The terms of trade
Competition and cooperation in neoliberal North India

Kriti Kapila

The economic restructuring of the 1990s has arguably brought about significant changes in the values that organise politico-economic and everyday life in India. One of the most visible changes is the moral weight placed on market competitiveness - at one level signalled by the state's own efforts at achieving global economic success. The second is the encouragement of homo-economicus, or the self-reliant and productive individual agent as the preferred subject of modern India. This paper explores the connections and the disconnections between an amplified ideology of market competitiveness and the emergence of homo-economicus. It argues that competitiveness and its other - cooperation - as organising values of everyday economic life have combined in new and unexpected ways in the differential emphasis placed on them by economic actors in the last 15 years. Mapping the rearrangement of the moral landscape allows for an investigation of how the success of state-initiated economic reforms is ensured and the ways in which these state-driven initiatives are perceived and negotiated at the local level.

David Harvey has suggested that the neoliberal state needs nationalism to ensure the success of its economic reforms (Harvey 2005). He argues that forced to act as a competitive agent in the world market, the state mobilises nationalism by positing common goals, history and teleology because of the way in which neoliberal values of self-realisation and individual choice interlock with the state's new role as a competitive agent in the world market (Harvey 2005: 85-86). Whilst in broad agreement with Harvey's proposition, through my material I want to suggest that because the nation is never a given or even a shared set of ideals, the state and the citizenry often have competing understandings of history and teleology and of their respective roles within it. These competing understandings simultaneously work to disrupt the uniformity and coherence of the neoliberal order as well as make for new forms of daily state presence and intervention. Contra Harvey, I argue that the values of individual choice and self-realisation are not created in a vacuum, but instead are given a public form as mutated versions of older values that were key to older and more established versions of nationalism. The newness of the moral landscape under neoliberalism is therefore not located in these values per se but in their newfound pre-eminence in the rearranged socio-economic landscape.
Furthermore, market acumen and market participation do not necessarily follow a given and implicitly evolutionist trajectory, or indeed a coherent narrative. As the paper demonstrates, economic restructuring in India has paradoxically blunted erstwhile trading capacities of certain agents, diminishing their entrepreneurial skills and capacities, forcing their withdrawal from the market and rendering them ever more reliant on state subsidies and welfare. At the same time, participating in world trade as individual competitive agents, and even as they become increasingly regulated and assessed by the norms of market-profitability, state-run corporations rarely conform to neoliberal ideals or indeed practices. Instead, they mobilise collective solidarities, often expressed in the idioms of kinship both to maximise entrepreneurial opportunity and to cushion the failure to come good on the new market-driven standards. Thus, the effects of neoliberalism have not only been less even or universal and have instead been remarkably different than anticipated in its own proclaimed telos, or indeed anticipated in Harvey's analysis.

The wool trade in north India forms the empirical context of this paper and here I focus on its two main agents in north India. The state-run Wool Federation of Himachal Pradesh is a corporation that is responsible for the regulation and the development of the wool trade in the province. An investigation of the Federation's short history later in this chapter reveals that even under the changed economic regime it has had to continually negotiate the rules of the market alongside the demands of 'kinship' from other state institutions, at times to the detriment of its own market standing. I read this short biography of the Wool Federation against the relatively longer history of the political engagement of regional wool producers with state and market forces. The Gaddis, a pastoralist community in Himachal Pradesh have negotiated recent changes in the economic policies of the Indian state in their capacity as primary wool producers and traders of the region. What is common to both these agents of wool trade in the western Himalaya is the centrality, though shifting and differing, of the Gandhian model of self-sufficiency as economic nationalism that has a vital bearing on the way economic restructuring is operationalised and perceived at the local level.

An examination of north Indian wool trade in recent years further highlights that not all contexts of neoliberalism produce the self-same subject in every context. In India, despite a deepening neoliberal order, state-run trade and commerce organisations may not necessarily emerge as lean corporates due to a range of reasons, which include not just welfare demands placed on the state but equally demands of cooperation from other state organisations. Thus, contradictorily, neoliberal principles such as self-regulation have produced stronger kinship ties between various state bodies, sometimes at the cost of producing competitive agency. On the other hand, ordinary citizens have not become self-regulating under neoliberalism per se. The self-regulating Gaddi is a subject of first its own mythical history, then that of anticolonial nationalism that subsequently consolidates as well as fractures in its participation in the project of citizenship and modernity.

Competitive cooperation

In the Western Himalaya, the Gaddis have traditionally been one of the foremost primary producers of wool. They are a pastoralist group who live on either side of the Dhauladhar range of the Himalayas in Chamba and Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. Whilst a majority earn their livelihood from pastoralism, in recent years other forms of livelihood (notably wage labour and agriculture) have increasingly become popular amongst the younger generation of Gaddis. Despite these recent trends in livelihood pursuits, pastoralism continues to structure the moral world of the community. The Gaddi myth of origin produces the Gaddi as the chosen pastoralist in this world as willed by divine forces. According to this myth, pleased by the choice of abode made by the first Gaddi ancestors, Lord Shiva created large herds of sheep and goats from the ash smeared on his body and promised them plenitude as long as they and their descendents continued to look after these animals. The synonymy of the community with pastoralism is etched indelibly in the Gaddi mind, public perception as well as official record. So strong has been the association between pastoralism and the Gaddis in the region that official records have sometimes classified herding families belonging to other communities (for example, the Kanets, a minor agricultural caste in the Kangahal region) as Gaddis (Saberwal 1999). The community until recently has been amongst the more prosperous and therefore more politically visible of the rural population groups in the region. Thus the strong link between the past, plenitude and pastoralism is continually invoked by the Gaddis to direct their present politics.

At least since the nineteenth century Gaddi pastoralism has been a critical part of the regional economy that includes agriculture, transhumance and trade (Bhattachtarya 1995; Roy 2002; Saberwal 1999; Singh 1998). Apart from the herders' vital contribution to agricultural productivity, the supply of and trade in commodities like wool, fodder, and medicinal herbs also relied on the long-distance mobility of the pastoralists in the region. The community was an important source of revenue for the pre-colonial and the colonial state and therefore a recipient of colonial patronage and grants in the form of customary rights in pastures across the region (Philimore 1982; Saberwal 1999; Singh 1998). I have elsewhere dealt in detail with the history of Gaddi engagement with the colonial and postcolonial Indian state (Kapila 2008; forthcoming). Here, I discuss the dynamics of the wool-trade in order to explore how the recent threat to their main source of livelihood shapes their relationship with or understanding of the Indian state post-liberalisation.

Up until the early twentieth century, Gaddi pastoralists earned their living chiefly from the sale of meat. Wool sheared from their sheep made for a secondary part of their income. The two world wars increased the demand for wool and especially of woollen blankets and uniforms for use by the troops (Roy 2002), which provided a huge filip to the Gaddi political economy.
The rise in wool prices made for a more generalised prosperity of the community and those who had large herds in particular became cash-rich as a consequence. A relative economic prosperity however did not necessarily make for an enhanced social regard, not least because of the location of the community outside the caste-system. Nevertheless, the interlocking of the community's well-established relationship with the state, their own political acumen and the electoral arithmetic that informs the post-colonial Indian polity has resulted in a greater visibility in the region, despite their relatively marginal status in the local society.

Prior to the 1990s Gaddi traders (colloquially referred to as 'agents') bought wool from herders and sold to bigger wool merchants, wool-factory owners and government-run small-scale and other industrial units manufacturing blankets and woollen garments. This meant that some Gaddi traders had to travel to the wool market towns in the plains with their ware. Today, just as the time before the world wars is remembered for its hardship, this period is now remembered by most Gaddis as the time of plenitude. They reckon that they became prosperous because they knew the ways to control the market. 'Tab market hamari pakad mein thi' ('At the time the market was in our grip'), says Ishar Das. Ishar Das was generally regarded as an important wool 'agent' in the area around the village where I conducted fieldwork. He was a man in his late sixties, and had been a wool trader for at least four decades, he told me. In keeping with a usual division of labour in Gaddi families of his generation-set, Ishar became a wool trader whilst his brother looked after the family herd.

If you were a good trader, and you had a good eye (agar nazar khari thi), then you could read the seasonal market well and could dictate an optimum price, or at least bargain better. If you were inexperienced or simply not good at your job, then you would leave your supplies with someone who was known to be astute (such as me) and leave it to them to gauge the right price for your stuff (maal).

