and everyone crosses that certain line. There’s so much temptation and intoxication. No one respects anything anymore…. There’s no sweetness left…. I think globalization plays a huge part in this…. We’ve ended up following a lot of things from the western culture. But the thing is we never pick up the good things…we just end up picking up the bad things.

--Aarti, twenty, college student

A lot of us are just caught in transition. We’re all just grappling with these new relationships that have come in because of the kind of exposure we have. So many people we meet. And it is so, so different from the way our parents were.

--Fatima, thirty-three, journalist working part-time from home

There is indeed room for pleasure in this new Bangalore, but perhaps not in the places one might think. The women I spoke with are finding some resolution to temporal disjunctures by occupying fragmented, provisional, and liminal spaces more fully, and by claiming them. They do this, I argue, through reformulating relationships with spouses, lovers, and especially friends, thus reframing the terms of intimacy and belonging. While they experience frustration in attempting to rewrite familiar scripts of power in romantic and sexual relationships, they seem to find unexpected intimacy and the freedom to imagine new life courses in friendships. That is why I focus here on friendship, a relatively neglected relationship in anthropology, because it provides a particularly productive lens for understanding temporality and belonging in Bangalore.

Much of the scholarly literature on friendship comes from psychological approaches that identify it with a western sense of middle-class individuality, privacy, and choice associated with modernity and liberalism (Adams and Allan 1998; Allan 1989, 1996; Bliezner and Adams 1992; Duck 1983; Giddens 1992; Moffatt 1989; Paine 1969). There has
been less attention to friendship as social practice, and still less to its variation and complexity. Since the reflexive turn in the 1980s, anthropologists have paid closer attention to their own friendships in the field and to their assumptions about “western” ideas of friendship (Grindal and Salamone 2006; Rabinow 1977). However, kinship overshadows friendship in anthropological work. Anthropologists have described “fictive” kin, as in the Latin American category of godparents or *compadrazgo* (Mintz and Wolf 1968; Pitt-Rivers 1973; Wolf 1966), “blood brotherhood” in Africa (Evans-Pritchard 1940), or “ceremonial friendship” in Amazonian societies (Viveiros de Castro 1996), and have studied alliance building through reciprocity and gift-giving (Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1990 [1950]).

Since David Schneider’s (1980, 1984) critique of American kinship, anthropologists have treated kinship as socially constructed, as in Marilyn Strathern’s theory of the “partible” person in Melanesia as constructed from social relationships (Strathern 1990: 85), or the concept of “relatedness” that addresses how people see themselves connected with others (Carsten 2000, 2004). As most people distinguish kin from friends, both are important but different ways of describing identity and belonging. For example, Kath Weston finds that families are considered “chosen” in gay and lesbian communities in San Francisco, yet also finds some agreement with the saying, “‘You can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your relatives’” (Weston 1997: 8).

Many western models of friendship see friendship as more voluntary and flexible, while kinship is thought be more ascribed and constraining (Bell and Coleman 1999: 6). A related question is whether friendship requires rough equality in status, or if it can exist in more “instrumental” or unequal relationships. Aristotle’s famous definition of friendship valorizes “genuine” friendship between men of equal status, as opposed to forms of friendship based on mutual utility or pleasure (Aristotle 1975; in Doyle and Smith 2002). James Carrier distinguishes between “co-workers, kin, patrons and clients” and friends who
are “the unconstrained people who come to feel spontaneous affection for, and so befriend, each other. To speak of friendship, then, is to speak of people as responding to an internal spring of motive, their sentiments” (Carrier 1999: 21). This modern self is grounded in 18\textsuperscript{th} century capitalism, which freed the upper classes from some of the interpersonal obligations previously required for survival, and allowed (male) members of “polite society” to become friends based on mutual sentiment (Carrier 1999: 26; see also Silver 1990).

While I agree that different cultures have different notions of personhood and self, and that an idea of a free individual has become associated with modernity and the west, I disagree that any person is free from social ties or obligations in practice, nor do I think friendship or any social relationship is free of power dynamics. Several anthropological approaches have questioned the idea of friendship as western and individual, finding non-western conceptions of autonomous selves in other places, as with the Mapuche in Chile (Course 2010), and have questioned the idea that western people think of themselves as individuals, as among friends in London (Evans 2010). The idea of voluntarism has also been critiqued, showing friends to be enmeshed in power dynamics even if they claim free choice (Cohen 1961; Killick 2010; Obeid 2010: 104).

The idea that friends are usually of equal status, however, is supported in most of the ethnographic literature (Desai and Killick 2010: 12-13). Employers and employees may be friends, but the relationship is hierarchical and more often it is co-workers of equal status that form friendships (Rezende 1999). Categories of kinship and friendship are particularly fraught for domestic servants and their employers. In Brazil, maids and employers both use a rhetoric of hoped-for friendship and female solidarity to imagine their ideal servant or employer who would, but rarely does, bridge gaps of class and race (Rezende 1999). In India, servants are often described in kinship terms, especially those who stay with families for more than one generation. However, it is a relationship of power that allows the upper classes
to define themselves as modern through performing a responsibility for managing lower class domestic servants (Ray and Qayum 2009: 2; see also Kumar 2006; Umrigar 2005).

Gender ideologies and relationships fundamentally shape friendships. If friendships form mainly between equals, what are men and women to each other? In kinship terms men and women are paired opposites, and romantic attachment and marriage can threaten same-sex friendships. However, in ideologies of romantic love and companionate marriage, lovers or spouses are supposed to be friends. Sexuality, romance, and friendship also blur into each other. The separation of friend and lover is made socially clear in statements such as, “We’re just friends.” When declared to inquiring friends or family this statement may in fact hide a romantic relationship, but when used between lovers, “Let’s just be friends” means that the relationship is over. Close same-sex relationships, which may be sexual, develop in situations of sex segregation, as in single-sex boarding schools (Du Bois 1974: 28), among women in 19th century America (Smith-Rosenberg 1975), or between women in an Indian joint family (Mehta 1996; Natarajan 2000). Friends may also be hopeful lovers.

Certain spaces facilitate friendships, especially schooling or the workplace (Bukowski et al. 1996; Reed-Danahay 1999), while social media has introduced a new rhetoric of “friending” and new forms of socializing online (Boellstorff 2008; McClard and Anderson 2008). Social change can also alter definitions of friendship and kinship. In an urbanizing Sunni Muslim Lebanese village, for example, Michelle Obeid (2010) finds that violence in the region led to new neighborhoods that mixed kinship lineages and created new friendships. Lila Abu-Lughod defines the Arabic term ‘ishra as “the bond of living together or sharing a life” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 63), and finds that among Bedouins she worked with in Egypt, it refers only to matrikin or co-residents. However, Obeid finds that in the neighborhood she studied in Lebanon, ‘ishra described wider bonds that encompass non-kin (Obeid 2010: 104).

In sex-segregated societies, anthropologists have focused on male friendships in the
public sphere and have often missed women’s friendships altogether (Du Bois 1974: 27) or theorized that they disappear after marriage (Leyton 1974). However, while women’s adult friendships may be more hidden they are very much present, even in sex-segregated settings as Andalusia (Uhl 1991) or Crete (Kennedy 1986), where women visit in homes while men gather in coffee shops. In rural Auvergne, while cafés remain male spaces and shops female spaces, men and women socialize together at communal dances or school meetings (Reed-Danahay 1999: 148).

While friendship is not “modern,” new regimes of capitalist labor and spaces of consumption are facilitating friendships in new ways. The phenomenon of an “extended childhood” for professionals in their twenties that allows a period of dating and consumption before marriage is becoming more common in many places, as in middle-class Taiwan where marriage is imagined as an institution with outdated gender relationships (Adrian 2003). In Iran, mixed-gender friendships are forming in a new private sphere similar to the situation in Bangalore. While the Iranian public sphere and often the familial sphere are sex-segregated and conservative in terms of women’s behavior, mixed-gender friend groups are socializing in house parties where women wear less conservative clothing and can smoke, drink, and socialize without fear of retribution (Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2009).

Friendship in India is most often related to kinship with the added complication of caste, although people from the same village can form long-lasting friendships that cut across caste (Froerer 2010). Several anthropologists have looked at cases of “ritual” or “ceremonial” friendship in India, which facilitates a cross-caste alliance (Desai 2010; Jay 1973). Within Indian families, there are particular forms of joking, platonic relationships, such as between a new wife in the family and younger brothers (Mandelbaum 1970: 88; 1986), or between parallel cousins in south Indian families, while romantic flirting between cross cousins in south India is tolerated and even encouraged as they may marry someday.
Recent studies of youth friendships in South Asia have focused on male friendships, finding a delayed adulthood for young men as they wait to pass exams or find a job before marriage (Jeffrey 2010; Liechty 2003; Lukose 2009; Nisbett 2007; Osella and Osella 1998). Women’s friendships, historically hidden in domestic spaces, are becoming more visible in Bangalore through women coworkers having lunch together, going shopping, or going out together in “ladies’ nights.” Yet mixed-gender friend groups are most common in middle-class Bangalore, as cross-gender friendships form in coed schools or in the workplace. These groups provide companionship, safety, and cover for dating relationships. However, before discussing friendship, it is important to explore the main location for women’s aspirations and disappointments regarding intimacy: in romantic and sexual relationships.

