❚ Article ❚

Grappling with Live-in-relations: Respectability, Dutifulness, and Sexual Desire among Migrant Young Middle Class Women in Bangalore

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Abstract

Much of the past research on the sexual behavior of Indian women has characterized them as subjects of patriarchy, who are passive bodies and embrace the codified gendered values unquestioningly. In contrast, this ethnographic study explores the emergence of new sexual practices among migrant young middle class women working in transnational call centers (TNCs) in Bangalore, in the form of live-in relations. This goes against the expectations of their families that daughters should abstain from pre-marital sex, which is considered to be a non-normative and shameful practice. Drawing on theories of practice and situated reflexivity, I demonstrate how these women negotiate the ambivalences and contradictions that they experience as dutiful, respectable middle class daughters and modern sexual partners. Both ruptures and continuities between the modern and traditional forces are revealed as these women voluntarily assume the homemaker's role, aspire to marry their partners, and re-claim respectability in an innovative way within their modern live-in relations.

Introduction

A huge public protest was staged against the noted Tamil actress Khusboo for her views in favor of pre-marital sex and live-in relations, expressed during an interview with a Tamil[1] magazine. Several criminal cases were filed against the actress for corrupting and downgrading the

traditional values of the Indian social order, which discursively moralises marriages, facilitating the de-legitimization of live-in relations. A live-in relationship is an arrangement in which a heterosexual couple co-habit without entering into the formal relationship called marriage (Yadav & Yadav, 2011). In Europe and America, live-in-relations are more common as an alternative to matrimony and are socially accepted (Baker & Elizabeth, 2013; Harris, 1996; Sarantakos, 1982, 1994). In India however, such relations are looked down upon and mostly take place away from the knowledge of the society. The present paper explores the expression of such unconventional relationships in the lives of the skilled, unmarried, middle class young Indian women who migrate and reside in Bangalore (Bengaluru),[2] a cosmopolitan city. It demonstrates how familial gendered values around marriage and respectability[3] are troubled and intricately negotiated in the course of migration.

Three sections follow. To begin, I will undertake an analysis of the academic literature in the area, followed by a brief sketch of the ethno-graphic and methodological background in the second section. Lastly, the narratives of the women unfold their emerging sexual practices amidst negotiations between familial values and modern sexual representations.

Literature Review

Premarital Relationships and the Indian Middle Class

It is widely believed that the rather rigid social norms prevalent in middle class Indian families that govern the practices of sex-segregation and marriage prevent premarital sexual behaviour. Academic research also echoes the silenced voices of such women relating to their sexuality inside the families, communities, and society at large. Researchers have frequently explored life-style changes among an upwardly mobile Indian middle class (Appadurai, 1997; Chaudhuri, 2001; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Radhakrishnan, 2008; Rajagopal, 1999; Scrase, 2002; Srivastava, 2009), while exploration of changing moral attitudes and sexual behavior has received less attention. A growing body of research in recent times how-

ever, indicates that premarital sexual relations are on rise both among women and men, facilitated by various factors, such as rising age of marriage, peer influences, migration, and higher education (Abraham & Kumar, 1999; Jejeebhoy, 1998; Singh, Sharma, Mondol, & Siddhanta, 2014). The research of Abraham and Kumar (1999) among college students from low-income families in Mumbai highlights the increasing acceptance of ideas and practices related to premarital sex among them. However, the potential consequences of premarital sex such as pregnancy, loss of honor, and family discord were found to deter these young women from engaging in sexual activity. Further explorations by Abraham (2002) revealed that premarital relationships were camouflaged as platonic *bhai-behen* (brother-sister like) relations, distinguishing them from true love and also from casual relations, which are perceived as immoral. A more recent study based on a survey method among metropolitan youth reports that pre-marital sex, including casual sex and one-night stands, are increasingly common among youth in large metropolises in India (Singh et al., 2014).

However, the socio-cultural context of premarital sexual relations and the conflicts between contemporary sexual practices and the traditional model of gender remain unexplored in the few studies conducted in the area. The present paper seeks to address this gap in the existing literature by exploring the lived experiences of women migrants in urban areas in relation to the ideal sexual behavior of unmarried daughters in traditional Indian middle class families. For example, virtues such as premarital chastity and virginity are highly valued in these families (Bagchi, 1995; Caldwell, Reddy, & Caldwell, 1983; Dube, 1988; Narayan, 1997, 2008; Puri, 1999; Puri & Cleland, 2007) and are secured through myriad practices like "[⋯] seclusion, chaperonage and also by denying female interest in sex" (Caldwell et al., 1983, p. 146). Restricted mobility, avoidance of male dominated public space, modest clothing, and a demure posture in public spaces also seem to characterize the respectability of middle class women in various parts of India (Gilbertson, 2014; Jeffrey, 2010; Lukose, 2009). For example, Jeffrey (2010) in his study in Meerut reports that, *good* women in the locality were expected to avoid tea stalls

in which mostly young men gather and to confine their leisure activity to more appropriately feminine spaces of sweet shops and confectionery stores. A disregard for these restrictions may become emblematic of a moral decline and loss of honor.

In contrast, young middle class women who work in transnational call centers (TNCs) have to step out of their accommodations at midnight, travel with their male colleagues in office cabs (Mitra, 2008; Patel, 2010; Tara & Ilavarasan, 2009; Vasavi, 2008), and engage in modern consumption practices and leisure activities in the cosmopolitan city (Derks, 2008; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Gilbertson, 2014; Lauser, 2008; Mills, 1997). In particular, the study explores the following question: to what extent do the starkly diverse socio-cultural context of the city coupled with financial autonomy of the female call center workers achieved through their jobs in TNCs influence these women's perception of morality and premarital sexual relationships.