(Research interview, 7.12.2006; village Gadihara, district Kangra)

The price of wool in those days – and to a certain extent even today – depends on the length and the cleanliness of the fibre, and whether or not the dark fibre has been separated from the light one. Gaddi sheep are sheared three times a year, and it is generally the case that the autumn wool fetches the highest price because of the length, strength and softness of the fibre. 'But the quality of wool was not the only consideration in naming your price', Daulati tells me. 'It also required knowing how much the Rajasthanis were going to sell theirs for'. Wool producers from Rajasthan posed the biggest competition for the Gaddis because even though the wool from Rajasthan was (and is) considered a notch inferior in quality, it could easily command a fair share of the market because its lower price made it attractive for manufacturers that did not require finer fibre such as blankets and carpets.

'But now you don’t need to be particularly intelligent to sell your wool. In some ways things are much easier now because the government fixes the price and we all sell to the government now at that fixed rate.' It is ironic that such narratives replete with nostalgia for the seemingly ideal free-market conditions that dictated Gaddi fortunes speak of a time when there was a much stricter state regulation of the economy.

But a simple demand-supply principle is not all that makes for this nostalgia for erstwhile ideal market conditions. Another distinct memory centres on the physicality of the market itself. Many older herders remember going to trade in the market towns in the Kumaon region of the eastern Himalaya. Until the late 1970s, there was no proper road link between India and Tibet, and legal and illegal trade relied on the use of pack animals. Older goats (2-3 years) that were past their prime for the purposes of meat were especially valued because of their agility and ability to traverse difficult terrain. Ishar Das said that he regularly sold these goats in the Kumaon market up until the mid-1980s when the road link was established. Even though Kumaon was very far to go on foot, he usually preferred to go himself instead of sending his maut (here animals as goods) with another trader. The region's Ramnagar Mandi in those days was considered particularly exciting, not least because of the contraband goods from across the border. 'There would be something new each year, something that you had never seen before, for example colourful toys, shiny new watches and clocks, etc.' Such markets also provided herders the opportunity to build personal links with people that were potentially vital for future trade. 'Today, most of our wool ends up in Panipat, Amritsar and Bikaner but we rarely go there ourselves.' In addition, there is virtually no market left for older goats as pack animals.

Gandhian commodity-chains

Not only have markets transformed into distant and virtual realities, the trade route and the commodity chain in which Gaddi wool is inserted has radically altered in the last 15 years. It is this set of transformations that bring into sharp relief the extent to which the moral landscape of economic nationalism has been reorganised. Jalandhar, in the Punjab plains, was a place of prominence on the pre-liberalisation Gaddi trade map, for this was where the largest single buyer of raw wool was located. Khadi Bhandar is a state-run corporation that sells among other things, khadi – the unique home-spun cloth promoted by Gandhi as a symbol of self-sufficiency and self-reliance during the anti-colonial struggle. According to the older herders, most of the Gaddi wool bought by the Jalandhar branch of the Khadi Gram Udyog (or Khadi Village Industries' Corporation) was used for the manufacture of blankets and woollen textiles. Most herders preferred to sell their stock to Khadi Bhandar because of its usually competitive prices as well as guaranteed payments. But there was another reason, and that had to do with the symbolic value of khadi in Gaddi political economy.
Raunki, a herder in his late sixties, was categorical about the difference between 'then' and 'now'. It is Gandhi, he said to me. Gandhi? I was puzzled at this unprovoked invocation of Gandhi in the midst of our conversation that had thus far centred on the more usual issues surrounding Gaddi economic fortunes, such as crashing wool prices, and the economic and physical hardship surrounding pastoralism, etc. In a manner reminiscent of Shahid Amin's (1984) succinct analysis of the figurative presence of Gandhi in nationalist life, Raunki said,

Well, in those days everyone was committed to following Gandhi's conditions on which he got us our freedom (jin sharton par azaadi dilayi). Sab Gandhi ka hakum mante the (everyone used to obey Gandhi's orders). But today we seem to think we don't need to follow them. And that is the difference between those times and now.

What exactly were these conditions that Gandhi had laid out for the people of India to enjoy the freedom he had won for them, I asked. Self-rule and self-reliance, he said, citing swaraj and swadeshi, the two central tenets of Gandhi's socio-economic thought, and went on to elaborate how the community had remained faithful to both these Gandhian principles. Raunki went on to describe to me what appeared to be a Gandhian commodity-chain analysis. According to his explanation, Gandhi did not mean self-reliance to be cultivated merely at the supra level but also at the micro, not just at the level of the nation (desh), and the village (gaanv) but even that of the community (log, jati). 'We Gaddis were mostly self-sufficient', he said.

We had our own priests. We were our own food producers since someone or the other in the family worked the land. There were even some traders amongst us, but not enough to make us self-reliant (atam-nirbhark). Therefore more of us had to become our own merchants if we were to become a fully self-reliant community.

Such a division of labour within the community pre-dated the Gandhian moment. Most clan histories recount an original ancestor who was one of three brothers, each of whom was respectively engaged in herding, trading and agriculture. But that this was one of the conditions of freedom, and at the same time the perception of a direct 'command' or order from Gandhi is what gave self-reliance as a value, as a telos, a certain unassailable force.

Wool trade in those days was different not just in the way competition was arranged between the local traders, or indeed in the absence of imported wool in the market in the pre-liberalisation days but more fundamentally in the path it traversed and the connections it brought into being. Initiating a commodity-chain in consonance with the conditions laid out by Gandhi, Gaddi herdsmen used to send off their wool and rough yarn that was sheared and carded along the herding trails to the Khadi Bhandar in Jalandhar with one of their own 'agents'. The Khadi Bhandar thereupon distributed this Gaddi wool to various weaver-cooperatives in the region, for the manufacture of yarn, and/or woollen material. These cooperatives then sold the yarn and woollen material to wool factories for the manufacture of goods such as carpets, textile, blankets, etc. The Khadi Bhandar in turn bought some of these goods, especially blankets and rough woollen textile, for their own retail trade. The Bhandar sold them at a fair price, Raunki said, enabling these commodities to be within the purchasing power of the masses. Thus, according to the older generation of Gaddis, self-reliance helped everyone along this chain. Ishar explained,

For as long as we were faithful to Gandhi's conditions, we did well, and rightfully enjoyed the freedom he had got for us. Our contribution to the nation's swaraj was to provide wool to the Khadi Bhandar. I preferred to sell my wool to the Khadi Bhandar in Jalandhar instead of the lala (merchant) from Panipat or Amritsar not just because they (the Khadi Bhandar) were trustworthy and offered a good price for our wool, but also because Gandhi da farmaan tha (it was Gandhi's order).

(Research interview, 7.12.2006; village Gadhia, district Kangra)

This was the way in which competition and cooperation were arranged in the pre-liberalisation economic life of the Gaddis.

That khadi enjoyed a position of metaphoric pre-eminence within Gandhian thinking and world-view is well noted in scholarship (see Amin 1995; Cohn 1996; Skaria 2002; Tarlo 1996). What has seldom been documented is the everyday life of this metaphor, the symbol of a self-reliant economy, outside the framework of anti-colonial nationalism. Focusing on the postcolonial life of khadi Dipesh Chakrabarty comments on the persistence of white khadi as de rigueur attire for politicians in India today. Even if their politics and practices have moved away from Gandhian ideals, he argues, this is not hypocritical on the part of the largely corrupt politicians, as is often understood. Instead, he points out that the persistence of the wearing of white khadi amongst politicians signifies the trace of the 'Gandhian semiotic' in postcolonial public life in India (Chakrabarty 1999: 5). According to Chakrabarty

the khadi that adorns the body of the 'hypocritical' Indian politician is a condensed statement of [the] tension between an untheorised and increasingly unacknowledged subject of colonial modernity – to which we now apply the collective appellation Gandhi – and the actual rapacity of Indian capitalism. For our capitalist practices promote values quite the opposite of those which Gandhian politics taught us to desire. Those desires have receded but not disappeared from Indian public life.

(Chakrabarty 1999: 12)

In trying to understand the herdsmen's location of difference between pre and post-liberalisation India in Gandhian self-sufficiency, I largely follow
Chakrabarty's reading of this semiotic as one that is produced by the tension between capitalism and sovereignty. But, instead of focusing on the traces of this tension in a public life made of politicians and media circulations, I attend to the utterances of herders that are evinced away from public political life and mass media. Is the invocation of self-reliance by the Gaddis an instantiation of the same Gandhian semiotic that Chakrabarty has outlined—that is one produced by the tension between rampant capitalism and its resolutely indigenous binary of self-constraint? To be able to fully appreciate this one needs to pay attention to the next phase and to the introduction of a new agent of the wool trade in Himachal Pradesh that unfolded in the economic restructuring of the early 1990s.

