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Author(s): Carol Upadhyia

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Ethnographies of the Global Information Economy: Research Strategies and Methods

CAROL UPADHYA

Globalisation and the increasing complexity of the contemporary world have posed serious methodological problems for sociologists and social anthropologists. This paper discusses new approaches, such as "global" and "multi-sited" ethnography that aim to capture these transformations. Drawing examples from a sociological study of the Indian information technology industry and its employees, it describes the research strategies and qualitative methods that were employed and some of the problems encountered. The paper also focuses on research strategies for the study of formal organisations, especially in the corporate world, and questions of reflexivity and research ethics.

Between 2004 and 2006, A R Vasavi and I carried out a research project on Indian software professionals and call centre workers. Our aim was to explore the transformations in work, identity, sociality and culture experienced by these employees of the information technology (IT) and IT enabled services (ITES) sector. These industries, which are engaged primarily in outsourced "knowledge work", have produced a highly visible new category of global "knowledge workers" and have also introduced rather unique forms of work and workplaces into India. While much had been written about the outsourcing phenomenon, a more in-depth and subjective understanding of these changes, and their implications for Indian society, was missing. Our intention was to produce an ethnographic and nuanced sociological understanding of this facet of globalisation in India.

Defining the research objectives in this way created several methodological problems, not least of which was the definition of the "field" itself. The IT/ITES industries are global in scope and are constituted by complex networks of capital, labour, commerce and organisation that stretch across borders, creating relationships between geographically dispersed firms, workers, and other actors. Many software professionals circulate physically between various sites within this global information economy, but as offshore workers they are also "virtual migrants" [Aneesh 2006] whose disembodied labour flows across the globe through high-speed data links between India and client companies abroad. To add to this complexity, the field itself is quite large: the IT/ITES industries employ nearly 20 lakh people directly in India and there are many more IT professionals working abroad. Bangalore alone hosts more than 1,000 software firms and is home to an estimated three lakh IT/ITES employees.

Because our aim was to gain a more textured understanding of the nature of work and workers' experiences in this industry, our approach was primarily ethnographic and we had to devise strategies to carry out qualitative research within this large field. In this paper I describe these strategies and discuss several of the methods that we employed, highlighting some of the problems we encountered and the lessons we learned that could be applied to other fields of the contemporary world. The paper does not directly address questions of feminist methodology, women's studies or research on gender issues, but the insights that we gained by doing research in corporate and middle class urban settings, and the discussion of qualitative methods, may be of some relevance to these areas of research.

This paper is based on a study of the Indian IT/ITES workforce that was carried out by A R Vasavi and me along with a research team at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, between November 2003 and March 2006. The research project was funded by the Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternatives in Development, the Netherlands, and was conducted in collaboration with Peter van der Veer of the University of Utrecht. For a comprehensive report on the study's findings, see the study by Carol Upadhyia and A R Vasavi that is available on the NIAS web site. Much of the fieldwork was conducted by our research associates for the project, Sahana Udupa and Sarita Seshagiri. Their insights into their field experiences were invaluable in helping us think through and modify the research strategy as we went along. I thank A R Vasavi for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper, which represents her thinking and her contributions to the IDPAD project as much as my own. However, I am solely responsible for its contents.

Carol Upadhyia (carol.upadhyia@gmail.com) is at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

Global and Multi-Sited Ethnography

In many ways, the problems we encountered in doing anthropological research in the IT sector are found in almost any field in the contemporary context. The methods of ethnographic fieldwork, especially "participant observation", were developed for the study of relatively bounded small-scale societies or communities. But in today's increasingly interconnected and complex world, there are few research topics in sociology/social anthropology that can be effectively pursued by confining oneself to one small community or geographical area. Because no social unit is independent in any meaningful sense, it is necessary to trace the myriad connections that any one location may have to larger regions, nation states, cultural formations, and across borders. The question is how to combine a global perspective with the kind of field research methods usually employed by anthropologists.

While economists, political scientists and many sociologists are well equipped to map contemporary society using macro-level quantitative data and statistical techniques, social anthropology as a discipline has been identified with micro-level studies, qualitative methods, and a search for subjective meaning, cultural understanding, and structural patterns. In the 1980s, a popular solution was to marry these two approaches by taking a political economy and/or historical perspective to map the larger context of the subject while carrying out intensive fieldwork in one or a few locations [Kearney 1995; Marcus 1986, 1995]. In this approach, however, the macro-level often remains as a background picture rather than an integral part of the analysis, and the insights gained from local ethnographic research rarely feed back into a better understanding of the larger political economy.