Aarti’s story: Feeling lost about relationships and commitment

Aarti, twenty and in college, links globalization to her perception that young Indians are no longer taking relationships or romance seriously. From an upper middle-class family in Bangalore, Aarti has disheveled long hair and wears jeans and a tank top with an overflowing shoulder bag to our interview. Her story shows how confusing intimacy can be for Indian women coming of age in an uncertain world. Overall, she thinks that things are better for women in India today as compared to the past, which she characterizes by arranged marriages and child brides, saying that not being able to choose your own spouse was “not that great.” However, she is ambivalent about whether love marriage is better than arranged marriage, saying, “I really don’t know which is better. I mean, now you get to choose it by yourself, but then what if it doesn’t work out and then you get a divorce? I don’t know. Both are pretty bad.” She says her grandmother had an arranged marriage spent her life taking care of her husband and son, but seems happy, saying, “I never heard her complaining or anything. I’m sure she was happy. Maybe you can love somebody after getting married. Maybe.”
She seems to have little faith in relationships working out. Her sister is twelve years older, and is married with a child. Aarti feels that her generation does not understand commitment, as opposed to her sister’s generation, saying:

I think it’s this generation, you know? It’s just so free nowadays. There are no boundaries, and everyone crosses that line. There’s so much temptation and intoxication. No one respects anything anymore. Because everyone thinks it’s just, “Whatever. You can just move on.” There’s no sweetness left, it’s just all…sad. Before, it used to be, like, “Your one true soulmate,” and you’re supposed to be with that one person and all that. Now…it just doesn’t matter.

She blames globalization and “western culture,” but says, “I think globalization plays a huge part in this…. Due to globalization, TV and movies and stuff, we’ve ended up following a lot of things from the western culture. But we never pick up the good things…we just pick up the bad things.” For Aarti, dating different people without a sense of having a soulmate, and forgoing love or “sweetness,” is not a positive adoption of perceived western attitudes, even if there are other aspects of western culture that might be positive.

Aarti feels that her sister and her sister’s friends were more serious about dating and romance, and are therefore happier. She says, “Definitely there’s been a change. They did everything. They drank, they smoked, they snuck out, they did drugs, and they hooked up and went around, whatever. But they still kind of realized what their priorities were, with love and marriage.” In contrast, she feels her generation does not have a sense of “priorities.” She gives the example of a guy friend who drinks every day and flunked out of college, saying, “The priorities are no more. They’re just haphazard. There’s no system. They’re not confused, they’re just out of control. It’s just taken a huge leap from what it was to what it is now.” She says that today, while the idea of “over the top” romance is encouraged in Bollywood films, the men in her generation are “not that into romance” and would rather “hook up without strings attached.” Overall, while her generation is more tolerant of dating, living together, premarital sex, homosexuality, and experimentation with drugs, she worries they have also “lost track” in many ways because of the sudden lack of rules.
However, when it comes to her own relationship, Aarti reveals her hopeful side. She insists she cannot have a fling with no emotional attachment and so is serious about her current boyfriend, who she has been dating for five months. She says, cautiously, “I’m not going to jinx it, I’m not going to say anything… but I hope it works out.” I ask what she is looking for in a partner, and she talks about emotional intimacy, saying, “Understanding, because I’m a little hard to handle. So really understanding, and funny, and loving, and just really sweet. Someone who’d just always be there for me no matter what, and love me unconditionally.” She thinks she started dating too young, at age fourteen, and by the time she entered college she had never been single. She decided to stay single for a year, because she felt she needed time for “self discovery,” saying she felt she was “always dependent on a guy” and needed to learn to depend on herself. She says this has helped her overcome insecurity, saying, “I just need someone to always love me. I don’t know why, I can never love myself. But I realized that. I mean, I’m trying not to need it.” She says she feels more independent in her current relationship. However, her hopeful search for understanding and unconditional love, along with her skepticism about her generation being able to commit, make me question whether she will find the intimacy and stability she is searching for.

I. Sex, power, and attempting to reframe the meaning of intimacy

Women in Bangalore are searching for new definitions of intimacy, even as they worry relationships have lost a sense of commitment as compared to the past. Sex is a particularly difficult subject for women in India, but they are questioning received views about it to an extent. Female sexuality in India has been shaped by discourses from the nation-state, as Jyoti Puri notes, such that, “Anything outside of marital sexual intercourse characterized by love and understanding is placed outside the domain of ’normal/respectable sex’” (Puri 1999: 37). In her ethnography of sexual discourse in Mumbai, Puri finds a
proliferation of narratives from middle-class women in Mumbai about desire and pleasure that are structured by normative marital heterosexuality, yet also provide women with ways to challenge these norms. In a related question, in the introduction to the edited volume *A Question of Silence?* (1998a), Mary John and Janaki Nair ask about contemporary India, “What aspects of our received knowledges of male sexual aggression and female suffering are deepened, what must be thought anew?” (John and Nair 1998a: 38).

Nearly two decades after these important volumes, talking about sex in many settings in urban India no longer feels taboo, but the question remains: can ideologies shift such that women can find pleasure and empowerment in sexuality? Sexual freedom for women in India has been circumscribed as a matter of familial pride, such that, “A woman in search of unconstrained fun, who transgresses socially acceptable boundaries, is perceived to be at best stupid and at worst, morally reprehensible” (Phadke et al. 2011: 113). While this “fun” is not necessarily sexual, and in the above case refers to women spending time together in public spaces and spaces of consumption, the idea of women experiencing pleasure—especially sexual—is an uncomfortable idea in India. In Bangalore, attempts to question received sexual power dynamics or sex within normative marital heterosexuality must address these questions about femininity, pleasure, and desire.

**Smriti’s story: Questionable reframings of sex and power**

In Bangalore, many women expressed to me a sense of frustration that older social “rules” about women not having sex until they are engaged or married are not changing in pace with other social changes. Smriti, a thirty-five-year-old businesswoman, does not want to marry but has a serious boyfriend. She believes that many women in India have an attitude of “sex negativity.” When I ask her define this phrase, she says, “I think sex negativity, to me, is seeing sexuality as dirty, wrong, shameful, rotten, and bad. Particularly in respect to
women, there’s a lot more of that. Men will be disgusting creeps but women should just want to have babies and families. And not enjoy sex.” She remembers her mother telling her, when one of her friend’s mothers passed away, that men often remarry quickly because, “They need to have sex… Men want it more frequently and more urgently.” However, her mother went on to explain that when a woman does finally want to have sex, women get much more turned on than men, an aside that has stayed with Smriti. While this shows women have a complex understanding of sexuality no matter the generation, Smriti argues that the norm in India is still to assume a monogamous, marital relationship, and premarital sex still follows established gendered power dynamics.

While Smriti feels that in “certain circles,” meaning for some upper middle-class women in Bangalore, it’s becoming “cool” to say you enjoy sex, she questions whether this extends to positive body image or the concept of having multiple partners. She says, “I still think it’s very monogamous implied…. They’re still good girls who like to have sex. So I don’t think it changes the very essence of sex positivity in that sense.” Smriti feels that sex drives the nature of relationships in India because there is a lot of value placed on women not having sex, and if they have sex with a man they think he has to do certain things, such as marry them. She says, “Women don’t do it for so long because they want to control the guy.”

Smriti explains that there is a lot of pride women feel in being a “tease,” saying, “I think there’s some price put on holding out.” She thinks this has to do with retaining power, saying, “There’s an idea that if you’ve had sex, you’ve given away, or you’ve relinquished your power…. So, for me, sometimes guys get confused when I don’t feel like I’ve given away my power when I’ve had sex…. [The guy is like] ‘What?’ They’re still transacting in that language.” She is frustrated when her female friends are devastated after sleeping with their boyfriend and suddenly being treated badly. She argues that instead it is the man’s responsibility to develop a relationship that includes sex and is not based on conquest,
pointing out that it usually takes a couple time to learn how to please each other.

Smriti worries that sexual power dynamics in India come from men thinking about women as a prize, which makes sex into a prize. She notes that many men in India divide women into two camps, having a woman on the side who they have sex with, and then a virgin who, Smriti says, they treat like a “goddess being who they adore and adulate.” She speculates that only a third of women in India will admit they like sex, and almost all of them will be “surface-level liberated, pretending to be modern,” but cannot actually handle the power dynamics in sexual relationships. She says these women fall back into stereotypical ways of dealing with men, or they feel bad about it, saying, “Nobody seems to really empower themselves or take back that power.”

Smriti finds it frustrating to see her friends fall into this trap, saying, “Even with your close friends, you feel like you’re on the same page, and suddenly you’re seeing them destroyed by some a**hole…. If it’s just because of these man-woman sexual roles, it’s just really sad. It’s so old by now…. There are so many ways of hurting each other. Why are we picking the same old routine?” These power dynamics are at the heart of debates about gender and morality in Bangalore at this time, with some women pushing for new definitions of what constitutes a powerful woman. Part of this redefinition is also about women having healthy sexual relationships when they are not married, so women do not feel that they must trade sex only for the promise of a long-term commitment.