**Cooperative competition**
When it was first set up in 1988, the objective of the Wool Federation of Himachal Pradesh was to promote the formation of wool cooperatives amongst the province's herding communities. There was nothing exceptional about these objectives at the time. As it may be recalled, the formation and promotion of cooperatives and state-run marketing corporations was a prime facet of state intervention in the economy in pre-liberalisation India. The purported objective of setting up of such bodies was to cohere a fair trade in goods and commodities at the provincial and national level, as well as with a view to securing a fair distribution network across the country. Inasmuch as these interventions were directed at ensuring distributive justice, they were equally driven by a degree of overt political instrumentality. The setting up of the Wool Federation of Himachal Pradesh forms the dividing line along which Gaddi herders perceive a before and after. An organisation such as the Wool Federation therefore emerged within the populist economic and developmental strategies of the time that coalesced around poverty-reduction, economic swaraj and vote-bank politics (see Gupta 1999: 59–79).

The objectives of cooperative production, fair trade and distribution did not necessarily produce their logical outcomes. Certainly, the Federation found the setting up of wool cooperatives amongst herders extremely difficult because of the very nature of sheep-rearing in the region. Herders (or sheep-rearer, as the Federation calls them) could not be organised into cooperatives at the village level because all large-scale sheep-rearers were pastoralists who held grazing rights in pastures in forest runs across the province. Organising wool cooperatives along respective pastures too was unfeasible because the users of a pasture varied from year to year, depending on the permit-sharing/renting arrangements between the herders. Once the impossibility of ever achieving their original objective became apparent, the Federation changed course, so that by 1995 they began to reincarnate themselves as a major buyer of rough wool from the Gaddi and other herders in the province. The timing of their change in tack roughly coincided with the inauguration of economic restructuring and ironically with a retreat of the state from certain economic activities. As far as the herders were concerned this shift also coincided with the moment when the state began to withdraw subsidies on the purchase price of wool, arguably to keep in line with its commitment to the conditions of world trade regimes (Kapila forthcoming). The conversion of the Wool Federation from a cooperative-promoting society to a state-run marketing body is significant, not least because it complicates the picture of the withdrawal of the state from key sectors under neoliberalism, to which I will return later.

The Wool Federation thus began to buy wool directly from the herders, by which it was meant that their personnel reached the herders at the pastures and paid them for the sheared wool in cash on the spot. The Federation then sold this wool in open auction, but in reality most of it was still bought by the Khadi Bhandar (in Jalandhar and elsewhere). Already the wool commodity-chain was beginning to look different from its Gandhian phase. The gambit to diversify into marketing paid off only in the very short-run, according to the present officials of the Wool Federation. This was because at the time the Khadi Bhandar was able to offer very competitive rates for wool as a consequence of the large state support it enjoyed making it a very cash-rich organisation. But once the Bhandar itself came under the purview of subsidy-cuts from the state around 1999–2000, it could no longer guarantee large-scale purchase of wool even from other state marketing bodies. This then precipitated yet another crisis for the Federation.

Cuts in state-subsidies were part of the 'opening up' of the economy that entailed a twin process of rolling back of the state from the economic sector and the opening up of the domestic market to foreign investment, trade and goods. Domestic markets were no longer subject largely to the logic of developments within the national boundaries, but were becoming bound up with wider networks of growth and crises. This is not to argue that economic and other developments outside the national boundaries did not have a bearing on the Indian economy prior to the 1990s. Crises in world oil production and trade, for example, have always had profound influence on the shape of the domestic economy since the first major occurrence in the 1970s. Instead, the intention is to point to the increased density of entanglements in recent years that reach well beyond the usual world trade-cycles and related developments, such as an oil crisis. The density of entanglements became manifest for the wool market in north India in a particular form. The Federation functionaries explain that their existing problems were compounded by a drought in New Zealand in the mid-1990s, resulting in large-scale culling of sheep in that country. An assessment report of the Federation states that the world wool market became flooded with large quantities of New Zealand wool at the turn of the twentieth century. Under the new free trade regime authorised by the World Trade Organisation (hereafter the WTO) to which the government of India was an original signatory, Indian commodity markets could no longer remain insulated from such global market trends. The Indian wool market thus became over-determined by the influx of a significant quantity

**The terms of trade**

205

Kriti Kapila

The terms of trade 205
of cheaper, but finer wool from the Pacific. According to one newspaper report at the time, the import of wool and woollen textile went up by as much as 792.3 per cent between 2000 and 2002 compared to the overall textile and fabric growth figures of a mere 8 per cent (Mital 2003). This growth in imports was actually achieved through several bilateral trade agreements between India and other countries (including New Zealand and Australia). It was not a matter of unalloyed free trade, and resulted in the plummeting of the purchase price of wool from around Rs 70 per kg (roughly $3 at the then rate) in the early 1990s to Rs 18 per kg by 1999-2000. In addition, the influx of wool from New Zealand and other parts of the world resulted in a low-rate fabric growth figures of a mere 8 per cent (Mital 2003). This growth in imported textile and wool was not a matter of unalloyed free trade, and resulted in the plummeting of the purchase price of wool from around Rs 70 per kg (roughly $3 at the then rate) in the early 1990s to Rs 18 per kg by 1999-2000. In addition, the influx of wool from New Zealand and other parts of the world resulted in a low-rate (as community) and the nation, and the second is the relationship between the citizens and the state and how they perceive their own agency has shifted within each of these relationships. For the Gaddis, the implications of the departure from a Gandhian mode of self-sufficiency were felt beyond the economic domain because the principle did not confine itself to the economic domain alone. Some older Gaddi herders believe that their input in nation-making had been to extend the principle of political-economic sovereignty advocated by Gandhi to include social self-reliance too. In doing so, they not only made their contribution to the nation as self-making, but that this exercise in turn contributed to preserving the distinctiveness of their community. Underlying the departure of swaraj and swadeshi is the reformulation of the relationship between the nation-state and the citizens. In the minds of the herders, the state in the form of the Wool Federation, inserted itself as an intermediary between them and the market, stunting their commercial acumen and thereby diminishing their economic productivity and scope for self-reliance. It further abandoned its original contract of reciprocity in the project of nation-making by allowing non-national interests to determine the fates of swaraj, which ultimately resulted in their diminished capacities as economic agents.

Lowered sales of wool and a growing disinterest in pastoralism as a viable source of making a living contributed to a renewal of Gaddi political agency in the late 1990s. Immiseration and loss of livelihood formed the core issues along which they have successfully lobbied recently for a unique compensation from the Indian state. In 2002, after nearly 50 years of struggle the Gaddis were declared a Scheduled Tribe, guaranteeing them enhanced welfare opportunities and political representation. Granting the Gaddis special status under the Constitution is simultaneously recognition by the state of their place within the calculus of electoral democracy as of their abjectness brought about by changes in the political economy (see Kapila 2008). In achieving this status for themselves, the Gaddis have thus recalled the neoliberal state that was seen to be in flight to recommit itself to its original promise of paternal or welfare obligations.

The Federation officials interpret the vicissitudes of the past decade within the larger framework of the post-liberalisation state reforms of the economy and their own role and influence within it. In any case, according to them, the guiding principle for state bodies such as the Wool Federation is not profit.

We are not a profit-oriented organisation. We are here to provide facilities and extend services to the kinds of people who do not have the capacity to participate in the market as individual producers. We stepped in, in order to diminish their (herders') exploitation by big wool merchants. This sentiment is echoed in a report of the Federation on improving the government's Integrated Wool Development Programme to be included in
the proposed Twelfth Five-Year Plan. "[The herders] have neither the means nor the time for market intelligence to find marketing outlets. The traders leave no stone unturned to exploit the helplessness of these breeders and the price of wool paid to the breeders is not remunerative." The hint of hubris in the Federation's assessment of the market capacities of the herders signals the way the state makes manifest its paternal position vis-à-vis certain kinds of citizens, having itself produced the conditions of their infantilisation.

Even if the Federation may not be guided by the profit motive, the other neoliberal imperative of competitiveness is certainly upon them. But this imperative too is parried or deferred in agency. Commenting on their own expanded vulnerability brought about by some key decisions taken by other government departments (such as those responsible for trade and commerce negotiations at the international level) one official said:

we are a government organisation and we are very small. We certainly do not have any right to interfere in the decision-making of other state organisations or ministries, even if these decisions work ultimately to containing our avenues of success or growth.