More recently, George Marcus (1995, 1998) has advocated multi-sited ethnography as a way of capturing the complexities of the globalising world. This "research imaginary" recognises that the contemporary world is characterised by flows and movement, and it focuses on tracing connections and making juxtapositions within "global assemblages" [Ong and Collier 2005] through fieldwork at several interlinked sites. The specific field sites are chosen strategically to represent crucial points within a global network, and they are usually not claimed to be "representative" of a larger whole in a statistical sense. Nor can these sites be pre-determined, for the research strategy itself consists of "...tracing and describing the connections and relationships among sites previously thought incommensurate", which is "...ethnography's way of making arguments and providing its own contexts of significance" [Marcus 1998:14]. In this approach, the global is not posited as the context of the local, rather it is "...an emergent dimension of arguing about the connection among sites in a multi-sited ethnography" [Marcus 1995:99]. Through multi-sited ethnographies, anthropologists have addressed questions posed by recent developments in global capitalism – tracing the effects of changes in one part of the world on another, or focusing on how the "global" is instantiated in the local, or how it is appropriated and transformed by actors [see, for example, Bestor (2001) and Tsing (2005)].

Saskia Sassen (2007b:1) notes that globalisation raises methodological and theoretical problems by challenging our

assumptions about the centrality, integrity and boundedness of the nation state and its separation from the realm of the global. However, most discussions of methodology in this context do not go beyond questions of research design and conceptualisation; yet our experience in the IT project suggests that the practice of fieldwork and research methods themselves must be rethought and revamped. One effort in this direction is Michael Burawoy's idea of "global ethnography", which he sees as evolving from his "extended case method" [Burawoy 1991]. In contrast to the "multi-site" strategy, Burawoy and his students have argued for studying the global through the lens of the local, through intensive field studies of specific localities that also explore the multiple connections to other places, structures and processes [Gille and O Riain 2002; for examples of such studies see Burawoy et al 2000; Sassen 2007a]. Global ethnography is "historically grounded, theoretically driven, macro ethnography" (2000:24) whose objective is to understand the "lived experience of globalisation" [Burawoy 2000:4]. In this approach, ethnography is not an "add-on" to macro-level quantitative analysis; rather, it is "...an especially suitable methodology with which to investigate social structures that are constituted across multiple scales and sites ... [because] ethnography can strategically locate itself at critical points of intersection of scales and units of analysis..." [Gille and O Riain 2002:279].

Our study of IT workers can be categorised as a multi-sited, global ethnography. The fieldwork sites were scattered around the city of Bangalore in India and we also travelled outside the country to contact Indian software engineers working abroad. The research was multi-sited in another sense as well, for it required tracking the "virtual" movements of software labour, the actions of "remote managers", and the circulation of narratives, images and cultural tropes within the cultural economy of the global IT industry. The complexities of pursuing this kind of research are obvious. In what follows I move from the larger theoretical framework of the study to describe some of the problems we faced in designing the study and in the research methods we chose.

Defining and Finding the 'Field'

The first problem we faced in carrying out our "global ethnography" was to define the "field" or the field "sites".¹ This should have been a simple matter because the research topic centred on specific occupational groups – software engineers and business process outsourcing (BPO) workers.² However, we were looking at them not so much as professional categories as representatives of the "new middle class" who are the primary subjects of globalisation in India. This approach presented several methodological problems: What criteria and methods should be used to select our subjects from the large field of IT workers? Should we include another professional group as a comparative sample (by studying only IT/ITES employees we would be unable to distinguish between effects generated by the software industry and changes taking place more widely in the urban milieu)?³ In addition, we wanted to extend the scope to the wider social context in which software professionals live and work – their workplaces, homes, and the city at large – making the "field" even larger and more unmanageable.

From the point of view of positivist social research, the definition of the field and selection of a sample within it must be based on clear criteria and procedures in order to ensure adequate "representativeness". In our study, for example, the relatively small sample of software engineers with whom we were ultimately able to conduct structured interviews meant that any quantitative data that we present is immediately open to question. But for qualitative research, the objective is not to select a representative sample from which one can draw general conclusions, but to allow the field to define itself by searching for linkages and relationships and then following them. In Burawoy's extended case method, for instance, the specific field site is always situated within its broader context, and connections are traced outwards from the micro- to the macro-level, and back again. The nature, extent and direction of these connections cannot be known before one actually begins fieldwork, and this is why immersion in the field is crucial. One has to begin somewhere and then see where that somewhere leads.

