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**Gendering Labour Geography: Mapping women's world of  
labour through everyday geographies of work-life at a Special  
Economic Zone in Tamil Nadu, India.**

Madhumita Dutta

Department of Geography

Durham University

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For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

## Abstract

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The thesis looks at the experiences of work and life of young women workers who have migrated from their villages to work in an electronics factory in a Special Economic Zone in Tamil Nadu, India. Moving beyond the lens of exploitation or emancipation, the thesis attempts to understand the meaning of work and relations that develop around it. It does so by focusing on the everyday lived experiences and practices of women inside and outside the factory.

The thesis pays attention to individual stories to create linkages between lives as waged workers in a formal workspace with the informal nature of work-life outside. It tries to understand the processes through which women enter formal waged work in global production sites and the choices they make in their everyday lives, both within the workplace and outside of it; and how everyday social relations are constituted and re-constituted through work and practices of labour. The research finds that the everyday lived experiences of work and life in the factory form a 'complex web of relations' to which women grow attached to and from which they derive new meanings of work. While the thesis does not claim that the women were able to transcend the larger politics of gender or labour, it does show that waged work did create possibilities for reworking gender relations for the women.

Finally the thesis argues for Labour Geography to look beyond the factory gates to understand the nuanced politics of labour as relations get 'reworked' within a patriarchal-capitalist society. It recommends paying close attention to the 'small-scale geographies' of workers (McDowell, 2015), their life narratives and experiences, but without losing sight of the larger struggles of labour and global processes, to develop a more grounded understanding of worker's agency and actions.

## Acknowledgements

I am writing this sitting under the leafy canopy of an old rain tree that leans over the back terrace of my home. Its early morning and the city is slowly waking up to another hot and humid summer day. But this morning, Chennai heat doesn't bother me. I am busy scanning the internet reading news about the garment factory workers, almost all women, who stormed the streets of Bengaluru for two days, their collective anger and frustrations bringing parts of the 'happening' city to a grinding halt. The city is baffled, the administration is clueless, and the trade unions don't quite know how to respond. No one had anticipated that these rural migrant women could cause a labour 'unrest', as the media calls it, jamming an important state highway. But more significantly, the action on the streets of Bengaluru forced the government to roll back a contentious piece of labour legislation. Hitherto invisible to the urban middle class of the city, the protesting women on the streets that day put into circulation a powerful counter image to the 'docile', 'disposable' 'third world' female garment factory workers. This PhD is inspired by many such acts of resistances—overt and covert, by the working people. I wish to acknowledge them.

There are many people who have inspired and supported me over the years and I would like to thank them. To my parents Mukta and Priyabrata Dutta, and Satyawati and Om Prakash Kalshian, my sister Sumita, saying thank you will never be enough. To my daughter Simoom, who perhaps bore the brunt of this PhD and learnt to ignore her mother's crankiness—this whole exercise would have been meaningless without you.

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## **Abbreviations**

AIDMK: All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

AP: Andhra Pradesh

CAG: Comptroller and Auditor General of India

CITU: Centre of Indian Trade Unions

DMK: Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

ENO: Engine Operation

EPZ: Economic Processing Zone

ESOP: Extended Supply Operation

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

HR: Human Resource

MBC: Most Backward Caste

MNC: Multi-National Corporation

NITS: Nokia India Thozhilalar Sangam

OBC: Other Backward Caste

Rs.: Rupees

SC: Scheduled Caste

SEZ: Special Economic Zone

SOP: Supply Operation

ST: Scheduled Tribe

TN: Tamil Nadu

TL: Team Leader

VAT: Value Added Tax

### 1. 'Economy of appearances'

In 2000, Anna Tsing wrote of a dramatic event that took place in Indonesia. A small Canadian mining company claimed that it had found gold in the forests of Kalimantan, Indonesian Borneo. The 'find' grew big over a period of three years (between 1994-97) with investors from North America, pensioners, even towns in western Canada investing money into this small Canadian company. Then all of a sudden in 1997 it was announced that 'Busang was barren!' (Tsing, 2000:117) It was a spectacular theatrical performance as Tsing (2000:118) writes - 'Bre-X was always a performance, a drama, a conjuring trick, an illusion, regardless of whether real gold or only dreams of gold ever existed at Busang'. She calls it the - '*economy of appearances*' - 'the self-conscious making of a spectacle (that) is a necessary aid to gathering investment funds' (Tsing, 2000: 118).

The story of Indian Special Economic Zones (SEZ) is somewhat similar to what Tsing describes above. It was a 'spectacular performance' in the media by Indian politicians, bureaucrats, industry associations selling the 'dream' of a secured 'future', and for the people it was, as Jamie Cross (2014:68) notes - 'stable, secure, employment that lay at the heart of their hopes'. He called the zones 'exemplary site[s] of anticipatory practice' (Adams, 2009 cited in Cross, 2014:9) where an 'unknowable future' is explored through 'modes of planning, calculation....mapping development visions' (Cross, 2014:9). Cross (2014:9) also calls them 'deeply affective spaces' where - 'the future is felt, encountered and inhabited; in which the lived sensation of future prospects can seize bodies, persons and selves, gripping them with hope and desire, anxiety and fear'. Since 2000, when SEZs were first introduced into Indian economic policy and later in 2005 legislated into national law and incorporated into industrial policies of the individual states, the idea of zones 'conjured' possibilities of an 'economic prosperity' with increased industrial production, foreign investments, exports,

employment generation, and the development of large scale infrastructures projects.

## **2. Research aim and questions**

This research is informed by my own work as an activist working in a rapidly industrialising area of Sriperumbudur located 40 kilometers southwest of the city of Chennai in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Here, over the last fifteen years, a number of automobile and electronics hardware manufacturing factories have been set up with the former state Chief Minister promising to turn it into 'Detroit of Asia' (Panneerselvan, 1997). The passage of the SEZ law in 2005 saw the setting up of a number of private and state owned SEZs with many Asian and European multinational companies investing inside the Zones. The area saw a large inflow of workers from across Tamil Nadu and other states, and a slow transformation of predominantly agrarian villages into small industrial towns. I got involved in the debates and struggles around SEZs, land and labour in the area. I observed the diverse experiences of workers in these hyper-efficient manufacturing sites. I was especially interested in the entry of young women from rural areas into these new manufacturing sites.

The research broadly aims to understand the social relations and processes that shape women's geographies of work, in the everyday context of life within which work is located and women's experiences of negotiating relations of production, perceptions of work, strategies of coping in formal workspaces and beyond. The research aims to contribute to a gendered understanding of labour geography.

The thesis makes a contribution to the sub-discipline of Labour Geography by unpicking the notion of labour as an undifferentiated homogeneous social group through empirical material that shows that labour's experiences and practices can be varied and is shaped by relations of gender, caste, poverty, families and other factors such as education, access to resources etc. It does so by a distinct methodological approach that is attentive to individual lives and life stories, and everyday lived experiences of women workers inside and outside formal workspaces. By doing so, it makes an important empirical and methodological

contribution to Labour Geography that is interested in how labour shapes lifeworlds: how women workers see themselves, how they imagine their (economic) landscapes, and how they behave as social-political-geographic agents shaping spaces, which may or may not always be an outcome of choice, but often challenges notions of class and class politics.

In my research I try to understand the processes through which women enter formal waged work in global production sites and the choices they make in their everyday lives, both within the workplace and outside of it; and how everyday social relations get constituted through work and everyday practices of labour. However, these practices cannot be conceptualized with the notion of 'woman' being an 'always already constituted category' (Butler, 1990; Mohanty 1991; Fernandes, 1997:5), but have to be understood in relation to other social differences and the diverse experiences of women, especially in the Indian context, linked to caste, land, access to other resources, including education, health care and economic activity. I ask the following research questions in order to broadly understand the conditions that shape women's geographies of work and women's role in shaping these conditions:

- 1 What are the expectations of capital and motivations of labour?
- 2 How is work experienced and perceived by women workers?
- 3 What does the loss of work mean to the workers?

### **3. History of Zones**

As a concept, 'zones' as spaces for economic activity have been known to exist in industrial countries for several centuries. Tracing the idea of enclaves historically, one could possibly see variations of the concept of zoned economic spaces and their role in international trade and commerce from 13<sup>th</sup> century Europe and even before that in 'the Roman port of Delos, in the Aegean sea in first century B.C.' (Easterling, 2012:2). For instance, maritime ports provided 'safe' spaces for trade exchanges, storage and secure passages for commercial goods (Farole, 2011:3). They functioned as spatially bounded segregated areas

insulated from domestic and international political conflagrations. James Sidaway (2007:4) has noted how these ports, which have existed since the sixteenth century, evolved into free trade zones acquiring special features. These became 'conduits of vast commodity flows' (Sidaway, 2007:4) and gradually became linked with production and manufacturing activities in the twentieth century (Farole, 2011: 32; also see Olivier and Slack 2006).

These newer attributes of the free trade zones led to the evolution of export processing zones (EPZs) in the early 1960s, which Easterling (2005:113-14) described as 'segregated areas' where materials were 'developed, branded, or packaged' and moved to the 'next container in the supply chain'. Adoption of export-oriented industrialisation policies and its association with industrial estates saw a proliferation of EPZs over the next two decades in newly industrialising countries in Asia and Latin America (Farole, 2011: 41). The key features of these zones were differential investment and regulatory regimes combined with infrastructural support and supply of labour. Easterling (2012:5) noted that although the 'chief beneficiaries' of such zones were 'private, corporatized interests', these also 'accommodate(d) significant populations of factory workers'. China's economic growth, 'inextricably linked to the use of special economic zones' (Farole, 2011: xiii), encouraged countries in Asia and Africa to adopt SEZs as a key tool to attract foreign investment and to increase exports. It became an important model for other developing countries wanting to integrate into the global market through export-led growth policies. Viewed variously, SEZs came to be hailed either as the 'miracle of Shenzhen', transforming a small fishing village in southern China into a cosmopolitan city with a high GDP, or as 'fenced in estates' in developing countries, where private corporations maximised profits through tax exemptions, cheap labour and subsidised resources (Farole, 2011:1). Amidst myriad definitions, the World Bank broadly describes SEZs as:

Demarcated geographic areas contained within a country's national boundaries where the rules of business are different from those that prevail in the national territory. These differential rules principally deal

with investment conditions, international trade and customs, taxation, and the regulatory environment; whereby the zone is given a business environment that is intended to be more liberal from a policy perspective and more effective from an administrative perspective than that of the national territory' (Farole, 2011: 23).

International agencies, like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and International Labour Organisation have been divided in their opinions on SEZs, with some crediting it with boosting national economies and employment, while others are sceptical of its actual economic gains and labour standards.

#### **4. Zones of contestation**

SEZs were adopted in developing countries as part of a neoliberal turn in development practice and an obsession with trade amidst contesting views about their purpose, achievements and impacts on resources and larger debates concerning liberalised economic and industrial policies in these countries. Diverse imaginations and anticipations of the zones produced what Anna Tsing (2005) called the 'sticky grip' as capital got 'caught' in contestations over land and labour (Cross, 2014: 10). Easterling (2012:20) describes zones 'to be the embassy or parliament of the elite parastate corporation, the site of multinational and offshore headquartering and the spatial instrument for externalizing obstacles to profit'. Zoning technology can be seen as a process where 'ever-proliferating species of global corporations stick together in the same extrastate legal habitat', developing a 'peculiar form of intentional community' (Easterling, 2012:20). Aihwa Ong (2006) has critiqued the zones as technologies aimed at creating spaces of political and economic 'exception' to their surrounding territory, deviating from the sovereign rules of the state in order to promote private entrepreneurship. She has also described these as 'postdevelopmental strategies of reconfiguring space and reregulating populations and their flows' (Ong, 2006: 91-2), where 'development apparatus and regimes' are selectively applied in certain spaces and populations located within the national territories (Sidaway, 2007: 3). Seen as part of the

neoliberalisation process<sup>1</sup>, zones can also be attributed with '*intensifying* the uneven development of regulatory forms across places, territories and scales' (Brenner et al, 2010: 184). Meanwhile, Sidaway (2007:2) calls for a greater scrutiny of these zones as they become sites of 'intensified processes and patterns of uneven development', with some features of 'formal territorial enclaves'.

An International Labour Organisation report noted that zones created 'opportunities (for the employers) to circumvent workers' rights with impunity' (McCallum, 2011:3) The presence of a high proportion of young female workers in the zones aged between 16 to 25 years, about 70%-80% of the total workforce, (Amirahmadi et al, 1995: 836), raised issues about the nature and conditions of work inside the zone. A 2003 report by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (2003 cited in Gopalakrishnan, 2007:21) states: 'Women, who are considered to be disciplined, meticulous and more compliant than men, and therefore less likely to join a union, are a godsend for unscrupulous employers, who, moreover, prefer them to be young, single and without children'. Trade Unions documented instances within the zones of the termination of employment upon marriage and even requirements for pregnancy tests to be completed along with 'state-sanctioned marriage bans in Korea' (Gopalakrishnan, 2007:22).

## **5. In anticipation of 'growth'**

India created its first set of economic zones (EPZs) between 1965 and the 1990s. This was done to promote exports for the generation of foreign exchange, bringing in foreign investments, technology transfers, creating employment and overall regional development (Aggarwal, 2007). But it was not until 2005, when the central SEZ Act was passed in the Indian parliament, without much of a debate (Jenkins et al, 2014:8) that the SEZs became part of the development 'speak' and 'drivers' for India's economic growth plans (Gopalakrishnan, 2007). The law offered separate sets of regulatory and administrative regimes to the

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<sup>1</sup> In a paper titled 'Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways',

zones, tax exemptions, and access to subsidised resources like land, water and electricity (Jenkins, 2007). The key incentives that the zone policy promised were single window clearances, fast track processing, self-certification and reduced bureaucracy. In other words it was a process that captured the 'speeding up of the global economy' (Harvey, 1990: 240) to meet the demands of global businesses for 'temporal efficiency'. The enactment of zoning legislation in India attracted interests from private companies, both Indian and multinational. 'Even before it came fully into force in early 2006, the SEZ Act had catalysed an enthusiastic response from businesses seeking profits and state governments eager to attract investments to their jurisdiction' (Jenkins et al, 2014:4). In fact in the initial phase, there were over a thousand SEZs proposed across the country (Ray, 2010). Some of the initial enthusiasm for SEZs came from real estate and infrastructure companies who saw 'a high premium in the real estate market' if they invested 'a little' in developing the land infrastructure in an 'infrastructure poor country such as India' (Shrivastava, 2008).

Interestingly in various quarters of the Indian government, such as the Ministry of Finance and the Reserve Bank of India, and also international financial agencies such as the International Monetary Fund, criticised the 'generous' offers being made to the SEZs and warned of high revenue losses (The Economist, 2006). Social movements, scholars and activists viewed the process of establishing SEZs as the dispossession of resources and livelihoods by corporate capital premised on direct forms of usually state-sanctioned violence and mass displacement (Guha, 2008). Levin called it an 'extra-economic process of coercive expropriation' by the state to help capitalists accumulate wealth (Levin, 2011:454). Indian trade unions meanwhile called for 'caution' against the violation of labour rights in these zones (Singh, 2009: 5).

Even the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) faulted Indian SEZs on counts of land, employment and investments. CAG's 2014 report notes that only 52% of land allotted to SEZs, some dating back to 2006, has remained 'idle'; land acquired for 'public purposes' (to set up SEZs) had been diverted for commercial purposes (up to 100% in some cases) after de-

notification of several SEZ projects<sup>2</sup> (CAG, 2014: v), implying that lands acquired by the state for 'benefiting' the public through the establishment of SEZs were actually diversified for private profit. The report also shows, based on data from 117 SEZs, that there was a 'nearly 93%' shortfall between the actual employment generated through these projects and what was promised or projected during approval of the SEZs. As per the CAG report, there were 152 operational SEZs out of the 625 zones approved as of March 2014 (CAG, 2014:5). Two southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Tamil Nadu (TN) have the highest number of operational SEZs with 36 in AP and 28 in TN respectively. The CAG report (2014:20) also notes the selective location of the zones in already industrialised and 'infrastructurally developed' states, exposing the fallacy of the claims that zones are 'necessary' for overall regional development. Based on the data available on trade, investments, exports, employment and infrastructure, CAG (2014: iv, 10) notes that SEZs do not show any 'significant impact' on any of these factors which were the key objectives for setting them. Instead, the government highly subsidised private capital via tax exemptions of more than £8.4 billion pounds in 'anticipation' of the country's economic 'growth'. Therefore even after almost a decade since they were set up, CAG's audit of the Indian SEZs shows what Tsing (2000) had once called 'a performance, a drama, a conjuring trick, an illusion', a theatrical enactment that promised a great finale but when the show ended there wasn't much to write home about. Ironically, even after all the broken promises, the 'SEZ dream' still continues to persist in the imagination of the state with the present government's '*Make in India*' campaign which is making plans to 'revive' SEZs in 'anticipation of '...boost(ing) domestic economy' (Economic Times, 2015).

## 6. 'Dream zones'

In 2003, Tamil Nadu adopted SEZs as a key strategy to 'boost' economic growth through private corporate led investments, with the stated objectives of

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<sup>2</sup> CAG (2014) report notes that in four states - Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal, 11 developers/units had raised huge sums of money on loan through mortgaging SEZ lands. Out of which, three developers/units had utilized the loan amount for 'purposes other than the development of SEZ' (CAG, 2014: v).

attracting foreign companies and infrastructure development, and generating employment. To that effect, Tamil Nadu formulated its SEZ policy in 2003, one of the first Indian states to do so, followed by legislation entitled the Tamil Nadu SEZ Act, 2005. In a short span, the state managed to attract applications from over 100 SEZ developers. In anticipation of investments, changes were made to industrial policy, including the creation of 'land banks' to facilitate the setting up of SEZs and 'integration of global supply chains' into the state's existing and newer industrial projects (GoTN, 2007). The CAG (2014:5) report shows that to date there have been 73 approved SEZs in the state, out of which 53 have been notified<sup>3</sup>, and 28 are in operation<sup>4</sup>. In its Industrial Policy note for 2013-14, the state government attributes its industrial growth to the - 'availability of good quality manpower at a comparatively low cost.... The state has a rich labour pool comprising of well qualified, skilled, disciplined, productivity-oriented and English-speaking workforce' (Thangamani, 2013: 4). The state offered 'a package of incentives' to attract investments including 'capital subsidies, VAT incentives', a 'single window (clearance) mechanism', and facilitating provision of land...through the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu' (Thangamani, 2013:7). The preamble to the state's SEZ Policy noted that: 'SEZs are virtually deemed to be a foreign territory within the country free from all the rules and regulations governing import and export' (Guidance Bureau, 2003: 1).