(Research interview, 7.12.06; Deepak Saini, Palampur)

The reprieve from the demands of competition is sought and achieved in a series of moves in order to mark distance from the diktats of the market. The most significant of these is the crafting of a primary network invoking kinship-based solidarity and cooperation with other state bodies and inserting oneself within it. Thus, references to the different government departments as members of the same family (usually as younger or older brothers) are fairly commonplace. Such a move of constituting the state as an encompassing kin category allows for operating within a different economic morality away from the demands of market rationality. However, in making such a move, the Federation opens itself to a neoliberal critique of socially embedded economic relations, such as a kinship-based economy (Granovetter 1985). This critique is based on the assumption that kinship systems on the one hand stifle productive economic exchange by allowing non-market considerations to distort price signals, and on the other, they come to promote greater trust among exchange partners thereby reducing their need of insurance against risk of default (Jenkins 2003: 588). In the case of the Federation, it is precisely the language of kinship solidarity (with other state organisations) that allows them to make a strategic move away from the neo-liberal demand of profit-driven market rationality as well as the negative fall-outs of the failure to meet this key demand. It also makes evident that it is in and through a language of cooperation and kinship solidarity the internal coherence and univocality of the policies of the post-liberalisation Indian state are achieved.

The imperative of competitiveness thus presents itself as the pre-eminent challenge to be met by the Federation as a sign of its responsiveness to the changed times. In order to remain minimally solvent they do need to be able to sell wool bought from herders - a task that has proved to be increasingly difficult in recent years. According to the Report on proposed strategies for improvement mentioned earlier, the lack of marketability of local wool is attributed to its low grade (or quality), and not necessarily to the direct foreign competition that has brought about a revaluation of wool quality. The proposed solution is not to lobby against the measures adopted by the trade ministry to open up the Indian market, but to improve the quality of wool, i.e. not to upset the network of cooperation within the state but to enhance the status of the state as globally competitive. This is imagined (and slowly being implemented) along techno-scientific lines, including providing crossbred ram species to the herders and mechanisation of the shearing and cleaning processes. The Federation thus attempts to ensure global competitiveness of Himachal wool in the foreseeable future, but the conditions that give rise to such a demand are themselves not questioned, confronted or resisted. This then is the Federation's twenty-first century version of swadeshi - i.e. one that is globally competitive (see also Jenkins 2003: 604).

Conclusion

The literature on the relationship between neoliberalism and nationalism alerts us to the different ways in which the advent of neoliberal reforms distorts and/or alters the relationship between the state and citizens (Babb 2005; Ferguson 2003; Gupta 1998; Jenkins 2003; Kohli 2006). Babb suggests that one of the biggest changes in this relationship is the erosion of the bargaining power of the citizens vis-à-vis a range of outside forces, for example, private investors (Babb 2005: 206). Drawing on material from Latin American and Caribbean countries, she argues that the compromised relationship is further exacerbated by the inability of many developing countries to create institutions of social welfare (Babb 2005: 206). In the case of India, and especially the case of north India that we have thus far been discussing, whilst the former assertion bears out well, the Gaddi case shows that this loss of bargaining power in the event of disadvantageous terms of trade is claimed as compensation elsewhere. The Gaddis' claim to long-term benefits from the state is therefore positioned by them as compensation for their loss of competence as economically viable agents - a loss brought about by the state's failure towards its citizens. However, it is ironic that their loss of erstwhile robust market capacities should come at a time when the state is bent on promoting entrepreneurial citizenship but actually ends up widening the net of welfare-dependent citizenry. The existence of a Constitutionally guaranteed commitment to redistributive justice is what marks some of the Indian forms of neoliberalism-induced immiseration different from other parts of the world.

It is not surprising in this regard that both state and a variety of non-state actors in India should endorse a rhetoric that emphasises the link between global competitiveness, national development and a better quality of life. As David Harvey argues, neoliberalism needs nationalism to survive because
the state is forced to act as a competitive agent in a world market where it is in direct competition with others, and to ensure success in this global competition for winners and losers, it sutures together appeals to the ideals of the nation, religion, history and cultural tradition (Harvey 2005: 85–86; Peters 2001: viii). The appeal to the nation is, however, indissolubly linked to a notion of the individual who, being a free agent, makes choices and bears responsibility for the situations in which they find themselves. The entrepreneurial citizen is thus reconfigured in terms of the entrepreneurial nation and the organising frame here is that of global success (van der Veur 2003).

The state on its part does not abandon the well-honed idioms of nationalism, such as swadeshi. Instead it shifts the constituency of the subject of the nation to a different kind of population as its new favoured citizens. Thus, technoeconomic nationalism is born through the discourse of globally competitive swadeshi which drives the new entrepreneurial forays, reminding us of Ferguson’s analysis of how new national elites are created and nurtured under neoliberalism (Ferguson 2003: 221; 2006). In India political leaders have since the early 1990s called on the nation to renew itself in order to become a global economic power, even whilst relying on older idioms of mobilisation (Jenkins 2003).

At the same time, older organising principles of economic life of cooperation and competition become rearranged under neoliberalism, and not in any given way. The neoliberal economic regime in India has not produced new values but new arrangements of values, not entirely new subjects but has instead shifted the constituency of favour and pre-eminence. Whilst the subject of neoliberalism is inherently a self-regulating subject (Amin 2005; Ong 2006; Sharma 2006; this volume), my material shows that self-regulation has instead shifted the constituency of favour and pre-eminence. Whilst the subject of neoliberalism is inherently a self-regulating subject (Amin 2005; Ong 2006; Sharma 2006; this volume), my material shows that self-regulation may not necessarily be produced with the inauguration of neoliberalism alone. The Gaddis became self-regulated subjects of their own remembered history, i.e. in staying true to their understanding of themselves in the divine order, by remaining committed to pastoralism as a people, for this was how the gods ordained their world and their plenitude. Therefore, those citizens who have been cast aside from the domain of favour are not necessarily or inherently unproductive or economically insolvent. But in their new status as insolvent and immiserated, these kinds of citizens in turn have managed to harness the state back in and not flee from its older promises.

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted at regular intervals since 1999 in diverse locales in the district of Kangra and Shimla, Himachal Pradesh. The Royal Anthropological Institute of the UK, the Staff Research Fund of the LSE, and a British Academy Small Research Grant funded different phases of this research. I would like to thank K. Sivaramakrishnan, Akhil Gupta, Henrietta Moore, Edward Simpson and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on previous versions. The usual disclaimers apply.

Notes

1 This is a highly condensed version of the history of the Gaddi relationship with the colonial and postcolonial state and its bearing on their current political practices. I have provided detailed accounts of the making of this relationship elsewhere (Kapila 2007; 2008).

2 For a political-ecological reading of the Gaddi pastoralist economy, see Saberwal 1999; for an agrarian history of the region see Singh 1998.

3 It is widely believed that the length of the autumn wool is greater than any other time in the year because the Gaddi sheep graze on good grass in the alpine pastures in the summer months.

4 I use the phonetic transliteration of Hindi/Gaddi words and therefore I write atma-nirbhār as opposed to the Hindi atma-nirbhār.

5 Research interviews with Deepak Saini, Regional Manager, Wool Federation, Palampur (07.12.06); Rajiv Lal, General Manager, Wool Federation, Simla (16.04.06). The information on the Wool Federation in the rest of chapter, wherever not cited, is based on lengthy interviews with these two above named and other unnamed Federation officials based at Simla and Palampur.

6 The state regulation of pastures for grazing emerged out of a wider environmentality (Agrawal 2005). Access to notified forest pasturage is regulated through a regime of customary rights, and a handful of Gaddi families have original rights in pasturage. The permits themselves are heritable and form a crucial part of exchange relations within the community. For a historical overview, see Saberwal 1999.

7 For the Gaddis, New Zealand came to stand in for the outer world' that was becoming tied into their everyday life. I have discussed the reference to animal husbandry practices in New Zealand in a comparative tone from the Gaddi herd-ers in 1999–2000 (and my own initial surprise at this comparison) elsewhere (Kapila forthcoming).


9 I have elsewhere dealt in detail with the question of the downscaled place of pastoralism in the contemporary world in the perception of the Gaddis (Kapila forthcoming).

10 Saini, 07.12.06.


12 Jenkins (2003) argues that since 1991, various political parties in India have found it felicitous to use this version of swadeshi in order to legitimate the structural adjustment programme by tying it to an older mode and model of resistance.

Bibliography


Bhattacharyya, Niladri (1995) ‘Pastoralists in a colonial world’. In D. Arnold and
10 Becoming entrepreneurial subjects

Neoliberalism and media

Purnima Mankekar

This article draws upon a larger project on South Asian public cultures and transnational media, and is based partly on preliminary research conducted by Akhil Gupta and myself in call centers in Gurgaon. It is also based partly on my analysis of a Bollywood film, Bunty aur Babli (2005; dir: Shaad Ali, Yashraj Productions), which effectively articulates some important shifts that have occurred with regard to the aspirations and fantasies of young people – particularly lower-middle-class youth in small towns – in the wake of neoliberal discourses of individual initiative, risk, and entrepreneurship. The editors of this volume ask us to examine “what liberalization means to the everyday lives of villagers, townspeople, low-level bureaucrats, and public institutions or welfare institutions” (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan, this volume:1, emphasis added). My objective is to use these two examples, of call center agents and of cinematic constructions of entrepreneurship, to trace the effects of neoliberal discourses on how the metrics of progress, success, and class mobility are recalibrated and, perhaps most crucially, aspired to by lower-middle-class youth. In so doing, I wish to problematize a binary implicit in much of the scholarship on post-liberalization India between the material effects of economic liberalization and its discursive, symbolic, or/and cultural dimensions.