In this case, the field was defined by focusing on IT workers and their own social fields and locations – their places of work, the city, the new urban middle class, the communities to which they belong, their on-site locations. Although the choice of field sites and specific respondents had to be somewhat arbitrary, it was based on preliminary research on the IT industry in Bangalore. We decided to contact IT companies in order to get access to a large number of IT employees for interview, and we selected a sample of organisations to represent the different types and sizes of firms operating in the city. Through this strategy we hoped to build up a network of subjects who could be interviewed outside the workplace as well, who could be contacted periodically over the research period and with whom we could engage in some form of participant observation. Although most of the respondents agreed at first to follow up interviews, in the end we were unable to actually set up appointments with most of them. Their reluctance was probably due to the formality of the research setting and the fact that they had been nominated by their managers to participate in the study. In this context it was difficult to build rapport with respondents and convince them to meet us again.

A more successful strategy that we used to generate our "field" was the standard "snowballing" technique. Starting from the informal contacts that all the research team members had with people in the software industry in Bangalore (in some cases, their own friends or relatives), we used these contacts' own networks of colleagues, friends and family members to build up a substantial database of informal interviews. However, as in the company-based research, most of the interviews were individual ones, whereas our objective was to engage in more sustained interaction with informants. This difficulty is inherent in any research in a middle class/urban context: one has to devise research strategies that are different than those usually used in small face-to-face communities and with subaltern groups, where the power equation is very different. When working within formal organisations or with educated urban groups, one is usually confined to "research by appointment" – fairly formal one-off

interviews – which means that it is difficult to develop sustained relationships with key informants.

In the end, the organisations where our subjects work – software services and products companies and call centres – became important field sites for our research. This meant a shift in focus to private sector organisations with their distinctive hierarchies, structures of power relations and organisational cultures. The field also included the networks of business relationships between IT/ITES service providers and their customers or parent companies outside of India. This strategy, although not part of the original research design, turned out to be productive because it provided a way of carrying out ethnographic research within fairly bounded social spaces.

Apart from interviews with managers and employees of the selected companies, we conducted nearly 50 interviews with other key people connected with the IT industry, including employment consultants, doctors, government officials, and industry association leaders. The wide range of people we interviewed demonstrates the multi-sited research strategy of following connections and looking for forward and backward linkages. For example, to understand how the IT workforce is produced, shaped and managed, we visited engineering colleges and computer training institutes and talked to "headhunters", soft skills trainers, consultants, and psychologists. The field also extended beyond the IT industry to include family members and friends of our primary subjects.

Because we were constrained by many limitations and difficulties in building up a network of informants and contacts, the field defined itself as the research progressed. This may be regarded as an advantage rather than a drawback, because by following connections and leads we could gain insights into this social field that we would not have had if it had been rigidly predefined. Moreover, as Michael Burawoy notes, the key dimensions that are investigated through the extended case method are all circumscribed by fields of power, which limit the reach of the research:

The shortcomings of our method only underline the ubiquity of domination, silencing, objectification, and normalisation. The extended case method seeks to highlight these limitations not by ignoring them but by centring them – by entering into a dialogue with those we study, by encouraging different voices to challenge our emergent accounts of process... We are engaged in a reflexive science in which the limitations of method become the critique of society (2000:28).

In the widest sense, our field was the global IT economy, or at least that segment of it where India has a significant presence. This economy is constituted by networks and flows of capital, labour (both physical and online), and commerce, and characterised by dispersed organisational structures. In order to capture some of these connections and to understand the experiences of Indian software engineers as they traverse the byways of the global information economy, we also conducted fieldwork in three countries of Europe – the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. In these places we were not able to conduct observations within software companies, but we did interview a large number of software professionals, managers and others connected with the IT outsourcing business, both Indian and

European. The benefits of this multi-sited strategy were many. For instance, in a few cases we were able to contact the same individuals in Bangalore and Europe, which allowed us to compare their narratives in different situations and over time. We were also able to construct several organisation case studies using information from both sides of the outsourcing relationship (i.e., the European parent company or client and the Indian service provider).

Entering the Field

The global workplaces of the IT/ITES industries became important field sites for our study, but they were not easy sites to enter or in which to do research. For one, it is difficult to become a "participant observer" in such a field because the anthropologist usually does not have the skills to be employed in a hi-tech company. And even if one could be hired, there are ethical issues related to taking up a job in order to conduct research.⁴ Since we could not become members of these organisations, we had to find a way to gain fairly free access. This was in many ways the most difficult and time-consuming part of the research – identifying potential sample companies, getting appointments for interviews with key decision-makers, and then meeting them to gather information and present the proposal to carry out research in their organisations. For obvious reasons (confidentiality contracts with clients, protection of intellectual property) most IT and ITES companies are wary of opening themselves to scrutiny by outsiders, and we had to develop strategies to convince them that we were conducting legitimate and important research.⁵ Our success rate was less than half, but the positive side of the exercise is that we could interview a number of chief executive officers (CEOs) and human resources (HR) managers from companies other than those that ultimately participated in the study.⁶