Narratives of Morality and Respectability in the Indian Middle Class Families

Middle class in the Indian context has been a vast and somewhat amorphous term, and includes a large number of groups with different socio-economic characteristics, who all refer themselves as such (Fernanades, 2000; Rajagopal, 1999; Srivastava, 2009). Puri explains, that although social class is a reality in India,

> Putative cultural notions of middle and upper class [⋯] are not easily pinned down. As it turns out, income is a rather inefficient indicator of social class [⋯] a number of cultural factors together describe the meaning of social class, including, but not reducible to, income, occupation, pattern of consumption, access to formal education, ritual or caste status, and historically specific relationships with the contemporary nation-state. (Puri, 1999, p. 17)

For the purpose of this article, middle class is treated as an evolving category[4] in the contemporary moment consisting of educated, skilled middle class career women (Rajan, 1993) and belonging to the two upper segments of the Indian caste system[5] i.e., *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*. Historically, the Indian society has fostered prescriptive values privileging purity of female bodies. Although these values are most often attributed to the higher-ranking groups in the Hindu social order (Mani, 1992; Nandy, 1994; Narayan, 1997), they nonetheless have permeated to other social groups, holding implications for ideal behavior. Partha Chatterjee (1989) elaborates how these values became synonymous with the national pride that counterpoised a spiritual east against the material west during the struggle for independence. Moreover, the Indian middle class, which most prominently participated in the freedom struggle, became iconic of this ethnic identity based on certain moral principles (Chatterjee, 1989, 1994; Narayan, 1997, 2008) such as the 'conjugal ideal' and confinement of sexual relations within the family (Srinivas, 2008). As a result, women outside of these conjugal relations, such as the temple dancers (*devdasis*) or (monogamous) concubines were most dramatically affected, as their statuses shifted to the contemporary understanding of prostitutes (Wald, 2009). This constructed identity of middle class women based on the notion of respectability, however, does not take into account the numerous and diverse local traditions prevalent in various regions of India. For example, the *devdasi*[6] system prevalent in eastern and southern India and the *nata pratha* or *maitri karar*[7] in western India socially sanction heterosexual relationships formed outside of the conjugal family without a ritual based wedding.

The expression of sexuality within the framework of arranged marriage is frequently understood as a consequence of a dominant patriarchal mechanism that subordinates women's individual choices as well as freedom in favor of parental and communal choice (Caldwell et al., 1983; Jejeebhoy, 1998; Jejeebhoy, Santhya, Acharya, & Prakash, 2013; Naidu, 2011; Sharangpani, 2010). Some recent studies highlight the ways in which marriage has become a symbol through which professional middle class

women can differentiate themselves from domestic workers who are allegedly marked by their undisciplined sexuality and disrespect for the legal sanctity of marriage (Dhawan-Banarjee, 2010). Moreover, the dominant norms of marriage continue to be influenced by traditional values such as family honor, social and community standing, expectations of the family etc. (Gopalkrishnan & Babacan, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Twamley, 2013). So the Indian family discourse and the idea that the proper place of women is in the home looking after children has in fact strengthened amongst the middle classes in the last couple of years (Twamly, 2013).

However, new forms of marriage, such as the "companionate marriage," have also evolved among urban and educated middle class Indians, where primacy is given to education and employment of partners, their personal compatibility, and individual choices (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007; Netting, 2010; Parry, 2001; Twamly, 2013). It is, however, argued that the ideas of love, desire, and choice that form the basis of companionate marriage are often found to be integrated within the framework of arranged marriages, where family participation and status enhancement still remain primary (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007; Twamly, 2013). The work of Parveez Mody (2008) emphasizes that love marriages in the Indian context have been the expression of agency, where couples attempt to escape the caste and communal control through legal means. However, such choice-based marriages often breed ostracism against the marrying couples and even lead to honor killings in the name of morality, thus reaffirming the stronghold of caste norms governing female sexuality (Mody, 2008; Mukherji, 2015).

Essentially, research in this area refers to morality and respectability and views marriage as a culturally embedded, intertwined and deeply gendered phenomenon. While there have been changes in certain norms of marriage, gendered ways of confining female sexuality within the paradigm of marriage still remain unchallenged. Moreover, romantic relations are considered as cheap lower class attributes. Research into more private realms, where sexual relations are pursued away from the normative gaze of society, has been almost non-existent. Many single women find ways

to pursue their desire by bending the rules of marriages, performing sexual purity in public while resisting from within the hegemonic sexual culture. This is particularly true of migrant women, who stay away from home and the surveillance of their close-knit communities. For example, live-in-relations have been reported to be flourishing in several cities of India, challenging the long standing norms relating to marriage and class based gendered norms (Mehta, 2015; A. K. Yadav & S. Yadav, 2011). The present research seeks to fill this gap in the current literature by exploring the private lives of the migrant women in my study, women who inhabit a liminal space between the gendered ideals of their families in smaller towns pertaining to respectable femininity and a new youth culture relating to sexual behavior in a cosmopolitan city (Bangalore) and a transnational work space. Moreover, the women in the study were all single and unmarried—a group that is understudied in the Indian context. The article seeks to answer the following two crucial questions:

How are live-in-relations rationalized by these middle class women whose families uphold that the expression of sexuality is appropriate only within the framework of caste based arranged marriages? How is agency to be understood in such practices?

Lives Away from Home: Migration, Women, and Sexual Behavior

The rapidly growing body of scholarship on contemporary patterns of gendered migration and mobility explores how global forces shape marriage, family, and sexual intimacies (Constable, 2005; Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006). Migration to cities creates opportunities for changes as many young women move away from families to a modernising milieu and so experience sexual and social freedom that was not available to them earlier (Altman, 2008; Ankomah, 1999; Battistella, 2003; Chambers, 1994; Christina, 2008; Mills, 1997; Morrison, 2004; Spronk, 2009). Researchers have long noted how urban living leads to changing sexual behavior due to exposure to media images, weakening of familial and communal bonds, decreasing parental supervision, increase in the age of

