

Cabs, male drivers and midnight commuting: manufacturing respectability of the unmarried women agents of call centers in India

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Abstract The present paper discusses the role of cabs and the presence of other men in the cab in manufacturing respectability for the unmarried women agents of call centers in India. The night shift, an intrinsic part of work, at call centers in India demands mobility and access to public space during nights for its women employees. The paper elaborates how the relation between gender and space is evolving in the backdrop of the presence of someone trusted, through a shift from private patriarchy to public patriarchy for the women agents while accessing the public space. The paper is based on a total of sixty-one qualitative interviews conducted with unmarried women call center employees and parents based in Gurgaon, India.

Keywords Gender · Public space · Trust · Respectability · Witnessed presence · Call center agents · India

1 Introduction

The rape and murder of a woman call center employee in Bangalore in 2005 received media attention worldwide (The Times of India 2010). Though the cab driver was convicted in October 2010, the crime raised questions about the trustworthiness of the transportation provided by call center organizations to its employees. The night shift work of call centers in India demands mobility and access to public space for its employees as they need to be outside

their homes during the night. Night shift work, especially when it goes tragically wrong, illustrates the relation between space and gender and how it shapes the concerns and values placed upon women.

The employment of unmarried women in call centers is being accepted, despite being predominantly a night shift job, and its consequent changes in control over women's mobility in India. The number of women who are employed in the call centers, and traversing the urban space in night, is significant in number. This underlines the need to examine the negotiations made by these women and their parents in developing trust toward mobility of the women agents in the night hours. Apart from providing employment opportunities to women, the information and communication technology (ICT) industry has to address the logistics of transporting women agents during night hours. Extant literature on call centers concentrates on issues related to labor processes, health and gender discrimination within the boundaries of the organization (for instance, Ng and Mitter 2005; Remesh 2004), but understanding of the role played by the transport facilities to the unmarried women agents is inadequate. The present paper attempts to fill this gap through qualitative interviews conducted with unmarried women call center agents and some of their parents. It especially focuses on cabs and cab mates (driver, security guard and male colleagues) as witnesses to the social processes happening during the night hours. The transport facilities provided by the call center are able to instill trust among the parents of the women agents due to the presence of others in the cabs who witness the actions of cab mates as well as the action of people outside the cab.

Apart from using relevant literature on public space and manufacturing respectability, the paper supplements the understanding using Nevejan's YUTPA framework (for

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details, Nevejan 2009). YUTPA is an acronym for being with “You in Unity of Time, Place and Action”. The concept of YUTPA revolves around the development of mechanical, electrical, electronic and digital technologies that mediates the interaction between people over time, place and distance. The technologies bring a witnessed presence among interacting members in negotiating the truth and trust. This framework is used in highlighting the role played by the cabs in the lives of the call center agents.

Empirical qualitative data were collected over a period of 5 months, January–May in the year 2009, through semi-structured in-depth interviews with forty-five women employees of call centers located in Gurgaon, a suburban locality of Delhi city, India. These interviews were conducted as a supplement to six elaborate case studies being investigated by the first author as a part of the doctoral thesis. Ten interviews with the parents of the women agents were also conducted. Women call center agents were selected through snow ball sampling technique. The interviews, which were conducted at respondents’ homes, were open-ended, taped and fully transcribed. The questions ranged from their experience of travel by the cabs in the night to their perception of the safety measures adopted for their safe access.

The age group of the women agents is 21–28 years. All the women are unmarried and have been working in call center since at least 1 year. These women are either staying with their parents (those who belong to same city, where the call centers are located) or they are staying in paying guest accommodations in Gurgaon (those who migrated from tier II cities to work). One woman is staying with her male partner in a live-in relationship (co-habitation without marriage). All the call center agents in the study use the transport facilities provided by the organization. Majority of these women belong to a class where their income contributes to the family’s income or expenditure. Eighty percent women are Hindu, and the rest included Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists.

2 The context

In the era of globalization, when work time is getting more flexible to the extent of even disappearing, the work is speeding up with the increasing connectedness of people across borders on the one hand and getting free from the traditional temporal controls on the other (Poster 2007). The growth of ICT sector worldwide, availability of a large English speaking and low-cost labor pool has resulted in India emerging as one of the desired destinations for Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) (Ramesh 2004).