In order to persuade companies to cooperate in the study, we had to convince the top management that our activities or publications would not harm the company and that we would produce findings and insights useful to them. In several cases, we had to agree to provide individualised reports of our findings on issues of concern to them. This presented an ethical issue – as anthropologists we did not define our role as helping software companies and their managers to function better – but we decided to make these commitments because we knew that we had control over what went into those reports. Also, all of the companies made us sign non-disclosure or confidentiality agreements (NDAs) that barred us from using certain types of information in our writing, but this did not pose a major constraint. The process of gaining entry into these organisations, although tedious, had a positive fallout in that our initial interactions with top managers and HR personnel opened up many new questions. Based on these initial interviews, we began to focus more on the context in which software engineers work, the work process itself, and how work and workers are controlled and shaped by corporations and by the global economy in which they have found a niche as a significant new category of technical "virtual" workers.

Even after getting permission to carry out our research in these organisations, clear boundaries were set up that confined us to certain spaces and types of interactions, and it was very difficult

to trespass these limits in order to establish more informal relations with people. This was mainly because we could not do the kind of "hanging around" that one normally does in ethnographic fieldwork. Usually we entered the workplace only on prior appointment, were given a room in which to conduct one-to-one interviews, and then were expected to leave immediately once the allotted time was over. Our movements were generally monitored, subtly or not so subtly, so that there was little opportunity to strike up a casual conversation or to observe work interactions. In large companies with their own campuses it was easier to hang around casually in the food court or coffee shop, but here also we almost never had free access to the workspace. One other context in which we had relatively more freedom of interaction was when we were observing workshops and training programmes, which usually stretched over several days. These occasions gave us an opportunity to establish rapport with individual employees and to interact with them informally during lunch and coffee breaks.

A step that helped enormously in breaking these barriers and that gave us greater access to everyday work activities was the shooting of an ethnographic film series on the software industry [NIAS 2006]. Contrary to our expectations, going in with the camera opened doors for us that had previously been closed. Although negotiating this project was very difficult, once we had permission to film in three companies we were given almost a free run of the workspace. (We had explained that we wanted to capture the nature of work in the industry in a natural way, rather than make a scripted documentary, and that we would have to do many hours of candid shooting in order to get the footage we needed. This seemed plausible to managements and so they granted us a fair degree of access.) This strategy allowed us to spend many days hanging around and getting to know people, observing day-to-day activities and interactions, and attending team meetings, company parties, and other events. One member of the research team always accompanied the cameraperson during the shoot so that she was able to observe what was happening and take notes (in addition to having a record of the activity in the form of film footage), and also use the opportunity to talk informally with employees. Also, because each of the films focused on a single team or small group of people within the organisation, we were able to establish good relationships with many of the films' subjects.

Reflexivity and the Research Relationship

One of the most difficult problems we faced in doing ethnography in the corporate world was to penetrate through the various layers of representation and ideology that appear to permeate these workplaces. Modern corporations are adept at producing images for public consumption and at manipulating organisational culture as an instrument of control over employees and their labour. As a result, in most organisations one finds a clear "party line" – often condensed into the company's "mission, vision and values" statements – which is retailed by almost all members of the organisation, from top to bottom. When everyone you interview says the same thing, it appears at first to be "true" or just common knowledge, but a little reflection and

probing suggest that what one is hearing is a received discourse. How then does one move beyond the official narrative and find out what workers "really think"? For instance, is their apparently enthusiastic participation in corporate rituals, such as the annual company event and team parties, a performance aimed at achieving personal goals, or does it indicate real incorporation into the social body of the organisation? Such problems are linked to theoretical questions about power, resistance and subjectivity, which are central to any study of institutions or formal organisations, but they are also methodological questions.

Methodological issues of reflexivity, interpretation, and understanding can only be handled through sensitive fieldwork and careful analysis of qualitative data. Marcus notes that in multi-sited research the anthropologist is just one among many producers of representations, which means that he or she must negotiate with diverse and conflicting representations as an actor within the same field as his/her subjects: "Reflexivity about a contending field of representations in or around a particular site of ethnographic work stimulates radical rethinking of research identities and relationships" (1998:17). In this kind of ethnography, the positioning of the ethnographer within the field is a central dimension of method itself, for he/she is interacting with others whose "discourses overlap with his or her own", a situation that "...immediately locate[s] the ethnographer within the terrain being mapped" (1995:112).