marriage, and prevalence of a consumption culture in urban areas (Derks, 2008; Lauser, 2008; Levitt, 2001; Mills, 1997; Puri, 1999; Resurreccion, 2005). Moreover, the emergence of a global youth culture in the "information age" (Castells, 2008; Murphy, 2011) is understood to be obliterating the local cultural differences and shaping ideas on love and romance in specific ways. The work of Ritty Lukose (2009) among the youth in an undergraduate college in Kerala, for instance, explores the ways in which new urban living characterized by commodity culture creates new aspirations and leads to changes in inter-generational relations. The young women in her study fantasize about love and romance and negotiate boundaries by wearing outrageous clothes in a college-hostel fashion show, clothes which could not be worn in public due to fear of transgression. Gilbertson (2014), in her study among middle class women in Hyderabad, asserts that, "relationships between young men and women have not arisen solely from a relaxing of sexual restrictions, but in large part a growing youth consumer culture, of which dating forms an important part" (pp. 147−148). These strands of literature illustrate the changing perception and dynamics of romance, dating, and premarital sex among young women as they become part of an urban way of living. While I borrow from this growing body of literature in the area to examine closely the texture of a complex relationship between the emerging sexual practices in the wake of globalization and class narratives of morality, I explore the factors specific to the call center industry in Bangalore, all of which play a key role in shaping the women's ideas about sexual relations, marriage and above all, being a modern woman. What differentiates the skilled young women in my study from the college-going women, who display a liberal sexual attitude as demonstrated in other research studies, is the financial independence that they achieve through their work in the TNCs.

In acknowledging that urban life creates certain new gendered values and meanings around sexual behavior, the study suggests that the migrant young women are not simply homogeneous or passive inhabitants of the city; rather, their socio-economic and cultural positioning as middle class women also influences their engagement with the sexual norms in the

city. I delineate Bourdieu's central notion of *habitus* to theorize how the relationships of the young women with their partners are negotiated around a sense of 'class-respectability,' constructed primarily with respect to sexual values and norms; these norms, moreover, are deeply internalized by the women during their early lives in their families and act as 'internal boundaries' in their current relationships. Habitus refers to "a set of acquired schemes of dispositions, perceptions and appreciations, including tastes which orient our practices and gives them meanings" (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 261). While the concept is referred as the 'cultural unconscious' (Bourdieu, 1984) that is deeply embodied by agents as attitudes, values and perceptions, it also offers ways to deal with the sweeping influences of socialization processes by referring to 'individual practices' (Wacquant, 2007) which cannot be explained exclusively in terms of dominant norms.

I make the case that the experiences of the women in my study as city-dwellers, colleagues-peers, and sexual beings give rise to an array of novel practices based on their desire, ambitions, and contingencies of their daily lives. According to Bourdieu, these "practices are produced as a result of the interaction between the dispositions of the habitus and the constraints and possibilities, which are the reality of any given social field" (Wacquant, 2007, p. 267). A *field* indicates the socio-cultural or the economic context within which an actor operates (Bourdieu, 1984). The actor has to learn the rules of behavior, specific to any field, in order to be a part of it. In this sense, the small towns where the families of these women reside and the cosmopolitan city of Bangalore may be defined as different socio-cultural fields, with their respective values and norms. The notions of habitus and social field, taken together, are helpful in exploring the agency of the women, as they transgress certain embodied values of their "middle class habitus" as a result of their lived experiences in Bangalore.

Research Method

"Bangalore has emerged as the 'Silicon Valley' of India" in recent

times (Heitzman, 1999, p. 2) and houses a number of global software companies and TNCs (Madon, 1997; Nair, 2001). Priti, a young woman of twenty-four, told me that she was inspired by her friends who work in some of the transnational software companies with higher salaries in the city and who frequently travel overseas to work for foreign clients on-site. She migrated to Bangalore after receiving her bachelor's degree in English and joined a TNC as a customer support executive with an entry-level salary of Rs 12,000. The company also provided benefits such as a provident fund, gratuity, group medi-claim insurance schemes as well as subsidized food and transport. Priti's story echoes the stories of several thousands of women who have migrated to Bangalore in search of work in recent times. The city has been linked to the global economy mostly through its software firms, which provide relatively cheaper services to various parts of the world and have effected its transition from being the "Garden City" to being the "Silicon valley of India" (Heitzman, 1999; Madon, 1997; Nair, 2001). The numerous high-tech buildings, air-conditioned glamorous shopping malls, fly-over's that have come up in the city during the past decade, create the disembodied sensory experiences of being in a western type country with its pubs and transnational fast food restaurants, such as Subway, Little Italy, Mainland China, Pizza Hut, Pizza Corner, and McDonald's. Several research papers also explore a set of prevailing conditions in the cosmopolitan city that have led to rapid socio-cultural transformations affecting gender roles, consumption patterns, and sexual behavior (Nair, 2005; Patel, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2009; Vasavi, 2008).

What I present here, in the form of narratives of the young women's emerging sexual behavior is grounded in my ethnographic research as a sociologist in Bangalore during 2007 through 2011. Using qualitative methods such as narrative interviews and participant observation, I elicited the women's accounts of their lived experiences in the city as independent inhabitants, global workers, and sexual partners amidst a liberal youth culture. These different roles overlapped and complemented each other. For example, higher salaries[8] obtained in the TNCs enabled the women

to live independently and participate in a peer sub-culture based on new consumption practices.

The research was carried out in two main phases. The first phase involved a pilot study followed by participant observation in two of the TNCs for a period of six weeks each. Both the TNCs were process-based and served clients of their own parent company in the U.S.A. for various products and services. During this period, I tried to elicit the women's experiences of being workers in a global workplace, their associated life style changes (if any) and their attitude towards premarital sex and dating. These women either lived in various working women's hostels, paid guest accommodations, or had apartments of their own. While these places had strict curfews—residents had to report before 11 p.m. in the hostels and before 10:30 p.m. in the guest accommodations—the women in this study were excluded from such surveillance, as they worked during the night. This also provided them with an opportunity to enjoy the nightlife with their boyfriends in the city without inviting any scepticism from the house owners or the hostel wardens.

In the second phase, which lasted for a period of eight months during 2009–2010, I interviewed twenty-five unmarried women employees from the TNCs who were in the age group of twenty-one to twenty-five and who had been living in Bangalore for the last three to five years. They self-identified as belonging to the middle class and came from the two upper castes. Sensitive questions relating to live-in-relations were left until third or fourth sitting of the interview. While all the twenty five women in both the TNCs had sexual relations with their boyfriends or partners at some point of time, only four women gave their consent for sharing their stories in full. During the interviews, which took place over several sittings, they spoke about the live-in-relations that they had with their partners. These relations provided a particularly useful arena within which to observe the tensions between traditional notions of honor and modern desires for autonomy and sexual satisfaction.