BPO, also called information technology enabled services (ITES), is the delegation of one or more ICT

intensive business processes to an external provider that in turn—owns, administers and manages the selected process based on defined and measurable performance criteria. Call centers are an important subcategory of BPO that specializes in the voice-based services. Call centers in India serve domestic firms as well, but their greatest prominence arises in cases where their clients or owners are from developed countries such as USA and United Kingdom (Singh 2007). Due to the different time zones of India and developed countries, most of the call center jobs, in India, are performed during night hours. For example, a customer in United States or United Kingdom wants to know her flight information during day time, and she would call the local toll free number which will be answered by the Indian call center employee, who is working the night shift at the same time due to her geographical position. Before the advent of call centers, other sectors such as nursing and hotel industry also involved night shifts, but the major work in these sectors is carried on during daytime. In case of call centers, majority of work is done during night hours and starts in late evening hours because the clients are based across the globe. Even the 24 × 7 working hours of call centers demand the agents to travel late night either to or from the workplace. As sizable revenue is generated from the United States, Indian BPO sector has late night working hours, due to time differences between United States and India.

The rise of the Indian BPO industry has been impressive from growing from USD 6.3 billion in 2005–2006 to USD 9.5 billion in 2007–2008 and with a growing employee base from 4,15,000 in 2006 to 7,00,000 in 2008 (NASSCOM 2009). Participation of women is constantly increasing from 25% of the total workforce in 2006 and expected to touch 45% in 2010 (NASSCOM Foundation 2008). The advent of BPO sector has substantiated the employability potential of English speaking women into the workforce.

Transnational call center employment provides women with relatively high-paying jobs that were previously unavailable and represents a marked shift in women’s access to employment (Clark and Sekher 2007). The transport facilities provided by call centers have encouraged many women to join this sector (Ng and Mitter 2005).

Night shifts raised initial apprehensions about participation of women in the call centers. For a woman in India to be out and about in the middle of the night is generally considered improper and unsafe. The presence of women in India’s urban nightscape is often linked with questionable moral values. In spite of this, women’s participation in this industry is increasing. Extant research does not provide an adequate understanding about how the issue of respectability is negotiated when women access to the public space while traveling to and fro work, during night hours.

In the earlier studies on gender and space, the sense of purpose has been attached with the woman's presence in the public space (Phadke 2007a), where unlike men, she is rarely seen loitering around. The sense of purpose adds respect to her presence in the public space. However, the paper argues that in the context of night hours, apart from the purpose, women need to have visible safety measures around her (which are sometimes symbolic) to further add the respectability that she is worthy of being protected. In the night hours, even the sense of purpose might attach the image of unrespectable or public woman with her. The paper discusses that how the safety measures adopted by the BPO sector contribute to the respectability of these women.

3 The safety measures

Article 66(b) of the Indian 1948 Factories Act states: no women shall be required or allowed to work in any factory except between the hours of 6 A.M. and 7 P.M. This defined the expected temporality attached with the women's access to public space. Any woman transgressing this temporality was labeled as unrespectable woman. Only as of March 2005, was this act amended to provide women the opportunity to work the night shift. This was done to cater the needs of BPO sector in India. However, the responsibility of the transport of these women lied with the employer. This was to ensure the safety of these women while traveling on the roads during the night hours. Hence, the first safety measure taken in the paper is the "cab" facility provided by the organization that how being a safety measure, it also contributes to the respectability of the women employees.

The rape and murder of a woman employee of BPO sector in Bangalore, India, in 2005 raised questions about the trustworthiness of the transportation provided by call center organizations to its employees. The reaction to this came from the call center and BPO sector by implementing various protective measures to avoid such situation in future. Two important measures adopted were: (1) no woman should be picked up or dropped off first, which means that whenever there is a woman in the cab with the driver, there has to be at least one male employee also present in the cab and (2) if woman has to travel alone with the driver, a male guard should be present in the cab for the security of the woman employee. The paper has explored how apart from purpose of security the presence of male in the cabs adds into respectability of the agents.

The finding section is divided into two parts. The first discusses the BPO cabs, and the second part discusses the presence of men (security guard and male employees) in the cabs.

4 Cab, an interface of trust

India by and large, with all its diversity, falls into the classic patriarchy social system (Kandiyoti 1988; Medora 2007). The male head of household has authority to control the family labor, production and property; that caste and kin are transferred from father to son; and in marriage, a woman is transferred from her father's family to her husband's family.

Typically, there are different rules and roles persisting for daughters and sons. In the process of socialization of girls, a considerable emphasis is given on the management of girl's sexuality, which is implicated by the organization of girl's space and time. In relation to this, the virtue of a daughter is extremely important for the entire family, as a daughter is an easy source of disrepute for the family, particularly before marriage (Dube 2001; Medora 2007). In this context, the mobility of women, especially in the Indian middle class, has always been temporally and spatially controlled. The employment in call centers broke this control by taking the women out of home during the night hours. Such mobility is being enabled by the cab/transport facility provided by the employing organizations.