Specifically, I focus on the place of impersonation in the work and lives of Indian call center employees and Bunty and Babli, the eponymous protagonists of the film mentioned earlier. That call center employees, or agents as they are termed, take on “foreign” identities by acquiring new names, modifying their accents and, in many cases, adopting active personas and lives has attracted a great deal of media attention. Although the modalities of impersonation that I will describe shortly are not unique to call center employees, as they are termed, take on “foreign” identities by acquiring new names, modifying their accents (either through imitating foreign accents or by “neutralizing” their own accents) and, in many cases, adopting fictive personas and lives has attracted a great deal of media attention. For many call center agents, impersonation is a pre-requisite of their jobs and, therefore, a crucial strategy in their struggles for upward mobility. I argue that these forms of impersonation are not unique to call center employees but, instead, articulate with other discourses of class and upward mobility circulating in contemporary India. Although the modalities of impersonation that I will describe shortly are particular to the current cultural context marked by the density of transnational media and the flooding of the Indian market by commodities,
Impersonation is hardly unique or unprecedented in scholarly and other discourses on identity and personhood. My conception of impersonation draws on the problematization of a stable and unitary identity implicit in the work of a wide range of scholars, including Erving Goffman (1959), whose work on the performance of everyday life has been foundational to much theorizing of the social bases of personhood; postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha whose work on the ambivalence of mimicry enabled us to reconceptualize how the micropolitics of colonialism are implicated in the construction of postcolonial subjectivity (1994); and the work of several queer theorists, most notably Judith Butler who has eloquently argued for rethinking gender as performative (1999).

Additionally, if conceptions of impersonation are not exceptional to South Asian public cultures, neither are they unprecedented. Hindu epics are rich in references to gods, goddesses, as well as lesser mortals who take on different forms, and the trope of the behroopiya (a protagonist who puts on many disguises) is ubiquitous in many scriptural as well as vernacular traditions. Many Indian performative traditions, from nautanki (a popular form of folk entertainment comprising theatre, song and dance) and Parsi Theatre to the Ramliyana traditions of Ramnagar (enactments of the Hindu epic prior to the festival of Diwali in a town in North India), take for granted the fluidity of identity. For instance, as pointed out by Anuradha Kapur, in Ramliyana performances of Ramnagar, the actors playing divine personalities are assumed to take on the characteristics of the characters they are portraying for the entire duration of the Ramliyana (2006). So how are the current modalities of impersonation that I am about to describe different from the forms of impersonation listed earlier?

I will begin by discussing the modes of impersonation followed by call center agents. Next, I will juxtapose the impersonation practices of call center agents with those engaged by Bunty and Babli in their attempt to make their way up class hierarchies. What do the particularities of these protocols of impersonation tell us about the formation of entrepreneurial subjects in urban, post-liberalization India? How do these modes of impersonation call into question some of our basic assumptions about identity and subjectivity in a context of neoliberalism and transnational media?

Impersonation at work

On a muggy July night in 2003, Akhil Gupta and I, accompanied by an old school friend of mine, first ventured into the world of call centers. As we entered a nondescript building in Gurgaon, a two-storeyed, white-washed structure that looked, for all intents and purposes, like a house, we confronted a high, metal gate guarded by a security guard. We gave our names to the guard, and he called in to see if we had permission to enter. Much to the astonishment of the guard, who probably didn’t expect the sahib himself to come out to identify us, we were greeted by the owner himself. But the sahib,
of flickering computer monitors, wearing headsets and speaking in low voices on the phone. The cubicles were bare, unadorned with any personal effects. I wondered if this was because the agents moved around the cubicles or because they simply couldn't be bothered to mark their space in any way. A few looked up and smiled, somewhat uncertainly, at us. Harry introduced us to the floor supervisor. We hung around in the room somewhat awkwardly until the supervisor asked if we wanted to listen in on a call.

As Sharma and Gupta argue, "As a symbol of economic globalization, call centers have come to occupy a central place in debates on the 'outsourcing' of jobs from the North" (2006:2). The informatics industry in India, which took off in the late-1990s, has been shaped by a phenomenon whereby Indian companies, many of which are "homegrown" and locally-based, are contracted by companies in the US, UK, and Australia to perform a range of functions, including telemarketing and customer services, business process management, back office clerical work, medical transcription processing, account services, building and maintaining legal databases, and data entry, digitization, and management. A range of multinational companies get their "back office" work done in India, the most prominent of which are Citibank, GE, AOL, AT&T, and Goldman Sachs. The shift to digitization has meant that large quantities of data are rapidly transmitted across vast geographical distances, and has resulted in new regimes of labor (Anesh 2006, Freeman 2000). Hundreds of thousands of Indian men and women are recruited, trained, and then put to work on the shop floor in the informatics industry as agents, where they earn entry-level salaries that are relatively substantial for most middle-class and lower middle-class youth.

Central to offshore production since the 1970s, labor arbitrage has taken new forms in recent years and has been fundamental to the offshore outsourcing of services. This has been particularly true of the IT industry where jobs ranging from software programming to back-office work have been outsourced. Labor arbitrage refers to the "ability to pay one labor pool less than another labor pool for accomplishing the same work, typically by substituting labor in one geography for labor in a different locale" (quoted in Aihwa Ong 2006: 161). Labor arbitrage enables cost-cutting, a crucial survival strategy for many IT companies after the dot-com bust. Labor arbitrage has also been facilitated by information technology because of its ability to synchronize the performance of online labor in different parts of the world. As Ong points out, labor arbitrage relies on the fragmentation of high-tech jobs into smaller, standardizable, and repeatable tasks. Today knowledge is increasingly subjected to a similar form of computerized coding and decomposed into small, rote labor functions. Many everyday business functions - such as data entry, customer servicing, and software development - are easily customized and done in back offices established offshore.

(2006: 162)

Labor arbitrage and information technology are thus co-implicated in complex ways. Typically, Indian firms lease dedicated telecommunication networks to connect with online databases and with overseas companies and clients: thus, for instance, call center agents sitting in Gurugram can look up a customer's purchasing habits to prep for a sales call, and debt collectors can tap into their customers' credit histories. According to one business owner that we interviewed, customer services are no longer as lucrative as they used to be in the 1990s, and some Indian firms are switching to debt collection and high-end work like medical services. Call centers can recruit from a fairly diverse employee pool, including homemakers, retired military officers, and so on. However, all the trainers and owners of call centers we spoke to were unanimous in insisting that they preferred to hire young people, either those still in college or recent graduates. One call center owner was very explicit in his reasons for preferring young people: "Older people don't have the stamina to do this kind of work," he said. "If you're over 30, you're basically too old. Plus, most people have families of their own by that age. And [in those cases] families come in the way of the work."

The time difference between India and most overseas clients means that Indian agents have to work at night to interact with them. The physical demands of working in call centers require a great deal of stamina and resilience, and the timings are such as to preclude having a "normal" family life. We interviewed one call center agent who was in his late-twenties and did, in fact, have a family. He had previously worked as a wholesale agent for washing detergent and had had to travel constantly to ply his wares. Since his income was tied to his sales, he had been under tremendous pressure to perform. He told us that, even though it meant that he had to do nightwork, he preferred to work in call centers. Despite the fact that here, too, he was under great pressure to meet targets, he claimed that he got less tired than when he had to go from shop to shop selling detergent. He liked the "young crowd" because they were fun to be around and made him feel young, the salary was much better and, most of all, he enjoyed interacting with "foreigners." When Akhil Gupta and I asked him whether this was a job he would do "learning to be someone else"| Sharma and Gupta point out that "outsourcing is seen as both a sign of state 'openness,' modernity, and good macroeconomic liberalization by the
defenders of transnational capitalism, and as a charged symbol of decreasing state sovereignty and control by economic nationalists" (2006:4). Since the call center and BPO industry first took off in India, media accounts have centered on two issues: one, debates about outsourcing and, two, that call center employees are trained to impersonate people living in their clients' countries. In most of these accounts, impersonation is represented as a marker of the duplicity of companies that outsource jobs to foreign workers. For instance, in the widely-circulated Australian documentary, Diverted to Delhi (dir. Greg Stitt; Australia Broadcasting Company, 2002), one commentator (a white Australian) expresses his anger at the fact that agents are pretending to be Australian — "Do they think we're stupid?" he asks, enraged. What clearly upsets him, as well as countless others quoted in other media accounts, is the practice of impersonation: the fact that young men and women in India are pretending to be someone else. In more sympathetic accounts, impersonation also becomes indexical of the economic exploitation and cultural oppression of agents who are forced to disavow their own identities as part of a larger process of being disciplined as "techno-coolies."