The vision of industrialisation through the establishment of zones is in line with Tamil Nadu's already established image as an industrialised state. Stagnation of the agriculture sector, a high rate of landlessness (asset inequity), diversification of the rural economy and, importantly, the early socio-political shifts brought about by the anti-upper caste Dravidian movement have significantly shaped the modernising ethos and industrialisation patterns in the state (Vijayabaskar, 2010). Additionally, the eight-year-long political partnership between the state

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<sup>3</sup> SEZ Rules 2006 sets out the mechanisms for setting up and operationalizing the zones, which includes administrative and legal processes of approvals and notifications before SEZs can be functional. Only after a SEZ has been notified, can it operationalize its facilities.

<sup>4</sup> The CAG report (2014:13, 16 17) for SEZ performance in Tamil Nadu shows there is 79% shortfall in employment; 47% shortfall in exports; 85% shortfall in Net Foreign Exchange which is linked to exports from what was projected while approving the SEZs.

government led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and central government led by the Indian National Congress during and after the passage of the SEZ law led to an aggressive promotion of SEZs in Tamil Nadu. In a 2005 press statement, former union minister of communications and information technology and a DMK leader Dayanidhi Maran said: 'All these MNCs (multinational corporations) look for a very good deal...They are waiting for the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) policy to be announced' (The Hindu, 2005).

The aspiration for social and political change has built up over many decades in Tami Nadu. Industrialisation promised to change the lives of a large number of people, especially the young, through employment and the consumptive economies they may generate. Tamil scholars have written about *dalit*<sup>5</sup> youths and members of other lower caste community groups gravitating towards factories as workers to realise their dreams, both to emancipate themselves from the shackles of caste, as well as for material prosperity (Jeyaranjan et al, 2002; Anandhi, 2007). As Cross (2014:68) argues, projects such as SEZs 'invoke local registers of aspiration and tap into vernacular dreams for social and material transformation that are assembled from globally circulating media forms and out of social histories'. This perhaps may have had a role to play in the nature of contestations around SEZs in the state which were 'less systematic resistances' (Vijayabaskar, 2014:304) as compared to the other states of India that saw large scale protests by land owners, farm workers, political parties, labour organisations and civil society organizations over the acquisition of land for establishing the zones. In his paper titled *The Politics of silence*, M. Vijayabaskar (2014:305) noted two key factors that contributed to the 'lack of concerted resistance' in the state – 'the state's evolving political economy; and the strategies deployed to curb resistances'. He argues that a combination of formal legislation along with 'informal, micro-level processes, such as the use of legal

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<sup>5</sup> A historically oppressed group of people earlier known as 'untouchable' under the Hindu caste system. <http://navsarjan.org/navsarjan/dalits/whoaredalits> (accessed on 14/8/2015)

resources, intermediaries, coercion, negotiation and contestation’ (Vijayabaskar, 2014:305) created conditions for the establishment of SEZs in the state.<sup>6</sup>

An important factor that built consent for establishing the zones in the state as Vijayabaskar (2014:305) notes is - ‘lower-caste mobilisations against the traditional, caste-based division of labour [which] have contributed to a general desire to exploit opportunities for social, economic, and spatial mobility—which in practice means moving away from a reliance on agricultural employment as the primary source of livelihood’. While the state had been undergoing industrialisation for the past several decades, the accelerated pace with which private capital started moving in to set up ‘exclusive zones’ perhaps leading to spatial, social, political and economic changes is not yet adequately researched. It is therefore against this backdrop of the ‘aspirations’ of the state and people that I now turn to discuss the entry of Nokia Telecom SEZ in Tamil Nadu and the ‘economy of anticipation’ (Cross, 2014) that accompanied this. However, Nokia factory finally closed down in November 2014 after a tax dispute with the Indian government, frustrating the hopes and aspirations of the young workforce, about which I write in Chapter 8 (Loss).

## 7. ‘India’s Shenzhen’

In 2005, when the Finnish multinational Nokia Corporation, with the world’s largest share in the mobile phone market at that time (Whitney, 2014), decided to set up its largest mobile phone assembling plant in India, there was an ‘intense struggle’ amongst the various Indian states to attract the company to

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<sup>6</sup> I have been a member of the anti-SEZ movement in Tamil Nadu (Sirappu Porulaathaara Madalam Edirupu Iyakkam: <https://tnantisez.wordpress.com/>) and coordinated the state level People’s audit on SEZs on land acquisition, displacement and employment in seven districts of Tamil Nadu along with National Alliance of Peoples’ Movement in 2009. The audit report highlighted the ‘coercive tactics’ of the state including the use of State Land Acquisition Act, the creation of land banks, the use of out-dated land tenancy arrangements and land-use records etc. to acquire land for the setting up of private SEZs and state owned Industrial parks. Caste based political parties too played a key role in the state to build consent for SEZ projects amongst people, including left wing political parties who demanded/negotiated a market price for land and who were not opposed to SEZ projects *per se*. I had to personally face the wrath of left political party cadres in Tamil Nadu over my political stance against SEZs after a farmers’ resistance that turned violent against a proposed SEZ project in Nandigram in West Bengal in 2007.

their respective territories - Haryana, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Oskarsson, 2005: 25; Das, 2014). Corbridge and Harriss (2000) noted that the competition between states to attract investments had increased the speed of liberalization in parts of India 'more than is often recognized'. The Finnish President of Nokia Corp. Pekka Ala-Pietilä (Nokia, 2005) said at that time in a press statement after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that:

'We selected Chennai to be the location for the factory thanks to the availability of skilled labour, friendly business environment, support from the state government, good logistics connections and overall cost-efficiency'.

A scrutiny of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the Tamil Nadu state government and Nokia India Pvt. Ltd -NIPL (a 100% subsidiary of Nokia Corporation<sup>7</sup>, Finland) on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2005 (TN Industries Dept., 2005) revealed the 'support' offered by the state government, in addition to the already 'liberal' fiscal incentives given in the SEZ Act that included land at a concessional rate and reimbursement of Value Added Tax on phones sold in the country (Dutta, 2009: 24). A paper titled *Nokia SEZ: Public Price of Success* concluded that it had cost the Tamil Nadu government 'Rs 645.4 crore' (approx. £65 million pounds) to 'attract' Nokia's investment into the state (Dutta, 2009: 25). The government of Tamil Nadu allocated Nokia India Private Limited (NIPL) 210 acres of land adjoining the national highway (NH45) to develop a 'product specific SEZ (Nokia Telcom SEZ) and to bring a cluster of its vendors/manufacturers of electronic components' (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2005). Much before the Finnish corporation Nokia set up its mobile assembly factory in the outskirts of the capital city of Chennai in Tamil Nadu, the state had already started acquiring farming land as part of its industrialisation plans through the establishment of industrial estates and industrial areas from 1960s

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of the signing of the MOU in 2005, Nokia Corporation's global market share of mobile phones was 32% and in India it was more than 50%. Nokia already had nine mobile phone manufacturing factories globally and the Chennai plant was the tenth one.

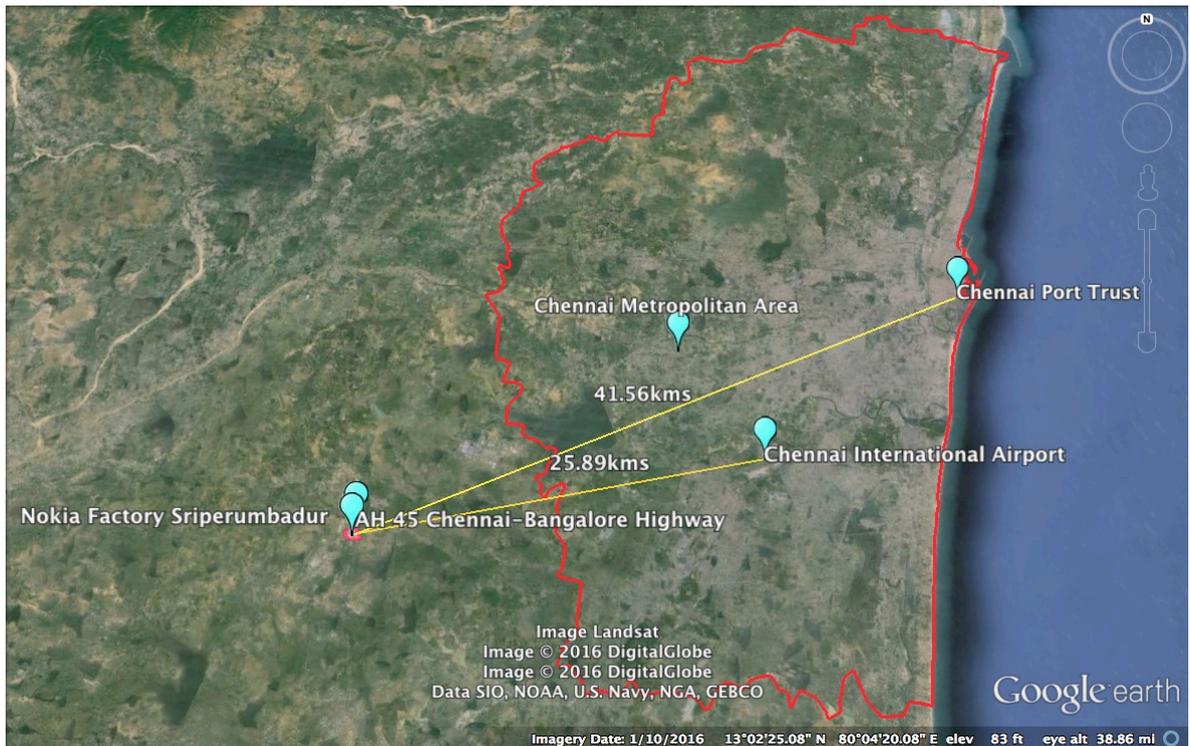
onwards (Interview with Louise Menezes, former Planning Commission member, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2014).

However, it was only after the enactment of a special land law - (the Tamil Nadu Land Acquisition for Industrial Purposes Act 1989) - that the state started creating 'land banks' for industrial and infrastructure projects.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the land that was leased to Nokia Telecom SEZ for 99 years was acquired in the mid-1990s from local farmers<sup>9</sup>. In 2005, when Nokia set up its largest mobile phone assembly plant inside the zone, the area already had a well developed network of national and state highways, an international airport at a distance of 25 kms and a major seaport within 40 kms and connected to the metro cities of Chennai and Bengaluru (Image 1). The Indian press called Sriperumbudur 'India's Shenzhen' (Times of India, 2009) and the World Bank (2009:13) wrote in its World Development Report 2009: 'In 1990 Sriperumbudur was known mostly as the place where Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. In 2006 his widow, Sonia Gandhi, watched as Nokia's telephone plant churned out its 20-millionth handset'.

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<sup>8</sup> Critics of the Act call it 'more draconian' than the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and also 'unconstitutional' as it supersedes the central Act (TN SEZ Peoples' Audit Report 2009).

<sup>9</sup> CAG's 2007 report had noted that in 1996 when the land in the area was acquired by the state government, the compensation paid to the farmers was between Rs 4-14 lakhs/acres of land (£4485-£15,698), whereas the same land was leased to Nokia at a concessional rate of Rs 4 lakh/acres (£4485), causing a loss of Rs 7.4 crores (£829,777) to the state govt. (Dutta, 2009:24).



**Image 1:** Map showing distances of major infrastructure facilities near Nokia factory such as Chennai Port, International Airport, National highway and Chennai Metropolitan Area. Source: Google Earth

Nokia set up its largest mobile handset manufacturing (assembling) plant in the world, with a capacity of 650,000 handsets a day in the Sriperumbudur plant in 2005 and started production in January 2006.<sup>10</sup> Within five years, the factory had produced 500 million mobile phones. The target was clearly the Indian market. Fifty per cent of the phones produced in the factory were sold in India and the rest were exported to the Middle East, Africa and other Asian countries, as well as to Australia and New Zealand (Nokia, 2007). Nokia brought along its suppliers—Salcomp, Perlos, Aspocomp (all Finnish companies), Laird and Jabil (both US companies), Foxconn and Wintek (both Taiwanese companies), and Flextronics (a Singaporean company) to the zone (Table 1). These companies supplied semi-assembled component parts to Nokia’s assembling plant and also accessories such as chargers, batteries etc. In the Nokia MOU, a clause extended similar fiscal benefits and tax exemptions to the Nokia vendors as was given to NIPL if they jointly invested Rs. 300 crores (£ 30 million pounds) within three

<sup>10</sup> On an average, the plant produced anywhere between 300,000-500,000 handsets a day during peak demand periods (between 2009-2012), including at times 650,000 in a day.

years of Nokia’s investment (TN Industries Dept., 2005:12). None of the Nokia vendors or even Nokia itself manufactured components in India. Instead they were imported duty free to the factories (Interview with the General Manager, Human Resources, Nokia India Pvt. Limited, August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013).

**Table 1:** Operational SEZs units\* inside Nokia Telecom SEZ

<b>Name of Unit</b>	<b>Investment</b>	<b>Production</b>	<b>No. of employees</b>
Nokia India Pvt. Ltd.	>1400 crores <sup>11</sup>	Mobile phones	11761**
Liteon Mobile	385	Mobile panels	3000
Salcomp Manufacturing India Pvt Ltd	100	Chargers	3100
Wintek Technology India Pvt Ltd	67		943
Laird Technologies India Pvt Ltd	60		450
Foxconn India Pvt Ltd	375	Mobile panels	5100

*Source: Letter from Petra Terasaho, Director (Finance & Control), NIPL to the Secretary to Govt. of TN, Industries Dept. Dated 19/1/2011. Copy of the letter obtained under Right to Information Act 2005.*

*\*\* Includes 2272 contract workers.*

*\* Between 2007-2014, Nokia had several component supplier companies inside the Nokia Telecom zone and two suppliers-Build Your Dream (BYD) and Flextronics were located outside the Nokia zone and operated independent SEZ units. Some of the units such as Jabil, Laird, Wintek, Aspocomp closed their factories between 2009-2011.*

## **8. Promise of a ‘flexible’ Labour**

One of the attractions of Tamil Nadu, beside the ‘availability of skilled labour’ was the ‘flexibility of labour law’ promised by the state government (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2005). A clause in the MOU specified what was on offer to the company including the ‘flexibility to hire the workforce without any

<sup>11</sup> Although Nokia Telcom SEZ was showcased as a ‘success’ story of SEZ policy in terms of investments, with Nokia claiming to have invested Rs. 1381.67 crores (£154 million) till 2012 (MOU 2012), a scrutiny of the company’s (NIPL) balance sheet for April 2012-March 2013 revealed that the company had an accumulated surplus of Rs 6602 crores (£ 740 million), while its capital investment (since 2005) had only been Rs 35.4 crores (£3.9 million). Meaning the company had an accumulated surplus of 188 times more than what it had actually invested. (Interview with Thyagu, private financial consultant and Company Secretary, June 26<sup>th</sup> 2014).

*restrictions and conditions*’; enabling the ‘SEZ site to be a ‘public utility’ to curb labour indiscipline’; the ‘flexibility in employment conditions (including working hours for women...allowing the employment of women in night shifts)’ and the ‘delegation of all powers under the industrial and labour regulation to the Development Commissioner’ (TN Industries Dept., 2005:10). While some of these were granted under the SEZ Act itself, the Tamil Nadu government also ‘allowed’ women to work on night shifts, a provision that is still restricted in many states of India.<sup>12</sup> This was perhaps an important incentive for Nokia and its suppliers looking to hire women workers in factories that operated three shifts a day including night shifts (Varadarajan, 2008).

‘Flexible labour’ regimes have been hallmark of the zones. Ong (1991: 280) describes zones across Asia and in Mexico as a complex mix of ‘labour relations and cultural systems’, ‘high-tech operations and indigenous values’, where disciplinary techniques, constant surveillance and suspended labour rights instil ‘productivity’ and ‘political stability’—conditions favourable for the global manufacturing sector (Ong, 2006). They were used ‘as experimental laboratories’ where new policies relating to Foreign Direct Investments, labour and land were introduced and tested before being extended to the rest of the economy, as was the case in China (Farole, 2011: 4). Although under the central SEZ Act 2005, individuals state cannot alter labour regulations, especially to do with ‘matters relating to trade unions, industrial and labour disputes...applicable under SEZ Act’ (Singh, 2009:7), if one looks closely at the SEZ policies and SEZ Acts legislated by individual states it is clear that modifications have been made to labour regulations to attract SEZ investments, especially to the Trade Union

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<sup>12</sup> Under Section 66 (1) of Factories Act 1948, women are not allowed to work in any factory ‘except between the hours of 6 a.m. and 7 p.m’. However, this provision under the Act was challenged in the Madras High Court in 2000 by a female textile worker from Tiruppur industrial area and an order was passed by the court allowing the TN government to make an amendment to the Act allowing women to work in night shifts in the state. Recently the states of Rajasthan (2013) and Maharashtra (2014) made similar amendments to the Act and also amendments are being proposed to the central Act. While these changes are being made in the name of ‘equal opportunity’ for women and men, it is important to bear in mind that the global manufacturing chains that demand high volume ‘just in time’ productions, especially in export manufacturing, also demand ‘flexibility’ in labour regulations, and states often amend legislation to ‘attract’ and ‘accommodate’ these demands.

Act, 1926 and Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 (ILO, 2012: 22). For instance, the Tamil Nadu SEZ policy promised to classify all industrial units in the SEZs as 'public utility service' under the Industrial Disputes Act (IDA), 1947. This essentially meant, as per section 22 of the IDA, prior notice of a strike has to be given and no strikes can be conducted during the conciliatory process in a 'public utility service'. A prior notice of a strike almost immediately starts a 'conciliation' process mediated by the labour department that continues over a long period of time. And if a strike is conducted during the 'conciliation' process, the state has the power to declare it as 'illegal' and both state and management often take harsh action against striking workers<sup>13</sup>. An International Labour Organisation (2012) report on *Trade Unions and Special Economic Zones in India* noted:

States have taken exemptions for SEZs from Section 22 of the Trade Union Act, restricting the entry of outsiders as office bearers in trade unions. Physical entry itself is restricted and workers' movement is strictly controlled and monitored by the employers. When workers have attempted to organise, registration is strategically denied. Any move towards unionisation leads to dismissal from service... Labour administration is absent... There is a clear nexus between the state and the employers, and workers' protests are being looked at as a law-and-order problem rather than as an issue of tripartite negotiation' (ILO 2012: 47).