**Talking about sex, desire, and stability**

Middle and upper class women in Bangalore feel they are talking about sex more openly than did women in the past, but, like Smriti, they debate whether the gendered power dynamics surrounding sex are actually changing. One woman notes that the Indian version of the magazine *Cosmopolitan* has been in India for many years, and she feels that its articles
about sex and how women can enjoy sex more have changed opinions in Indian society. She thinks, though, that women want to enjoy sex and have talked about it in intimate settings for generations, but within a marital context. For example, when she was first married about ten years before, her sisters-in-law talked with her about orgasms and told her, “It’s a must. Women must have that.” She speculates that these attitudes have been present in “well-educated kinds of households” for some time in India.

There have, however, been some changes in spoken attitudes towards sex in the past ten years. Another woman, also married, talks about how she discusses sex openly with her friends, noting that, “Earlier it was much more hush-hush.” Shanti agrees, saying that she can talk more openly with her female friends about formerly taboo topics like sex than in previous generations, while her teenaged daughter is more open still. She feels that a good relationship rests on the man sharing everything but the woman holding something back, saying, “Women will never tell a man everything…. Women always have secrets.” She says that, however, women tell their female friends everything, even about their sex lives, which was not the case in previous generations, saying, “I think here [in India] sex was never spoken about for a very long time. It was taboo…. I cannot imagine my mother ever mentioning a word to anyone. Our generation, that’s normal for us.” However, she says that things are different for her daughter’s generation, saying, “They talk about everything…the girls feel open about discussing the size of their boobs with guy friends. Sometimes she shocks me when she tells me something like this. And she’s like, ‘Mama it’s cool. We don’t have these problems.’” This implies that the younger generation of women views not talking openly about sex, even with male friends, as old-fashioned.

However, I heard a lot of debate about whether attitudes about women and sex are “really” changing. Usha, for one, feels that men do not mind sleeping around, but still want their wife to be a virgin. She worries that many women still view sex negatively and are
given the message that they should not enjoy it. She illustrates this point with a story about her friend, who has a love marriage, and recently came to her and confided that her husband had told her that she should not enjoy sex as much as she did. Usha says she was surprised such a “modern” guy would question this aspect of his wife. She says, “She’s pretty, she’s got a good body and she can manage a household. She’s very talented. I don’t understand this guy saying this. And this guy’s pretty modern, he’s a hostel guy, he’s never stayed at home, he’s had girlfriends.” She worries that he’s seeing someone else, or that maybe he does not like sex with her friend, as she feels it is rare for a man to think a woman enjoys sex too much. I feel, however, that he may hold the view that women—his wife, in particular—should see sex negatively. This story indicates to me that women have an expectation that “modern” men should expect women to enjoy sex, and shows the disappointment and sense of shame when actual men’s attitudes differ from the expectation.

When married couples have difficulties, many women observe that instead of going to counseling or trying to be more intimate with their spouse, their friends share with someone else of the opposite sex. Shanti, for example, finds that for some colleagues at work who are married, a close relationship with someone else that may or may not be physical often works for them. She is forty-five and has chosen to stay single after her husband passed away, saying, “I think it’s the married people who are having flings because they have a husband or a wife to go back to, versus the singles who go back to an empty house.” She adds that she would never be able to see a married man because it would be too damaging to her ego, although married men are the ones who tend to pursue her. Likewise, another married woman describes how some of her friends have found “additional relationships” at work, saying, “One friend is excited about going to work every day…. She’s not terribly unhappy with her husband, she just gets bored of her life…. I can understand that, because marriage can be tough.” She says her friend sees it as finding a new friend she can open up to, and feels it
adds to her life rather than taking away from her marriage. However, some women appreciate the stability of marriage despite its difficulties and possibility of a lackluster sex life. Anjum, married with one child, says that marriage is more work than she expected, saying, “There are so many things that nobody tells you about being married.” She feels that many young adults in India, including herself, are like “grown up children” because they live with their parents, yet notes that living alone is not like taking care of a family after marriage either. She worries that the passion she and her husband once felt for each other has faded. However, she explains that she likes the stability of her husband, as “an emotionally steady person,” and of marriage in general, saying, “What is really nice is that feeling of stability, just knowing that there’s this person.... It’s really reassuring to have a person.” From concerns about commitment and emotional intimacy, to anxieties about sex without commitment, to searching for emotional connection within or outside a marriage, women in Bangalore are asking questions about the relationship between sex, commitment, and intimacy. In this context, the condition of temporal liminality allows for new opportunities in relationships, and for the potential to rewrite some of the received social rules about intimacy.

II. Women’s friendships in Bangalore: Generational changes

Much of the literature on women’s lives in India does not focus on friendship specifically. Many studies describe close ties between women in joint families (Seymour 1999; Trawick 1990), among unrelated women in religious organizations (Hancock 1999; Wadley 2014b), or between neighbors (Mankekar 1999; Ring 2006). These women provide emotional and material support to each other, especially during times of family crises, and pass the time with each other as they are home with children much of the day, but we do not learn much about the meaning of these friendships in their lives as a whole. In new spaces of
globalized labor, women have new kinds of social lives with coworkers and new concerns to discuss with them. Caitrin Lynch (2007) describes female garment workers in Sri Lanka taking trips and attending weddings together, as they had access to money and companions that allowed socializing beyond the family in a way housewives did not. In call centers in Mumbai, Reena Patel (2010) finds that women form friendships, sometimes across class lines, that provide support for unconventional life choices that their parents opposed, such as dropping out of college to work in the call center or marry someone outside their community. In my fieldwork, friendship emerged as a central aspect of temporal identity and possibility.

In many cases in India, lines of kinship and friendship blur, as certain family members can become close friends, or parents’ friends can become family. The terms “friend,” “cousin,” “aunt,” “uncle,” or “sibling,” in various Indian languages, are meaningful as signals of special closeness. One woman explains that her mother’s closest friend is a distant relative, but because she is so close with the relative’s daughter, she calls her a cousin. Another woman says that because she is so close with her cousin, “She’s more a friend than a cousin,” while another describes her cousins as so close they are “like siblings.” Unrelated friends can also become like family, particularly in the next generation. One woman says that she thought of her parents’ friends from college as family, saying, “We called everybody auntie and uncle. But the Indian names are more endearing, I’d call them chacha chachi, the best friends of my parents.” Another feels that her grandmother’s closest friends came from her family, saying, “She has a very rich social life in which her cousins and her sisters-in-law…also play the role of friends. It’s not just the tie of family out of obligation.”

Friendships in past generations can also be characterized as more like family—and thus, having a special closeness—as compared to friendships today. One woman describes her grandmother’s friends as family, and feels this kind of closeness is not found in her own friendships. Her grandmother’s friends are other married women from the same town in
Punjab, from the same religious and caste community. This woman went with her grandmother and friends once on pilgrimage, to visit the Gudewara in Punjab, and says:

They were more like family to her than friends. I mean they relied on each other for everything, support, emotional, financial, everything. And they were really close. It’s something that you don’t see in today’s time, things have just changed so much. Things have become much more superficial. I feel like friendships aren’t based on the same things that they were back then. They somehow accepted each other more readily than people accept others today. Maybe when it came to religion there were those barriers, but among a community they were more like family, which is hard to see these days. In fact for a long time I actually thought that [my grandmother’s friends] were extended family because of how close they seemed. But one day when I was talking to my dad, he told me that they are just really close friends because they grew up together. And they’ve stayed in contact with each other through everything. That’s a long-lasting relationship that you can’t exactly find.

Her grandmother’s friends were all from the same area and socioeconomic background, and the same community and caste. Yet inside this group, they seemed accepting and supportive of each other in a way that is described as “like family.” I find it particularly significant that this woman feels her grandmother’s friends were more like family because they were less “superficial” than people are today, implying a depth of connection she would like for herself. As women discuss changes in friendship over generations, they are also talking about the kind of intimacy they value, and how they think about belonging.

Changes in friendships as signaling generational change

Older women in their sixties and seventies described their friendships changing over time and becoming even more important than family. They also talk about friendships as different for them versus the previous and the next generation. Kavita, for example, told me that her mother spent time only with family because she lived in a joint family, and left the house only for family functions. Kavita, however, goes out with her friends in Bangalore, saying, “[My mother] never used to go separately with friends…. Not like us. I have my own circle of friends. I go out with them for movies. I go out for a walk.” She met her current “best friend” ten years ago through a neighborhood elder center, and says they get along
because they’re from the same community in south India. She says she used to value family over friends, but says, “I feel friends are more important now.” Deepa, on the other hand, feels that the quality of friendships has changed between her and her daughter’s generation, which she perceives as having an intimacy that is more western. She says she did not share personal things with her friends growing up, “like in the west,” but explains that her daughter shared her dilemmas and dreams with her friends, both girls and boys, in a way she did not.