Live-in-relations are intense private issues, and research around them carries high ethical and practical barriers. As such, they pose methodo-

logical challenges to a study that is highly grounded in ethnographic data and relies heavily on narratives and oral histories. My own subject position as an Indian woman who was raised in a middle class family contributed greatly to my informant's feelings of ease and comfort. In identifying an appropriate number of participants, I took as precedents other qualitative research studies that sought in-depth understanding of life stories, expressed by a relatively smaller number of participants (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Marshall, 1996). The data gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews were analysed and developed into themes. The analysis in the study was made both on the basis of the themes developed and narratives on live-in-relations. I begin with themes regarding the liberal atmosphere in the TNCs and the changing attitude of the women employees towards pre-marital sex and live-in-relations.

Transnational Work Space, Liberal Peer Culture, and Changing Attitudes towards Premarital Sex

During the observation period, I sat through some of the training programs organized for the new recruits as customer service executives (CSEs), accompanied the teams for dinner or for a movie outside,[9] and interacted with the women during their breaks. All the new recruits in the organizations were required to undergo an orientation program for a period of one month, to make them familiar with the accent, culture, and geographical features of the countries of their clients. The training modules were specifically designed to make the employees learn and enact American culture. The women, as agents, were serving clients from various parts of the U.S.A. and performed night shifts, which spanned from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. in the morning. The agents worked in teams, with a team-leader monitoring the tasks assigned to the agents. A team, which included both men and women, typically consist of seven to nine members. During a shift, the agents were given two small breaks of 15–20 minutes each and a lunch break of 30–40 minutes. It was difficult to speak to the women during the short breaks, as the time was mostly utilised to rush to the washroom or grab a cup of tea or coffee. Lunch breaks at midnight and

team outings offered opportunities to have discussions with these women.

Most of the women cited "better salary," "glamorous buildings," and the "comfortable work atmosphere and cool décor," of the work place as major attractions of working in a TNC. At both the TNCs, the modern cafeteria, the lobby with a soft leather sofa and colourful cushions, the trendy-looking men and women, the recreation rooms with all modern amenities for refreshments, and the prominent use of English as a mode of communication—all these features imparted the impression of a liberal atmosphere to an external observer. While sharing meals with these women in the cafeteria, I came across a range of American names with which the agents were addressing each other. For example, Ramani and Kiran were known as Robin and Kim respectively, and Priti was referred as Pat by her team mates. The college-like atmosphere in the cafeteria or the recreation room provided a lighter moment in the lives of the agents, who actually had altered their biological clocks and kept interacting with their customers all through the night.

Modern Women—"Progressive versus Immoral"

A small group of us—seven female call center executives, all migrants from other states and me, were present in the cafeteria at TNC-X during a lunch break at around 12:30 a.m. for an informal discussion. The women spoke about their everyday life in Bengaluru, while sipping their post-lunch coffee. All of them spent most of their waking hours at work and went back to their hostels or flats in the morning, to sleep through the day. Unlike other women executives, who belonged to the city or nearby places and could go home in the morning or during the weekends, they had to stay in the hostels and socialize mostly with their colleagues. Places in the city characterized by a vibrant nightlife, like M.G. Road, Kormongla, or Brigade Road, were their favorite destinations for a movie, dinner, or a drink. Out of the twenty-five women I interviewed during the second phase, twenty-one women visited pubs with their boyfriends, though four of them never had alcoholic drinks.

Kamal: Weekends are dull and boring if you stay inside. I used to feel lonely when I came here. Initially I used to go out with one of my female friends, who left work after marriage. I mostly go out with Susil, my boyfriend, who is also in my team.

Mahua: I mostly go to Lemon Tree (a local pub in M.G. Road) on a Saturday night for a drink with my boyfriend. He works in a different team. We were together during our training program, when we joined.

Amita: I love to go out on Sundays. I mostly go with Sanjiv, my team leader, for a movie or drink or just for shopping.

For these women, life at home and as a migrant in the city were articulated as two different spheres, offering different norms of behavior. All the twenty-five women articulated during the interviews that their life changes when they visit home during the holidays. At home, they have to be more "obedient, talk softly in their native language and restrict their movements after evening." Visiting pubs with friends in late evening was not acceptable in most of the families. Their new ways of dressing in jeans or skirts however, seemed to be acceptable by their families as signs of progressiveness so long as it was "decent."

Kiran: At home it's always a 'half sari' or a *salwar-kameez*. Here I wear jeans or skirts most of the time. I have to blend with people here. My mother is fine with it so long as it does not look vulgar or cheap.

Kritika: My father was happy to see me in jeans. I look more pro-fessional, he says.

Kamla: When I go home, it's alright to go out with my old female friends. But we generally do not go out late in the night. It's a close community back home. I can wear anything,

> traditional or western, so long as it's decent [⋯] I mean it look respectable and does not give you the impressions of a flashy or wrong woman.

Priti: For me it's always jeans or skirts. I am not that sari type. Even my parents know that. They do not complain.

On the other hand, all the twenty-five women during the in-depth interviews said that they refrain from discussing their sexual lives with their family members or even friends back home.

Kiran: My parents will not understand. It will be a hail storm at home, if they know that I have a partner here. I might be even called back immediately.

Priya: I keep saying that I go out with my girlfriends from work. Back home, it will not be ok at all. My friends back home are also very conservative and shall think that I have become bad.

Shipra: I cannot tell anyone at home right now that I love someone here or have sexual relations. Even my old friends will not understand. They might even go and tell my parents. Everyone will think that I have become cheap.

Home was articulated by most of the women as the traditional space, which forbids and looks down upon premarital sexual relations. They were thus apprehensive to disclose their relationships or even their week-end activities with their boyfriends in the city to their families for fear of condemnation. The liberal atmosphere of the call center, on the other hand, provided a context in which these women could conduct their romantic lives "without feeling guilty or being perceived as an immoral person." Courting couples were visible in the premises of the TNCs where the study was conducted; embracing and kissing during late night parties,

walking hand in hand in the cafeteria and sharing secrets were common sights during the observation period. While most of the women openly expressed their sexual desire and love, there was always a concern for steering clear of being branded as immoral or a promiscuous woman. For instance, they rationalised dating and live-in-relations as being integral parts of their changing lives in following ways.