The International Trade Union Confederation (2007) in its survey of the violation of trade union rights in India noted the difficulties in unionizing in SEZs due to restrictive entry to the zones. The report noted 'inaccessibility' to the workers as they get 'bused' in and out of the zones and with the majority of workers being young women who are 'too frightened to form unions' and fearing 'victimization by (the) management' as some of the key reasons hampering

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<sup>13</sup> On May 1, 2015, Indian newspapers announced that it would be difficult to form unions under the proposed labour reforms by the central government, led by National Democratic Alliance government (see Business Standard, 2015). The labour reforms will also make it difficult for workers to conduct strikes because of application of similar rules of notice periods, like in 'public utilities'. Therefore the so called 'exceptionalism' of SEZs will become 'normalized' and will be applied to other non SEZs facilities.

unionizing efforts in the SEZs (ITUC, 2007). However, it should be noted that this sort of restricted entry of trade union activists to factories is not new. It was prevalent in Tamil Nadu even before the SEZs were established, especially in textile industries (ILO, 2012: 36). In the case of Tamil Nadu a certain amount of 'flexibility' vis-à-vis labour was already in place before the SEZ laws were enacted, which perhaps might have been an 'added' attraction for global corporations such as Nokia to set up its factory in the state.

However, despite all the barriers, in 2011, six years after the factory started, the permanent workers of the Nokia factory formed an independent employees' union - 'Nokia India *Thozhilalar Sangam*' (NITS). The formation of the union was preceded by two major sit-in strikes by the workers inside the zone in 2009 and 2010 respectively. In fact between 2009-10, there were over 15 labour strikes in different factories, some of them SEZs, dotted around the industrial area of Oragadam-Sriperumbudur in Kancheepuram district.<sup>14</sup> As Beverly Silver (2014:48) writes 'labour unrest is an endemic feature of historical capitalism' and that with the geographical shift in the location of production, labour unrest has also shifted 'over time, together with the rise or decline of new leading sectors of capitalist development'. Lu Zhang (2015:143) studying the politics of labour and workers resistance in China's automobile factories argues that even as the automakers shift their production sites to new regions, either in response to the competition of local governments 'seeking to attract auto sector investments' or 'differences (whether real or perceived) in the cost and docility of labour on different areas of China', workers in the new investment sites 'soon carried out struggles against management's arbitrary and unequal treatment'.

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<sup>14</sup> The Sriperumbudur and Oragadam areas under Sriperumbudur Taluk in Kancheepuram District, Tamil Nadu has seen rapid industrialisation in the last 7 years. In 1995 the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) acquired land in Irrungattukottai in Sriperumbudur for the setting up of an Industrial Estate. In 1996 the Korean multinational Hyundai Motors started its car manufacturing factory in SIPCOT. But it was only after 2006 that the area saw much electronics industrial activity by Nokia, Dell, Sony Ericsson, Motorola, Flextronics and auto companies like Renault Nissan and Daimler also set up shop in the area. Automobile majors also set up their supplier base in the area boosting the industrial activity and the inflow of workers. Finnish multinational Nokia has also been credited with setting up the first Telecom SEZ (mobile phone manufacturing) in the area and creating significant employment opportunities for women workers.

This evidence also lends support to the thesis ‘where capital goes, conflict flows’ (Silver and Zhang 2009). Therefore despite the process of ‘globalisation’, that has arguably fragmented the labour force and undermined its capacity for class-based mobilization, workers have nevertheless mobilized and resisted global capital in new geographical locations (Silver, 2003, 2014; Zhang, 2015). It demonstrates the ability of labour to ‘unfix’ capital’s strategies for accumulation in different locations across time and geographic locations. However, this research is not about the ‘heroism’ of labour or the formation of larger class interest, but is about the everyday politics of work- ‘grassroots politics that unfolds on the shop floor’ (Fernandes, 1994: 29), conditions of ‘consent’ or ‘dissent’ to labour and the dreams and desires of young women workers that shape the politics of everyday labour in these global corporate sites.

## 9. Thesis outline

The thesis is organized into three main parts entitled *Origins, Experiencing labour’s geographies*, and *Losing labour*. These three parts address the three main research questions that I explore in this thesis. It begins with a discussion of key literatures and conceptual ideas that frame the thesis, followed by a detailed outline of the methodology used for the fieldwork and rationale behind it. This is then followed by three empirical sections that map the work-life of women workers, and a final chapter that draws out the conclusions and contributions of this research and flags up areas for future research.

Chapter 2 engages with a wide range of literatures in order to understand how they have engaged with questions of work, workspace and the politics of labour. Paying attention to ‘small-scale geographies’ (McDowell, 2015), the chapter speaks of the ‘emotional’ attachment to work and the workplace that gets developed through the everyday experiences of work and life. The chapter seeks to problematize the boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ by connecting the different spaces that women inhabit and locating women’s lives and labour in the larger context of society. The chapter conceptualizes work beyond ‘wages’ and ‘formal employment’, framing it within the larger feminist understanding of

women's labour to understand the experiences, perceptions and meaning of work for young women workers.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach and the various methods that I draw on to conduct the research during twelve months of fieldwork. I discuss here the various challenges and opportunities of doing research in different spaces –shop floor, homes, streets etc., and the use of creative, often 'thinking on your feet' methods to negotiate relations in different contexts. I discuss the challenges of using both ethnographic and participatory methods, issues of ethics and positionality, and my background as a researcher activist.

The chapters are then arranged in three parts starting with *Origins*. Chapters 4 and 5 contained in this part look at the question of the 'expectations' of corporate managers and the aspirations of workers that form the basis for everyday work and workplace politics. In Chapter 4, I discuss the managerial preferences and labour recruitment strategies of the company. The chapter shows the enduring nature of the social stereotypes and prejudices that circulate amongst the global corporate managers seeking out 'docile', 'disciplined' third world female working bodies to meet their expectations. However, we also see in the chapter that even though the expectation of global capital may be universal, how it negotiates the conditions to meet its expectations is non-uniform, local and specific.

In Chapter 5, through the life stories of some of the young women, I look at the processes that motivate them to leave home to become workers in a factory. The chapter foregrounds the explanations offered by the women to enter waged work that are often obscured in the larger debates around women's participation in formal employment. It tries to understand the complex social relations intertwined with women's aspirations for change that create conditions for consent to labour under hyper-efficient work regimes.

Chapters 6 and 7 are contained in the section *Experiencing labour's geographies*. They look at life inside and outside the factory of the young women as they

negotiate everyday relations of work-life within the workplace and in rented rooms in migrant towns and villages. Chapter 6 looks at the arrangement of production-work- labour inside the shop floor. It discusses in detail the everyday relations of production, work process, disciplining and coping strategies, contestations and contradictions on the shop floor. The chapter argues that through everyday practices, friendships, solidarities and resistances, labour reshapes a capitalist production space to gain control over the labour process. It specifically argues that women's experience of labour processes on the shop floor and their responses to it are closely linked to their lives outside the factory. Chapter 7 discusses the everyday living of women workers in migrant spaces. The chapter shows how different sets of women experience and negotiate social relations in their living spaces differently, that experiences are not uniform and that they are shaped by the contexts of work and life back home and their motivations to enter waged work in the first place.

In the last part, *Losing Labour*, Chapter 8 details the process of factory closure and the non-linearity of the process as experienced by the workers. I argue in this chapter that the workspace is also an 'emotional space' and that one needs to pay due attention to the emotional attachment of labour to such spaces. I pay attention to the views and perspectives of the women workers on the factory closure and what loss of work and workspace means to them. Chapter 9 draws together the key conclusions of the thesis and outlines a number of areas for future research.

## Chapter Two: Literature review

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### Introduction

As outlined in the previous Chapter, this thesis sets out to examine the experiences and perceptions of work of young women workers in a mobile phone assembly plant and the social relations that shape women's everyday geographies of work. The thesis is concerned with, as Leela Fernandes (1994:29) has said, the 'grassroots politics that unfolds on the shop floor', trying to gain an understanding of how the everyday practices and responses of labour shape geographies of work. Although the literature on labour geography speaks of workers' active agency in shaping the geographies of work, little attention has been paid to the 'lived experiences of workers' and to 'race, gender, age and other embodied attributes' that shape them (Kelly, 2012: 431). McDowell (2004: 251) in her review of Castree et al's core text on labour geography, calls it: 'a manly tale of institutional regulation and workers' struggles, with relatively little about individual workers or workplaces, about the changing nature of work, the rise of embodied service work, for example, or the terms and conditions of everyday labouring on the shop or factory floor'. In this chapter, I have engaged with a range of literature, especially feminist literature, to understand how they have engaged with the question of work, workspaces and the politics of work. The chapter is organized into three main parts entitled *Origins*, *Experiencing Labour's geographies* and *Losing labour*, that thematically frame the thesis. These themes contribute to the literature on labour geography by paying attention to the stories of workers and their experiences of work, and reconnecting them to the wider social context, which I argue helps us to develop a more grounded understanding of worker's agency.

### 1. Origins

The story begins with the question of 'expectation' that forms the origin of everyday work politics: expectations of managers to maintain a labour force that help to expand a company's operations and profit making and also furthers their own careers as corporate managers; expectations and aspirations of workers for

better wages, mobility and perhaps the possibility to transform life circumstances. However, the process of how these expectations are formed, the conditions that engender them and their outcomes are not at all straightforward. Expectations are negotiated and contested processes that are embedded in the local registers of gender, caste, class and the socio-economic, political and cultural context within which these expectations are played out.

### **Managerial expectations**

Managerial expectation is of a disciplined worker, who is young, preferably female, 'disposable' and whose 'docility' and 'finger dexterity' make her an 'ideal' candidate for hyper efficient, flexible, lean, just-in-time production. Melissa Wright (2006:25) writes that: 'With [in] virtually every multinational firm in the electronics industry, managers hire women to work on the assembly line on the assumption that they are the best electronic assembler because of their famous 'dexterity', 'docility', 'patience', 'attentiveness', and 'cheapness'. In a study done amongst the women workers in the electronics factories in Delhi, Amrita Chhachhi (1997:4) found the bulk of the women workers to be 'young, just out of school, their first job and first venture outside the security of home...Managers called them 'fresh and green' - like vegetables - their youth would be consumed in producing consumer items few of them could afford to buy'. However, I also found managerial practices inside the shop floor, about which I write in Chapter 6, that were contrary to this discursive myth of 'disposability' that sought to 'empower' women, even though they were highly problematic and stereotypical. Goger (2013:2635), researching Sri Lankan apparel factories referred to these managerial practices as 'antidisposability logic' in an industry trying to 'upgrade' in the global value chain.

In their seminal investigation of women's employment in 'world market factories'<sup>15</sup>, Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson (1981:92) asked a key question: 'Why is it young women who overwhelmingly constitute the labour force of world

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<sup>15</sup> As per Elson and Pearson's definition 'world market factories' represent a shift of production of certain kinds of products from developed countries to the 'third world'. Typically the final products are exported back to the developed countries (Elson and Pearson, 1981: 87).

market factories?' They problematized the 'relations' through which women were being 'integrated' into the development process by highlighting the 'gender struggle' within such processes. Similarly, Jeyaranjan and Padmini Swaminathan (1999:283) critiqued policies to 'increase women's wage employment' by choosing to set up facilities that forced 'women to work in women's work'. Swaminathan (2012:10) approaches the relation between capitalism and gender as a 'system [capitalism] that extends beyond formal factory-type workplaces as sites of [the] appropriation of surplus to a wide range of activities that form part of the national and international systems of capital accumulation, calling attention to organisation and [the] conditions of work beyond the factory gate'.

Researchers have long exposed the myths around the 'suitability' of women to perform certain types of work that involves tedious, repetitive and monotonous actions purportedly due to their 'natural' attributes for manual dexterity, 'nimble fingers', and inclination to 'accept tough work discipline' etc. (Elias: 2005; Elson, 1981; Fernandez-Kelly: 1983, Ngai: 2005, Ong: 1987; Salzinger: 2003, Wright: 2006). The social invisibility of the domestic labour of women, argued feminists, that trained and produced many of the 'skills' at home (such as those requiring manual dexterity) often got categorized as 'unskilled' or 'semi-skilled' in the realm of waged work. A feminist lens on the nature and relation of women's employment showed how comfortably capitalism and patriarchy accommodated each other (McDowell, 1994) to create women as 'second class workers'. They argued that women entered the labour market 'already (pre) determined as inferior bearers of labour' (Elson et al, 1981:94). Saraswati Raju (2010:1) points out in the case of India, 'a gendered location remains the primary axis along which exclusion and marginalization continue to take place', even while other factors such as caste, class and ethnicity intersect (also see Kapadia; 1995; Kapadia and Lerche 1999). As Connell (2005: 71) argues 'globalisation of gender' can be understood in terms of 'the structure of relationships that interconnect the gender regimes of institutions, and the gender orders of local societies'. The issue also is how much of this gender subjugation has been internalized by the women themselves, who may to a certain extent start seeing themselves or their 'skills' unworthy or secondary to that of men.

Wright (2006:5) writes:

I regard the myth as a tool of interpellation, in the sense intended by Louis Althusser (1971), since it establishes the expectations both for identifying disposable third world women within specific populations and for determining how those subjects, so identified, should behave in relation to those who do the identifying (Butler 1997). In this sense, the myth is an attempt to summon the disposable third world woman into existence as a normalized subject who reaffirms explicit relations of power and hierarchy.

However, Elias (2005:211) states that we need to look at the 'construction of productive femininities...as more than simply a discursive process' which 'involves the targeting of a specific group of female workers through company recruitment strategies and the subjecting of this group to highly supervised assembly line work'. This indicates the complex interplay of discourse and practice with the 'structure of relationships' (Connell, 2005) that come together as a powerful mechanism to construct a 'disposable third world woman's body...that combines bits and pieces of workers' bodies with industrial process and managerial expectations' (Wright, 2006:45). It also shows the enduring nature of these processes that not just circulates in disparate geographical locations but also continues over time and is in a way 'incomplete, contradictory and possible to disrupt' (Goger, 2013: 2632). The conduits of these processes are the corporate managers of the global firms who through discourse and practice construct a worker subject - an 'ideal' working body that can suitably deliver their expectation. In the Indian context, scholars have shown the defining role of caste in the labour recruitment strategies that often determines the labour hierarchies and even geographical preferences for recruitments (Carsell, 2013; Harriss-White, 2003; Harriss-White, Gooptu, 2001; Kannan, 1994; Thorat, 2007). I also found this in my research (discussed in Chapter 4). What emerges from these literatures is an intersection of relations of gender, class, caste, place and production logic that determines the managerial expectations and practices and is embedded in the particularity of a place as much as determined by the larger

global processes of corporate business. Through an ethnographic focus, my research has further investigated this process to show how managerial practices in a global firm reflect the unequal social relations in the society through recruitment practices, perceptions and everyday discourses to produce spaces of work that are gendered and prejudiced, and that predetermine women's labour to be inferior.

### **Worker's expectations**

However, these global corporate sites of manufacturing are also not one-sided stories of managerial preferences and labour discipline. As Jamie Cross (2014) notes, these sites also paradoxically 'foster' imaginations for a better future amongst people. Cross (2014:133) contends that 'consent to terms and conditions to work' is often shaped by the 'personal projects for personal and social transformation'. Both Leela Fernandes (2000) and Cross (2014) point out that a 'new middle class' in India does exist as an important 'social category' that people aspire to. The desire to be part of a 'consumptive' urban lifestyle is an aspiration amongst young factory workers who may want to be understood as more than just 'labour for global commodities' but also as consumers for goods and services (Freeman, 1998:254-255; Cross, 2014: 133). In my own work with the young workers in the factory, I too observed 'consumerist desires' (Ngai, 2005:157) amongst the young women and men, but then it constituted only a part of a larger 'aspiration' that was embedded in the specificities of individual lives and social contexts.

In her study of garment workers in Bangladesh, Naila Kabeer (2000:86) found that while economic need was one of the key reasons for women to choose factory work, there were 'varying degrees of urgency which characterized their decision'. And this Kabeer (2000:86) states, 'introduced variations in the extent to which the decision was experienced as an act of agency on their part, or one that had been imposed on them by their circumstances'. Kabeer (2000:84) breaks the decisions down into sub-decisions of—'basic decision to earn'; 'decision to work outside the home'; and a 'specific choice of garment

employment over alternative forms of outside employment'. Kabeer's (2000:85) analytical findings help us to understand the finer details of how decisions were made by the young Bangladeshi women - individually; collectively with 'shared vision of joint household welfare'; and through processes of consensus, negotiation or conflict to arrive at the decision to migrate from rural areas to work in the garment factories in the capital city of Dhaka.

In writing about the motivations of Chinese *dagongmei* (factory sisters) leaving the rural hinterland to join the industrial workforce in the cities, Pun Ngai (2005:65) writes that 'they desired to do so in the hope of challenging the patriarchal family and changing their life situation in rural China, even if it meant 'alienating' themselves through industrial labour'. Ngai (2005:65) states that the *dagongmeis* were quite aware of the harsh conditions of work and low pay in the 'sweatshops' but the possibility that they 'might be able to transgress their individual 'fate' of rural family life' motivated them to enter waged industrial work. Scholars researching women's waged work indicate these changes are 'pushing up against the boundaries of old structures and helping to reconstitute them in a more enabling way' (Kabeer, 2000:362). Ester Gallo (2005:217) researching the migration of Malayali women (from Kerala, a southern Indian state) to Italy states that the 'relation between women's transnational migration and changes in household relations and practices should be understood as a dialectical process' and not just viewed as a mechanism that serves the 'needs of global capital' (Anthias, 2000:15). However, Ruth Pearson (2013) points to the paradoxical nature of women's waged work. She writes that 'women's new opportunities for paid work could easily become a vehicle for increasing women's responsibility for others, just as much as asserting their own autonomy and independence from social norms, thus relegating them to an inferior position in the family and society' (Pearson, 2013: 21). Pearson's (2013: 22) key argument being that: 'Employment can decompose existing modes of gender subordination as well as intensify and recompose women's subordination'. Both Kabeer and Pearson's arguments point to the rather complex and paradoxical nature of women's waged work where both 'transformative' potential exists alongside that of possibilities of subjugation/exploitation. They also point to the

fact that experiences of waged work for women are not uniform and are conditioned by the various social relations that women are able to either negotiate or concede to. Jayati Lal (2011:555) observes that while:

‘Experience of factory work subjects women workers to new regimes of governmentality and produces new modes of subjectivation to public patriarchies’, it however also creates ‘conditions of possibility for articulating new claims for rights within the family’ and may ‘provide the resources necessary to challenge the normative gender order....enabling them to maintain relatively atypical independent lifestyles’.