In our research in software organisations, the research relationship had to be carefully negotiated using subtle strategies of representation and camouflage. We had to create representations of ourselves and our objectives that would persuade the companies to cooperate with us, without at the same time seriously misrepresenting our intentions. Most important was to disguise the fact that we might take a critical (i.e., sociological) view of what we found, in contrast to the dominant celebratory accounts of the IT industry that circulate within the national and international media. The popular media and IT companies' own public relations departments have produced a veil of images and discourses that swirl around the industry, and a major part of our research effort was directed at unpacking these ubiquitous narratives that were retailed by so many people.

Studying the Corporate Workplace

The global corporation is a central locus of power and a dominant institution in the world today, and with the rapid expansion of Indian economy and the entry of many multinational companies (MNCs) in the post-liberalisation period, it constitutes a significant site for research in itself. There are many questions that can be asked of the corporation from a sociological or anthropological perspective: What kind of social institution is it, and how is it shaped by, and in turn how does it shape, the larger society? How do these "knowledge industries" produce, mould and control their workforces? How do they craft new identities and subjectivities, and how do employees negotiate between the cultures of the workplace and their private lives? Such questions can be answered only through in-depth study using qualitative methods.

But how does one do an ethnography of a modern organisation? Although there is an extant literature, especially within

sociology and more recently management studies, on institutional or organisational ethnography, much of it was not very helpful as a guide for this research [a notable exception being Kunda 1992].⁷ The Chicago school of sociology had a tradition of institutional studies in the 1920s and 1930s that continued through to the 1960s, but as Burawoy (2000) points out, most of these failed to locate their subjects within the larger political economic context. There has been little anthropological work on formal organisations; one of the first was by Laura Nader (1969), who also wrote about the problems of "studying up". Today "corporate ethnography" usually means using ethnographic methods in the service of management goals, as anthropologists increasingly find employment in the corporate sector [Hamada 1998].⁸

In India, sociological/anthropological studies of formal organisations and institutions are also few; after the wave of studies of new industries in the 1960s under the umbrella of modernisation theory, there has been little interest in the formal institutions either of the market or the state, although there has been significant work on labour and the working class. This lacuna is especially glaring in the post-liberalisation period, when profound changes in the economy have been accompanied by economic and governance reforms. Moreover, private sector organisations are becoming more prominent as political and economic actors and cultural icons, and as they are becoming more closely integrated into the global economy their traditional organisational forms are getting transformed. Yet the nature and impact of these changes have hardly been studied from a sociological perspective.

This absence of models meant that in designing our study we could not rely on time-tested research methods but had to use trial and error to a great extent. Our approach, tactics and techniques evolved over the course of the study as we discovered what worked and what did not. In the end, a combination of methods proved most effective, but this approach produced diverse kinds of data that created complications in analysis and interpretation. Below I briefly describe several of the methods employed and their advantages and disadvantages.

One of the major research methods we used were structured one-on-one interviews with a sample of employees drawn from the participating organisations. In each of the companies, a stratified random sample of employees was selected to reflect its workforce demographics. However, this sample cannot be regarded as really representative or random – first, because it was difficult to get companies to participate in the study, and second, because in most cases the respondents were selected by the HR departments, which may have had their own reasons for choosing particular employees for interview. In addition, due to the difficulties in marshalling respondents, the final sample size was very small compared both to the total number of employees in each organisation and to the total universe.⁹ This in itself is not an issue for qualitative research, but we had hoped to generate some amount of quantitative data, such as on the social backgrounds, careers, work experiences, lifestyles, and aspirations of employees.

Although conducting a structured interview may seem to be a straightforward process, due to the formality of the situation the

researcher has to carefully strategise in order to elicit meaningful information. In this context one must also be very sensitive to the multiple levels at which narratives are produced and action takes place – especially the split between the expected answer and what employees “really think”, between reported behaviour and what “really happens”, and so on. Of course, this is an issue in every interview process, but the difficulties are more acute in corporate settings where employees may think that what they say may have negative repercussions. Moreover, the interview process involves a subtle process of negotiation between researcher and subject in which the subject is constrained to give the “right” answers and present his or her self based on what he/she thinks the researcher is doing, while the researcher attempts to find the right approach, based on her assessment of the subject’s orientation, to put him/her at ease.

From one angle, the structured survey method did not produce much significant information: although we gathered long narrative responses to questions, in most cases they did not seem to convey much beyond what is “common sense” about the industry. But from another perspective, these interviews were important because they provided a window into the functioning of the corporate workplace. For example, the predictability of responses to questions about their organisations, work culture and their work experiences suggested that there is a widely accepted formal ideology or official culture in which employees are well versed. In most cases we were not able to dig beneath the surface of this hegemonic discourse (although several respondents did break with protocol to tell us something unofficial – “offline” – after being reassured that we would not write it down), their stereotypical answers pointed to the operation of subjective modes of organisational control. But deeper analysis allowed us to understand respondents’ narratives not only as a reflection of organisational domination but also of the strategies they use to negotiate their position vis-à-vis managers.