> Nandita: I am already 23 and never had sex before. However, I guess it's ok if I just stick to one person. Is it not what marriage all about? People get married at 18 and then have relations with their husbands. Times are changing and we have to work. I shall get old if I just keep waiting for it.

Several other women spoke in a similar manner and said that having sex before marriage, if "it's not with too many partners," was fine.

> Supriti: In these times women are doing everything on their own. Why cannot they have their own sexual desire satisfied or the right to choose their own partner? I think it's unfair to judge a woman on the basis of her physical attraction to someone before marriage. But definitely, you should not have physical relations with more than one man.

Later, Priti (Supriti's team member) told me, "Supriti has a boyfriend from a different community and does not want anybody to know, in case it reaches her parents." Along similar lines, other female participants referred to notions of love, marriage, and respect while talking about their sexual relations with their boyfriends and partners.

> Sarita: I am not that kind of a person who will sleep with anyone. For me love is important and I should also know the person properly before taking such a step.

Lita: My family is quite conservative and I shall only have sexual relations with the person, whom I am going to marry.

Kavita: In our culture we can't just behave like Americans and kiss anyone or sleep with anyone. It's [more] serious than that. However, I kiss my boyfriend and hug him but never have gone beyond that. I shall feel cheap.

Priya: I do not want to spoil my relations with my parents. If I have sex with someone then I shall get married to him.

While twenty-one out of twenty five women were conflicted on the issue of having premarital sex casually with anyone, they described dating, kissing, and hugging as normal and acceptable. The remaining four opined that sexual relations could be formed based on attraction and could be with more than one person. For instance, Mita, one of the participants, offered the following opinion: "If the relationship does not end up in marriage, then perhaps it was not meant to be and one should keep looking for the right person. There is nothing wrong in being attracted to a person, have physical relations and not necessarily end up with spending ones whole life with him." Loneliness, desire to blend with the peers at work, and team outings also created opportunities for the women to form relations with their male colleagues from work. The team outings were opportunities to observe these women being physically closer to their boyfriends without raising moral alarms, as a city like Bengaluru offered plenty of opportunities for nightlife in pubs, restaurants, and theaters for the young crowd. Conflict between traditional and city values also influenced sexual attitude and behavior of these women. While most of them came out in favour of sexual relations before marriage, they made a distinction between their behavior and that of immoral western women on the grounds of being serious in a relationship and considering emotions and feelings; moreover, they emphasized that such relations were only appropriate in the context of marriage or a potentially long term relationship, leading to marriage. Below, I present stories of three women, who

lived-in with their partners, evolving a form of relationship characterized by continuous negotiations between ideas of morality ingrained in their familial and class habitus (Bourdieu, 1998) and their changing attitudes towards premarital sex in the city.

Sumita.

Sumita is the eldest daughter in a lower middle class Bihari (from the state of Bihar in India) family. She is twenty-three, and had lived in Bangalore for four years at the time of our interview. As a daughter, while she had all the liberties to pursue her education and make friends with women or go shopping alone, she articulates the boundaries being drawn with respect to "interaction with men, dating and even wearing pants or jeans which were considered as path to being westernized."

> I did not have any male friends during childhood. I was not allowed to invite boys to my house. Oh, god, back home there will be a storm at home if I would be seen with a boy or go out with one.

Sumita tells me about the ways in which she has changed over time and how the limits for mobility and morality have changed for her in the city. She enjoys working and going out with her colleagues in the city, and fell in love with one of her male colleagues at work. After two years of dating, they both decided to stay together and Sumita moved in with her partner Ravi. She provides a detailed account of how her interaction with her colleagues in the call centers and how her life in the city changed from that of a modest and conservative small town girl to that of a modern woman. She grew up in a very small town without any exposure to city life. Her family did not even have a television till she was in high school. She is the first in her family to move to Bangalore for a career. In the beginning, she stayed in a women's hostel, sharing a room with three other women whose families were elsewhere. She came to Bangalore at the age of nineteen, with the dream of working for X,

a big multinational brand. She was extremely shy, and found it difficult to make friends and participate in city life. She felt lonely during the weekends, when her roommates would go out and have fun with their boyfriends, and would tell her all about their merriment. She was a medio-cre performer as a result of her shyness, and assumed that after some time, she would quit her job to get married. She describes the changes in herself as a result of her association with Ravi, who was her team leader, and who helped her view herself more as a career woman than as someone who came to work temporarily in the city. Under his super-vision, she worked extra hours, took an English language course, and made elaborate changes in her wardrobe to be more comfortable and feel accepted in the work place. Slowly, she started earning lots of in-centives, began to be considered one of the smartest women on the team, and made many friends. The satisfaction that she presently derives at work lets her perceive herself differently from the small town girl that she was. She narrates why she moved in with Ravi after living two years in the city:

> I have seen my colleagues kissing and doing all sorts of things in the public park when they like each other and desire each other. I know that I am in love with him (Ravi). So why not move in with him? He has provided me so much of support and helped me in everything. We take precautions in our relationships. I do not want to get pregnant. I have to work for some more years before thinking of marriage and settling down.

In their living-in arrangements, Sumita has to do all the household chores after her shifts, which she describes as "tiring but surely part of her job." She also finds it disturbing to refuse the sexual demands of her partner. Thus the entrenched gendered aspects of a patriarchal middle class habitus, where the wishes of the male members dominate over those of the females, lead Sumita to believe that it is inappropriate to refuse sex to her partner; this leads her to comply with the dominant

norms of a heterosexual relationship. Thus her modern ways of being implicitly enact some of the traditional aspects of gender identity as inculcated in her familial habitus. As Sumita's commitment to Ravi grew and she started feeling happy with her life in Bangalore, her distance from her family's expectations grew as well. She carries on with her life at Bangalore with Ravi as her parents continue looking for a match for an arranged marriage. Unlike her former self, when she came to Bangalore initially, she no longer sees marriage as the singular aim of her life. While career seemed to have taken precedence along with a desire to be financially independent, she wants to be able to take care of her family at the same time. However, at times she is not sure whether her parents would appreciate the changes that have occurred in her, even though they are happy with her job. Her family does still not know about her relationship with Ravi.