The thesis foregrounds the explanations of the young women to enter waged labour and their expectations that often get obscured by the dominant economic and development logic of the state, capital, labour-supply demands and poverty. Barbara Laslett (1999:392) argues that personal narratives can ‘address several key theoretical debates...macro and micro linkages; structure, agency, and their intersection; processes of structuration; social reproduction; and social change. They can provide access to both the individual and the social, and make it possible to see the connections between them’. I have looked at the ‘small scale geographies’ (McDowell, 2015:2) of women’s lives and spaces that they inhabit as workers, whether it is domestic or outside, to understand the different processes that engender women’s decision to enter factory work and their expectation from the work. Their everyday agency is relational to wider societal structures and needs to be reconnected to the social contexts of women’s lives (Coe, 2013; Coe et al., 2011). As McDowell (2015:19) advocates ‘working at small scale, collecting narratives, listening to workers....will provide rich detail to support arguments about, inter alia, new gender regimes...or new form of capitalism, if these are identifiable.’ The above literature foregrounds the choices made by women, contextualizing them within the larger context of women’s labour in a patriarchal-capitalist society. These literatures indicate that waged work creates possibilities for transforming gender relations at individual level but the process can be uneven and varied for different sets of women. The literatures also point to the role that women might play, to varying degrees, in making decisions to enter waged work. I add to these literatures by focusing on

the life stories of young women, their motivations to enter waged work and processes involved in making those decisions. 'Agency emerges cognitively' (Lal, 2011: 555) in the process of recounting their life stories where women explain their decisions to leave home and their expectations of waged work.

## **2. Experiencing Labour's Geographies**

In his seminal work *'Labour and Capital Monopoly'* Harry Braverman (1974) argues that in capitalist labour processes the 'translation' of labour power (capacity to labour) into labour is done through managerial control. Managerial control, as per Braverman, is achieved through processes of 'deskilling' and fragmentation of work- 'stripping each task down to its simplest component, routinized work activities' (Smith, 1994:405). Through separation of mental (conception) and manual (execution) labour, Braverman (1974: xvii) claimed a 'monopoly over knowledge to control each step of the labour process and its mode of execution' is created to form a particular 'capitalist social structure' (Burawoy, 1985:22). Braverman's work illustrates 'how corporate structure and accumulation strategies were integrally tied to micro-level strategies of control and exploitation' (Smith, 1994:405).

Michael Burawoy (1979: xii) on the other hand contested the argument to say that 'coercion alone could no longer explain what workers did once they arrived on the shop floor'. The question he (Burawoy, 1979: xi) posed was 'why do workers work as hard as they do?' to advance the 'interests of the company?' He (Burawoy, 1979:27) claimed that in the Marxist theory of the labour process there is no place 'for organization of consent, for the necessity to elicit a willingness to cooperate in the translation of labour power into labour'. According to Burawoy (1979: xii): 'an element of spontaneous consent combines with coercion to shape productive activities'. Burawoy (1979:27) argues that 'consent' arises in the way activities (work) are organised, that presents the workers with choices—'as though...with real choices' and 'it is participation in choosing that generates consent'. Burawoy (1979: 51) argues that workers 'consent' to work through a process of 'making out' involving a 'series of games

in which operators attempt to achieve levels of production that earn incentive pay'. He claims that this 'game of making out' provides a 'framework for evaluating productive activity and the social relations that arise out of the organisation of work'. For Burawoy (1979:65), the 'art of making out' is to 'manipulate those relationships' to advance as quickly as possible from one stage to another. This he argued gives rise to a 'shop-floor culture' that produces 'competition with another' and 'particular forms of conflict on the shop floor' due to 'tension between control over machinery and subordination to others, between productive activities and production relations'. In summary, Burawoy's main contention is that 'conflict and consent are organized on the shop floor' through the organization of work, and therefore 'coercion' is too narrow a lens through which to understand the politics of shop floor production.

In my own ethnographic research inside the Nokia factory, I found 'consent' and 'conflict' working together to create shop floor dynamics. However, I find Burawoy's analysis of the 'shop floor culture' too narrowly confined to the shop floor and delinked from the wider community within which workers live and work. He doesn't problematize the relations with the world outside that may influence the actions or responses of the workers. For Burawoy the 'game of making out' begins and ends at the point of production. The 'social embeddedness of factories' is absent from both Braverman and Burawoy's accounts of experience of work and labour process in factory (Mollona, 2009: xvii). Critics have also pointed out that there is a 'gender bias' in Burawoy's analysis 'in that an all-male population received only a job-model analysis, implicitly assuming that behaviours and processes are gender neutral' (Davis, 1990: 394). The fact that 'orientation to work' is often a gendered process that is determined through various factors like domestic responsibilities, cultural expectations of employment and family priorities is not part of Burawoy's analysis where his main problematic is 'working' and not 'coming to work'. In my research, I have focused on motivations to come to work and factors influencing those decisions, as they form an important basis for understanding labour expectations and experiences of work. Studies have suggested that men and women may not experience 'paid work' in the same way (Davis, 1990:394-95).

The other criticism of Burawoy's analysis of 'shop floor culture' is that it may 'represent a particular type of male culture that is imported into the workplace' (Davis, 1990:396), which perhaps is also very western. For instance, in Burawoy's culture of 'making out' through control of tools and machinery, independence and autonomy and displays of strength, it can be argued that it 'reflect(s) externally derived conception of masculinity' (Vallas and Epstein, 1987:16; Knights and Willmott, 1989:555). This points to the fact that shop floor culture is 'not simply structured by the labour process but is imported and learned from sites in the wider community' (Davis, 1990:397).

There are many feminist studies that illustrate the diverse forms of shop floor culture that can arise in all female or male-female mixed groups of workers (see Westwood 1987; Ong 1987; Salzinger 2000). Feminists have long argued for 'expanding' the definition of work beyond wage work to include 'unpaid' reproductive work (Federici, 2008) and the work of politics and community activism (England and Lawson, 2005: 77). They have 'trouble(d) the boundaries of the category "work"', to identify a 'multitude of ways work is gendered', and the spatiality of work in the process of economic restructuring (England and Lawson, 2005:77, also see Nagar et al 2002). A feminist lens has opened up 'analysis of diverse sites of work' - 'formal' workplaces, homework and 'unregulated' sites (England and Lawson, 2005:78). A key contribution of feminist activists and scholars has been to show how historically social and spatial segregation of 'waged work' from 'sites of reproduction' along with the rise of a 'patriarchal capitalist system' has led to 'work' being socially constructed as 'waged activity in the "public" sphere of capitalist production and 'non-work' as the activities undertaken in the feminised 'private' household sphere' (England and Lawson, 2005:78). This implies that the concept of 'work' gets constructed in the 'gendered sites' where it is being performed. Feminists have challenged the binaries of public-private/inside-outside/work-non-work to expose how these binaries profoundly impact women's lives and labour. As England and Lawson (2005: 78) write 'feminist geographers continue to challenge limited conceptualizations of 'work' and articulate the ways gendered spatial division of labour between 'productive' and 'reproductive' spaces

produce a series of exclusions and devaluation of the many types of work that women do’.

I echo this feminist objective of ‘troubling’ the boundaries of work to analyse the ‘politics of work’ that the young women produced (and experienced) on the shop floor to maintain some degree of control over the labour process. To understand the varied expectations that women expressed towards the factory work, it was important to understand their context of work-lives outside the factory space. In my research, I have travelled back and forth across the factory gate to connect the dots between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ world through following the lives of women as they travelled across different sites – shop floor, homes/rented rooms to understand and situate ‘work’ in the different spaces that they inhabited and how they perceived and experienced work. I pay attention to the ‘social relations *in production*’ (De Neve, 2005: 134) to understand how the organization of work creates ‘relations of authority, friendship(s) and conflict in production’ - that is how relations of production become ‘embodied experiences in the shop floor’ (De Neve, 2005:135). Geert De Neve (2005: 135) notes that ‘*authority* in the workplace is not merely reflection of the employer’s power, but the outcome of a particular organization of labour recruitment, workplace supervision and production tasks’. Often these processes are gendered, as we see in the recruitment preferences, and the organisation of tasks in the Nokia factory, which produces a specific kind of work politics, linked as much to the life outside the factory as inside the shop floor.

### **Embodied labour**

Bodies are an important site of inquiry in labour literature. As Michel Foucault (1979: 26) notes, ‘[the] constitution [of the body] as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection; the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body’. What Foucault (1979:26) means here is that body is invested with different forms of power relations, not just through mechanisms of violence, domination or ideology, but ‘can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material

elements, and yet without using violence... it may be calculated, organized...maybe subtle....and yet remain of a physical order'. In my ethnographic work in the factory I observed how some of these power relations played out with the way work was arranged in the shop floor alongside managerial strategies of 'employees engagement' schemes, everyday perceptions and discourses that produced 'productive' and 'subjected' bodies (Chapter 6). According to Pun Ngai (2005:77): 'the body, especially the female body, is of utmost importance to the global capital....because it is the means by which the production machine can extract labour power'. Positioning bodies in assembly lines, disciplining it through rhythms of work in shifts and time tables, producing 'line culture' and 'social order' are some of the techniques employed to construct 'working bodies' suited for hyper-efficient manufacturing process. By placing individual bodies in specific positions they are 'nailed down into a grid of power and discipline' (Ngai, 2005:80-81) and labour power gets fragmented and stretched over an assembly line. As Foucault (1979:143) noted: 'disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed', so that any 'collective dispositions' can be broken up and individuals can be supervised at each moment. Discipline, as per Foucault (1979:143), 'organises an analytical space' where each body can be individually assessed and their qualities calculated and to 'establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals'. Cross (2011: 120) has described global manufacturing sites, such as SEZs as locations where 'first world technology was imposed on the third world woman, colonizing her body, and in which the assembly line was revealed as a source of male authority and power'.

However, John Allen (2003:2) notes that 'people are placed by power, but they experience it at first hand through the rhythms and relationships of particular places, not as some pre-packaged force from afar and not as a ubiquitous presence', emphasising that power is a 'relational effect of social interaction'. This is a useful approach in understanding how the arrangement of bodies and work creates everyday relations of power in the shop floor that evolve and emerge through the changing nature of social interactions between people. Since power does not exist as an 'entity' on its own, but in relation to others, it is

therefore important to understand how 'relationships of power' (Foucault, 1994) are evolved through work arrangements and experiences. Ngai (2005: 86) has also argued that while spacing bodies in an assembly line fragments labour power, it is also a 'technique of power' that reunites 'individualised bodies in a concerted action'.

Feminists have shown that relations of power and disciplining have been resisted and reworked by the very bodies that are to be disciplined. Writing about the 'maquiladora mestizas', the Mexican-American women working in the *maquiladoras*<sup>16</sup>, Melissa Wright (2006:96) states that the women at these worksites have emerged as 'new political subjects in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands', who through 'deft navigation of the multinational maquiladora workplace and the politics of difference that characterize the Mexico-U.S. borderland' are disrupting the 'myth' of 'disposable' *Mexicana* (female) bodies created by the global capital. Wright (2006:93) contends that 'to disrupt the myth of the disposable third world woman is to disrupt the capitalist systems that require that the story be constantly be told'. In the shop floor of Nokia, I observed how women disrupted the carefully constructed 'myth' that sought to produce 'disciplined female bodies', thereby producing 'counter-subjects'. It was a site of contradiction—at once a space of 'friendships' and 'feelings' and a capitalist site of production. It is also a site of 'experimentation' of various human relations. Women responded bodily to gain control over 'lines' with strategies such as 'fainting', 'crying', 'pain', 'sleeping', 'chatting', 'gossiping', 'stopping the lines', 'non-cooperation', 'counter-complaints'. Ngai (2005:78) says that female working bodies are 'always in a 'structure of contest' to use situational opportunities and even hegemonic discourse to protect themselves'. Their actions, perhaps self-defeating at times, 'prevent[s] disciplinary power from producing a reified, unitary image of their bodies' (Ngai, 2005:78). As Ngai (2005: 61) noted of Chinese *dagongmei* – 'they have been tactical agents in

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<sup>16</sup> 'Maquiladora' or 'Maquila' are manufacturing sites (such as factories) in Free Trade Zones in Mexico, where raw material, machinery etc. is imported duty free into the zones and products are assembled/manufactured by local workers and the finished products are exported.

negotiating their own lives and in manipulating those exploitative forces for their own ends in the daily struggle’.

In my own research, I contend that these everyday forms of actions by the women are not just produced on the shop floor in response to managerial controls but are located in the everyday context of the lives which the women live outside the shop floor. Women use them to gain control over their bodies and labour process both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, in ‘public’ and in ‘private’.

### **3. Losing Labour**

Everyday experiences, practices, relationships and ways of being produce new meanings of work and workspaces. As Jayati Lal (2011:559) notes, experiences of work ‘generate[s] new sentiments regarding work that culturally and emotionally normalize the role of work in working women’s lives. They include expressions of pleasure in and anticipation for work, and of work as a source for a newfound sense of worth and independence’. Work produces ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977) for the workers from an ‘actively lived and felt relationships’ that, as Ong (1991:305) describes, helps them to gain a ‘sense of their particular oppressions and interests, but also achieved some degree of effectiveness and self worth’. It is an emotional non-linear process where workers develop a ‘web-of-relationships’ (Arendt, 1958: 183), and grow ‘attachment’ to the work and (work) space that at once liberates them, gives them a sense of worth and also seeks to ‘colonise’ their bodies through technology, discipline and authority (Cross, 2011:120). As Massey (1994:265) notes space is ‘created out of vast intricacies....a complex web of relations’. Perhaps these complex *feelings* towards work and workspace becomes most visible when there is a threat of *erasure* to this carefully constructed space (Breman, 2004; Joshi 2003). I witnessed the intense emotional responses of the workers, oscillating between a sense of disbelief, anger, frustration and helplessness in the months preceding the closure of the Nokia factory. I discuss this in Chapter 8. These emotions united and fragmented the workers as they tried to make sense of the disruptions in their lives caused by the threat of

erasure of the space that they had grown attached to both emotionally and materially. As Sara Ahmed (2004:39) notes – ‘emotions are crucial to the way in which bodies surface in relation to other bodies, a surfacing that produces the very effect of collectives, which we can describe as ‘felt’ as well as imagined and mediated’. While people ‘mourn’ the loss of ‘space’, it is important to understand that ‘space’ is not static, it is dynamic, ‘emergent’ and the process of remembering or grieving a space is the way people cope and adapt to changes.

By asking us to pay attention to the ‘production of space’ by workers to understand labour’s ability to survive and reproduce itself (Herod, 2001), labour geography helps us to understand labour’s attachment to space. Workers’ strong ‘attachment’ to their workplaces has been scoffed at, but labour geographers argue that to do an ‘a-spatial class analysis’ ignores ‘certain feelings’ or a ‘sense of place’ that workers may have (Herod, 1998). And it is important to understand that ‘feelings’ do not necessarily ‘depoliticise’ a process, but can help us to understand the complexity of people’s response under certain conditions. While economic geography helps us understand the linkages between industrial change and the reorganization of social arrangements at different scales, and as Ray Hudson notes ‘economic restructuring is bound up with socio-spatial change’ (Hudson 1992: 75), it however only peripherally acknowledges the emotions that people experience by the process of ‘restructuring’ or ‘rearrangements’—emotions as felt in bodies and places (Bondi et al, 2005). However, literatures from different sub-disciplines explore ‘emotions’ with a ‘common concern with the spatiality and temporality of emotions, with the way they coalesce around and within certain places’ (Bondi et al, 2005: 3). Specifically around the subject of industrial closure, researchers have explored ‘trauma’, haunting’, ‘nostalgia’ and ‘memory’ amongst industrial workers and ex-mining communities.

In his review of the literature in human geography on the ‘changing geographies of production’, Ray Hudson (1992:74) maps the approaches adopted by human geographers studying industrial change. He points out that much of the work emphasises ‘structural determinism’, thereby leaving little scope for the

'conscious strategies of people as (individual and collective) active agents in the reproduction of capitalist societies. People are simply reduced to their ascribed roles as bearers of structures, to the status of cultural dupes'. An 'influential' change in the approach came with the investigation of links between particular forms of capital, the organisation of production and 'spatial division of labour' (Massey 1984; Hudson 1988), leading to the 'restructuring approach' (Lovering, 1989). This approach sought to illuminate the link 'between [the] spatial division of labour and the spatial patterning of social relationships' (Hudson, 1992:75). Massey (1983:74) emphasised the link between industrial restructuring and class restructuring by stating that 'industrial restructuring is a process of class restructuring; it is one of the mechanisms by which social structure is reshaped, social relations changed and [the] basis for political action broken down or reconstructed'. Her study of old coal mining regions in South Wales, North East England, Central Scotland and Cornwall and the impact of new economic activities showed very different 'social effects' in different regions, despite the new industries being of similar nature (employing women in low paid unskilled jobs). Massey (1983:73) points to the very different nature of 'class and other divisions, such as those based on gender', in these areas. They were 'at the heart of this dynamic', according to Massey.

Similar bodies of literature exist in the Indian context where mostly labour historians and social scientists have looked at the large scale closure of textile mills and labour retrenchment in cities of Kanpur (Joshi, 2003), Ahmedabad (Breman, 2004), Kolkata (Gooptu, 2007), Mumbai (Adarkar, 2006; Adarkar and Menon, 2004; Chandavarkar, 1998). They broadly looked at the changes in the social arrangements and relations in the working class population post mill closures such as—erasure of spaces for 'social cohesion' (Breman 2004: 290); 'alternative notions of community and identity' (Joshi 2003: 174); 'communal groupings' amongst retrenched workers (Breman 2004; Joshi 2003); 'fear and loss of power' (Gooptu, 2007:1927) and more recent work by Mhaskar (2013) which refreshingly looks at the political mobilization (since 2006) amongst ex-mill workers in Mumbai who claimed entitlements to 'housing and alternative employment'. While these literatures are important in understanding the

linkages between industrial change and the reorganization of social arrangements at different scales, they don't help us understand workers' attachments to work beyond wages.