The call centers provide pick up/drop off between employee's house and the workplace. The cab includes six to eight agents, and travel time is up to 2 h depending on the distance between the workplace and the residence of the employee. Respondents agreed that the cab is the most convincing feature about their job which also convinced their parents about the night shift employment. According to the respondents, the comfort of home pick up and drop cannot be counted as a facility provided by the organization for their night travel, but rather as a major enabler for their participation in this sector. Even before joining this sector, knowledge about the cab facility being provided to the agents was one the most luring factors for these women to get attracted toward this sector. To quote one respondent:

When my cousin used to work in call center before I joined, her mother used to boast about the cab facility provided to them highlighting the safety during the travel time. This really helped to convince my parents when I decided to join call center. With the example of my cousin, my parents were somewhat already convinced with the cab provided by the organization to travel in the night hours and I used to feel that it is going to be really good if a car would come to pick me up for my workplace.

Another respondent who came for a job interview at Gurgaon after getting to know about the call center work environment from a friend also mentioned the cab facility explaining that,

When I decided to go for the interview for a call center job, the cab facility was a major contributing factor in my decision. I thought that I will be able to convince my parents if there is cab facility. At office you do not feel that you are working in the night. It is only during the travel time when you realize that you are out in the night hours and if that is addressed by the organization then majority of your concerns are handled.

The findings suggest that the cab is the most important factor in determining the decision to explore the call center employment by the unmarried women. The responsibility taken by the organization for the travel during the night hours convinced the parents about the safety of their daughters. The responses from fathers of women agents highlighted that the cab facility by the organization puts the onus on the workplace for the safe mobility of women in the night. Earlier, this safety used to be ensured with the presence of a male family member whenever the mobility of women was needed at odd hours. According to one father,

The company provides the cab facility, which provides safe travel to women employees in the night. The cab driver is always overseen the transport division of the company. The driver is not the only person involved in the travel from the organization, rather there is a proper transport division behind him, which keeps on calling him either on his mobile phone or wireless to ensure his activities.

According to a mother, “all the employees are given the number of the transport division and if there is any problem on the way, they can call the transport division or their manager”.

Extant research does show the night shifts as a distinctive feature of call centers (Poster 2007) but focus more on health and safety (for instance, NG and Mitter 2005). We do not know how these night shifts have given unprecedented access to public space in nights and the related experiences to many middle-class women. The study of a space also encompasses power relations, which construct rules and boundaries, both social and spatial, defining who belongs to a place and who may be excluded (McDowell 1999). In the Indian context, these rules and boundaries have excluded women from the public space in the night hours. The power relation reflected through this exclusion demands the presence of a male family member to access the public space by women.

The vast expansion of the BPO industry in urban India contributed in reshaping the relation between gender and space, when they travel without the presence of any male family member, by putting the cab as an interface of trust

between the organization and the employee’s family. The covert reason of such trust is the presence of others in the cabs who witness the actions of cab mates as well as the action of people outside the cab.

However, the reshaping of such relation is not devoid of patriarchy, though the evident form of patriarchy is a distinct one rather than its classic form.

4.1 Cabs and respectability

The discourse of safety for women can actually be discussed as the discourse of sexual safety, where the concern is not that women will be killed or even run over by vehicles but that they will be sexually assaulted. The gendered safety then is inextricably linked with the manufacture of respectability (Phadke 2007b).

The cab is not only a mode of safe transportation in the night hours, but it also plays a latent function of manufacturing respectability for employment in the night hours for the women employees. Working in night shifts attaches disrespectful connotations such as prostitution and lower class/caste status (Patel 2006). In this context, staking a claim by the parents for the safety, of their daughters, is to demonstrate that one is worthy of being protected.

This demonstration takes varied forms including the presence of protective men as mentioned in the next section. This also highlights the perspective of communities and families about the preservation of women’s respectability and honor implicitly, where a clear message about their daughter’s access to public space for a respectful purpose is sent out.

When asked about the anxiety involved in his daughter’s access to public space, one respondent’s father explained:

Whenever some relative or neighbor asks about my daughter’s night travel, I tell them that the company takes proper care of their travel during the night; they are given home pick-up and drop facility and a guard also travels with them to ensure their safety.