> I have not told my parents about Ravi. We—she and her partner —are from different castes. They will not agree to an inter-caste marriage.

Sumita's narrative makes transparent some of the crucial inner dilemmas that result from her simultaneous embeddedness in two different cultural contexts. She has become more individualistic and reshaped some of her earlier values while adapting to her current life in the city. While she has been motivated by her successful career as an executive and by her financial independence, she does not want to hurt her parents. She describes her parents as highly conservative, who may not understand the new situation in her life. However, the expectations of the family have not deterred Sumita from persisting in her choice.

Priti.

Priti is the eldest in an *oriya kshatriya*[10] family with a brother seven years younger than her. Her father worked as an engineer in the Rourkela steel plant and her mother was a housewife. She was a reserved young

girl at home, who had to cope up with the constant fights between her parents during childhood. She was completely disillusioned with marital relationships, with her alcoholic father ill-treating her mother all the time. Her silent explorations into romantic relationships while in college were mostly through storybooks and novels, as she was under the strict monitoring of her grandmother, with whom she lived after her father died. Her romantic imaginings found real expression, however, when she met Sameer at work in Bangalore. In addition to their jobs in the call center providing them with opportunities to spend more time with each other, independent city life away from their families along with a supportive peer culture facilitated their close bonding.

> We keep meeting at work, in the cab, all the time. We kept bumping into each other during the night shifts and talked about our home town, friends schools etc. One of my friends, Phalguni, she also had a love marriage with one of her colleagues. So they used to tease me about Sameer. I slowly started kind of bonding with him and we went out during team get-togethers [···] did lots of weekend activities together.

At the initial stage of her relationship with Sameer, Priti was always conscious of her own respectability, which was mostly defined in sexual terms. According to her, even if she had the opportunity of pursuing a sexual relationship with Sameer without her family or others knowing about it, she herself always felt strongly against it. She articulates these internal boundaries in the following way:

> I could move around with him and spend time with him, but it was not until we decided that we might talk to our family members about getting married, that we actually got closer. But it was never purely sexual. I decided to move in with him, as I came to know that he gets these epileptic attacks. Initially I had a different room than his. I was very self-conscious that he would think that I am a cheap girl who comes easily.

Here Priti refers to some of the habitual aspects of her identity, which made her withdraw from pre-marital sexual relations in spite of living with Sameer in the city. Her perception of sexual relationships before marriage as stereotypical of "cheap" women made her negotiate between her sexual desires and being respectable in the eyes of her partner. Her ideas of entering into a love marriage with Sameer (which followed shortly after the interview) was based on the ideas of more independence in decision making, pursuing her career in future, and an expression of craving for a relationship based on equality. While in many ways she wanted to be different from her mother, yet there were moments when she was passionate about maintaining her groundedness in middle class culture. This groundedness was clear when she emphasized that her decision to move in with Sameer was a result of her sense of duty to her future husband more than for any other reason. She was also dutiful in taking over the other household duties of cooking, cleaning, and shopping, even though both Priti and Sameer were working night shifts. While her sense of autonomy in the city made her "reflexive" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 36) about the choices for her future, she did not want to sacrifice some of the values and practices that she considered were feminine and should only be performed by women. The concept of reflexivity, as used by Bourdieu draws attention to the "social and intellectual unconscious embedded in an agent" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 36) and asserts that, the potential to negotiate and bring in changes, arise out of the differences and movements between varying cultural fields.

While Priti feels it's natural for her to be in charge of the domestic chores as a good future wife, she emphasized the facets where her life is different from that of her mother. According to her, she has a "voice" in her life, which is more important for expressing herself as a "real human being and not a dummy partner." She further elaborates on what this voice means in her relationship and her independent life:

I argue, answer back to Sameer on many occasions. I never accept whatever he says without questioning. I have seen my

mother being completely speechless.

While Priti is *self-reflexive* about her own changing conditions in the city life which she perceives as empowering, she at many points emphasizes her commitments to her partner in their current living-in arrangement. She describes how she manages her domestic chores after a night shift and how she has sex only when it's initiated by her partner.

> I start doing my housework immediately after I come back from my work. I cook for both lunch and the evening meals and then take my bath and go to sleep. I also go by [⋯] I mean if he is interested to have [⋯] you know what I mean.

In her current role, on the other hand, Priti is also an active, reflexive agent who understands the meaning and implications of her own decision to live-in with her partner. She wishes to establish some changes in her personal life from being a dependent voiceless partner to being an independent career woman with more decision-making capacity. However, she also succumbs unconsciously to the internal boundaries set in terms of her gendered habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) that appear consistent with some of the traditional norms of femininity in spite of the modern traits that she has acquired at work, as well as in the open urban cultural space that she inhabits.

Unlike Sumita, Priti seemed to be more confident in getting the approval of her mother and grandmother for their future marriage, as Sameer belonged to the same caste as hers. Moreover, her job and ability to earn for a living gave her confidence to go on with her life "as it comes," even if things did not materialise in terms of marriage or acceptance of Sameer by her family. This was perhaps due to her prior experience as an independent woman and decision maker in the family after the death of her father.

Kiran.

Kiran belongs to a middle class *telugu brahmin* family from

Vishakhapatnam. Her parents have only two daughters and have never shown any preference for a son. She takes pride in the ways she has been brought up by her parents "almost like a son" and given all facilities to complete her post-graduation. While her parents are proud of her job in Bangalore, they are anxious about her safety in the city and about her future marriage, specifically because her sister's marriage, which was arranged by them, has failed. At the age of twenty-four, Kiran already had three years of work experience in two different TNCs in Bangalore and earned a salary that is more than her father's salary in a government job after years of service. She emphasizes that her job in the industry has made her family understand the new culture at work and odd shift timings. This has led to changes in many of her family conventions, with respect to her travel during the night, interaction with male colleagues, and sometimes her attending official parties.