In trying to understand labour's emotional attachment to work and workplaces, researchers have looked at the feelings that workers develop towards workplaces, created by the everyday rhythms of work, and social relations and experiences at workplaces. Exploring 'trauma' in an ex-industrial (steel works) community in South Wales, Valerie Walkerdine (2010:101) states that a 'containing skin' is formed by 'shared spaces, shared activities, emotional sharing....produce a sense of being *knit together*' (emphasis added). This 'skin', she argues, provides protection against the 'uncertainty of industrial production'. Delving into the psychoanalytic work of Esther Bick (1968) and Ogden (1986), Walkerdine (2010:96) argues that the 'psychic skin' is as important as the physical skin 'because it provides for us an affective sense of our boundaries' and is created through a 'network of affective relations' (2010:106). Walkerdine (2010:107) writes that a 'protective envelope' is created in the Steel town with the '(steel) works' as the central object - 'a set of rhythms of life, of affective relations and practices which were deeply containing...contained the inhabitants through a long history of struggle and difficult conditions'. But this 'skin' gets ruptured by the closure of steelworks—'ruptures a sense of community's continuity *of being* in a catastrophic way, which is felt and experienced in a wide variety of ways' (emphasis added) (Walkerdine, 2010:93). The 'collective trauma' experienced in the community by the closure of the steel works 'damaged the affective relations through which the community held its members and provided a sense of going on being in a most profound way' (Walkerdine, 2010:109).

Lars Meier (2012:470) talks of 'encounters with haunted industrial workplaces' as he investigates 'feelings of loss' when former metalworkers in Bavaria (Germany) 'encounter' their former places of work. Foregrounding the 'identity-related sense of place', Meier examines an industrial ruin where workers keep coming back to reconstruct an identity by 'creating meanings from memories'.

These memories, what Meier (2012:470) calls 'haunting' evokes 'a sense of injustice and triggers emotion'. In his interviews with ex-workers, Meier (2012:478) encounters 'mourning a loss' for a place, which he says are 'nostalgic hauntings...which effectively hide the logic of a capitalist production mode'. For Meier (2012:479), a worker's sense of place is developed by the experiences of a place (workplace) and becoming part of a community (of workers). Therefore, it is through their everyday lived experiences and practices that labour creates its place and its not necessarily predetermined. In the case of Nokia, for the women workers, the factory was 'us', it was about shared experiences, practices and rhythms of everyday work, friendships and solidarities, identity and a sense of self-worth. While one can be sympathetic towards Meier's observations that these 'feelings' perhaps may 'hide' the logic of capitalist production, but it also important to know how spaces are created by human interactions where social relations are formed and also on how people draw strength from these relations in their everyday lives. This illustrates the ability of workers to produce their own spaces to survive and reproduce.

Katy Bennett (2009:189) explored 'nostalgia' in an ex-mining village of Wheatley Hill in county Durham where the residents 'engage in an emotionally mediated process of nostalgic reflection' to 'cope' with changes and to 'feel a sense of continuity regarding their identity in the face of apparent discontinuity'. A discontinuity was brought about by the pit closure to the 'rhythms and practices [that] were once heavily influenced by the demands of the pit' (Bennett, 2009:189). Bennett (2009:189) has investigated 'affective relational contours between individuals and landscapes' through 'nostalgic feelings, practices and performances of a particular group of people...[in their] attempt to [re] create a sense of collective identity'. She looks at the rituals of annual celebration of the miner's gala, where residents experience nostalgia both privately and publicly. Both Meier and Bennett's work shows how former industrial and mining communities through 'nostalgia', 'memory' or 'haunting' create a 'common identity'- a homogenized space that may not have existed in reality, but offers them a feeling of continuity and Walkerdine's (2010) 'containing skin' that holds the community together.

Looking at the steelmaking histories of towns in America and Canada, historian Steven Hugh and photographer David W Lewis (2007:11) studied the 'public memories' connected with rituals of demolitions of industrial sites, which they describe as 'industrial sublime and a sense of being swept away by the beauty and terror of economic change'. With this public memory of 'industrial ruins', Hugh and Lewis combine powerful oral histories given by ex-workers with photography to tell a compelling story of factory closures from the two countries (USA and Canada). The workers narrate stories not just about feelings of being 'hurt' and of 'hardships' but also about 'anger' and 'resistance'. 'These were no passive victims' (Hugh et al, 2007:14). I find resonances in my own research. In their decision to make a video, *'Disconnecting People'*, the workers and union members in Nokia strongly expressed their desire to be 'heard' and to express in public their disapproval of the closure, their anger at the management's decision, their resistance and their refusal to be seen as helpless victims.

Drawing upon the various approaches to 'industrial closures' that different researchers have taken, and my own research, we see that workspace is a complex *emotional space* layered with relations, feelings and memories that workers attach to it, producing consciousness of 'self worth' and 'interests'. To an outsider labour's actions and responses might seem contradictory, 'contingent' and perhaps even 'depoliticised'. However, Herod (1998:3) argues that to dismiss certain actions of labour as 'false consciousness' without understanding the workers 'sense of place' is 'not only intellectually dishonest, in that it merely brushes away real-world situations that do not fit preexisting theoretical arguments, but also politically questionable, for it suggests that working-class people are too ignorant to recognize their 'true' interests at particular historical moments in particular places'.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This Chapter explains the bodies of scholarship useful in developing the analytical framework for the thesis. In three sections, *Origins; Experiencing Labour's geographies*, and *Losing Labour*, I discussed different sets of literatures

that engage with questions of expectations that forms the origin for everyday work politics; the paradoxes around women's waged work; experiences and meaning of work and its loss to the workers.

These literatures points to the deeply gendered nature of work and labour preferences at global manufacturing sites that demand hyper efficient and disciplined labour. The literature showed how managerial recruitment practices and preferences predetermine women as 'inferior bearers of labour' (Elson, 1981) as they enter new work sites. Troubling the boundaries between work and non-work, and public-private, feminists have shown how patriarchy and capitalism creates spaces of exclusion and devalue women's labour (England and Lawson, 2005; Federici, 2008). In the Indian context, researchers have also shown how the intersection of gender (Raju, 2010; Kapadia, 1995) and caste (Carsell, 2013; Harriss-White, 2003; Kannan, 1994; Thorat, 2007) play a role in labour market hierarchies, showing how global capital accommodates itself to local social registers in its attempt to expand.

However, researchers have also shown that these are not just one-sided stories of managerial expectations of a docile labour, but a combination of aspiration and the possibility of changing personal circumstances that motivate workers to enter these hyper efficient manufacturing sites (Cross, 2014; Fernandes, 2000). Some studies show the role played by work in shaping women's sense of self and their personal circumstances, and their ability to make choices in life (Gallo, 2005; Kabeer, 2000; Lal, 2011; Ngai, 2005). These studies locate women's entry into waged work within the larger context of women's labour in the society, of which waged work forms a part although it does play a significant role in shaping their lives. To understand what motivates workers to consent to labour, geographers have argued for the reconnection of the everyday agencies of workers with the social context in which they live (Coe, 2013) and that attention should be paid to the 'small scale geographies' of work-life of workers (McDowell, 2015).

Manufacturing of female working bodies has been an important site of enquiry by researchers to show how through positioning of individual bodies on specific location, labour power gets fragmented and relations of power gets established on the shop floor. However, these relations are not static and are experienced and negotiated, often bodily, by the women workers (Ngai, 2005). These literatures help in understanding how power relations circulate in different forms and at different times and places in the shop floor.

Scholars have also shown the role emotions play in understanding the attachment and feelings that workers develop towards work and workspaces created by the everyday rhythms of life and community centred around work (Bennett, 2009; Meier, 2012; Walkerdine, 2010; Hugh et al, 2007). These emotional attachments are sometimes dismissed as depoliticised responses of labour, a perspective that ignores workers 'sense of place' and which Herod (1998) says is an 'intellectual dishonestly'.

In conclusion, the literature I have drawn on illustrates that labour and its geographies are constitutive of each other, and that these are not static or predetermined, but reconstituted by changing relations of work. I use these sets of literature to understand the everyday lived experiences of women workers in a mobile phone assembly factory. I add to this body of literature through my empirical work by paying attention to and linking the work-life experiences of women workers both inside and outside the shop floor in order to evolve a more grounded understanding of workers' agency and actions. Through my research I have tried to emphasise the meanings that women draw from waged work that is linked to their lives and labour outside the formal workspace. The sentiments that they attach to these new workspaces are produced by their new found sense of self worth as waged workers and the possibility of changing life situations. My research reconnects the social contexts within which lives of workers are embedded to their everyday responses in the shop floor to show that different sites occupied by labour are deeply connected, and illustrates that in order for labour geography to understand workers' everyday agencies we need to look at different social relations and sites inhabited by labour.

### Introduction

“Waiting! Waiting...still waiting. It’s 12 o’clock, where is she, where is Kalpana, where is Muthu? The smell of food is making me so hungry...rice, sambar, beetroot koot, pickles.... Periamma is cooking lunch. How long should I wait? Hope it’s not a no-show again. Periamma’s husband is sitting in his small shop, he looks sleepy. I feel sleepy too! The shop sells mobile phone recharge card and ‘fancy’ items. The heat is unbearable. Am waiting...patience with a capital ‘P’!

*Field diary, 30/7/2013*

*(Sitting on a red plastic stool in the verandah of Periamma’s house facing the main road in Sriperumbadur town.)*

While reading through the margins of my field diary, I came across so many such short, hurriedly scribbled notes that I wondered why I had written them and what prompted me at those moments. Were they in anyway reflecting the process or particular phase of my research at that moment? What is the link, if any, between those jottings and my research? As Cindi Katz (2013) notes, these bits in the margins keeps a researcher ‘afloat’ in the field. She kept a comic book journal while doing her fieldwork in rural Sudan. ‘I secreted my crankiness, recorded my amusements and amazements, and kept myself afloat....it was private, reflective, and therapeutic’ (2013:1).

I have chosen the above jotting to illustrate the nature of these observations. Reflecting upon it, I think there is a methodological link between these and the process of ‘doing’ research (see Shah, 2014). The writings in the margins often capture ‘situations’ at a very gut level, registering the immediate moment. For instance, I have written about ‘waiting’ and ‘patience’. This was a phase of my research when I was meeting young women, who were all factory workers. My anxiety levels were high because I was ‘looking’ for co-researchers. The women worked in three shifts, travelled long distances and their everyday rhythms of

life were very different from mine. I was trying to negotiate the many practicalities of doing the fieldwork - of time, priorities, interests, gate-keepers, places to meet and my own childcare responsibilities. The only thing I could do at that moment was to be patient and wait – often by the phone, at a tea stall or a bus stop, market place or someone’s house. To persist, have patience, and keep my chin up was not always easy. It was all part of the research ‘process’ (Cook, 1997, 2005: 172).

One of the things that I did during ‘waiting’ or travelling (often over 100 kilometres a day, changing buses, trains and walking) was to take photographs, some of them randomly, some purposefully, capturing mundane everyday human activities in different places (Image 2). Since my research revolved around ‘work’ and ‘working lives’, the field seemed vast to me, because the ‘geography (of work) was everywhere’ (Cook, 1997, 2005:169). It didn’t begin or end at the factory gate, but extended to the bus stops, tea stalls or roadsides, where I observed all sorts of livelihoods. In a blog post later, I wrote a photo-essay based on these images connecting lives and places.<sup>17</sup>



**Image 2:** Women selling false hair in busy T Nagar market; women weaving cane curtains on the street in Adyar.

As Karin Becker Ohrn (cited in Hugh, 2007:16) wrote of photo-essays they ‘illustrate relationships among diverse people, places, or events’. These images,

<sup>17</sup> ‘The everyday’: A photo-essay from the ‘field’: <http://labourmatter.blogspot.in/p/life-stories.html> (accessed on 23/8/2015).

observations and random conversations help situate the larger context in which women's lives in the world of labour are located, a key concern of this thesis. Therefore 'notes from the margins' bring in the researcher's sub-conscious observations and 'feelings' of places/spaces or how she/he sees a place or people. This can help situate and capture the messiness of research and the researcher's experience of the field.

This Chapter is about the process of 'doing' research, from conceptualizing a research idea to doing the fieldwork and then making sense of the data and writing. For instance, how and where the 'data' was collected, the 'spatial context' and 'un/equal relationships between the narrator and interpreter' (Benson et al, 2006: 584) influence narrations and observations. Therefore, in the empirical chapters, I have often included explanations for a particular data collection method, describing the space and my 'location' within it. The questions that this thesis asks are as follows - what motivates young women to enter 'waged' work? What are the expectations of the management from the workers? How is work 'perceived' and 'experienced' by the women? What does work mean to women and its role in shaping their sense of self? Researching these questions required me to be in different places and spaces at different times – within both the factory and rooms of the women. Each space had to be negotiated differently to gain access. As Cook (1997, 2005:177) points out 'research is always bound up in networks of power and knowledge and is, therefore, inherently political'. In the following sections I will elaborate on the method(s) and approaches taken in conducting the research and the rationale(s) behind them. I suggest, based on my experience, that there can be multiple and creative ways to work with workers by adopting both ethnographic and participatory research approaches.

## **1. Pre-fieldwork planning**

### ***Negotiating access***

As I was drawing out the research proposal and fieldwork plan in Durham, approximately 5111 miles (8225 kms) away from the state of Tamil Nadu in

India where the fieldwork was conducted, I anticipated some challenges. My background as an activist with a longstanding commitment to workers' rights and the social justice movement in India guided the research topic. While I did not see any contradiction in combining my activist commitment with rigour of academic research (see Hale, 2001), I was however conscious of my position as a 'local' activist, studying in a 'foreign' university and going back 'home' to do research, which made me both an insider and an outsider (see Gilbert, 1994; Mullings, 1999).

Having an 'intimate' knowledge of the field and having 'contacts' has its own dynamics (Sultana, 2007: 378). I was aware of the 'gate keepers', mostly male trade unionists and NGO activists, with whom I would have to negotiate 'turf'. One issue was being seen as an 'insider', an activist, meant 'trust' and a certain 'expectation' of the 'outcomes' of my research from the people who I have been associated with for years. The other issue was my 'public' stance against Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and my writings on the issue in local newspapers, blogs and journals such as *Kafila* and the *Economic and Political Weekly*. I was aware of the possible implications of this on my accessibility to one of the key research sites – the Nokia factory. I intended to observe the production process, arrangement of work and labour inside the shop floor, in addition to conducting interviews with the Nokia management (see Upadhya, 2008).

This was the first fieldwork challenge that I faced while in Durham. Access to the factory site was denied for 'security reasons', in an email letter to one of my supervisors by a representative of Nokia Corp. based in Finland.<sup>18</sup> However, after following up with emails and a letter from supervisors requesting management interviews outside the factory premises, access was granted to the site and I was asked to contact the local factory management in Sriperumbadur.<sup>19</sup> The process

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<sup>18</sup> In an email letter dated 9th April 2013 addressed to the academic supervisor and the researcher a senior manager from Nokia Corporation stated that "*our factories are strictly confidential places with restricted access. Therefore unfortunately I cannot provide Ms. Dutta access to the factory*".

<sup>19</sup> In an email communication from a senior manager of Nokia dated 7th May 2013, permission was granted to me to meet the HR Head of Chennai factory to discuss issues of gaining access to the factory. The letter stated-"*I hope you understand that this is very*

of negotiation to access the site indicated the 'nature' of the 'space' that I was intending to research and therefore my fieldwork actually started even before I reached the 'field' (Cook, 1997, 2005:172).

### ***Interpreter***

The other practical challenge I anticipated was of language. While I had a working knowledge of the local language, Tamil, I was not confident about my ability to conduct in-depth conversations and discussions with the workers. I was, however, confident of finding Tamil 'friends' whom I could request to be my interpreter(s) in the field. I was aware of the 'politics' of translation, which I knew was 'more than a technical exercise' and involves a 'social relationship of power' and an 'imperfect mediation of culture' (Bujra, 2006:172). Yet having lived and worked in Tamil Nadu for a few years, I had a good sense of the local dynamics, and I followed colloquial Tamil well to sense 'imperfections' or odd comments. However, I decided to join a government run Tamil language class to learn basic reading/writing and brush up on my spoken Tamil skills after returning to Chennai. I discuss some of the challenges and opportunities of using interpreters/translators in later sections.

### ***Choosing method(s)***

I wanted to take an approach that would allow women workers to play an active role in the 'production of knowledge' in a reflexive and participatory way. I was committed to an approach enabling workers to tell their stories with 'an intimacy, complexity and force' (Pratt, 2000: 640), offering multiple views of factory workers' experiences and dispelling stereotypes. Ong (1995: 354) has theorised this process as 'marginal groups interven[ing] in global narratives by putting into circulation alternative circuits of discursive power'. I felt that taking a participatory approach in researching the everyday experiences of women

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*exceptional to allow an individual researcher inside the facility as it is a highly confidential production area."* The letter came with a caveat about Nokia's non-disclosure agreement that the researcher had to agree to prior to access.

would allow them to participate in all or in some 'stages of research'—from setting the research framework to research process and its outcomes. While thinking about methodology and in thinking of 'how to get at these practical, routine knowledges' (Latham, 2003:2001), one was reminded of Thrift's (2000) observation of the 'methodological timidity' of human geographers while studying 'the ordinary'. The question he prompted us to ask is what methodologies might one use to be more sensitive to the 'creativity' of everyday practices? One that would offer possibilities of 'theorising up' without portraying people as 'victims' (Rigg, 2007:7-8) seemed the most appropriate answer.

I read literature on both the politics of doing participatory research and various methods developed by researchers, NGOs, activists and developmental agencies. I was aware of the criticism of participatory research as 'the new tyranny' (Cooke et al, 2001) which could 'clean up' local knowledge and marginalise those voices that challenge the 'status quo or is messy or unmanageable' (Cooke, 2001:12). However, I was also aware of the 'situated' and 'reflexive' nature of participatory research approach, drawn from critical strands of—feminism, post-structuralism and critical race theory (see Cameron 2005; Cahill 2004, 2007; Sangtin et al 2006). During my literature review I did not find any specific literature on the use of participatory research with factory workers most of which were based either on 'participant observations' (see Westwood, 1984; Lynch, 2007) or by 'immersing' oneself into the lives of workers through 'living' the experiences (see for instance Burawoy, 1985; Ngai, 2005; Cross, 2014). However, I felt that these approaches might not allow for enough active participation of the women in the research process, and therefore decided to take a participatory action research (PAR) approach. This meant that although I had identified the broader research focus and questions, the co-researchers, in this case women workers, could identify specific issues and engage in the research process. I designed my research methodology as a PAR project 'nested' within the wider project of the PhD. This approach, I felt would foreground the knowledge created by 'ordinary' people about their lives, recognising that there is more than one reality 'out there' (Pain, 2007: 28) and offered possibilities of 'methodological innovation' (Kindon, 2007: 13).