Alka and Devika, who are mother and daughter, articulate their perspective on generational change through friendships as well. Alka says she had no friends when she first got married, but when she moved to Bangalore and Devika was young, she met a friend who became her business partner, which was, she says, “A turning point in my life.” Through her friend, Alka met other friends and learned to network for her small business, saying she now has ten to twelve groups of friends who are not connected to each other, along with three, “Close friends who I’m in touch with every single day of my life.” Interestingly, Devika, says that if she were to compare herself to her mother’s generation, she thinks that their friends are more from family or their husband’s connections, while Devika’s friends come from her own activities, whereas Alka sees things somewhat differently. Devika says:

Generationally, yes, there is a big transition. Absolutely. Because people…around my mom’s age…they tend to have friends but they completely lose touch. They get married and they go elsewhere and their husbands’ friends and their wives become their friends…. Most of their current friends are either their own family, cousins, sisters or brothers…or their husbands’ friends’ wives. Those tend to be their friends. But I think with us it’s an understood thing that…we have our own friends. We don’t have to rely on anyone else to be making friends. I think all of us are pretty particular about the fact that we have our friends and will always have them. No matter what comes in the way, we’ll still have that. So generationally, yes, there is a big difference in terms of what it used to be and what it is now.

Devika’s friends are from her childhood and she positions them as long-term, “no matter what,” while she describes her mother’s generation’s friends as more transitional and dependent upon other people. Alka, however, describes more of an evolution in her friendships that has followed the course of her life and the way she has grown as a person.
The way Devika talks about her friendships is important, however, because she articulates a sense of independence through her friendships that she uses to distinguish herself from the past. She argues that women in her mother’s generation had to check with their husband’s schedule before seeing friends, but she and her friends meet whether they are married or have children. She says she prioritizes her friends, “In a selfish way…. I say, ‘I’m going to meet my friends for lunch,’” regardless of what else is happening.

In a similar way, Usha, whose family is in Mumbai, describes her mother and grandmother as socializing mainly with family. She says it has taken her mother some time to understand her friendships in Bangalore, who she describes as her “family in the city.” Usha thinks her grandmother did not have friends because she had so many siblings and always lived in a joint family. Similarly her mother, she says, “Has not been exposed to friendship at all…. So she did not understand my friend circle. She would say, ‘Why are you out with friends always…why don’t you want to spend time with family?’” However, Usha says, “I told her very clearly that here I don’t have a family, so my friends are my family.” This strategy, of talking about one’s friends as family to help the older generation understand their relationship, illustrates how younger women see generational differences.

Smriti clearly articulates the change she sees in the past three generations in her family through friendships. She says, “My grandmother’s generation, it seems like their friendships with other women were only relative-based, because that was their main social structure…. Whatever stories I hear, it’s about relatives, extended relatives, her relatives, his relatives.” Her mother had friends outside the family, but from their same caste and language community, and Smriti still feels family came first, saying:

Now my mom’s generation…her closest friends are still from the community, so they’re all similar. They do fun things, they take off and go on trips. But I feel that, while she values them greatly and while they share a lot of troubles and joys, family is the top priority. They understand that about each other. If somebody completely blows you off for something that came up with their family, however minor it might seem, they absolutely understand because that’s their value system.
In contrast, Smriti has many friends outside the family from diverse backgrounds, because of work and her social activities in Bangalore. She makes a distinction in friendships not just in terms of the social circles available—family for her grandmother, the caste community for her mother—but in terms of priorities. By arguing that past generations have prioritized family over friends, she indicates that she places more importance on friends.

The urban migrants from Andhra Pradesh also saw changes in friendships as compared to previous generations. Sunita says her mother did not have friends, “Like we say we have friends or best friends now,” but instead is closest with her sisters even though they are married and live several hours away by bus. She says her mother and aunts used to talk occasionally on the landline when she was growing up, but now they all have mobiles so they talk more often. Mrinalini, whose mother is “from the village,” had trouble understanding her friends in Bangalore, but has visited and now understands that she has many friends, including men. Mrinalini says:

I have college friends, work friends and all. Previously my mom never liked all those things. But when she’s staying with me she can understand. Now she’s thinking, “It’s practical.” She’s changing…. Talking in front of others, she never liked that in her village. But now she sees it’s a common thing.

The transition from the village to the city makes generational contrasts even more evident, but Sunita and Mrinalini also see the idea of friendship itself as distinguishing their generation from the past.

Phones and social media are helping friends stay in touch now, especially for older women who lost touch with school friends after marriage. One woman her in her fifties says that it is easier to be in touch with her old friends, saying, “Today I’m in touch with my entire class from school and college, but that’s all thanks to Facebook now.” Another younger woman describes how her mother was close to friends in college and that they would exchange letters after they were married, but these friendships faded due to lack of
communication. However, her mother recently got back in touch with her old friends by finding their telephone numbers, and they now talk on their mobiles frequently. Social media also helps younger women stay close to their friend groups given their busy lives. Lakshmi says that even her close friend group, who meets in person often, “Because of Facebook it’s just easier to keep track of what everyone is doing.” She noted, however, that seeing her friends’ activities online means that it feels less urgent to meet, and she has to remind herself that what she sees online does not actually tell her how her friends are doing emotionally.

While the younger generation may use social media and are enmeshed in the politics of “friending” people online, they also value the depth that comes from sharing in person. I often heard complaints from older women about how, because peoples’ lives are so busy, they now must call ahead to visit instead of just dropping in, as was their custom years ago. They describe networks of women in apartment buildings or neighborhoods for whom homes were open social spaces during the day as they visited each other, with or without their children. Perhaps in an era that includes middle and upper-class women in Bangalore having expanded social circles and occupying different spaces outside the home, they also must consciously choose to see their friends, and thus frame friendship as a priority.

**Friendship, marriage, and fears of losing the self**

The women I spoke to expected their husbands to also be their friends, echoing expectations about companionate marriage elsewhere. As one woman argues about marriage, “[Women] want someone they can talk to. They want someone they can bond with about everything. Friendship has become more important. Great friends lead to great marriages.” However, younger women talked about friendship as important to their identity especially after marriage, and spoke of anxieties about “losing themselves.” Maintaining friendships after marriage is thus a significant marker of generational change, while, the degree to which
husbands restrict their wives’ visiting friends is a signal of the progressiveness or equality of their marriage. Alka describes how early on in her marriage, it was hard to see friends because her husband did not like her going out alone. She visited one friend, however, who could not leave the house because she had young children and no help at home. She says her husband got used to this after some time, and she says, “I would go, buy my groceries, and visit her and have a cup of tea, then come home in time for my husband to eat lunch. So he wouldn’t mind. He knew what I was doing, no? And after some time he stopped asking me where [I was].” Another younger woman describes how many of her friends have to “take permission” from their husbands to go out with friends, while she feels lucky to have a “supportive” husband who does not mind her maintaining a social life.

Friendship is, in fact, an important marker of how a woman changes after marriage. Usha is particularly close to one friend because she does not feel judged by her, saying, “Even if I’m doing something wrong she is not a person who will tell me not to…. She’ll just give me an alternative and let me make a decision. So I get this liberty to decide what’s right for me. Not right for the world, but right for me.” She admires her friend for not changing after marriage, explaining that many of the married women she knows have embraced a “Hindu way of depicting marriage,” including wearing a mangalsutra, the gold necklace Hindu women typically wear when they get married, dressing more conservatively, and not going out with female friends as much. Usha says if she sees her friend with her husband it’s “like they’re still dating,” and while her friend’s husband does not drink or smoke, her friend does both openly. As her friend works in public relations, she has an extensive friend network, attends parties, and travels alone, both for work and for holidays with female friends, such as coming to visit Usha for a week by herself. Her in-laws are also “progressive,” which Usha explains is crucial because in typical families, “Usually they’d be like, ‘Why are you going alone? Go with your husband.’” Usha describes her friend as a
woman who has maintained a sense of independence, seen in her after marriage, but this is in large part because her friend’s husband and in-laws “allow” her to do so.

Someone who distances themselves from their friend group after marriage, especially if it is their own decision, can be seen as abandoning their own identity in a way that is ultimately false. For Fatima, who is thirty-three and married, it was a male friend who changed after marriage, which underscores that it is not only women who change their lives after marriage. Her friend recently had an arranged marriage, and told Fatima that his new wife does not make friends easily, and is not “comfortable” with the group, so, she says, “He just stopped meeting people and hanging out with them…. So it’s not just the women making sacrifices…it’s across the board.” She argues that at this moment, women are actually more able to keep a sense of self after marriage, saying that women are, “More emotionally strong and more capable of maintaining their identity after marriage.”

After marriage, Fatima has seen men react in one of two ways, saying that some men do not change anything in their lives, while others completely change their personalities. She worries that the men who change will someday realize what they gave up, but she says she has never seen women change in the same way. Instead, she says women complain to each other about their husbands or marriages, and may change little things, but they realize they do not need to completely change themselves to be happy. Friendships are an important part of identity, and while she positions balancing friends and a spouse as an issue that characterizes these “modern” times, she comes down firmly on the side of maintaining one’s identity, signaled by investing in friendships.