For Kiran, the changes that have come up in her family with respect to her job have been substantial and positive. "No one fusses anymore if I have to go out in the evenings alone or if one of my male colleagues drops by or makes a call while my mom is visiting." Kiran is happy about such changes in her life, as they have made her more acceptable among her peers at work. She is however, not sure about how her parents would react if they came to know that she is living with Sahil. Her anxiety also stems partly from the fact that Sahil is a *punjabi Kshatriya,*[11] which is completely different from her *telegu Brahmin*[12] caste status. Their families celebrate different festivals and speak different languages. Kiran is a pure vegetarian, while Sahil is fond of non-vegetarian food. She met him at work a year ago and fell in love with him after one of the office parties, when she danced with him.

> I had never danced with anyone before. We hardly have such parties back home. Even in my college, we mostly went to restaurants in the town, which were affordable and considered good for women. Sahil is the first man in my life I danced with. We find it so nice to dance together; we go to most of the dance

parties our colleagues throw and sometimes to the discotheques
on weekends.

Living in Bangalore has provided Kiran with anonymity, and no
one asks her prying questions about her personal life. The new context
of living in the city provides her with the choice of forming a sexual
relationship with her partner without being socially condemned or risking
the reputation of her family. While she is not discreet about her relation-
ship in the call center where she works, as "almost everyone has a boy-
friend," she is careful of her living arrangements. She still retains her
one bedroom flat, where her family visits her regularly. Kiran's eagerness
to meet two different sets of expectations, to be a good daughter and
also a good partner and future wife, reveals deep chasms in her life.
This is heightened by the fact that her partner belongs to a different
caste from her own Brahmin upper caste status. "I cannot tell my parents
about Sahil, as they will be terribly hurt. I love Sahil and want to spend
my life with him. My sister's marriage has failed. They have enough
worries to handle because of my sister." She articulates her tension relat-
ing to their inter-caste relationship in the following manner:

> One of my cousins had a boyfriend from a lower caste in her
> college. They went around for two years. Finally my uncle came
> to know about this as the neighbour talked about it. She was
> locked up and her education was stopped. Finally they found
> a Brahmin match for her and got her married.

Kiran' relationship with Sahil is still a secret from her family, as
she stays away in the city and avoids friendship with women from her
community. Caste differences and her sexual relations before marriage
both create anxieties for Kiran. However, she justifies her inter-caste rela-
tions in face of changing times.

> In many ways, Brahmins in my native place are still conservative
> in their thinking. I try to avoid them here [···] as there are plenty

of people from my area in Bangalore. They would carry the message back to my family in Vizag.

She upholds her familial and caste values as being good in their own ways. However, she justifies her inter-caste relations in face of changing times:

> My family is quite religious [···] Most of my cousins are married to Brahmins only. Nobody has married outside of the caste. Look [···] it was different for my mother and grand-mother and even for my sister who never left home. My mother was married at 16 and my sister got married while she was 21 just after her graduation. I am 24 and have to stay on my own. I have no one here and have to support myself. Sahil is a good person and that's what matters for me. Sometimes, I feel bad for not letting them know. But they will not understand and the neighbours will talk.

Kiran is also worried that she was still not married to Sahil, even after living for two years with him. She considers a civil marriage in case their parents do not accept their relations. In her everyday life, she tries to alleviate her anxiety by imagining herself not only as a partner of Sahil but his future wife. She refrains from taking alcoholic drinks and dancing with her other male colleagues. She also asks his opinion on what she wears and does not attend late night parties without him. Her effort to maintain her honor is expressed in the ways she regulates her movements and other consumption practices. She ensures that she is mostly escorted by her male partner while going out at night and only goes to places that are considered decent. As she puts it,

> I like to be considered as a modern career woman, but certainly not one who is available. I do not go to the pubs regularly. Even Sahil does not like it.

Thus Kiran in her relationship with Sahil draws on acquiescence

as the meaning of love for women. This shapes her perception of what she should or should not do, to prioritize the need of her partner over hers and follow him. These new choices in Kiran's life in many ways are governed by the dispositions of her familial habitus constructed as internal boundaries within her. She experiences a deep-seated conflict as she tries to make choices like having sex before marriage against her family values. The conflict is also manifested in the compensatory activities she engages in: sending money, gifts, and organizing *pujas* (worshipping) in her flat when her mother visits her. While she is highly cognizant of the ways in which she has crossed the family boundary of pre-marital chastity, her makeover in the city has brought her rewards in her personal and professional life. Thus, in the long run, she reinforces the idea of being a respectable middle class woman who agrees with the family decisions "in some but not all" important matters of life.

Discussion and Conclusion: Traversing Conflicting Cultural Terrains

The narratives of the migrant middle class women in this paper express a craving for individualism and making free choices in the realm of sexual behaviour away from the direct monitoring of middle class families. Courting couples were visible in the premises of the TNCs where the study was conducted. Embracing, kissing and walking hand-in-hand with one's partner or boyfriend during the team outings and parties were also observed during the study. I found the women in my study to be part of the group of vibrant youth enjoying themselves with their partners at Café Coffee Day (the favorite "hang out" spot of young employees during weekends) or in one of the several discotheques or pubs in the city away from the normative gaze of the family. I also encountered the incarnations of a dutiful daughter draped in a half sari (a traditional south Indian garment) with flowers in her long braid on religious occasions with her family, or the future daughter-in-law touching the feet of her future-in-laws with her head modestly covered with the *pallu* (the end of a sari) displaying feminine submission and deference. The study shows that these women