In developing the research design I tried to consider issues of when the research might be conducted in ways that fitted with the multiple commitments of workers (including their different production shifts and time spent commuting between work and home). I planned to ask the women to keep journals/diaries for a period of time, which could be in written form or audio-recorded diaries (on mobile phones). The remit/ themes for the diary would evolve through group discussions amongst researcher and co-researchers. The idea was to create a cyclical process in which reflective writings, sharing, discussions and the self-interpretation of diary entries became part of the data generation and analysis (Cahill, 2004: 278). As a researcher, I envisaged my role in facilitating the discussions, take reflective notes of the discussions, reading the diary entries/transcripts in detail, and sharing it back with the group for further discussion. However, there were challenges that I faced in the field, which I discuss in the later section, and I had to adapt my methodological approach accordingly in a way that proved to be 'engaging' and 'creative' both for the women I worked with and me as a researcher.

In the case of the factory, I decided to use ethnographic tools, such as interviews, observations, informal interactions, note-keeping and a flexible approach that allowed me to 'adjust' to any emerging situations at the time of fieldwork (Crang et al, 1995). This approach felt appropriate for the purpose of my fieldwork inside the factory which was to understand the workspace as 'experienced and understood in the everyday lives of people (workers) who actually 'live them out' (Crang et al, 1995: 4). While I was aware of the limitations and 'partial' nature of this approach, and as James Clifford (1986:7) had noted – 'ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*—committed and incomplete' (emphasis in original)—I believed they would help me to understand and situate, even if partially, the experiences and 'feelings' about the work and the factory space as 'felt' and 'narrated' to me by women outside of their workspace. I also intended to use these methodological tools, such as interviews and informal interactions, with a broader section of workers, trade unionists, activists, NGOs and government officials to understand the wider experiences of

work and employment, debates around SEZs and labour, political-social contexts of industrialisation in Tamil Nadu.

## **2. The Arrival: Fieldwork and gate-keeping**

I arrived in Tamil Nadu in the middle of summer in June 2013 to begin the fieldwork. And as often happens, despite all the careful planning, things turned out quite differently on the ground. Despite going back 'home' to a place I was quite familiar with and to people I knew or was confident of knowing, fieldwork threw up many more challenges than I anticipated. A key lesson it taught me was the ability to 'let go' of the plan at times and to 'think on your feet' most of the time. These were important 'revelations' that extended well beyond the 'fieldwork' into everyday life.

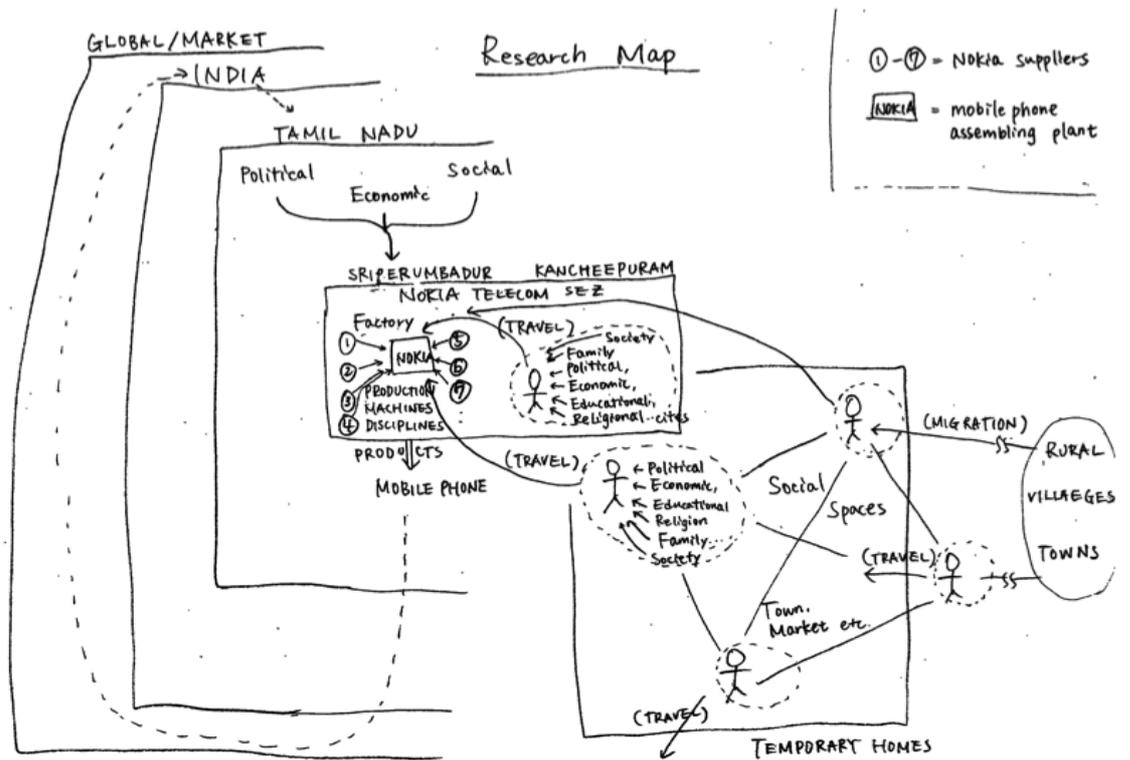
The research site was located in the north-eastern part of the state of Tamil Nadu in Sriperumbadur *taluk*<sup>20</sup> in Kancheepuram district, about 45 kms northwest of city of Chennai. The area is a hub of automobile and electronic hardware manufacturing industries with a large population of inter-district and inter-state migrant workers.

The state government had promised that over 200,000 jobs would be created in the area by multinational companies setting up factories in Sriperumbadur (Govt. of Tamil Nadu, 2008). The case study for the research was The Nokia Telecom SEZ, a mobile phone handset manufacturing complex located in Sriperumbadur. It was an interesting case study for the following reasons - the global significance of the product it made; once one of the largest sites for mobile phones manufacture in the world; a flagship SEZ with the highest investment and exports in India. Furthermore it had a high employment rate; a predominantly female workforce; and was a site of labour unrest over the past few years. The zone had seven factories and was one of the largest employers in the area with over 25,000 workers (Finnwatch et al, 2011). Young workers from different districts of Tamil Nadu and from other states worked inside the

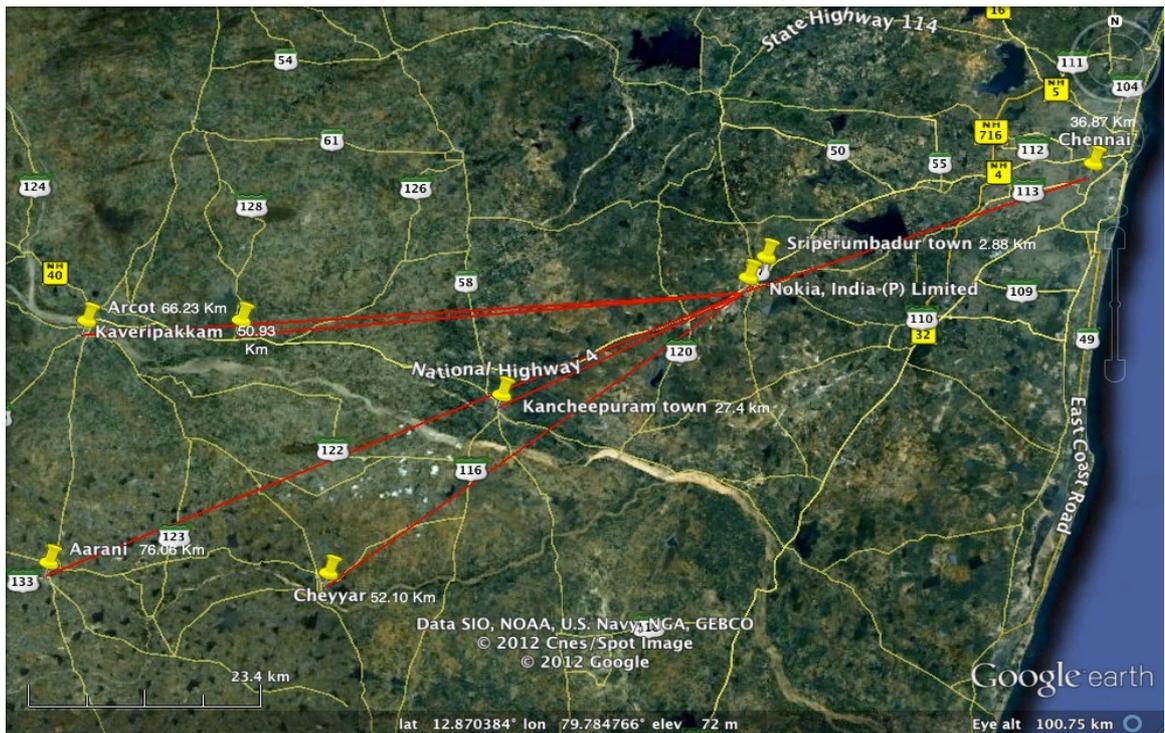
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<sup>20</sup> *Taluk* is a sub-division of a district.

Telecom SEZ. They mostly lived in rented rooms in the villages and towns located within 25 - 70 kilometers radius of the SEZ and some lived with parents (Image 3). The workers commuted daily to the factories by buses provided by the companies.



**Diagram 1:** Hand sketched diagram mapping out the research sites



**Image 3:** Map showing distances travelled by the workers everyday from their residents to Nokia SEZ. Source: Google Earth

After arriving in Chennai, I visited the state and district offices of the left party trade union - Centre for Indian Trade Union (CITU) that worked with the employees' union in Nokia and its supplier company Foxconn located inside the SEZ. I also met with the representatives of local NGOs – VELs and Cividep which worked with agricultural and industrial workers respectively. I already had extensive background knowledge of the area and was aware of some of the 'gatekeepers' who could help me reach out to the workers. I was also aware of the 'turf' politics where I could be seen as a 'threat' to the 'membership'<sup>21</sup> by the trade unions and the NGOs. Therefore in my first meetings I explained my research plan and fieldwork ideas to them (Valentine, 1997, 2005:116). I was hoping to be introduced to some of the workers and union members in the SEZ through them, although I was aware that I could be 'seen' or 'perceived' by the workers as a 'unionist' or an 'NGO person' depending on who introduced me to them. But I was confident of being able to 'snowball' my layers of contacts

<sup>21</sup> Having previous experience of working with trade unions and NGOs, especially my involvement with the anti-SEZ movement in Tamil Nadu, I was aware of the tensions of organizing in the area where 'outsiders' were often perceived as threat to the union or NGO memberships.

(Valentine, 1997, 2005:117) after initial introductions with the workers were established. CITU General Secretary, AS Soundararajan, agreed to 'lend' his support to my project and said he would inform his district secretaries and also the leaders of employees' union in the zone. However, he told me that the representatives of Nokia Employees' Union might be hesitant to be involved in any research project as 'they have a good relation with the management'.<sup>22</sup>

During this time, I also met with the HR Manager of the Nokia factory D. Soundararajan, as instructed by the senior manager from Nokia Corporation in Finland. I had already emailed him from Durham to establish preliminary early contact. However, I did not know what to expect from the meeting, since the email from the Finnish manager only said '*Mr Soundararajan will welcome Ms Dutta to Nokia factory.....I suggest that to avoid any misunderstanding Ms Dutta and Mr Soundararajan first discuss on what information can be shared and published as part of the research, and what are the conditions on Nokia's non-disclosure agreement*'<sup>23</sup>. When I met D. Soundararajan in June 2013 and he asked me what my 'requirements' were, I asked for access to the shop floor to observe the production process and interviews with managers of different sections. I also tentatively asked if I could 'work' in the assembly line briefly to experience the work process, but this was immediately turned down stating 'safety' reasons and 'high skill' requirement (see Zhang 2015:5). The HR manager, however, granted me the other two requests and asked to see a detailed plan of the study. He even volunteered to organize interviews and group discussions with workers in the factory after the management 'vetted' my questions that I would ask the workers. I merely nodded to his suggestions and was not particularly concerned about this *condition* since I did not intend to conduct any interviews with the

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<sup>22</sup> Meeting with AS Soundarajan, General Secretary CITU, Chennai dated 14/6/2013. I felt that my activist background (especially anti-SEZ campaign) was the reason for the CITU leader's comment since he felt that the workers might perceive my research to be a threat to their jobs. I also had a good relationship with the district secretary of CITU but knew the hierarchical functioning of the organization that needed 'consent' of senior leadership before I could seek support from district level cadre. I did not seek support from DMK led union (LPF) and AIDMK led union (ATP) since the Nokia employees Union had broken their 'ties' with these unions. And having previous knowledge of the leadership of these two Unions, I did not feel confident about approaching them.

<sup>23</sup> Email correspondence addressed to my supervisor Marcus Power from Ms Miia Hapuoja, Senior Manager, Nokia Corporation, Espoo Finland. Dated 7/5/2013.

workers inside the factory. My primary concern was the 'non-disclosure' document that I was to sign before commencing the fieldwork inside the factory in August 2013. Soundararajan 'encouraged' me to travel with the women workers to *'find out how happy they were even about travelling long distances everyday to come to work, some even travel 80 kms one way to come to work'*.<sup>24</sup> He instructed one his junior staff members to organize meetings with the other managers and 'arrange' for my shop floor visits in August 2013. After my meeting with him I recounted our conversation in an email to him as a way of keeping a written record of what was agreed.

### **3. Fieldwork activities**

#### ***Factory***

I spent over five weeks carrying out ethnographic fieldwork inside the factory staggered over a period of three months (August, September and November 2013). I divided my time between speaking to management officials and spending time on the shop floor (details in Table 2). All my interviews with the management were arranged by the HR office and I had to explain my research plan to everyone. I asked for permission to record the interviews and sought oral consent from the people I interviewed and audio recorded them. Since the interviews were set up by the HR office, most of the managers did not mind the audio recording of the interviews and gave oral consent. Only in one instance, a senior manager from the training team asked me not to record the interview although he consented to talk. I conducted interviews with managers from various departments - production, quality control, human resources and services (transportation, canteen, security). I also attended management organized events in the factory such as the *'5 years job completion'* ceremony, where permanent workers who had completed five years in the company were 'honoured' with a certificate and a small plaque with their names on and speeches made by senior managers and workers recounting their 'good fortune' to be working for the company. These events are 'valuable material to be collected by ethnographers' (Upadhaya, 2008: 70) as they give insights into the

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<sup>24</sup> Meeting with HR Head Nokia India Pvt Ltd dated 11/6/2013.

'manufactured culture' (Kunda, 1992 cited in Upadhaya, 2008: 70) of the corporate world. I even sat through an audit process for one of the service providers (a security agency).

To understand the labour recruitment routes, I attended a 'job fair' in Srirangam town in Trichy district where Nokia was recruiting. While in the factory, I spent much of the time in the shop floor, observing the arrangement of production space and production processes, the arrangement of workers and shop floor meetings. I also interacted with shop floor managers and whenever there was a possibility I tried to interact with women/men in the assembly lines. The rationale behind doing the various sets of activities in the factory was to gain an understanding of the nature of work and workspace, everyday activities, management-labour interactions, interactions and relations amongst workers, as well as gaining an understanding of the general atmosphere in the factory. In Appendix 1 - *Notes from the factory*, I record some of my personal impressions from the factory. These *notes* are 'self-reflexive' field-work accounts, perhaps a little 'naïve, confessional and analytic' (Clifford, 1986:14), but helping to open up a possibility for the researcher to discuss 'a wide range of issues, epistemological, existential, and political' (1986:14). Therefore, no longer in the 'margins of ethnography', these 'informal' accounts, as Clifford puts it, can be 'seen as constitutive, inescapable' (1986:14). Below in Box 1 and also Appendix 1 (Notes from the factory) are excerpts.

### **Box 1: Shop floor impressions**

*A 'friendly' and 'controlled' environment, a well-lit modern looking air-conditioned factory. I do not quite know what to expect, there are curious glances and 'smiling' faces around me! I feel something odd about the 'over-friendly' atmosphere and the chatter of 'we are Nokia family'! When I mentioned this to a friend, he said - "You are an 'embedded' researcher". Was I an 'embedded' researcher? Seeing only what the management wanted me to 'see'?*

*I am in the ATO restroom. It has three floors. "It's a comedy, this place" Kaplana said. I understood why. Women were sitting on the steps and landing of the stairs. Most of them were sitting in groups of 2-3. A few were sleeping with their heads tucked in their folded knees. Kalpana and I joined a big group of 5-6 girls - Lakshmi's gang, as Kalpana called the group. I was introduced as a researcher and "I am her co-researcher"-Kalpana. "I am her co-researcher too, she comes to our room in Kancheepuram", Lakshmi said. I feel curious eyes on me from the other women. "What is her age, take a guess", Kalpana asked the girls pointing towards me. It's a 'quiz' she plays each time she introduces me to people. "28-30" said Manimozhi looking at me intently. A shriek of laughter from Kalpana and Lakshmi—"she looks young, but she is older than your mother"! I smiled, having overcome my earlier embarrassments. I look around the walls along the stairs—symbols of hearts drawn with pen, a few lines in tamil declaring love for one Suresh, a few lines of poems... "they (management) keep rubbing it off, but we keep on writing them" giggled Manimozhi. She is a poet, has written songs even.. "I wanted to be a journalist, ended up as an assembly line worker". What a fascinating place restroom is, a subversive zone!*

*Shop floor notebook entry, 18/11/2013*

My fieldwork diary is full of anecdotes from the factory. These informal accounts are important ethnographic impressions that registers the personal 'feelings' of a researcher through which she/he tries to make sense of a place and situates oneself. They bring out the doubts, confusions and anxieties that are part of everyday fieldwork. These notes form an important source of material while

analysing and writing the thesis, much after the fieldwork, as they help to contextualize situations and can provide a basis for exploring particular themes and developing arguments. There were two particularly challenging and awkward moments that I experienced and negotiated in the factory that I note in Box 2. As Clifford (1986:14) notes these ‘accounts’ work to ‘specify the discourse of informants, as well as that of ethnographer....who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back’.