Friendship can mean quite a radical redefinition of the self, particularly for women who are less accustomed to the freedoms many of the women in this study enjoy due to their class status. Alka, who feels she can go out with friends or in the city when she wishes, told me about her cousin, who she describes as “uneducated” and from a small town. She explains
that her cousin never had friends, because she grew up with five sisters and never looked beyond them for companionship. She and her sisters married and moved to different cities, and the cousin moved to Bangalore and at first felt very isolated. However, Alka says she has made two female friends in her apartment building. Alka explains that her cousin never used to go out without her husband because she was very nervous, and her husband was also overly protective. However, she says that now her cousin goes out every day with her two friends. Each day they come up with different errands to run that are acceptable for married women in their social class—for example, one might need jewelry or clothes for a wedding, and they all go together. She says this is a “big change” for her cousin and her friends, because, “None of them come from the background that I have come from where there was a lot of freedom. So, in their life I find a big difference in what they were and what they are…. Amazing transformation.” She says that her cousin’s husband was at first concerned about her going out, because he worried she would be too anxious, but after a few months he realized it was good for him as well because he also gained more freedom.

Friendship is thus part of current social changes in Bangalore and is also about class. The idea of a separate identity, practiced in part through friendships, is not a western innovation or part of a derivative modernity. However, it is described by young women as part of what makes their generation distinctive in Bangalore’s particular social and historical context. Women’s social worlds are expanding, leading to confusion about life course and altering desires about relationships and intimacy, including with friends.

III. Friendship and temporality: Finding belonging in uncertain times

Friendship is a form of emotional and temporal belonging. Middle-class women’s friendships in Bangalore have shifted from “kitty parties,” or gatherings of non-working women in domestic spaces, to professional women “going out” together. Now these friends
form part of the way women deal with uncertainty. In fact, it seems that the ideas of marriage and friendship have shifted such that friendships are the new stable relationships in the face of increasingly uncertain romantic relationships and marriages.

Support for new identities: Kitty parties, ladies’ nights, and the workplace

Over the past century, middle and upper-class women in India have met in groups called “kitty parties,” in which a group of women contribute money to a “kitty” that one of the members wins each time at a monthly gathering. These parties are often hosted at one of the members’ homes, although now these groups may meet at a local restaurant or bar and may even take trips together. There are few sources that trace the history of kitty parties, a lack confirmed by Anne Waldrop, whose chapter “Kitty Parties and Middle-class Femininity in New Delhi” (2011) seeks to partially address this gap. Waldrop references research by Raj Sethi from the late 19th century that argues kitty parties came from pre-colonial village savings associations in south India referred to as kuri, chitty, or chit funds and spread to northern India mainly after Independence (Sethi 1995: 164-6). Although middle-class kitty party participants enjoy their periodic financial windfall, Sethi notes that these kitty parties emphasize socializing rather than savings.

The contemporary understanding of kitty parties as social gatherings for middle-class housewives likely became established after World War II and Indian Independence in 1947, when there was a marked growth in the urban middle classes and a move to nuclear households, along with an idealization of a socially engaged housewife who would contribute to nation-building (Waldrop 2011: 165). Waldrop interviewed a kitty party group in New Delhi, and argues that current kitty party participants join these groups in part to save money throughout the year and enjoy a one-time lump sum, which is seen as a morally appropriate way for a woman to put aside money for her own use. Participants sometimes used the money
for items or travel for themselves, but would more readily admit to spending it on the family, in keeping with my and other findings about the gendered morality of consumption.

However, more important is the “exposure” these groups provide, defined by Waldrop’s interviewees as leaving the house and exchanging information about food, family events and gossip, television, and larger national events or social issues. In many ways, this exposure means learning about the cosmopolitan world. Finally, these groups are about friendships, as urban housewives create new social ties beyond their families. In fact, many of the women Waldrop spoke with treated their kitty party friends as extended family, attending each others’ family functions and recommending arranged marriage matches for children (Waldrop 2011: 174). Currently in India, there is some evidence for an urban trend of “couple kitty parties” that include wives and husbands. According to one article about couple kitty parties in Mumbai (Modak 2011), the men say they attend because they feel it is good for “networking” while the women emphasize the social bonds they have formed, which are gendered responses to a question about the value of such a group.

In Bangalore, the idea of the kitty party accesses a temporal debate about the changing nature of women’s friendships, mainly due to women increasingly working outside the home. Anandi, in her sixties, meets a “kitty group” of women of varied ages once a month for lunch out or have a potluck at someone’s house. The group has been meeting for the past twenty years. She says she has learned a great deal about social and personal issues from the group, saying, “Sometimes some topic, like divorce and remarriage, or how children are today, comes up and we discuss. It gets thrashed out. You get so many good ideas.” Another younger woman remembers stories about her grandmother’s grandmother, who was from an intellectual family in Calcutta and had a “kitty party” group that were her closest friends. She says, “She used to go out kitty partying in the 1920s. She had her own circle of friends.” Her grandmother met in an “informal kitty party” with other educated women from
her neighborhood. The woman said she found these parties boring when she was little, saying, “They would just sit and bitch about their in-laws or bitch about housework or bitch about their husbands,” but now realizes her grandmother had an active social life.

Alka speculates that kitty parties began so women could meet despite gendered restrictions, but they have become events in themselves as women in Bangalore have become an important consumer group. She notes that kitty party groups have “gone ahead,” indicating progressive values, meeting at local hotels and serving alcohol, saying:

It was difficult at the beginning because the husbands were very strict at the time. But it has developed into something tremendous. It’s very organized. Now hotels are giving special discounts for “kitty women”…. Every single day they’ve got twenty or thirty women talking and shouting, having fun. Now it’s gone ahead. There are drinks, everything. Drinking was not part of our background but now everyone is doing it.

Overall, Alka thinks that women socialize much more together now as compared to twenty years ago, and speaks about the popularity of “women only trips” where women travel in groups together. Because middle and upper class women—many of whom are not working—have more money than in the past, while their husbands are working harder than ever and do not have time to travel, women travel abroad or to places in India together. Alka notes that these groups usually include women who are over age forty, whose children are a little older, and are mainly women who are not working or who work part time. These women might only know one or two other women and book through a group such as “Women on Wings” that organizes tours, then, Alka says, “When you travel together you form new friendships.” She says these trips are “booming” because women’s travel is seen as a “new market” in India. Alka says, “Husbands won’t have time to take us anywhere. So why should we deprive ourselves of enjoyment?” This statement shows that older housewives as well as younger professional women find resonance in classed narratives about women feeling empowered to seek, but being also responsible for, their own pleasure and happiness. They pursue these goals through forms of consumption that they feel contribute to self-development, such as
travel with female friends rather than family.

Despite these stories of kitty parties providing an important source of support, the younger professional women I spoke with have mainly negative ideas about kitty parties. Jyoti sees them as get-togethers for wealthy women who do not work, saying, “I have no exposure to kitty parties, but I can tell you the stereotype…. They’re get-togethers of a certain upper socioeconomic background, women who don’t work…. I see them as trying to fill up time.” Devika also thinks that kitty parties also are for women who do not work, saying, “We all stereotype kitty parties to be for really jobless housewives. They just have nothing to do but chat about what they watched the day before on TV.” She sees a kitty group as a “network,” but not like a work-based network, because, she says, “I look at a network as an opportunity, because you can get something from someone in a network. But [kitty parties are] more about trying to make friends and not expecting too much. It’s just a good friendship and more an escape, a way of relaxing.” She speculates that women in such groups would have to work around their children’s and husband’s schedules, unlike her and her friends that go out when they choose despite family. She notes this difference temporally, saying, “Now you go out. If you want to meet your friends, you meet your friends no matter what. Even if the kids are there, the husband is there, your boyfriend is there, it doesn't matter. It’s your life. You can do that now…. I don’t need a reason to meet my friends.”

Catering to younger women, “ladies’ nights” are being promoted by bars in Bangalore as a new market. Posters with pictures of red lips or martini glasses and offers of discounted or free drinks for ladies on certain nights can be seen throughout central Bangalore. Sometimes these offers are attempts to get more women into bars that often have many more men than women. However, women going out on their own, especially in the early evening after work, is becoming more common and more of a consumer trend. Devika feels that men have always had friends to go out with, but this is a new phenomenon for women, saying,
“For guys I don’t think it’s changed too much…. They’ve always had their friends from school or college or whatever and they continue having their friends. Guys have always had it easy. Their friends have always been their friends throughout. They don’t lose touch.”

Devika talks about going out with her friends as more of a deliberate, almost defiant, effort, saying, “It’s only now that the girls are finally getting their own groups and saying, ‘If I’m to do a ladies’ night out, I’m just going to do it.’”

Amrita, who has recently gone back to work as a journalist after a two-year break when she had her daughter, describes how she also has, “Very good, very strong friends” whom she regularly meets for drinks. She either goes out with friends from her office or meets her two closest friends, women whom she met at her first job. When she was not working, she says she had a regular “ladies’ night” with these friends, saying, “At least once a month or twice a month, this bar had a Wednesday ladies’ night with free drinks for the ladies. My daughter was pretty young. I’d leave her at home with my husband, and I’d come down here and go catch up over drinks with them. That was my lifesaver for two years.”