valued the relationships with their families as well as their independent lives in the city. In the end, a middle ground was struck in various ways⸺ Sumita and Kiran keep their live-in relationships a secret from their parents to uphold their positions in the family. Priti attends most of the functions organized by the Oriya association⸺the linguistic community she belongs to⸺and visits her uncle in the city to demonstrate her communal and familial affiliations. To a great extent, the economic opportunities of migration and the urban living context have facilitated new sexual practices among these women. Their life stories to some extent reflect the changing sexual lives of female professionals in Nairobi, portrayed by Rachel Spronk (2009). Based on her ethnographic study, she argues that the "images of a modern woman in the city, which was constructed through extensive media discussions of love and sex, stimulated these women to create an alternative sexual culture through live-in relations and pre-marital sexual activities" (Spronk, 2009, p. 512). Amanda Gilbertson, in the context of her study among young middle class women in Hyderabad, writes that, "as certain forms of hetero-sociality and romance become fashion, young women further face challenges in their efforts to appear respectable without being deemed backward and overly conservative" (2014, p. 148). The present study extends the previous findings by unfurling the complex interplay of certain deeply embodied gendered values inculcated in families with the incoming global influences and suggesting that evolving sexual norms are not necessarily transformative; nor do they always replicate the familial prescriptions. The narratives of the migrant middle class women in this paper express a craving for individualism and free choices in the realm of sexual behavior away from the direct monitoring of middle class families. The study suggests that the sexual relations established in the urban space become the meeting points of familial patterns of socialization (habitus) and new ideas of proper behavior. The women negotiate the constraints of "ideal" class gendered values around the notion of respectability, with the "imagination of a new life conditioned by the material freedom, ideas, images and symbols" (Appadurai,

1997, p. 54) provided by a cosmopolitan city and westernized work places. Three main observations are made from the women's narratives on live-in relations:

First, making their own choices to move-in with their partners leads these women to a sense of empowerment and independence. The decision also complements their aspirations for a long-term career at the call center. Second, the situation captures well the notion of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 167) in the relationship between partners, where there is an unconscious assumption of more traditionally defined gender roles for the women and acquiescence to the sexual demands of the partners. It is defined as the "violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 167). Last, there is also awareness among these women that there exists a disparity between their living-in-relationships and norms of arranged marriages, based on caste or communal affiliations and upholding the purity of their female bodies. This is referred as "situated reflexivity" (McNay, 1999) and is grounded in the movement of these young women through disparate "fields of actions" (Bourdieu, 1984), represented through the cultural domain of middle class families and that of the cosmopolitan city. The "dispositions" acquired in the familial or class habitus of the women are delinked from the traits required to live in the city. For example, values such as pre-marital chastity or virginity lose their meaning as markers of respectability as these women identity themselves as modern-selves and socialize with their male colleagues in the permissible urban space or enter into live-in-relations normalized among peers. As Kiran puts forth during the interview, "while it may be considered scandalous to be seen with a boy in her native town, it's a matter of pride to be seen with her partner on weekends as a modern and attractive woman." As these women in my study breach the familial values around sexual-restraint in favour of an active sexual life in their live-in-relations, this also results in an inner anxiety, which further makes them "reflexive" about its implication for future relationships with their families. They strive to carefully balance their pre-marital sexual practices with the de-

mands of what is regarded as familial and traditional. This is expressed in their aspirations to get married to their partners in future, gain social acceptance, and uphold their respectability. I therefore suggest that these evolving relationships are typical of the local cultural context fraught with caste, class, and communal variables and differ from live-in relations practiced in the western context. A middle ground is devised, where the women in the present study try to construct identities reflecting "being modern in an Indian way."

The study has a number of limitations. Although the opportunity for reporting premarital sex anonymously in one-to-one interviews did result in obtaining information about sexual relations, building rapport and gaining confidence of these women took a considerable period of time. This resulted in fewer numbers of interviews. While live-in-relations were considered by the informants as a pathway to future marriage, due to time constraints it was not possible to explore if these women got married to their partners, or if not, why they failed to do so. Observing the lives of the women with their families and at their native places when they paid a visit during the holidays was also not possible. While twenty five in-depth interviews were conducted during the field trip, only three women provided their consent to share their stories in full. Moreover, the data for the study were collected during 2007–2011. As several years have passed, there might have been changes in the observations made in the current paper. The study is also limited in that it did not focus on migrant males, nor did it seek to explore whether similar changes could be observed in their lives as well. Future research in the area could explore these aspects to address the gaps present in the current project.

Note

1) Tamil is the official language of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and the union territory of Puducherry (Pondicherry).

2) The name of Bangalore, capital city of Karnataka, was officially changed to Bengaluru in 2014.

3) The dominant discourses of the Indian social order idealize the confinement of female sexuality to marriage. A detailed discussion on respectability and sexuality shall follow later on, in the article.

4) Sociologists in the western context have distinguished between the old middle class consisting of mainly small business men and property owners, and the new white collar middle class (Giddens, 1973; Mills, 2002). In India, research traces the evolution of a new professional middle class since independence, which has grown rapidly with the onset of the process of economic liberalization, during the 1990s. Presently, this class is described to include entrepreneurs, business executives, and skilled technical and professional staff in the booming economic sectors, such as IT and financial services (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007). Citing the caste elements, Satish Despande indicates that throughout India, the middle class is drawn disproportionately from the upper castes (Despande, 2003).

5) There are four castes, ranked according to their ritual purity in the hierarchal order of the Indian caste system. Brahmins occupy the highest position, followed by the Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Shudras.

6) Devdasis: Girls were dedicated to Hindu shrines as dancers under this system. While they were considered to be wedded to the Hindu God, in real life they would have sexual relations with others which were socially accepted.

7) Maitri Karar is a concept similar to the contemporary live-in relationship and is practised in the state of Gujarat. It is a system in which a man and woman live together and share an intimate relationship without being legally wedded, even during the lifetime of a wedded partner. Nata pratha in Rajasthan, in a similar way gives sanction to hetero-sexual relations without a ritual based wedding.

8) A call center executive usually starts with a salary of INR 12,000 to INR 13,000 at the entry level, which is almost double the salary earned in the government or private sector by employees with similar qualifications.

9) Every week, the best team was rewarded, based on its performance in taking calls and rendering quality service to the clients, measured in terms of several parameters. The company provided free movie tickets, dinner coupons, or shopping vouchers to the entire team, as part of the incentive.

10) Oriya Kshatriya—People from Orissa, an East Indian state, who are Kshatriya by caste.

11) Punjabi Kshatriya—People from Punjab, a north-Indian state, who are Kshatriya by caste.

12) Telegu Brahmin—Brahmins from Andhra Pradesh who speak Telegu as their mother tongue.

Acknowledgements

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