Certainly, call center companies invest a great deal of effort in teaching agents to be someone else. As Shakuntala, a trainer with a major multinational BPO company based in the United States, informed Akhil Gupta and me, training sessions usually last for 6 to 8 weeks. They include not only learning the protocols of what to say to clients but how to interact with them. They are taught to make small talk with their clients, and this entails having an intimate knowledge of the contexts in which they live. They have to know about-weather conditions in the place where the client lives — after all what better way to pass as local, as inhabiting the same time-space as their clients, than talking about the weather? They must also be able to talk to them about the most recent sports event — thus, for instance, young Indian men and women have to learn all about baseball or American football to be able to make a sale, clinch a deal, or extract necessary information from clients. Sometimes it helps to chat about their families: hence, agents have to acquire not only American names but also American families.

But "becoming American" involves not just talking like an "American" but also learning to inhabit an American body and learning anew how to move through space like an American: agents are taught to use deodorants, how to enter and leave elevators (“while entering an elevator they should first wait for those inside to come out and then enter — they shouldn’t rush in as if they are boarding a Delhi bus”), how to stand in the hallways (“they should not stand with one foot against the wall”) and, last but not least, how to use western-style toilets. Although most of them probably watch (or used to watch) imported television shows and Hollywood films in their leisure, they now mine these media as crucial sources of how to become American.

I believe that these modes of impersonation are crucial to understanding the kinds of subjectivities being constituted not just in the BPO industry but in the larger sociohistorical conjuncture in post-liberalization India: indeed, we might well conceive of these forms of impersonation as modes of personation. The modes of impersonation practiced by call center agents are therefore not diachronically opposed to an authentic self, nor are they facades that cover up a deeper truth, but are a crucial modality of subject formation. Drawing on Brian Massumi’s (2002) notion of movement as integral to social process and subject formation, I am interested in how the protocols of impersonation I’m describing foreground the emergent nature of subjectivity. Impersonation exemplifies how subjectivity is always emergent, in motion in tandem with the physical and imaginative travel of subjects through space and time. However, departing from Massumi, I conceptualize these emergent subjectivities as formed not just through movement but as forged in contexts of struggles for mobility, thereby foregrounding the social and political bases of subjectivity.

As countless agents, trainers, and call center owners suggested to us, the desire for mobility is the primary driving force that brings hundreds of thousands of young men and women into call centers: the desire to move from the tedium of small towns to the busy, border-crossing world of call centers, from the humdrum anonymity of lower middle-class lives to the flamboyantly glitzy world of malls and the erotic mysteries of pubs and bars. While in the early years of the BPO industry, agents were recruited from metropolitan centers and nearby universities and colleges, they are now drawn from small towns and cities far and wide. (Indeed, small towns are themselves becoming new venues for call centers.) For instance, agents in the call centers Akhil Gupta and I observed came not only from small towns in nearby Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, but from Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Assam in the northeast of India.

Struggles for mobility, through space as well as through class, form the context for practices of impersonation and become crucibles for the forging of identities and subjectivities. Mobility and impersonation converge when these young men and women begin their work as agents. When agents do nightwork in order to interact in real time with overseas clients they inhabit a different time-zone — or what Raka Shome describes as the “collision of multiple times” — and engage in transnational border crossings. (2006). Other crossings also occur: as noted previously, agents are required to adopt “fictive” names, personas, identities, and, in some cases, lives. Diverted to Delhi depicts a “naming ceremony” that call center agents undergo when they take on new names: this naming ceremony functions as a ritual in which agents are reborn, as it were, with new identities.

Transnational mass media play a significant role in their training in the practices of im/personation (Shome 2006:112; see also Aneesh 2006). For one, these media are centrally implicated in the formal training of agents who are required to watch Hollywood films and multiple episodes of US TV shows such as Friends, and use them as resources for acquiring American accents, adopting American colloquialisms, and learning about American lifeways and relationship patterns — in short, for “becoming American.” These media...
also work more subtly in enabling them to imagine the American spaces and landscapes in which they then attempt to insert themselves: for instance, as my description of the cafeteria in one of the call centers I visited suggests, some of the spaces they occupy in call centers are directly shaped by representations of “American” spaces in Hollywood films.

Of course, the work of transnational media begins before agents start their formal training and, certainly, their reach and influence exceed far beyond call centers. As I have argued elsewhere, transnational mass media like satellite television and Hollywood cinema have become ubiquitous in the lives of many young men and women in urban and semi-urban parts of India for several decades, and have been centrally implicated in the fuelling of multiple desires, ranging from the craving for the commodities flooding Indian markets since the 1980s, to shaping erotic longings (Mankekar 2004). Mobina Hashmi argues that “desire for American style” (2005:246) is what drives many young men and women into becoming call center agents. The agents’ imagination of “the West” is fed largely by their consumption of transnational media (Hashmi 2005). These media, which include Hollywood films, American magazines like Glamour and Elle, and television shows imported from the US, the UK, and Australia, converge with portrayals of globality in Bollywood films, print media like India Today and Indian editions of magazines like Cosmopolitan, and transnational television networks like Zee TV and Asia TV.

Growth and mobility

Fundamentally, impersonation involves a strong element of fantasy — of globality, upward mobility, and, in particular, of “making it big.” Like many other fantasies, these fantasies are not antithetical to “reality” but, because they play such a crucial role in shaping the practices, aspirations, and worldviews of the agents, are constitutive of it. Many agents quickly learn that their dreams of upward mobility are fragile and can easily be dashed to the ground by the ongoing surveillance to which they are subjected in the name of quality control, the quotas and targets they have to meet on an hourly basis, the constant threat of layoffs, the vulnerability of their jobs and indeed of their companies to the vicissitudes of global markets — and, equally debilitating, the physical and psychic burnout that many of them experience. Nevertheless, call center jobs remain hugely attractive to educated youth in India because of the fantasies they engender. They promise not only an escape from the ever-present specter of unemployment but offer relatively high salaries and the high-end lifestyle enabled (or at least promised) by these salaries, the sense of freedom and adventure associated with doing night-work, the glamour attached to call centers and, last but not least, the notion that working in call centers will enable them to “grow.”

Call centers engender fantasies of moving to a place where one can be in step with a fast-moving world and, for some, of being part of India’s own growth as an economic power on the global stage. Working in the BPO and call center industry is itself a mode of participating in the (post)modernity engendered by late-capitalism, symbolized by the physical environments in which they work — such as their airconditioned and “westernized” workspaces (which contrasts sharply with the dusty and grimy spaces that most of their parents have worked in); the fact that they work with computers, the ultimate icons of the new age of informatics; and their constant interactions with clients in the West. Finally, the work of agents entails processes of what sociologist A. Aneesh terms virtual migration, where work travels but bodies stay put:

The new space of transnational labor has reversed its relationship with the worker’s body. Rather than move the body across enormous distances, new mechanisms allow it to stay put while moving vast quantities of data at the speed of light.


Feminist theorists such as Sara Ahmed et al. (2003), Caren Kaplan (1996), and Doreen Massey (1994) have demonstrated that spatial mobility is crucially refracted through gender. How are the new forms of border-crossing entailed in virtual migration shaped by gender and sexual politics? Media accounts of Indian call centers portray women agents, many of whom come from small towns and/or from middle-class and lower-middle-class families, as simultaneously sexually transgressive, emancipated, and vulnerable. This is particularly true of their portrayal of women who work nightshifts. Certainly in Delhi and New Delhi, whose public spaces have long been notorious for the sexual harassment of women, going out at night to work is fraught with risk and danger. The call centers Akhil Gupta and I visited in 2003 and 2005 provided transportation for all employees. But it was clear that managers and owners were particularly worried about the safety of their women employees.

Most of these companies hired or owned Toyota Qualis SUVs, and company drivers would pick up agents at the beginning of their shifts and drop them home when they finished work.

Although, in general, call center managers seemed to adopt a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy towards the gendered and sexual dynamics among their men and women employees, they took great pains to portray their workplaces as safe (read: “respectable”) spaces so as to mollify the fears of the parents and families of their employees. One manager we interviewed talked of how she frequently organized picnics and “family days” to which agents could invite their families: the idea was that, on family days, agents could bring family members to their places of work so that they could see for themselves “the healthy atmosphere” in which they worked.