The workplace provides a space for these strong friendships to form. Indrani, in her fifties now, had a memorable first job in Bangalore with an advertising firm, where she met her husband and a group of close girl friends. From an educated, upper-class family who had lived in the US during her high school and college years, she moved from her family home in Madras to Bangalore to live on her own after college. Because she had been living abroad, she had an accent, she smoked, and she had different attitudes such that the women in her new job could have rejected her, saying, “I had this style of having been ‘foreign returned.’ So in effect I was a very dislikable person. I wouldn't have been surprised if they…hated me. But we have been friends till today. One of the girls I worked with is one of my closest friends. And we just got on like a house on fire.” She says she and three other women from her job shared “everything,” speculating that it is easier to make such good friends in one’s
early twenties because at that age, one “shares without inhibitions.” She remembers that they would complain about office sexism together, such as the men changing a deadline so they could watch a cricket match, and also shared personal dramas. At one point, they helped one of the women who had a “runaway marriage” because she was Christian and wanted to marry a Hindu man, and their families did not approve. The couple eloped and lived secretly together for some time before breaking the news to the families, which Indrani says was “exciting.” About her friends, she says, “I think we discussed everything under the sun. Parents, family, attitudes, ‘If you are in this position, what would you do?’”

Devika also says that she made her best work friends when she first “joined,” or began working. Her closest friends are from childhood, but she also keeps in touch with two female friends from her first years of work, saying, “When I first joined it was very new…. So at that time I did make a lot of friends…. We’re friends for life and they’ll help you out whenever you need it.” She says that she cannot share with her coworkers now, saying, “Whether it’s work related or something personal…I don’t think I would go and confide in them.” Devika makes careful divisions between her family, her friends, and her coworkers. She explains, “When I’m stressed at the house I come to work. When I’m stressed with work I sometimes go home. When I’m stressed with both, I have to go and meet my friends.” She keeps these groups separate, using the corporate term “portfolio,” saying:

It’s like a portfolio kind of a thing that I’ve made. I think most people have that now… They’re separate spheres. There are very fine lines between all three groups. You will have times when you all merge, but…I try and maintain [boundaries]. Because…when you have a lot of mixing happening I just feel like, “Okay, I’m meeting the same guys again and again.” It keeps me fresh. It relaxes me a lot more.

Dividing time one spends at home, with work colleagues, and with friends is also a way of dividing the self by what we can think of as qualities of intimacy. These qualities have a temporal component that has to do with time of life: Are your most close relationships with family, friends from childhood, friends from the early formative period at work, new friends,
or coworkers? For Devika, the friends she considers the most intimate are those from childhood and from when she first began working, and the quality of intimacy she values in these friends is stress release and relaxation; as she says, these friends keep her “fresh” and “relax” her when is “stressed” at home and work.

**Flipping the script: Uncertain marriages, stable friendships**

The women I worked with had the sense that marital relationships are becoming more difficult than in the past, despite the opportunity for more emotional and sexual intimacy. In particular, there was a great deal of confusion about where to go in the case of problems in a marriage, or how to resolve problems of emotional intimacy. Priyanka’s first marriage, for example, ended in part because she did not know where to go for help. She speculates that women in the past dealt with problems within joint families, especially if the marriage was arranged, but when I ask where her peers go for help, she says, “Never family. Friends. You’d be too ashamed about your family…. Very few people have very close-knit families who would not be judgmental about your decisions and help you go through it.” She says when it came to her own marital problems and divorce, however, she did not even tell her friends because she was too embarrassed. In older generations, Priyanka thinks that marital problems were less central because of the joint family, arguing that her grandmother had so many co-sisters living with her that she would “cook and chat with them,” and not think about fights with her husband. Now, however, she argues that communication between spouses is more important because they live apart from family.

A few women talked about counseling becoming less stigmatized in India, yet still as uncommon. Lakshmi speculates that couples do not know where to go for help, saying:

Counseling is still not acceptable, so they usually just talk to friends. That’s how you get your advice…. Whereas I think in the west people started moving away from their families and their friend circle kept changing, so it was easier to talk to a stranger where it was all confidential and it wouldn’t travel in your circle.
She feels that in India, it is a concern that your friends might talk about you, which hinders her willingness to discuss personal issues with friends.

Fatima, a married mother of two, on the other hand, wishes more women would go to counselors instead of friends. She says, “A lot of [women] vent to their inner circle, and I think that’s a problem. Most of us would go on a girls’ night out…and you really don’t get good advice there. You’re just getting one side of the story.” She says if the problem escalates women will go to their family, but she points out that family is not a “neutral party” either. She explains that many people just do not talk about marital problems, which is in part a generational problem.

Fatima feels that for her parents, love was not a factor in marriage, saying their thinking was, “‘No one ever falls out of love. Love is like, a utopian thing. No one stays married because of love.’ You know?” She says parents would not understand ending a marriage for something such as “not being on the same wavelength,” speculating that her parents would say, “‘What wavelength? You are both married, you have a child. You make it work. That’s how it is. There is no other option.’” She says parents would understand a problem like an affair, or a husband not giving his wife money, but emotional problems are not valid reasons for questioning a marriage. She explains, “You can’t talk about it outside. Maybe to your friends. But to someone older, that’s not a valid excuse.”

Friends often provide the most support for relationship issues, especially as relationships feel less stable. Gouri, who recently married her boyfriend of the past few years, says that when relationships end it is difficult for women in her friend group to go to family for support, because parents usually do not know about boyfriends. Her friends maintain an important network. She says, “I think friends over here form a really good support system because if something happens, we’re there. One of my friends had a really bad breakup last year and we were all there for her and helped her get past it.” When she was younger, Gouri
says she thought the most important part of her life was having a boyfriend, but began valuing her friendships more when she realized relationships might not last. Her friends likewise have made it a point to maintain friendships.

Gouri describes her husband as her “best friend,” but insists that she needs friends outside her marriage. She says, “I would say he’s my best, bestest friend…. He has friends as well but they just don’t mean as much. I feel that I need that group of friends away from my personal life to just have fun and discuss.” In a later conversation, she tells me that although she has faith in her marriage, she would need her friends should anything happen with her husband, and has seen how women with less stable marriages lean on friends. While female friendships, perhaps formed in kinship groups, have likely long provided Indian woman with support during times of difficulty, the new landscape of potential relationship instability—along with women’s independence, search for happiness, and desire for intimacy—also structures friendship as a more stable relationship than marriage.

Alka talks about having different “degrees of closeness” with different friends, arguing that women must have close female friends because, as compared to the past, she does not have the same degree of closeness with family. She says, “For my mother, if she doesn’t have friends, it doesn't matter. For me it matters a lot, and for my daughter I think even more so.” Alka reflects on how her friendships shift over time, saying, “Relationships keep changing…. Married friends are different, unwed friends are different…. There are certain things which you would share with your family or with your friends.” She says she has many friends, but that the degree of closeness varies, saying, “I don't know how to put it. Different levels you can see…. different levels of closeness and proximity.” She argues that while she may be closer to some friends than others, she feels closer with friends as compared to her husband, saying, “Companionship comes only with women…. I don’t know about other men, but Indian men don’t talk too much. I need my friends. I need my
companionship. I need to talk with friends.” She thinks it would put too much burden on a marriage to expect companionship from it as well as everything else, saying, “The minute I made friends I was a happier person when I was at home. And for that [my husband] became a happier person too…. There is no need to be in each other’s pockets all the time.” Thus, even when stably married, women find a sense of closeness with female friends that they may not find in their marriage, which indicates a different quality of emotional intimacy in female friendships that women value.

**Fatima’s story: New kinds of relationships and the search for “something more”**

Overall, negotiations over romantic relationships and friendships are part of women in Bangalore questioning what they want in their relationships, and thus, asking themselves who they would like to be in a perceived time of transition and opportunity. Many of these questions involve anxiety and a sense of possibility in terms of redefining relationships between men and women, as well as relationships between women, although many of these questions are in the framework of normative monogamous heterosexuality.43 I would like to conclude with Fatima’s story, as she describes how it feels to have temporal questions about qualities of intimacy, especially in cross-gender relationships.

Fatima is thirty-three, and closely values her friends. Above, she spoke about the importance of maintaining friends after marriage, and about how she and her female friends share about their romantic and marital issues with their friends, in part because their parents do not understand contemporary marital problems that have to do with emotional intimacy. She is from a north Indian Muslim family, and had a love marriage with a south Indian Muslim man whom she met during a postgraduate degree program. She works in journalism

43 Women who identify as lesbian or bisexual are present in Bangalore, and have a different structure of dilemmas, as most are trying to avoid marriage and are often not out of the closet with their families. I spent a short period of time with one such friend group, and will briefly discuss their approach to heteronormativity and gendered expectations about marriage, as well as their support networks, in the Conclusion.
part-time from home, which she says is just until her son is older. Over the course of our conversations, she articulated complex thoughts about how relationships in India are changing, and admits she thinks “deeply” about these questions. She says she is happy with her marriage and finds emotional connection with her husband, and she also questions the nature of the new mixed-gender relationships she and her friends have now. She struggles to find guidelines for these new relationships, because, she says, they are so new.

She feels that much confusion and angst over relationships comes from comparing the past to the present, and articulates this change through the discourse of “exposure,” saying:

> We have seen our parents have a certain dynamic and we try to model our life on that. Then we see all these changes that we are exposed to, all these different kinds of relationships that people have. It just doesn’t fit into our idea of a perfect marriage. But it’s all evolving, and there’s so much space for the gray.