Neighborhood also contributes in restricting the movement for women, putting concerns over their reputation and respectability (Phadke 2007b). According to one respondent, “When a cab comes to drop us, it gives an indication to the people around that we are not in any immoral business. We also put lot of hard labor in our work and earn money”.

The cab implicitly also gives out a message in the neighborhood about the employment of women in an organized sector. In the absence of cab, there could have been questions regarding the women’s mobility in the night hours and her employment. However, the findings reveal that the class structure of the neighborhood brings variation on the issues of restrictions.

Accessing public space with colleagues and friends for recreation is not encouraged by parents when the transport and safety from the organization are not involved, as it can raise question about the respectability about their access. The mother of one of the respondents insisted on the fact that her daughter does not go anywhere with the colleagues where the transport facility is not provided by the organization:

My daughter only goes for work in the night and we do not generally allow her to go with her friends in the night because nobody is there to take the responsibility of transportation.

A father of a respondent said,

When they (employees of call center) go out on their own for recreation in night, I discourage my daughter to go to such parties because the office cab will be missing there. When my daughter is out of home in the night a cab has to be there for safe and respectful travel.

Along with the increasing employment opportunities, the persistence of an environment where women's respectability is needed to be constructed and maintained actually reduces woman's capacity to access a public space and increases her struggle to negotiate with it. In this struggle, the cab plays a crucial role to maintain safe travel as well as respectful face for the employment. The presence of high-priced cabs, mostly sports utility vehicles, makes people accept the authenticity of the employment of women who travel in the night hours. This depicts how the cabs provided by the organizations are used as a mode of negotiation that addresses the demand of traveling in the night hours, embedded in the employment in call center.

5 Symbolic men

Walby (1997) discusses public patriarchy in the form of segregation and subordination of women within the structure of paid employment, which is distinct from the private patriarchy visible in the domestic regime including exploitation of her labor, sexuality and exclusion from public arena. The experiences of respondents represent an extension of public patriarchy visible during their travel embedded in their access to public space.

Initially, to provide transport to the agents, many call centers outsourced their transport demands to local providers. This in turn brought a new sector of transporters, which provides a cab with a driver to the call center organizations for commuting of call center agents. However, the Bangalore rape and murder case brought the issue of reliability of drivers employed for the transport needs of

the call centers to the limelight. The instructions were given to not keep any woman first to be picked up and last to be dropped off, so that she is not left alone with the driver for any time during the travel and a male colleague is always present to avoid such situation.

Another measure adopted for the security of women agents during the commute is the employment of security guards to accompany the women agents if they happen to travel with the driver. The security guards are hired from independent security agencies. However, after getting affiliated with the call center, they are perceived as call center's security guards and they represent that particular call center for which they work.

When security during the travel was discussed with the parents of women agents, they confidently highlighted the presence of a security guard in their cab. One of the father said, "The company not only provides the cab but also provides a security guard in the cab so that nothing wrong should happen during the travel in the night". When the father was asked about the reliability of the guard, then he responded by saying that,

Guard is from the company, he is company's representative for the security of women. We have to rely on him since he is provided by the company to its employee. If we trust the company as a workplace where our daughter is going to work, we have to trust the facilities provided by it as well.

The presence of a security guard and other male colleagues to accompany the travel in the night has been viewed as a continuum of protection and surveillance of women's bodies (Patel 2006). However, the presence of other men does not ensure safety, rather being symbolic. To quote a respondent from Delhi:

The guard in our cab does not carry any weapon and he is neither strong enough to handle any tough situation, most of the time he sleeps during the travel. But my parents feel that I am safe when I am coming with a guard but I think he is good for nothing.

A shift from private patriarchy to public patriarchy for the women agents while accessing the public space is apparent when the presence of security guard and male colleagues is ensured for the safe travel. According to another respondent:

Earlier, going out in the night used to always be with a family member but now it is accompanied by a male from the organization where we work. But with family members we used to feel safe but not with these males. For an outsider we have a safe journey with all safety measures but the presence of a guard with a driver can be double the risk.

The need to access the public space due to the changing workplace temporalities is also modifying the extant form of patriarchy through the inclusion of other men. This form of inclusion of other men creates a form of patriarchy, which is ‘in public’ and ‘for public’. It is ‘in public’ because it is ensured in the presence of other men representing the public regime rather than the family members representing the domestic or private regime. It is ‘for public’ because it is created for the public regime out of the semi-private mode of transport, the glimpse of the presence of guard and other men inside the cab reflects a secure travel for women to the viewer who happen to look at these women traversing the urban space in night.

However, the personal experiences of the respondents reflect a different picture. According to one respondent from Gurgaon, “For an outsider we have a safe journey with a security guard but we know that it hardly makes a difference”.