Informal Interviews

As noted above, not many of the survey respondents agreed to participate in further interviews, but in those cases where we were able to conduct follow-ups, comparison of their responses in the first and later sessions demonstrates the differences in the kind of data that can be produced through structured as opposed to informal methods. An important factor is the site of interview – they were far more constrained when interviewed at their workplaces. While many were also wary when interviewed at their homes or elsewhere, it was easier to build rapport and get more of the “offline” picture in such settings. We were also able to build on several of these contacts to establish relations with their friends and family members.

We conducted many more informal interviews with people who were contacted through other avenues, and these interviews generated a large number of narratives and observations. We were also able to cultivate research relationships with several individuals who we could talk to at intervals; this enabled us to construct a picture of their life strategies and career paths over time without relying solely on their own accounts of past decisions or events. For instance, we were able to track their responses to major life events

such as getting married, having a baby or changing jobs. Through repeated interactions with a few subjects and their families, we have also generated several family case studies.

Another research strategy that proved useful were group discussions organised with groups of colleagues or friends. These were especially effective in gaining insights into the dynamics of the workplace as well as ferreting out information on sensitive issues. For instance, we organised a group discussion with several women from a call centre on the issue of sexual harassment, and they were probably more forthcoming in a group than they would have been in individual interviews.

Observations in the Workplace

Because of restrictions on our access, we could not carry out as many direct observations in the workplace as we wished. The exception was during the making of the film series, when we were able to engage in informal observations of a single team in each company over a period of several weeks, including meetings, work activities, and interactions among team members. This gave us a better understanding of workplace dynamics, for instance by revealing mechanisms of control over the labour process and the multilayered process of negotiation between managers and employees that characterises IT workplaces. However, most of our observations were restricted to specific events that we had permission to attend, such as training programmes and company functions.

(1) Training programmes: We observed a number of training programmes for employees, especially what are known as “soft skills” training. These trainings are aimed at moulding their personalities and developing behaviour patterns and communication styles that are thought to be appropriate to the global workplace. We recorded many hours of communication skills, “cultural sensitivity”, leadership skills, time management, stress management and team-building workshops. Observing these programmes turned out to be a very rich source of data on IT workplaces, for they revealed much about the ways in which employees are expected to transform themselves to fit into what trainers call “global corporate culture”. Employees’ responses to these efforts also pointed to sites of resistance or conflict that could be further probed. Observation and filming of these programmes allowed us to analyse the micropolitics of the workplace and provided clues about the formation and reconstitution of worker subjectivity.

(2) Meetings: Observations of team and other kinds of meetings gave us many insights into the nature of social interaction and structures of power in these organisations. From an anthropological perspective, meetings can be understood as rituals in which individual, team or group identities are constructed and presented or corporate identity and ideology are enacted and reaffirmed. Most interesting were the “virtual” meetings, conference calls and video conferences with overseas clients, onsite colleagues or managers/colleagues at other locations. In outsourced projects these are frequent events that may involve up to 20 people in different locations and time zones. Observation of these calls

uncovered subtle conflicts between "offshore" and "onsite" team members and revealed much about the politics of "virtual teams".

(3) Company Events and Other Programmes and Activities: Corporate programmes and activities such as annual functions, team outings; and "all-hands meetings" were other important sites for observation. Especially useful were the induction programmes that are organised for new employees, when the company's philosophy, values, and goals are imparted to fresh recruits in addition to nitty-gritty aspects of management and organisation. In these programmes, the official corporate culture is clearly articulated and the expectations that the company has of employees are laid out. Induction programmes are more than information dissemination events, for they are also consciously designed as rituals through which the process of incorporation of subjects into the workplace is initiated.

(4) The Physical Environment and Documentary Material: The design and layout of the workspace itself is an important source of data, for it reveals much about the company's culture, how it organises its workers and the workflow, and the image it tries to present to its employees and the outside world. The physical environment embodies the official culture and also influences the formation of employee subjectivity and their orientation to work. IT companies put much thought into image-making and so they may be housed in upscale campuses with expanses of

manicured lawns and flowing fountains on the outside but cramped and airless workspaces within. Other companies provide lavish five-star facilities with spacious workspaces, free flow of good coffee and food, laptops, generous salaries and benefits to signal their "employee-friendly" policies, while at the same time putting tremendous pressure on employees to perform.