Examples of this “gray” space include having friends of the opposite sex, while in the past any mixed-gender relationship outside marriage would be assumed to be an affair. She describes how women have changed by talking about how she goes out for ladies’ nights with her married friends, and they debate whether a one-night stand or emotional attachment to another man would be acceptable or not. She says, “A lot of us are just caught in transition. We’re all just grappling with these new relationships that have come in because of the kind of exposure we have. So many people we meet. And it is so, so different from the way our parents were.” Fatima worries that she has no precedent for dealing with having a male friend with whom she does not have a physical relationship, but who she feels comfortable talking about things she does not with her husband. On the other hand, she says sex not connected to marriage is also confusing for women her age because, as she puts it, “We have this Indian traditional mentality that sex outside conventional marriage is taboo.” For Fatima, the “rules” about sex and relationships are in transition.

Fatima worries that her life does not look like that of her mother, yet also justifies her choices. She worries she should behave in the same ways as her mother, saying:
When these new modern relationship complications come in, it just kind of shakes you up. You think that you’re doing all the wrong things, and this is not how you should be behaving. I cannot think of my mother ever going out for ladies’ night of drinking. So now, when I plan a ladies’ night, I feel, “Is it okay for me to take up this time for myself?”

She feels guilty for not spending her free time with her son, because that is what her mother did. However, Fatima argues, “Motherhood is totally overrated. You should do it only when you’re ready. It takes a lot from you emotionally and physically. If you are doing it because people are asking you, that the last thing you should be doing.”

She worries that many women think that a child will improve their marriage, but argues that a child only pulls spouses apart, because parenting takes so much time and energy. She speculates that using a child as a “diversion” from an unhappy marriage may work for a few years, but will not bring a couple closer. However, she suspects many “modern marriages” are like this, and many in previous generations as well, saying, “They just got involved with their children so that you didn’t care about what your husband said and did, or what your wife did because you had a job outside or a household to look after, and the child to keep you busy.” However, she has observed women in her mother’s generation realizing they did not do anything for themselves, and finding they are very lonely.

The difference between the past and present, she argues, is the desire for better, more intimate marriages. Despite her feelings that marriages in the past could be emotionally distant, Fatima also feels that in previous generations, there were arranged marriages that, “Perfectly work…you just made your peace with whoever you got married to no matter how different the person is from you.” However, in “modern marriages” like hers, she feels she knows her husband very well and they still “drive each other up the wall.” She sees marriage as part of societal pressure to socialize as a couple and to appear perfect, saying, “As long as you try to maintain the façade, the more pressure it puts on you. You’re always trying to appear perfect in front of people and not do the wrong thing, so that people won’t think, ‘Ok
there’s a problem.”” Fatima thinks that raised expectations about marriage and relationships have caused women today to be unhappy. Echoing other women in this project, she says, “A lot of us want more from life. We want things to be good and fun.”

She says differences in desires is generational and also depends on individual personalities, as many people she knows are content with “mediocrity and mediocre relationships” that are stable. However, Fatima says she likes relationships that are “mercurial” and have highs and lows. She values her husband because he is stable, but says, “There’s a part of me that still yearns for that spark, that magic, that impulse.” She says sometimes she feels guilty for wanting to be “more happy,” as she has a child and a husband who is “a good friend who I can talk to.” She asks herself why she should want more, remembering that her mother used to tell her that a more exciting life with many different love interests would make her unhappy in the end. She feels badly that she wants more, saying, “If I look for more happiness, if I look for more mercurial relationships in my life, I know it will end up making me unhappy in the end.”

Questions of happiness, intimacy, and stability are intertwined. Because stability in marriage has been so valued in Bangalore and in Indian society generally, and because these ideas about stability are gendered, women desiring intimacy, unruly passion, or the variety of multiple partners feels new. These desires—which feel more possible now than in the past—are empowering for women and are also the source of guilt, as they feel ashamed for not being happy with stability or with what they have. Wanting more than one has is morally inappropriate in this setting, especially for women, yet this era is also defined by wanting “more” and being “happy.” Friendship both symbolizes a full and “happy” life for women and is a way of finding intimacy, understanding, and belonging at a temporally uncertain time, when marital and professional life feel ever more uncertain.
What is the importance of intimacy? Someone who is intimate implies not just physical or sexual involvement, but also emotional closeness. An intimate can also be a friend, or a family member—romantic involvement is only one form, albeit a hegemonic form. Intimates are the people who know the “real” us, the people we can “open up” to, the ones who know what is “really” going on in our lives. There is a premium on authenticity in the idea of intimacy, rooted in the idea that there is a “real” self that only certain people can comprehend, or that we let certain people see. In Bangalore, ideas about who can know the self—or if there is an individual self to know—are structured by gender and kinship. For many women, emotional closeness may not be found with one’s husband, but instead with close female kin or perhaps friends. Further, the idea that one must share personal feelings, doubts, anxieties, or desires in order to be an authentic person is not a common idea in India, and indeed, as Foucault (1990 [1978]) argues, dates to the 19th century in Europe. The women in this chapter are thinking about intimacy, sharing, and the self, however, in ways that question gender relations and seek support for new ideas or life choices.

Questions of intimacy resonate with recent work in anthropology and social theory on aspiration, affect, and happiness (Ahmed 2010; Allison 2013; Appadurai 2003; Berlant 2011; Mazzarella 2009). The idea of affect in particular has been a subject of interest in recent anthropological literature, inspired by questions in social theory of how emotions are culturally mediated to form felt bodily sensations and public sentiment (Clough and Halley 2007; Massumi 2002; Mazzarella 2009). Public sentiment is important when considering gender in India, especially as questions of morality, sexual violence, and the figure of the modern woman are in the news and part of public discourse. These debates mediate emotions in that they help set the terms of gender ideologies and possibilities, which women both follow and struggle against.
My interest, however, lies more in how women in Bangalore are defining and valuing ideas like love and intimacy, often in relation to imagined others, and how these ideas help them find meaning in their lives and motivate their actions. This recent focus on affect builds on the feminist anthropology of emotions of the 1980s, which questions the universality of emotions (Lutz 1988; Rosaldo 1980) and addresses how particular gender ideologies guide how women feel emotions (Abu-Lughod 1986). In south India, for example, Margaret Trawick (1990) explores the idea of love within a rural joint family in Tamil Nadu. She finds that affection between mother and child and between husband and wife is downplayed, largely because these relationships are too important to complicate with emotion and attachment, so children and wives find affection and love with other relatives. As is the case elsewhere in India, it is the weaker ties in terms of kinship that provide the most intimacy, which is a parallel to the intimacy of friendship in Bangalore.

For the women in the above narratives who are struggling with gendered temporal dilemmas, love or intimacy may be expressed in listening, supporting decisions, not being judgmental, or just spending time together during periods of stress or opportunity. These expressions help women feel that although they may not belong temporally in terms of family or ideas about a normative life course, at least they belong with their friends.
Conclusion

In utopian visions about the global technological economy, women play an important role as the beneficiaries of development and as responsible for uplifting society as a whole. In Bangalore, however, the “modern Indian woman” is a fraught figure who symbolizes fears about the future and must constantly fight gendered stereotypes to maintain her precarious position. Professional women in Bangalore use narratives about the past to justify their choices and new ideas about the self and happiness. Yet technology jobs in particular structure feelings about the morality of temporality such that women blame themselves when they leave their jobs, instead of finding fault in an impossible work culture or unrealistic gendered expectations about family care.

Globalization may indeed be about a moral balancing between the global and the local instead of cultural homogenization, as William Mazzarella (2003) argues in his ethnography of the advertising industry in a newly liberalized, late-1990s India. Yet this balance of morality, especially for those in “global” jobs in a postcolonial place such as India, is fundamentally gendered, a point Mazzarella does not address. Globalization is not just different for men and women; its central tension is articulated through real and perceived changes in women’s lives. In this project, I have suggested that “balance” is the wrong word to describe the dilemmas of professional women in India, as it evokes binary, zero-sum arguments about work/life balance or a balance between tradition and modernity. Instead, I hear them wanting work and family, and tradition and modernity. I see them creatively using their work experiences and family histories to envision novel versions of a happy life, as they attempt to reformulate ideas about morality itself.

Relationships between women and men are changing in middle-class Bangalore. Marriage has been reframed as a choice because of the ways young people distinguish themselves from past generations, through asserting control over their life choices and in the
ways women seek a measure of independence from elders. Marriage has also been “neoliberalized” in the sense that the burden of choice and potential failure is placed largely onto women. However, because women must still protect their reputations, their choices are more constrained than they would like to believe.

These anxieties are temporal and structure a condition that I have termed temporal liminality, an in-between zone between life stages characterized by worry about making the wrong choice. However, there is also creative potential in this zone of liminality. Chaos is more creative and powerful than order, as Mary Douglas argues:

Disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power. (Douglas 1996 [1966]: 95)

Temporal liminality feels like temporal disjuncture or suspension, but also provides space for the creative formation of new identities found through friendship and work, albeit in the shadow of pressure to marry.