A respondent who stays in Safdarjung in south Delhi said:

My house where I stay on rent is in a narrow lane where my cab cannot go. I feel the need for security when I de-board my cab and walk through that narrow lane in the night. A guard will never take the initiative to walk with me through that lane and drop me and I am not sure how safe I will feel walking with him in the night.

However, from the organization’s and parents’ perspective, adding more men in the cab will counter misdemeanor as the men will police each other and random placement of security guard in the cab avoids any nexus between the driver and the security guard.

The requirement to transport women to/from workplace at night adds another dimension into the public patriarchy, travel time, which is outside the workplace yet representing an extension of the same. However, this form of patriarchy shall be viewed in the context of constructing/manufacturing respectability for the women as their movement in the night might continue to be a deviating action in the Indian society.

5.1 Symbolic men and respectable women

The presence of men presented different planes of trust and witnessed presences involved in the transport arrangements of women agents of call center during night hours. However, these arrangements can also be analyzed in the backdrop of Nevejan’s YUTPA framework (for details, Nevejan 2009). In the context of night travel of call center industry, the witnessed presence is crucial for the people both within the cab and outside the cab. To begin with, the initial phase of call center sector required the transportation

facility to witness the presence of the masculine space on the road. Here, the organization’s cab witnessed the people on road and secured call center agents from potential dangers. Apart from mitigating the risk involved during night hours travel, the cab has created a reputation for women agents because the families and neighbors of the women agents were ensured that the night travel of women has been witnessed by the organization, as the cab is an extension of the organization.

However, the case of rape and murder of call center agents by the cab driver has raised a demand for witness within the cab. This is in contrast to the earlier phase where the cab itself served as a witness. The measures adopted by the organizations, security guard within the cab and presence of a male colleagues are to witness the action of others involved during the travel time, either inside the cab or outside the cab.

Now, we will see how these measures adopted by the call center organization to ensure the safe travel to women agents can be analyzed within the YUTPA framework. The transport arrangement for the call center agents involves different types of technology at different levels, like cab (to shuttle employee between workplace and home), mobile phone (to eliminate the waiting time on road), wireless communication between cab and employer (to track the movement of the cab). Through all these technologies, the organization has mediated the presence and interaction with the agents. As per the time, place, action and relation dimension of the YUTPA configuration, the organization though not with the agents—present there physically in time and place and action, but it has deployed technologies to have witnessed presence of people involved during the travel.

Apart from the technologies, the physical presence of the people from the organization like the security guard and other male colleagues is the physical representation of the organization that develop trust among the parents and the neighbors of the agents. This gives the whole system of night travel for the night shifts of call centers, a cultural and social sanction of respectability. In this context, the organization ensures the witnessed presence of people in night hours through either technological measures or through the representatives of organization or through both. These types of mediated presences create a specific configuration of time, space, action and relation in the transportation process, which determine trust and truth in the context of the night time travel.

6 Conclusion

The transport arrangements by the organization play a substantial role to contribute in the respectability of the

women employees when they step out in the night hours. The paper attempted to analyze the safety measure and the transport arrangement in light of the respectability framework. The role of the cab as a trust building factor becomes more crucial in the backdrop of the Indian patriarchal society where the mobility of a woman during night hours is not encouraged. With the new workplace temporalities, there is a demand for trusted allies to accompany women during the night travel. This demand is fulfilled by deploying the cab as an interface of trust between parents and employers. The other men like security guard or male colleagues are witnessing each other's conduct with women during the night hours. The cab mates posing as witness to each other's conduct also witness the conduct of men outside the cab, which prevent any harassment for women during the night travel. Apart from witnessing the conduct of men inside and outside, the cab also projects a reliable image to the external society, which observes the women agents who are traversing the urban space at night. The neighbors tend to believe the employment of women being a reputed one if they travel by the cab. Otherwise, women using other mode of transportation in the night are associated with disrespectful employment.

The relation of 'purpose and respectability' established in the earlier studies seems insufficient to analyze the public space access of women working in call center, during night hours. The paper suggests that "temporality" acquires the definitive differentiating factor in this context. The factor of temporality has been addressed by adoption of safety measures by the BPO sector. However, the paper has found that these safety measures play twin-fold role. On the one hand, they play the function of providing some tangible security to their women employees. On the other hand, they also contributed in the production of respectability for the women employees during their travel in the night hours. Thus, the paper puts forth that the manifest function of providing security also entails the latent function of producing respectability, while the issues of safety still remaining intact.

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