The office environment embodies the official corporate culture of the organisation in other ways as well: the workspaces are littered with exhortatory and cautioning signs, posters, slogans, and emblems on walls and mousepads and in the lavatory that convey the organisation's "mission" and "vision" and urge workers to maintain security norms, work hard, and keep the toilets clean (and, in one call centre, a sign inside the toilet stall warning workers not to spend too much time there!). The manufactured culture [Kunda 1992] of the corporate world is made most visible in documents such as the "mission, vision and value" statements that are available on their websites; handbooks and other material provided in induction and training programmes; oral traditions about the company's founding and history; managers' speeches at company events and awards ceremonies, etc – all of which is valuable material to be collected by the ethnographer.

Problems of Analysis and Interpretation

Pursuing multiple research methods meant that we generated diverse types of data, including many pages of notes from informal interviews and interactions; filled-up formats from the



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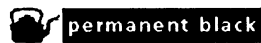
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structured interviews; recordings and notes of meetings, training programmes, and social events; documentary material from companies; newspaper clippings; and many internet files and web pages. Different methods of analysis and interpretive strategies are needed to handle these data. For instance, narrative analysis may be applied to the interpretation of informal interview transcripts; performance theory to the analysis of meetings and training sessions; and content analysis to documents and media clippings. But the analysis of different types of data cannot proceed independently, for they also need to be put together and interpreted simultaneously through a kind of "triangulation" process.

Most of the data we collected are in the form of notes and transcripts from the many informal interviews and interactions we had with over 250 IT workers and managers in Bangalore and Europe. Such narratives can be analysed in themselves, but the interpretation becomes richer when they are supplemented with other kinds of data in order to contextualise informants' representations and statements. Observations in the workplace provided the context for the interpretation of informants' statements: for instance, the often-stated claim that IT companies are "flat" rather than hierarchical was contested by junior engineers, and our probing suggested that this statement is part of a dominant management ideology rather than a reflection of the ground reality.

Interpretation of data from diverse sources proceeds by making interlinkages between the various types of data and counterpoising what one learns from one source to related information from another. For example, responses to structured interviews could best be interpreted by reading them along with what respondents said in more informal settings. An example can be drawn from women software engineers' narratives about the impact of work on their lives: during formal interviews their statements usually reflected the official company line about women's "empowerment" through IT, but in informal interviews many women told stories about the difficulties they face in pursuing their careers and in balancing work and family. Similarly, interview transcripts of people in different positions (entry level software engineer versus project manager) or of varying social profiles (by age, gender) must be read together to find points of contrast. Differences in informants' narratives at different points of time or in different contexts (such as in Europe and in Bangalore) are also revealing.

A major problem that we have faced in analysing our data relates to the interpretation of layers of meaning in subjects' narratives and the question of reflexivity and the research relationship noted above. In this case, the language of the ethnographer is to a great extent also the language of the subjects – for example, the concept of culture and ideas about cultural difference have permeated the global corporate world and are utilised extensively by soft skills trainers, management experts and by organisations in formulating HR policies. Similarly, ideas such as "corporate culture" are central to contemporary management theory and pervade everyday discourses in the corporate world. As a result, these concepts can be used by the anthropologist as

analytical categories only in the most reflexive and critical way. How does the anthropologist talk about cultural difference in multicultural or global settings in a way that takes into account the discursive construction of cultural difference by her subjects and by other agencies operating within their social fields (such as global management consultants and professional "culture" experts), but which is also different from their received ideas about culture?

Another set of problems in such research flows from the fact of "studying up" – when the subject is the corporate world with its sophisticated image-management mechanisms and one's interlocutors are at least as well educated as the ethnographer, the research process and dialogue inevitably generate conflicts between the anthropologist's interpretation of what they are doing and that of the subjects. As Marcus (1998) argues, in contemporary anthropology the research relationship itself needs to be revamped, and the researcher has to recognise that the production of knowledge is intersubjective in a more intense way than in the usual fieldwork process. This may be an advantage because the possibility of discussing one's findings and ideas with one's interlocutors, of trying out theories and testing connections, is a good way of opening up new questions.

Politics and Ethics of Ethnographic Research

By way of a conclusion, I turn to the politics and ethics of ethnographic research – especially the often-debated question about "when they read what we write" [Brettell 1993]. In this case, we were expected to share our findings with the participating companies in a way that would be "useful" to them. The ethical problems are obvious: Can we produce reports that are acceptable to the companies without violating our own academic principles and perspectives? Should we not avoid providing insights or information that would potentially increase the power of corporations over employees? Should we mould our findings to suit their expectations, or write such innocuous reports that they say nothing at all? In short, what are our ethical obligations to ourselves, to our institute and funders, to the academic community, to the IT workers who gave us their time, and to the companies which permitted us to carry out research? How do we strike a balance between these?