The gender and sexual politics faced by women call center agents as they negotiate the physical and social spaces around them are multiple and complex, and range from the pressure to be part of the “in crowd” and sexual
harassment at work to the surveillance of family and neighbors. Anxieties surrounding women who work outside the confines of the home are far from new in urban India (see, for instance, Mankekar 1999). But these anxieties take on an added dimension when women engage in nightwork, as suggested by the moral panics surrounding women call center workers. Thus, even when women are the financial backbone of their families, they are subjected to increased surveillance from members of their families and communities.

Impersonation and personation occur simultaneously through the consumption practices of call center agents. The subjectivities of call center employees—men as much as women—are gendered through their labor as well as through their consumption practices. The construction of malls in close proximity to call center companies in Gurgaon is surely not a coincidence, and several observers (including trainers and owners of call centers) remarked to us that these malls provide not only spaces where agents socialize but, more importantly, present them with the high-end commodities so fervently desired by agents. As noted earlier, most of the call center agents we met displayed the sartorial signifiers of globality by being exceptionally well-groomed and fashionably dressed. Shopping is thus a major form of consumption and a favorite leisure activity for agents, as is going to expensive restaurants and pubs. These forms of consumption are all deemed markers of globality, of being part of a modern generation that is participating in globalization and its so-called glamour. Further, it is critical that we note that while all agents may not have the money or time to engage in these consumption activities, they are driven by the aspiration, the desire to do so. Ironically, while both men and women consume, it is women's consumption practices that are socially condemned. Thus, for instance, women who participate in transnational fashion are singled out as “ultra westernized” or, worse, sexually promiscuous and, therefore, asking for trouble.

Last but not least, the impersonation practices—and the personation or subject constitution—of agents is mediated by their interactions with overseas customers, in particular, those who respond to them with xenophobic and racist behavior. One agent described to us how customers were often cranky, suspicious, or disorganized about the information solicited from transnational fashion are singled out as “ultra westernized” or, worse, sexually promiscuous and, therefore, asking for trouble.

Even though Bunty aur Babli is not about call center agents, it is an effective materialization of the present zeitgeist: as two lower middle-class youths from small towns, Rakesh and Vimmi, are motivated by the same entrepreneurial spirit as many call center agents: a “hunger in the belly” (sic) that drives them to pursue their ambition (to make money, to earn fame, to acquire a glamorous lifestyle). Rakesh wants to become a business tycoon, and Vimmi, a famous model. As they leave the familiar but claustrophobic world of their parents to pursue their dreams, Rakesh and Vimmi become Bunty and Babli respectively. At a critical moment in the film, Bunty says that he wants to be a business tycoon like Tata, Birla, and Ambani (three leading industrialists in contemporary India) and that, in order to do so, he has to leave his hometown of Fursatganj and go to Mumbai: “If Tata, Birla, and Ambani had stayed on in their hometowns, do you think they would have reached anywhere?”
Bunty and Babli, like call center agents, must take on other personas if they are to succeed in their ambitions: their physical travel from UP to Mumbai is, in fact, enabled by their impersonation of a host of characters (ranging from gurus, business tycoons, and bureaucrats, to a minister and her secretary). Although their pursuit of freedom, adventure, and glamour is laden with hardship and risk, like call center agents these fantasies of “making it big” have material effects on the choices they make and the lives they lead. Mobility is the key to their success, indeed to their very ability to leave the claustrophobia of their hometowns.

The film portrays them perpetually on the move: in trains, in buses and cars, on top of trucks, and on foot, fleeing irate mobs. As a consequence of claustrophobia of their hometowns. with hardship and risk, like call center agents these fantasies of “making it is always emergent, always in motion. As the title song puts it: “Never do they to settle down.” But what does the constant mobility of Bunty and Babli symbolize, and what does it suggest about discourses of growth, upward mobility, and success circulating in contemporary India?

The film starts with a commentary that situates the story within two Indias. In the voice of the legendary film star Amitabh Bachchan, playing the policeman Dashrath Singh, the commentary begins: “This is India. Shining, dazzling, whispering that if you have a dream come, fulfill it. (Yeh hai India. Chahionoma, jagmaga, phusphusata hai, ki agar tera sapna hai to aaja, karle poora).”

As the titles roll, we see skyscrapers sparkling along a seashore, presumably, the Bombay seashore: the dazzling skyline of Bombay beckons all those who dare to dream. The voiceover continues:

If there is a hunger within you, then come, satisfy it. Respect, glamour, money, power – all will become your friends, and your life will become a never-ending dream. Yes, this is India. The India that Bunty and Babli dreamt of. (Aagar tera sapna hai to aaja, karle poora. Aagar there me koi bhokk hai, to aaja aur karle poori. Izzat, shohrat, paiza, taakat, sab tere dost ban jayenge aur teri zindagi kabhi na khatam hone vela sapna ho jawega. Haan, yeh India hai, voh India jo Bunty aur Babli ka sapna tha).

(Bunty aur Babli 2005)

Then there is a perceptible shift in Bachchan’s tone, and the landscape is completely transformed. Instead of the enticing cityscapes of Bombay, we now see glimpses of small town and rural India. The voiceover continues:

And this is India as well. The India that was their reality. Which said that if there is a hunger within you, then come, satisfy it. Respect, glamour, money, power – all will become your friends, and your life will become a never-ending dream. Yes, this is India. The India that Bunty and Babli dreamt of. (Aagar tera sapna hai to aaja, karle poora. Aagar there me koi bhokk hai, to aaja aur karle poori. Izzat, shohrat, paiza, taakat, sab tere dost ban jayenge aur teri zindagi kabhi na khatam hone vela sapna ho jawega. Haan, yeh India hai, voh India jo Bunty aur Babli ka sapna tha).

(Bunty aur Babli 2005)

As in the case of call center agents, Bunty and Babli’s desires for mobility, glamour, and success are fed by transnational media. This is particularly true of Vimmi. The film’s script-writer, Jaideep Sahni, describes her as a young woman who lives in a small town but who derives her knowledge of the world from cable TV. And very early in the film, we see her mother lamenting that ever since she has started watching cable TV, she has “lost her mind.” Her room in Pankinagar is plastered with photographs of international models and Bollywood and Hollywood film stars. We see her talking to a photograph of Sushmita Sen, one of the first Indian women to win an international beauty pageant: Sen is clearly one of Vimmi’s role models. In another scene, we see her bring a photograph torn off from a glossy fashion magazine to her tailor in Pankinagar so that he can copy the outfit worn by the model.

Like call center agents, the emergent subjectivities of Bunty and Babli reveal shifting boundaries of impersonation and personation, problematizing the distinction between “fictive” and “authentic” identities. Towards the end of the film we see them back in Fursatganj: Bunty has reverted to being Rakesh and works in an office (much like his father), while Babli is a homemaker and spends her time cooking and caring for her family. But it remains ambiguous if they have “returned” to who they truly are or if they are impersonating Rakesh and Vimmi, a good son and daughter-in-law. When Dashrath Singh visits them in Fursatganj, he sees that they are desperately bored: as Babli says to him, “If I have to bottle another jar of mango pickle, I will die!” He invites them to return to their life of impersonation but this time they will join a special investigative team and, rather than rejoin their earlier life of fraud and petty crime, they will serve the Indian state by deploying their uncanny gifts of impersonation to hunt down criminals.

It should be evident that the impersonation practices I have described earlier are neither inherently empowering nor subversive. In the case of call center agents, they are obviously shaped by specific relations of power, such as the relations of inequality between agents vs. supervisors, or call center owners vs. their client companies which can cancel their contract if the quota is not met or if “accent interference” gets too much and begins to anger customers. Similarly, for all the freedom that they are able to enjoy after running away from home, Bunty and Babli eventually return to Bunty/ Rakesh’s hometown of Fursatganj where they live with his parents, thus reinforcing patriarchal notions of roots and belonging. Even when, at the end of the film, they leave Fursatganj for the second time, they do not do so as autonomous subjects. This time, their uncanny ability to impersonate others is harnessed by the Indian state itself: they are recruited to deploy their talents toward hunting down those who commit crimes against the state.
Neoliberalism as ethic and enchantment

In their introduction to this volume, Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan ask:

What does liberalization mean to Indians in cities and villages, in small towns, and metropolises, in poor, middle-class, or wealthy homes? How does the post-liberalization state appear in the lives of hyper-mobile citizens as opposed to those who are sedentary? (this volume: 000)

This article is less ambitious in its scope: I have been interested in emergent conceptions of entrepreneurial subjectivity as materialized in the aspirations and practices of the lower middle-class youth I met in call centers, and in representations of success and progress in a popular Bollywood film. In particular, I have been concerned with how contemporary forms of impersonation (exemplified by call center agents and Bunty and Babli) in a specific historical context have been shaped by neoliberal conceptions of entrepreneurship, chiefly those pertaining to the crafting of the self through risk taking, individual initiative, personal responsibility and ambition, and individualistic notions of success.