### **Box 2: Awkward moments**

#### ***Non-disclosure***

On my first day in the factory, I was given a ‘Personal Non-Disclosure Agreement-Confidentiality Agreement’ to sign. The document had one particular condition that posed a serious challenge for my research—*‘I acknowledge that any and all information that may be available from computers or databases of Nokia or its employees, officers, directors or agents, disclosed to me orally in internal/external discussions of such Nokia employees, officers, directors or agents or otherwise available, shall be deemed especially sensitive confidential information of Nokia, which I shall not disclose to anyone or use for any purposes’*.<sup>25</sup> The document also sought my ‘consent’ to process and transfer electronically my ‘personal data’ that I had given to the company. I sought clarification from the HR manager, before signing the document. He gave me an ‘oral’ assurance that I could use all the information for ‘academic purposes only’. He also mentioned orally that before publishing the final thesis, Nokia would like to ‘see’ and ‘approve’ the section on ‘Nokia only’. I was in a fix. There were serious strings attached to the approval process. I consulted my supervisors about this. We decided to seek a written approval from the HR manager regarding the use of the information. I recounted the ‘oral’ agreement in an email to the manager, to which he replied by stating (dated 8/10/2013) – *‘It’s confirmed that you can use the material to publish for non commercial academic*

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<sup>25</sup> Personal Non-Disclosure Agreement signed by the researcher on 1/8/2013.

*purpose only*'.<sup>26</sup> There was no mention in the email about requirement of Nokia's 'approval' of the thesis content before publication.

***Confrontation***

Into the second week of my time in the factory, I was confronted by one of the senior HR managers in the factory accusing me of carrying out some undercover espionage. The manager asked me – ‘is this an undercover job?’ I was quite unprepared for his abrupt behaviour and sensed hostility in his voice. When I reminded the manager about my PhD project he shot back – ‘PhDs and all can be made up...fictitious’. He went to the extent of saying that even the geography department in Durham University could be a non-existent entity - “all can be made up these days”<sup>27</sup>. He told me that he had ‘discovered’ who I was and read my ‘journalistic’ writings about Nokia, especially my report on the death of a female worker in Nokia in 2010. He was clearly upset with his ‘discovery’ and wanted me to speak the ‘truth’. I told him politely that he should clarify his doubts with the HR manager and Finnish office about my ‘credibility’ before accusing me. It was a very awkward moment for me but I kept calm and answered politely.

**Table 2: Details of activities in factory**

<b>Factory*</b> (5 weeks at different intervals over the months of August, September, November 2013)	
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interviews with management	15 interviews over a period of 4 weeks. Besides formal interviews, there were many informal conversations with the junior managers in the shop floor, cafeteria, ‘chats’ in HR.
Shop floor visits/observation of work/understanding	I spent 5 weeks on the shop floor, sometimes spending a full shift with a Team leader of an assembly line and sometimes on my own. I was

<sup>26</sup> Email communication from HR Head to the researcher dated 8/10/2013

<sup>27</sup> HR cabin, Factory dated 13/8/2013

production process	usually accompanied to the assembly lines by a junior HR manager or a Team Leader, but many times was left by myself in the lines.
Attend shifts-A shift (6.15am-2.45pm), B shift (2.45-10.45pm), C shift (10.45 pm-6.15 am)	Could only attend morning general shifts from 7.30 am -4.30 pm (9 hours) due to childcare responsibilities and problems with night bus transportation during A shift pick up and B shift drop off that were in the mid-night.
Making contacts with Nokia India Thozhilalar Sangam (employees' union)	5 interviews (inside and outside the factory) with union leaders. Including invited to observe the 2 <sup>nd</sup> election process of the employees union in February 2014.
Non production spaces	Spent time in canteen and restrooms in the shop floor hanging out with the women workers 'unsupervised' by HR managers or Team Leaders.
Making contacts with women workers in the assembly line	I met many women workers inside the factory and also while travelling in the company buses but wasn't able to maintain contact with many of them outside the factory. While the women gave me their phone numbers, they often didn't pick up my calls or said that they were too busy to meet. There were times that after fixing up dates and time, women wouldn't turn up for the meeting. Women who stayed with parents/family said they couldn't meet since their parents would not allow.

\* I had planned to spend more time in the factory over the coming months, but conditions in the factory changed very rapidly after December 2013 with uncertainty about its future operations and I was not given further access to the factory to do field work from January 2014.

### ***Rooms/Homes***

In June 2013, before starting my fieldwork in the factory, I started contacting workers through local union offices. I visited the district office of CITU in Sriperumbadur a few times and after 'enduring' weeks of waiting (see Cook,

1997, 2005:172), CITU's district secretary S Kannan arranged my first meeting with a young female worker in Nokia - Kalpana<sup>28</sup>. Kalpana invited me to visit her 'room' in Thiruvallur town at a distance of 25 kms from Sriperumbudur the next day, which she shared with three other women workers from Nokia. It was a 'production day off' for the workers. She introduced me to her roommates as 'thozhar' (comrade) from the 'communist office'<sup>29</sup>. Thus began my first set of interactions with the women workers from the Nokia factory. Over the next few months Kalpana introduced me to other young women living in rented rooms in Kancheepuram and Thiruvallur towns. I discovered 'Muthu's room' in Kancheepuram town through Kalpana, a space that I mention several times in the empirical chapters. I also made contact with women inside the factory, some of whom I met in their homes or they visited my house in Chennai.

### ***Co-researchers***

At the beginning my first challenge was to explain my research to the women and why I wanted to do it. Why they would be interested in the research, was something that was troubling me. It felt a bit awkward to explain the participatory process that I was proposing to adopt. Suddenly, the whole exercise seemed a bit 'artificial' and my keenness for finding 'co-researchers' and 'collaboration' seemed out of place. It was more 'my need' and not something that the women expressed a need for. The context, I felt, at that moment wasn't right. The women were not familiar with the idea of 'research' or 'participation'. While they were quite happy to talk to me and were very generous with their time and stories, they didn't seem particularly interested in the process of the research, something perhaps to be expected. We usually started talking about families, homes, with they being as curious about my personal life, asking probing questions (Nagar, 1997). For the first few months, I was troubled by the fact that the research was 'driven' by me and I did not have a 'core' group of co-researchers who were collaborating in directing/evolving the research process

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<sup>28</sup> Meeting with Kalpana, CITU district office, Sriperumbudur, date 2/7/2013.

<sup>29</sup> As I had anticipated, depending on the person who makes the initial introduction, the workers perceive affiliations. Sometimes it can be beneficial and sometimes it can silence discussion.

as I had planned. But I was conscious of not 'forcing' participation (Cooke et al, 2001) and letting the process 'flow'. I knew that there would be opportunities for a deeper 'engagement' as the process evolved and I needed to be 'patient', 'flexible' and adaptable (see Kindon et al, 2007, for discussion on 'openness' in participatory research approach). Over a period of time, I developed friendships with a group of women, who became interested in the project, and we started interacting regularly. In fact some of them enthusiastically called themselves 'co-researchers', but with the exception of Kalpana, who from the beginning had remained interested and engaged in the research, the others were not as 'actively' engaged. We all met regularly in groups and individually to share stories, experiences, ideas and watch films (*Modern Times* and *Madhavidai*) and engage in reflective discussions that shaped the research project.

However, my suggestions about writing diaries did not interest the women despite repeated attempts at it. While two of them claimed to have started writing diary entries, they did not share them with me or in the group. I proposed recording entries on mobile phones if writing was difficult, but women did not find the idea appealing or practical. I felt there were both practical and cultural issues around diary writing. The practical difficulty was of time constraints. While I was aware of the cultural 'fact' that diary writing is not a common practice, I was interested in introducing this idea in order to engage the women in reflective thinking about their everyday at their pace and time. I did not persist. Instead, I spoke to the women over the phone quite frequently. They told me about their day in the factory or room or anything specific that they observed and thought about. After each telephone conversation, I noted down our conversations in my field notebook. The women also sent me text messages and images on phones and 'Whatsapp'. In the case of one woman, where it was difficult to meet her due to family restrictions, we mostly communicated through phone and texting each other. I felt the women were making 'entries' about their everyday through this process rather than maintaining diary entries.

### ***Collaborative initiatives***

There were two collaborative initiatives that emerged from our interactions that form important 'research material' for the empirical section 'Experiencing labour's geographies'. These outputs were driven by my commitment to create a collaborative research project and evolved over a period of time during the fieldwork. I briefly write about them below.

***Mobile Girls Kootam***: A Radio Programme (10 episodes)<sup>30</sup>: In 'Muthu's room' through a dialogic process we created a series of 10 conversations on a range of topics that were of interest to us, connecting our lives as women, sharing stories, finding common and completely different experiences given our very different social and economic backgrounds including rural and urban differences. We recorded each conversation (in Tamil), and later my interpreter and me lightly edited them to an episode format with a short introduction to each conversation. We played them to the women in our next visits to the room and later uploaded it on the Radiopotti site (an independent radio podcast site) along with an English transcript with each episode. My interpreter and friend Samyuktha played an important role in the technical production of the radio podcasts. It was a collaborative process where all of us participated in creating not just the 'product' but also framing of the discussion (Nagar, 2002: 185).

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<sup>30</sup> All the episodes can be listened at: <http://radiopotti.com/category/conversations/>



**Image 4:** In Muthu's room one afternoon. We were playing a game and recording a radio episode.

**Play script** (unfinished): In March 2013, while recording one of the episodes of *Mobile Girls Koottam*, the idea of writing a play script emerged in a chance conversation when Samyuktha, my interpreter, mentioned that her sister was a theatre actor and she herself was a script writer. This led to a discussion on the different kinds of plays that all of us had watched from street theatres to the short 'awareness' skits in the factory on sexual harassment in the workplace. During the discussion, Samyuktha suggested the possibility of scripting a play together on the 'everyday lives of factory girls' based on all of our conversations, life stories and everyday experiences in the rented rooms and factory. The question we asked ourselves was 'who should be our audience?' This led to a lively discussion with all of us suggesting different audiences – friends and other workers, mobile phone users, management and family. But all of us agreed with Lakshmi's comment: 'it will be good for our families to know about our lives here (rented rooms) and also the factory. They don't know much of our lives here...'<sup>31</sup> While we planned the general story idea for

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<sup>31</sup> Discussions between Abhinaya, Satya, Lakshmi, Kalpana, Pooja, Samyuktha and Madhu in Muthu's room, Kancheepuram 30/3/2014.

the play and also met to discuss the script, the situation in the factory changed rapidly over the next two months and we could not write the script together. The play remained incomplete.

**Table 3: Details of interviews with workers**

<b>Interaction with workers outside workspace</b> (June 2013-July 2014)	
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>
Recorded conversations/interviews <sup>32</sup>	40 recorded conversations besides many informal unrecorded chats. These include multiple conversations with the 9 women and interviews with other workers (women and men) from the Nokia factory whom I met over the course of fieldwork. These were conducted in unstructured and semi structured form to be able to provide the workers with ‘opportunities to bring up their own ideas and thoughts’ (Willis, 2006: 145) as well as covering some of the issues that were important for my overall research questions.

***Challenges***

There were quite a few logistical challenges while I was working with the women and I discuss two critical ones here. The first was ‘finding’ an interpreter who had the time, was not too expensive and was sensitive and interested in the research. I was keen on working with a woman interpreter since my interactions

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<sup>32</sup> I gained oral consent from everyone I spoke to before beginning any audio recording or note-taking. I explained my research, my intention of using the conversation/interview as material (data) for my thesis and publications and their decisions to speak with me and of anonymity. Although I explained the University’s ethical consent process to the women and their families (whenever I spoke to them), I however felt awkward in producing the ethical consent form for signature as required by the University. Being aware of the local context where signing papers could be seen as a ‘formal official’ process, which could change the dynamics of the informal settings and interactions. I checked back with my supervisors about these constrains. They advised me to take oral consent and to ensure that people fully understood my research and use of data.

were mostly with women workers. I felt there was a 'role' for the interpreter in the research process beyond the technicalities of translation, which in itself is a big challenge. Since I had no 'extra' resources other than my University research grant for doing the fieldwork, I had to be judicious about spending it on extra fieldwork expenses. Therefore I wanted to find 'friends' to act as an interpreter, with whom I could work and also compensate modestly for their time and expenses. However, this proved to be a major challenge after I reached Chennai. Initially I had to work for a few weeks with a young man, a musician in a local Tamil music band, with no experience of research, but interest in fieldwork and 'labour issues'. While he was a very pleasant young man, given his complete inexperience as an interpreter, he was hesitant and unsure while he translated. Additionally being a man it wasn't easy for me to take him to womens' rooms. I then worked with a friend who was an experienced fieldworker and it was beneficial for the fieldwork since she understood the context of 'doing' research and had worked on gender issues. While sometimes I worried about her interpretations of certain statements, given my colloquial comprehension of the language, I was able to understand and overcome some of the challenges. I also recorded the conversations, which I got another friend, a Tamil historian, to transcribe into English. I was aware of the complicated nature of the process and possibilities of 'losing' some of the meanings (Bujra, 2006:172) and textures in the layers of translations. However, I took extensive notes during the interviews/conversations that I catalogued and filed in my computer after each meeting that helped me to clarify any doubts or discrepancies in the transcriptions.

Despite all these precautions, I acknowledge that there still might be room for inadequacies in the process (Bujra, 2006:175). In January 2014, another friend – Samyuktha, a young, creative and enthusiastic young woman, mentioned earlier in this chapter, joined me as a field interpreter. Samyuktha and I worked well together and had extensive discussions post meeting sessions with the workers. She was 'socially aware', 'interested in other people's views' (Bujra: 2006: 177) and competent at interpreting and later transcribing the recorded conversations. She also brought innovative and creative elements to the research process, and

being of similar age group as the women workers, she struck a very good rapport with them. All these factors, I felt, enriched the fieldwork and collaborative research process (Nagar, 2002).

One of the other factors that I faced at the beginning of the fieldwork, especially while approaching women workers who lived with their parents, was access. During my time in the factory, I met many women who shared their contacts details with me but later refused to meet outside the factory, since they feared that their families wouldn't approve of the meetings, not even in their own homes. Some of the married women said the same and also the ones with children said they did not have enough time to meet me after work due to household-responsibilities. In some cases, I managed to negotiate access through first meeting the parents (e.g. Nisha) but in some cases (e.g. Jamuna), it was very difficult to do so. I had to meet some women at my house who came to visit me without telling their parents or met me at public places far from their homes.

### ***Trade unions and government agencies***

I conducted semi-structured interviews with senior trade unionists (CITU) and local level cadres, government bureaucrats and labour scholars to understand the wider context of state's development and industrialisation plans and policies, labour relations and on going debates around SEZs. I have given the details in Appendix 2. I also used the Right to Information Act 2005 to access the state government's policy documents on SEZ and the Memorandum of Understanding between Nokia and the state of Tamil Nadu, in addition to accessing publicly available official documents such as state government's Industrial Policies.

### ***Challenges***

I already had an established rapport with leftist trade union CITU from my past work in Sriperumbadur as an activist. However, there were some instances when I was confronted by some of the leaders because I asked critical questions about the organizing strategies of unions. For instance, in January 2014, when I met AS

Soundararajan, Secretary of CITU, he questioned my 'motivation' for doing the research and why I was taking 'so much pain' in doing it and how I was 'perceived' by the workers. He said he had 'some doubts' about me. He wanted to know my personal and political background, alleging 'women like me' are being 'used' to 'tarnish the left parties' (Interview with AS Soundararajan, CITU, Chennai, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2014). I was shocked by these allegations and the nature of the interrogation by a senior trade unionist whom I had known for over five years. While I answered him politely, I was disheartened by this episode and felt that it showed that the senior leadership was not open to critical questions.

I finished my fieldwork 'officially' in July 2014 and returned to Durham in August 2014. However, I continued to speak to the women and some of the trade union members over the phone. They kept on updating me about their lives and also the factory, which finally closed on November 2014. Below I write about the process of writing, my ethical dilemmas and limitations.

#### **4. Writing and analysis**

Analysis and writing proved to be a major challenge after almost fourteen months of fieldwork, about seventy recorded conversations and interviews (many lasting over two hours), lengthy transcripts, over eighty pages of detailed typed up field notes and numerous informal conversations. My own 'emotional' engagement with the research, as an activist-scholar, often blurred the lines between research and activism, what Kye Askins (2009:8) calls 'geographies of activist emotion'. I experienced intense emotion as a woman sharing stories with other women, and a powerful sense of injustice and anger as I saw the factory closing down, anger at the laying off of the contract workers and ill-treatment of the inter-state migrant women. Unspoken emotions were *felt* but difficult to verbalize or capture in texts. While I was doing the fieldwork there were elements of analysis in the discussions with the women, but they had to be systematically organized and 'material' collected had to be brought together, made sense of and written up in an academic structure (Askins, 2009: 6).

I adopted a narrative style of writing, inspired by writings of feminist geographers such as Liz Bondi (2002) and Kye Askins (2009). Based on my understanding and 'feel' of the 'material', I developed a 'story outline' and then through an 'iterative' process of moving between material-ideas-writing and so on (Crang, 1997, 2005; 224) organized the material to explore the research questions that evolved with the fieldwork. I did not 'code' the material in the strictest sense but rather chose to group them in short empirical essays like 'vignettes' and gradually developed them into themes. I found this process useful as I read through the complex layers of life stories, experiences, interrelations and interactions between lives and spaces and my own impressions and experiences of doing the research. The 'material' guided me to foreground the everyday lived experiences of work of the young women workers.

### **5. Positionality and ethics**

My 'identity' as an activist, 'insider', 'having knowledge of the field' worked in complex ways as I carried out the research. There were 'expectations', issues of trust' and 'perceptions' that I had to negotiate during the fieldwork, some of which I have mentioned in the previous sections. Being a 'non-Tamil', yet someone who lived in Tamil Nadu, made the workers 'curious' about my background. In my meetings with the women and their families (whenever I had an opportunity to meet them), I could not in the first instance mention the fact that I was divorced and a single parent, because I was not sure how I would be perceived by them, especially in a context where 'being divorced' is not easily accepted or considered respectable. Later when I mentioned my marital status to the women in Muthu's room and to Kalpana, while I knew they did not 'judge' me, their faces showed expressions of pity. One of the women, whom I had met several times, did not mention her separation with her husband for a long period after we first started interacting. She 'pretended' to be married, as I did initially. This shows how difficult it is to speak and share these personal issues, especially for a woman in a certain context in India. Unless 'trust' is built, which takes a long period of time, these issues are difficult to reveal and discuss. There had also been conversations, for instance where a young woman shared very

intimate details about her abusive relations with her husband, I felt instinctively, even though she didn't ask me the need to pause the audio recording of the conversation. As she was speaking, I realized that it was for the first time that she was able to speak about her abusive past in a supportive, non-judgmental space and in her emotional state did not realize that the tape recorder was on. Even I was not prepared to deal with the emotional impact of the conversation and acted out of 'instinct'.