But what about women who wish to avoid marriage altogether? In one example, I spent a brief time, about a month at the end of my fieldwork, with a group of women who identify as lesbian in Bangalore. Sexuality is a difficult topic in India, as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is typically not accepted by families or wider society (Dave 2012).44

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44 In India, transgender people have more historic acceptance because of the hijra community. Hijras are born male but historically dress and lived as women. They have also been historically persecuted and today many have turned to prostitution for their livelihoods. There is an emergent gay and lesbian community in Bangalore, and I ended up making friends with a few gay men and a group of middle-class lesbian women towards the end of my fieldwork. In a group with the women one night, I asked about the nature of their friendships. Some said they spent time mainly with other lesbian women, so friendships could always blend over into something sexual, and within groups there were friendships, relationships, and histories of dating within groups. There was some variation in class background in the group, as at least one woman was from outside the city did not speak good English. However, there are tensions and divisions between various lesbian, gay, trans, and bisexual communities, and they said that the different groups, including local hijras, only collaborate for the annual pride parade. One woman said that transgender people can be difficult for either group because most gay men and lesbian women typically try to appear straight in wider society. Most gay and lesbian people who I met are not out to their families. Some are actually married and have children, another rift in the communities. In the gay male community in Bangalore, one man said of bisexual men, “They always end up being married men. So they are emotionally unavailable and just looking for sex. There’s a lot of ill will towards them.”
As Indrani noted in one interview, although parents are more accepting of love marriages or alternative career choices, they still are not accepting of their children being gay or lesbian. If her daughter came out, she said, “I would accept it. But I would say, ‘Oh God, life would be so easy for her if she went the trodden path’ where this is concerned. That’s still a bit of a no man’s land, sexual orientation.”

Late one night with the lesbian friend group I had met, the conversation turned to marriage. A few of the women had previously been married to men, and were now divorced and living as lesbians. These women were generally left alone by their families, who accepted that they may not marry again. In the group, none of the parents or families knew they were lesbian. One woman explained that the women who had not been married and were in their late twenties or early thirties were feeling family pressure, saying, “They’re still fighting off their parents’ constant repeated haranguing about getting married. So they struggle with that, particularly women my age, because thirty is in that slot which is just past the decent age to get married.” She says some who are thirty-five or older had married and divorced just to, “get their parents off their back…. They just did it to get freedom at least.”

Another noted that bisexual women are resented, as many lesbians feel they would marry a man to appease their families if they could. While this issue would require long-term research to gain a deep understanding, I see these women as experiencing a different form of temporal liminality before marriage that is uncomfortable because they are seeking to extend this period as long as possible. Here the friend group provides support and intimacy—as romantic partners and not—that is crucial to social survival.

Class also structures temporality in addition to gender, and the lower middle-class women in this project have more constraints on what they can aspire to and achieve, while their gender roles are also more fixed, as seen in women who are seen to overstep gendered class boundaries. Urban migrants experience a particularly acute temporal disjunction, in that
they have achieved the dream of working in the technology industry in Bangalore, yet they
do not fit at home or in the city and may not have an option for what they see as a happy life.
Is this how the hollow promises of neoliberal capitalism play out? For them, friendship with
other women in a similarly liminal position provides perhaps their only source of belonging;
as Sunita told me once, “Only my friends here [in the hostel] understand me now.” Indeed,
friendship allows women across classes a way to access intimacy and a sense of belonging in
a way kinship perhaps did a generation ago, and provides a partial solution to these temporal
anxieties and disjunctures.

Although marriage offers the most obvious solution to the discomfort of temporal
liminality for younger women, married women can also experience this state, in that they
have new standards for relationships and happiness that may not be met. In discussions about
sex, intimacy, and marriage, women seemed confused about what should expect and whether
it is possible or moral to form emotional relationships with men other than their husbands, or
if their husbands could be expected to give them everything they need emotionally. They also
looked to friends, and to their work, as a source of emotional authenticity and stability in an
increasingly unstable marital world. Further, they experienced this feeling of temporal
vulnerability in terms of their career, whether they had stayed in their jobs or left, either
feeling like a temporary state to be remedied by improving the stress in their jobs or returning
to a better job. Thus, married women also felt their lives were provisional and subject to
negotiation, and experienced pressure to make the right temporal choices—including choices
about work and morality—which are feelings that characterize temporal liminality.

In connecting feminist theory with temporality, I find that the multiple identities
women inhabit in the course of their daily lives have specifically gendered and \textit{temporal}
constraints. These constraints are especially apparent when women combine their kinship
identities with those in neoliberal capitalist workplaces, in that women must contend with
social and personal ideas about the past and future, ideas about life course, and the value and use of their time on a daily basis. When the future seems foreclosed, they feel suspended in a way that is unlike an “extended adolescence” (Adrian 2003) because it is frustrating and frightening, and its duration is unknown. Duration, for Bergson ([1908] 1991), combines the quantitative and the qualitative, the material and the chosen, matter and memory. Time itself is at once objective and subjective, a universal force and a matter of individual perception and meaning. People experience multiple durations that come from memory, as Veena Das (2007) argues, as well as from narratives they have been told and from present experiences. The future is at least as important as the past, as a zone of potential that, like the past, constantly hovers. These multiple durations, and thus temporality itself, is gendered in that ideas about gender shape all of these temporal experiences.

The emotions that become attached to these temporal constraints, such as disappointment, a desire for more choice, an impulse to redefine happiness or morality, or a felt need for intimacy, are the “feelings of structure” that are part of the world these women inhabit. As women in Bangalore contend with temporality, they are negotiating and attempting to redefine the feeling of structure found in the intersection of global capitalism, local gender ideologies and histories, and time itself. In turn, these structural forms produce gender in Bangalore, guiding what women think they can hope for, and the ways they are disappointed. Reaching out to friends and to emotional intimacy is a way of searching for happiness, which is found in part through a sense of temporal belonging.

For Sunita and her friends in particular, I wonder, will they find what they want, or (how) will they be disappointed? What impact will their work experiences have on their future lives? For them, joining the urban IT workforce offers the most opportunity for change in class status and lifestyle aspirations, but also carries the most risk as it could prevent their living a normative married life. Similarly, single women seem to have the greatest
opportunity to redefine gendered morality and are also subject to the most social risk. Why and how they are avoiding marriage, and what does that avoidance mean in terms of their family and social identity? Working further with lesbian women would shed light on these questions from a non-heteronormative perspective. Finally, I did not focus on men in this project, yet there are important questions about how men experience temporality and perceive changing gendered morality in light of the pressures they also feel at home and work.

Few women in this project managed to have a family and a full-time career. The women who did struggled to feel morally acceptable, to others but especially to themselves. Questions about career and home life are not just questions of work/life balance, but are about the nature of global technology work itself. How does the substance of technological work affect how workers understand globalization and other places, in addition to their own lives? What do they think they are creating, and do they think their work has a larger purpose? What is the meaning of “productivity” and the value of time in such workplaces? How does this compare to the value of time spent at home and with intimates? Gender, along with race, global location, class, and other factors, is part of technology work in interpersonal interactions and in structuring categories of knowledge. As this kind of work becomes more hegemonic in shaping workplace norms and the ways more people globally spend time, we must attend to the gendered feelings of structure that this work entails.

This project raises questions of urbanization, change, and risk. What is the significance of changes in gender relations as global capitalism intensifies, as work becomes more demanding, as aspirations seem closer and more out of reach, and urban life seems to become more stressful? How do the risks of romance, marriage, children, career, and friendship measure up to other uncertainties found in urban growth, the volatility of global

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45 Educated, working women across Asia are avoiding marriage in larger numbers, especially in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan, but also in China and India, at least in part because of high expectations for domestic care work after marriage. This trend, when combined with a lack of marriageable women due to sex-selective abortion, has profound social implications for societies across Asia (Economist 2011).
capitalism, and environmental change? What do women feel they are losing in Bangalore in these equations, and what are they gaining? If happiness can be thought of as a sense of belonging, temporally and otherwise, then risk and uncertainty destabilize the categories necessary for this situating. In a Bangalore and a world where risk increasingly defines lived experience across classes, gendered temporality becomes only more important as a category of self-definition and meaning making.

In this dissertation, I have argued that temporal liminality is a category of subjectivity that is not simply different depending on gender, but is constituted by gender and cannot be understood outside this frame. Gender is the reason we see the world in complementary binaries and is the foundation for categories and boundaries between inside and outside, understood and unclassifiable. Time, far from being continuous and neutral, is constituted by these categories of belonging. As a state of transition and impurity, liminality is gendered in that it differs from, and by implication moves toward, a new state of (gendered) legibility. The rules and dangers in this necessary yet precarious state differ for men and women.

Temporal liminality, which refers to liminality in terms of life course and historical time, must be understood through gender because this is how we understand what is understandable or legible, and thus what it means to belong. Certainly, people have a sense of always transitioning to various new states, but these are processes often structured and made safe through ritual liminality. When the rules are in flux, safety and predictability in transitions are not guaranteed. This also opens the possibility of novel paths in a life course and in historical time, and allows for creativity and excitement. However, these possibilities, as well as the ways people are vulnerable to feeling left out of time or permanently in transition, cannot be understood without placing gender at the center of the analysis. An understanding of time as neutral assumes a masculine time—yet this theoretical assumption can no longer stand when taking seriously the implication of gendered time.
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