Although it would be misguided and reductionist to assume that neoliberalism is the singular or even dominant discursive formation at work, the impersonation practices described earlier suggest how some of the normative imperatives of neoliberalism function to produce the moral subject as an entrepreneurial subject (Brown 2005). I am therefore concerned with the role of neoliberalism as an ethic as it mediates the practices of impersonation I have analyzed above. This ethic of entrepreneurship, whereby individuals choose to take risks and take full responsibility for the fulfillment of their ambitions, is valorized in Bunty aur Babli. Early in the film, Rakesh and his mother discuss the different financial schemes he has designed to make money. In one such scheme, he invests in a shower in his backyard. When his mother complains that he has wasted money on the shower and that he should stand in line at the communal bathroom down the street, he responds: “There are two kinds of people in this world. Those who stand in line in front of taps, and those who construct taps so that they never have to stand in line.” We are left in no doubt that he belongs to the latter group: his entrepreneurial energy, embrace of risk, sense of adventure, and can-do spirit is foregrounded throughout the film. Similarly, Vimmi defies her parents and leaves home to follow her dream of becoming a “supermodel”: like Rakesh, she takes on herself the responsibility to fulfill her ambitions.

As I note earlier, I wish to reject the spurious dichotomy constructed in some analyses of post-liberalization India between the economic effects of policies and the discourses that have emerged in conjunction with economic liberalization (which, of course, have material consequences for lives and subjectivities). For while the discursive aspects of neoliberalism pertain not to economic policy per se but to distinctive techniques by which subjects and citizens are constituted and governed, there is clearly an intimate relationship between the liberalization of the Indian economy, the growth of informatics, and neoliberalism as political rationality and an ethic of self-governance and self-production. As evident in the impersonation practices of call center agents, the informatics industry is particularly dependent on the manipulability and fungibility of labor prescribed by neoliberalism. And as discussed earlier, the neoliberal strategy of labor arbitrage provides the economic rationale for the offshore outsourcing of services to sites like India. Yet, as impersonation blends into personation, we see that it is not just labor practices but subjects themselves who become fungible: as suggested by the title of a popular documentary about call centers, agents have to be “Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night” (dir.: Sonali Gulati, Women Make Movies, 2005).

Thus, the implications of neoliberalism for the labor practices and lives of call center employees extend into the constitution of specific kinds of subjectivities. Gupta and Sharma describe neoliberal governmentality in terms of the “direction of conduct towards specific ends, which has its objects both individuals and populations and which combines techniques of domination and discipline with technologies of self-government” (2005:1). For many agents, mobility connotes growth and freedom. Yet, their mobility is highly fragile, their opportunities for growth precarious, and their sense of freedom illusory. The BPO industry, like many others that are inextricably entangled with foreign capital, is extremely vulnerable to changes in the global economy. The capriciousness of the global market, the fact that most call centers survive only on the basis of the contracts they are able to get with multinational companies, and fluctuations in the stock market mean that agents can be laid off at a moment’s notice—regardless of their performance on the job. Furthermore, agents are subjected to relentless surveillance while at work, as indicated by the ubiquitous presence of close-circuit cameras, the daily monitoring and evaluation of calls by the floor supervisor, the monotonous repetition of formulaic scripts several hundred times a day and a prohibition on deviating from that script, and the constant monitoring of their work by team leaders who, in turn, have to report to supervisors. The free agent of neoliberalism is thus not a sovereign or autonomous subject; on the contrary, freedom becomes the very means by which the self is disciplined to “take care” of him/herself (Harvey 2005).

Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that neoliberalism has flattened out the agency of call center employees. For one, neoliberalism is not a singular or monolithic discursive formation. Instead, as defined by Ong, it consists of “mobile calculative techniques of governing that can be decontextualized from their original sources and recontextualized in constellations of mutually exclusive and contingent relationships” (2006:13). Furthermore, neoliberalism is discontinuous and unpredictable in its effects: far from being homogenizing or totalizing, it cannot be viewed in teleological terms. As pointed out by Wendy Brown,
Neo-liberalism can become dominant as governmentality without being dominant as ideology – the former refers to governing practices and the latter to a popular order of belief that may or may not be fully in line with the former, indeed may even be a site of resistance to it. (2005: 49)

The impersonation practices and lives of call center agents and Bunty and Babli share much with some of the cultural and discursive traits associated with neoliberalism (a valorization of entrepreneurial energy based on risk-taking, an individualist ethos, and an emphasis that individuals own and take responsibility for following their ambitions). Bunty aur Babli suggests that it is not just acceptable to lie, engage in fraud, disobey and defy one’s parents, and flaut conventional modes of behavior, but that it is necessary to do so in order to succeed in one’s ambitions. “Older” conceptions of duty and service thus exist in tense articulation with the imperative to venture out and take responsibility and ownership of their ambitions to make it big. Let us recall, once again, the opening scenes of Bunty aur Babli that juxtaposes two different Indias: the India in which individuals may strive to fulfill their dreams and the “other” India in which individuals could “dream only of those things within your reach.” The film’s representation of these two, apparently oppositional worlds, the India of collective welfare vis-a-vis the apparently neoliberal notions of national and individual progress and success respectively. In Bunty aur Babli, as much as in the lives of many call center agents, the neoliberal ethic of entrepreneurship as self-care sits uneasily alongside other moral imperatives prescribed by discourses of gender, sexuality, family and nation – and at some level, is held in check by them.

Wendy Brown points to a reading of neoliberalism in terms of an extension of Weber’s conception of rationalization and disenchantment:

The extension of market rationality to every sphere, and especially the reduction of moral and political judgement to a cost/benefit calculus, would represent precisely the evaporation of substantive values by instrumental rationality that Weber predicted as the future of a disenchanted world. Thinking and judging are reduced to instrumental calculation in this “polar night of icy darkness” – there is no morality, no faith, no heroism, indeed no meaning outside the market. (2005:45)

I’d like to argue, however, that this is not what is happening in the world of call center agents or indeed in Bunty aur Babli. Theirs is not a disenchanted world but is, in fact, a world that has its own sources of enchantment – the enchantments provided by transnational media that enable young lower middle-class men and women who live in small towns the means to imagine life in other places. This is a world shaped by the enchantments of fantasy and impersonation. However short-lived they might ultimately be, like the impersonation practices they engender, these fantasies shape the subjectivities of call center agents (and Bunty and Babli) and give their lives meaning.

Notes
1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my friends in New Delhi who introduced me to the world of call centers, to Akhil Gupta for his collaboration in this project, and to my brilliant and hard-working research assistants Ulka Anjaria (Stanford University) and Preeti Sharma (UCLA) without whom I would never have been able to write this paper. Most of all, I am grateful to the call center owners, trainers, managers, and agents who generously shared their experiences with us.
2 The positionality of call center agents are a lot more heterogeneous and complex than is often represented in media accounts. One set of representations portrays them as harbingers of the new age of digitalized capitalism, and as young men and women who are empowered not just economically due to their relatively fat salaries but also socially – as leading a social revolution because of the kind of work that they do. By working in the information technology or IT sector, these media accounts claim, they are leading India into the digital age and enabling the nation to establish itself on the world economic stage. Even more problematically, these representations also dwell on how, after years of segregation, young men and women now work together, thus replacing one set of stereotypes (of rigid gender segregation in Indian workplaces, thereby ignoring the fact that there have long been contexts in which men and women have worked side-by-side) with another (in which IT, and more generally, globalized capital has led to a breaking down of gender barriers). Another, diametrically opposite set of images represents them as techno-coolies or cyber-coolies, as slaves to the machinations of multinational capital and greedy Indian entrepreneurs.

3 Here I draw upon but also diverge from analyses of class mobility in Fernandes 2000 and Jeffery et al. 2004.
5 It must be noted, however, that media are centrally implicated in all forms of impersonation. For instance, as several film theorists point out, impersonation is crucial to processes of spectatorship. Chakravarty, for instance, has analyzed how disguise, masquerade, and impersonation are the visual means that constitute spectatorship; furthermore, impersonation is an important modality for imagining alternative worlds created through film.
6 For more on the social bases of fantasy, see Allison 2000, Laplanche and Pontalis 1974, and Zizek 1989.
7 Brown critiques this reading of neoliberalism because she believes that, like Marx’s theory of capital, Weber’s theory of rationalization does not bring into view the historical-institutional rupture it signifies, the form of governmentality it replaces and the form it inaugurates, and hence the modalities of resistance it renders outmoded and those that must be developed if it must be effectively challenged. (2005:45)
Bibliography