In the end these were not very difficult questions to resolve: we shared the draft report in full with the study participants and even hosted a consultation with them to discuss our findings and get their feedback. This process itself gave us more grist for the mill. Even the review of the films by the participating companies (to get their permission for release) did not result in censorship, and it turned out to be a valuable procedure because we could observe the reactions not only of top managements but also of the software engineers who featured in the films, which told us a lot about how they perceive themselves and their organisations. Although there were some aspects of our conclusions that were not liked by senior industry leaders, they made little attempt to influence the final report or other outputs – not because they agreed with us or believe in free expression, but because they knew that we were in a relatively powerless position.¹⁰ Whatever we write or say, it is unlikely to have a noticeable impact on the IT industry or

government policy, for their actions and decisions take place in a sphere where academic work has little significance. The research relationship is always unequal, but in this case it is the reverse of the usual asymmetry of ethnographic fieldwork.

What then of the idea of engaging in dialogue with one's informants, with allowing alternative voices to participate in the research process and the production of knowledge? When one is "studying up", the danger is that such a dialogue will overwhelm the autonomy of the researcher, for one's interlocutors have a clear sense of their identity and extensive self-knowledge about their lives, motivations and aspirations, and they are usually unwilling to entertain a different perspective. They are also often speaking from a position of power as well as greater knowledge, and so assume that their understanding is more valid than that of the ethnographer. Our problem then was more lack of dialogue: informants would often ask us about the progress and findings of the study and we did our best to answer them, but often encountered non-comprehension, resistance or even hostility in response. These discussions did sometimes result in debate and argument and at times in greater understanding, but ultimately it was not a

dialogue – we did not arrive at a mutual understanding of the situation, we did not succeed in conveying our sociological understanding to our informants, nor did they persuade us to think differently about our interpretations. It was only in conversation with a few particularly reflexive and thoughtful individuals that we felt that the research process was truly dialogical. Although we tried to be reflexive and to recognise that "...ethnographers cannot be outside the global processes they study" [Burawoy 2000:4], in many ways we remained outside of this social field, and therefore we must acknowledge that our view of it is that of outsiders.

In summary, doing a "global ethnography" of the corporate world forced us to revise our conventional research strategies and methods, but more importantly also to rethink and renegotiate our subject positions as researchers, not only vis-à-vis our subjects but also in relation to the social field that we were studying. Exploring the "forces, connections, and imaginations" [Burawoy et al 2000] that shape the contemporary globalising world is an enlightening experience, but also a humbling one, for it demonstrates the insignificance of certain forms of knowledge within these larger fields of power.

NOTES

- 1 The concept of the 'field' in anthropology has been subjected to much criticism and rethinking, in part under the impact of globalisation [Gupta and Ferguson 1997], as has the notion of "site" [Metcalfe 2001], but these questions are not addressed directly here.
- 2 Business process outsourcing (BPO) includes call centres as well as a range of outsourced back office work; the more generic term for this business is IT Enabled Services (ITES). Our study focused primarily on software outsourcing companies and software professionals, but it also included a smaller sample of BPO units and workers. Most of the examples in this paper are taken from the software sector, but the methodological issues were broadly similar in both cases.
- 3 Although we did not intend to do this kind of comparison, by including both software professionals and call centre workers in the study, we ended up with a readymade comparative sample of people with very different socio-economic statuses, cultural orientations and work experiences.
- 4 It would have been very easy for us to place a researcher in a call centre, but we would have had to hide the fact that we were doing research; hence we decided against this strategy on ethical grounds. A counter-example is the fieldwork carried out by Sean O Riain (2000), who worked as a tech writer in an Irish software outsourcing firm as part of his research on the industry. In his case, however, the company and team members were aware that he was there for the purpose of research.
- 5 Interestingly, one of the main concerns of the IT companies was to protect their workforces: they attempt to keep information on the skill profiles of their employees confidential in order to prevent other companies from "poaching" them – a practice that is quite common in the industry.
- 6 In the end, 18 companies participated in the study, but we interviewed 35 CEOs and other top executives and 36 HR managers and executives from a range of companies.
- 7 Other ethnographies that have been very useful in thinking through our data are Kondo's (1990) study of women workers in small Japanese firms and Freeman's (2000) of women teleworkers in Barbados.
- 8 But for anthropological studies of the new economy, see Fisher and Downey (2006).
- 9 The final sample size for formal interviews was

- 132 software engineers from 15 companies, against a target of 500 from 25 companies. We also interviewed 34 ITES employees.
- 10 In one instance we were politely requested not to speak or write in public on the issue of caste discrimination and employment; but we have nonetheless published our findings without any negative repercussions.

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