I was also aware of the big difference in the financial situation of the women and their families and myself, a recipient of a studentship from a foreign university. While this fact did not impact the quality of our interactions, I sometimes felt uncomfortable about this difference. There were only a few occasions when some women requested small financial support (small sums of Rs 1000/£10) for some personal needs, which I did not hesitate to give. The relations with some of the women had over a period of time evolved into a strong friendship that went beyond the researcher-participant relationship. For instance, Kalpana often came to stay at my home and once came to 'study' for a correspondence course exam, but just slept and rested for two days. I pampered her by cooking special dishes and taking her to the beach for ice creams. I felt she came to me, without saying it, to rest and recuperate from her exhaustion from the work and troubled relations with her family.

While I was aware of the 'differences' in our social and economic statuses; 'power' and 'privileges' between me and the women I worked with, their 'identity based reflexivity' (Nagar, 2002:182) did not create an 'impasse'. Instead I saw it as a political project, where there was the possibility of collaboration across differences (see Benson et al, 2006) and as Cindi Katz (2001:1230) argues possibilities of creating 'counter-topographies that link different places analytically and thereby enhance struggles in the name of common interest'. Perhaps given the limited resources of PhD project it is not always possible for a researcher to collaborate at all levels or create 'counter-topographies' as desired, but it certainly opens up the possibilities of long-term future collaborations, friendships and solidarities.

## 6. Conclusion

Reflecting on 'doing' the research, I realize of course, that there have been many limitations, such as not being able to spend more time in the factory or spending more time with the women workers, or speaking with government officials. However the timeframe of a PhD project does not allow for an extended period of fieldwork. Also I had to balance my own personal childcare responsibilities, being a single parent and doing the fieldwork/PhD project, which also limited my time and energy. Having said that I would like to briefly highlight my thoughts and the lessons learned about participatory/collaborative research with young women workers.

I feel that participatory or collaborative work is a long-term process and perhaps, as in my case, has opened up the possibility of future collaboration and lasting friendships. Initially I felt that while the women were happy to meet and talk to me about their experiences in the factory or their homes, they were not very keen on exploring larger questions about women's labour, work etc. They were young and in a different phase of life. I realised while planning a collaborative/ participatory approach, it is important to bear in mind that people respond differently at different times/phases in life apart from the contextual differences or logistical challenges.

While I did not go to the 'field' with any notions of 'transforming' the lives of women, I did wish to 'engage' them in a process of questioning and exploring issues around work/labour and how that shapes their sense of self/life. Use of creative methods such as making radio episodes or conceptualizing a play script opened up the space for reflection and conversation, and encouraged the women to come up with their own ideas, thoughts and themes that then became some of the key themes for the research project. I argue that a participatory research approach should be seen as the *beginning* of a collaborative process, in my case 'nested' in a PhD project, rather than *just a method*. It requires time, creativity and flexibility that should ideally extend beyond the PhD. Another key lesson from the fieldwork was the need to be flexible to emerging situations. There are

many ideas, unfinished conversations and journeys that will be undertaken in future that started with this rewarding PhD project.

## Chapter Four: Capital's Expectation

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### Introduction

'When I came here in 2004, I asked my mother whom should we hire. People were telling us BE-electrical, BSc-electrical, but I was thinking what we do in the factory requires semi-skills, it doesn't need this high level of qualification. So I asked my mother, she has been a teacher in a government school in Chennai for 40 years. She said - hire my girls, they are bright, they don't do anything after they get out of school, they either get married or do some odd vocational training here and there...they are good.'

(Interview with Senior Manager, Nokia, Mobile Phones procurement and inbound Logistics, Chennai, November 7<sup>th</sup> 2013).<sup>33</sup>

In 2004, the senior manager and his 'boss' were sent to India from Nokia's Dallas plant in the US to set up Nokia's biggest volume factory. He described himself as 'a fixer', 'a bouncer' who got 'called' to set up new factories. At the time of the interview, he was busy setting up Nokia's newest mobile assembling plant in Hanoi, Vietnam. The manager explained: 'We (Nokia) did not have any benchmark in India to work with young girls. I call them kids in factories. So I went to 'Intimate Fashion' and saw it for myself. It was working beautifully. Perfectly. Two thousand young women were working in two shifts, it was our benchmark'. However, the 'benchmark' or preference for hiring young women to work in electronics or garment factories is neither as new nor as banal as the manager made it out to be. The same manager commented 'while we couldn't discriminate, we were hoping boys don't apply much...we wanted girls'.

This is what Melissa Wright (2006) calls a discursive 'myth' that keeps circulating amongst managers in global manufacturing worksites seeking to create an assembly line worker who is young, preferably female, docile, with 'nimble fingers'. A manager who dismisses 'one of these workers before her

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<sup>33</sup> The interview was unrecorded as the senior manager asked me not to record our conversation.

coveted qualities were fully exploited is inefficient and wasteful' and if a worker remains in employment beyond their 'prime' that too then exposes the company to the 'risk of maintaining a labour force whose fingers have stiffened, whose eyes have blurred, and whose mind wanders' (Wright, 2006:25). It is these 'myths', Wright (2006:23) contends, that corporate managers use to 'extend their firm's operation...while furthering their own careers'.

In this Chapter, I write about the managerial preferences and strategies for labour recruitment driven by the logic of creating a disciplined and efficient workforce and workplace. The Chapter also shows that gender, caste and class are indexes that influence hiring 'preferences'. The recruitment strategies used by Nokia show how managers penetrated rural labour market by using state agencies and regional political parties. There was also a geographical preference for not hiring from within the surrounding villages for 'fear' of collectivisation and local community support for workers. The key revelation that emerges is a preference not just for hiring young girls, but also specifically those who have not done well in school exams. Managers and recruitment agents 'felt' that the aspirations and expectation of 'failures' would be lower than the others who had scored better marks. This was also a strategy to retain workers and lower the 'attrition rates' (turnover) of workers, based on the assumption that people with lower marks will not aspire or have too many options to move to other jobs and remain factory workers. Therefore the workers entering the factory were already 'predetermined' as inferior and not expected to desire or aspire for more. This subjectivity was disarticulated by the workers in several ways as we will see in Chapters 6. This Chapter has two empirical sections – the first one describing the managerial strategies for labour recruitment, followed by one on the practices of the shop floor managers who seek to translate managerial 'expectations' into an imagined reality entangled with their own perceptions about rural 'infantile' and 'unfit' bodies that needed 'disciplining' and 'cajoling' to meet expectations (Ngai, 2005:79).

## 1. Hunting for labour

I start this section by asking the question what is capital's expectation of labour? Possibly a simple answer to that is a workforce that has the ability to meet production demands, in this specific instance of a multinational corporation that manufactured a highly competitive electronic consumer product - mobile phones. This meant that the expectation was for a workforce that would keep up with the pace of production, is able-bodied enough to meet the high volume targets, is 'flexible' to adapt to the changes (to new phone designs/ models) and can be disciplined to meet these expectations. Besides these, as Chhachhi (1997:18) has shown in her study of the electronics industry, preference was also for a workforce with lower 'social cost of reproduction' and 'domestic responsibilities'. This Chhachhi (1997:18) argued was an 'advantage (that) employers derive(d)' by preferring to hiring young (unmarried) women or childless single women. A similar hiring preference in the garment exports factories has also been observed by Ruwanpura and Hughes in Pakistan (forthcoming, 2016). In the case of Nokia, while the managers didn't explicitly spell out their preference for single, childless women, their recruitment strategies clearly targeted young female school-leavers. I write about these strategies in the next section.

The HR manager for 'labour resourcing' told me that the 'preference' for hiring young women was due to their 'natural attributes', an often-heard stereotype in global export manufacturing sites.

'We have 60:40 female to male workers ratio. Do you know why? Because of (the) nature of work. We look for finger dexterity, hand eye coordinations, hand steadiness. These are extremely repetitive jobs. They (women) are better than men. Women are naturally good at this. This is scientifically proven. There are minute screws. There are 1024 components in mobile phones that need to be assembled to make the phones. Women have all these natural skills to assemble. All Nokia mobile

phone manufacturing facilities hire more women than men because of this reason. We (have) been hiring women workers’.

(Interview with Resourcing Head Nokia India Pvt Ltd, Chennai, August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013).<sup>34</sup>

The manager seemed convinced of women’s ‘special’ ability to perform these tasks. He went on to explain the ‘skill tests’ that were conducted during recruitment process in which, according to him, women scored more highly than the men. These included a set of aptitude and manual exercises. One of them was a Psycho Diagnostic Test (PDT) that, the HR manager explained, tested the ability of a person to work ‘in (a) monotonous environment, how they are handling their stress situation and stressful task and accuracy and speed...and be attentive and following instructions...whether they are able to follow the instruction whatever their line managers (gives)’. He showed me the different graphs that were plotted for individual performances indicating attitudes: ‘give up tendency’; ‘manipulation’; ‘complete depression’. However, he explained the key test was a set of ‘neuro-muscular tests to assess a candidate’s hand-eye coordination, finger dexterity and gross manual dexterity’. There were three sets of tools that tested the hand steadiness, ability to handle small objects in less than 75 seconds like putting thin metal rods in different sized holes without touching the sides; hand and eye coordination while moving two levers to draw a line in the middle of a blank sheet. I was struck by the ‘skilful’ tests that the women had to undergo and qualify to get the jobs that were considered ‘semi-skilled’ or ‘unskilled’. Elias (2005:209) has identified that these tests feature in highly gendered recruitment strategies that lead to the ‘crowding of women workers into the lowest paying, lowest status jobs within the factory, not least because of the way in which recruiters construct the manual dexterity skills displayed by female workers as innate/natural, and thus not deserving of higher rates of pay’. According to Elias (2005: 209) recruitment practices can be viewed as ‘a primary mechanism through which Taylorist management processes are neither ideologically nor gender neutral, embodying both the needs of the

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<sup>34</sup> I conducted two interviews the HR manager dated 2/8/2013 and 14/8/2013.

business to secure low cost 'nimble fingered' labour and also the requirement for 'docile and diligent' workers'.

## **2. Strategies for recruiting workers**

Nokia launched its factory in Tamil Nadu with 200 workers in January 2006. Numbers rose quickly to 4000 in a span of two years and by the end of 2012 there were 12,500 workers. 'Labour resourcing' is subject to the 'demands' of the market explained the HR manager:

'Volume fluctuation is almost 70%, so managing the resources is heavy risk. Business (is) seasonal. How quickly you can ramp up and how quickly you can ramp down? How the flexibility (or) 'temp' ratio (can be) maintained?'

The plant in Chennai had the capacity to produce 6.5 lakhs mobile handsets a day. 'During peak time, we are producing 5 lakhs (phones) per day in this factory. We produce on demand, we don't keep inventory', the HR manager said. Workers on permanent and temporary contracts were hired to meet the production demands along with trainees and apprentices. The HR manager expressed the challenge of balancing a labour force that would give optimum productivity without exposing the company to the risk of maintaining 'extra' labour force (see Wright 2006). The idea was to keep the system 'lean'. At the time of interview, there were 7000 permanent and 1600 temporary workers. This is typical of 'Just-in-time' production systems, as Zhang (2015:83-84) has also noted in the automobile industries in China, where to achieve 'lean production' companies do not keep product inventories, and employ 'flexible' contractual workers to meet its demand.

The 'heart' and 'organ', as the HR manager referred to the permanent and temporary workers were recruited between the 'lean' and 'high peak season', usually in the middle of the year between May and June. The 'high peak season' coincided with major Hindu festivals in India, when the sales of mobile phones

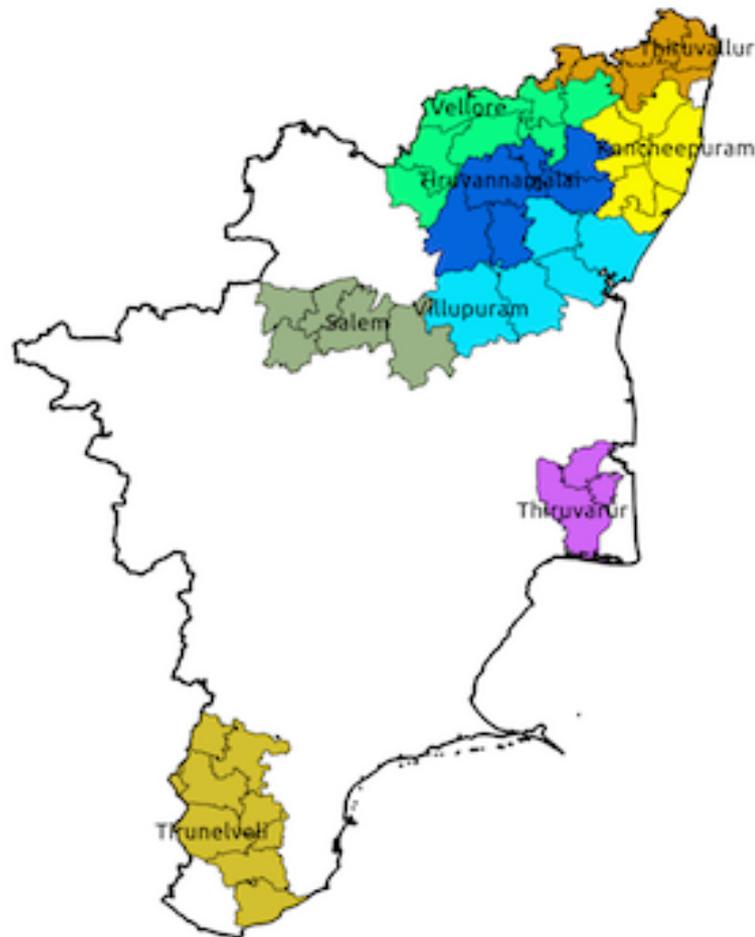
were high. There was an elaborate network through which labour was recruited for the company, including state government schemes, state or political party sponsored 'job fairs' or through recruitment agencies. The minimum age of entry for a worker was 18 years, with a school pass certificate, and the average age of workers in the factory was 24 years. When the factory had opened in 2006, workers felt encouraged to bring their friends to work in the company. *'We went to our friends and told them that this is great company and encouraged them to join. We did it on our own, we thought this was a good opportunity'*, said Rajesh, one of the workers (Interview with Rajesh, office bearer of Nokia India Thozhilalar (employees') Sangam, Chennai, April 9<sup>th</sup> 2014).

### ***Labour catchment***

The company targeted rural areas and small towns for its recruitment drives including some of the peri-urban areas surrounding Chennai city. They had 'labour catchment areas' in eight districts of Tamil Nadu according to the HR manager (Image 5). While showing me a district-wise map of the state on a power-point slide, the manager explained:

'Wherever there are star marks, the catchment is very high. Salem, Vellore, Thiruvallur, Villipuram, Thiruvannamalai, Thiruvarur (near Kumbakonam, Chidambaram), Thirunelveli, Kancheepuram. You can see here, in P7 (7<sup>th</sup> month), we had conducted 9 job fairs, 643 people short listed and 604 people offered, 416 joined, 31% drop out (people who did not join after being offered job). This gives us the hiring outlook for the entire state'.

## Labour catchment area map



**Image 5:** Map showing eight catchment districts for Nokia's labour recruitments: Kancheepuram, Thiruvannamalai, Thiruvallur, Villupuram, Salem, Vellore, Thiruvārūr and Tirunelveli. Source: National Indian Ocean Technology

Two junior HR staff members of the company explained what made a good 'catchment' area:

'The districts from where we mostly hire are Nagarcoil, Thirunelveli, Kovilpatti...these are places from where a lot of people come to work in Nokia, since there are no other factories or much work there. There are some places from where we don't get much recruits, like Trichy, where there are already lot of local companies where people (can) get jobs. The trend in Tamil Nadu is after 12<sup>th</sup> standard people want to go for degree. Their ambition is to become teacher, police or nurses'.

(Interview with junior managers, Human Resources Development, HR Dept., Nokia, Chennai, August 6<sup>th</sup> 2013).

The managers explained that the areas were chosen on the basis of the number of government schools present in the area. 'It's purely based on numbers of schools and number students studying there. So these are the areas where the number of schools are very high and the resource (labour) availability is also very high', said the HR manager (Interview with Resourcing Head Nokia India Pvt Ltd, Chennai, August 14<sup>th</sup> 2013). Adding that wherever there were already established industrial belts, for instances places like Coimbatore, the company did not conduct recruitment drives, as 'people prefer to get local employment'. Nokia had a 'school tie-up' programme through which it organized 'training' for students in senior secondary government schools. The schools were approached directly by the company officials. The HR manager explained how it was done:

'It is through (the) head masters. So the students will be in their 12<sup>th</sup> standard, we have contract agreement, so we sign up with them (schools) and they will identify which are the students that are looking for employment after +2 (school pass examination). Then we will train all the students in mobile phone manufacturing techniques....in schools itself. We give them certificates...after 18 years of age if they want to join (the company) they can approach us. It's not compulsory.....you can't push that (recruitment) otherwise government will kill us'.

The manager candidly explained that the training in school were also part of a strategy to 'position your brand in the student community and then you are getting the people for the job'. The headmasters of the schools played a key role in the labour recruitment, which according to the managers was not driven by financial incentives. The manager had a list of 15 schools that had been identified for potential recruitment adding 'these schools can play a role in getting the desired number(s) through out the year'. The manager pulled out some statistics showing the state's literacy rates, female to male school enrolments ratios and pass out ratios. There were also data on district-wise government higher secondary schools, aided schools, and in a chart the distances between the schools and the factory were mapped. He informed me that they pulled out information from state census data which was 'professionally' analysed before

recruitment plans were made. The preference was for government schools from where there was a higher likelihood of acquiring workers. The assumption being children from lower income (and lower caste) families would study in state subsidized government schools and would be more likely to look for low-skilled, low pay work in the factories after school than others who may have more options. As Elias (2005:210) noted in her study on Malaysian garment export factories 'Far from being a scientific/objective process, recruitment represents a highly gendered and racialised everyday international business practice, and constitutes the key mechanism through which localised social inequalities and hierarchies are reproduced within the workforce of the firm'.

Two agents from a recruitment agency, SS Horizon, hired by Nokia, explained the networks through which the company recruited workers. One was through 'job fairs' organized either by the recruitment agencies with the help of local village or town *panchayats* (local institutions), or sponsored by state government or political parties (Image 6). The recruitment agents explained:

'We have established networks in different districts (of Tamil Nadu). In *panchayat* (village or town level government body), NGOs (non governmental organization), district employment officer, government schemes-*Vazhaledu Kattuvoam*<sup>35</sup>, self help groups. Pamphlets are distributed with information on age (minimum 18 years) and qualification requirement (school pass certificate), date and venue for recruitment. The venues are usually government schools or community halls. Information is also displayed on the notice boards of district *panchayat* offices. The *Panchayat* president helps in spreading the word

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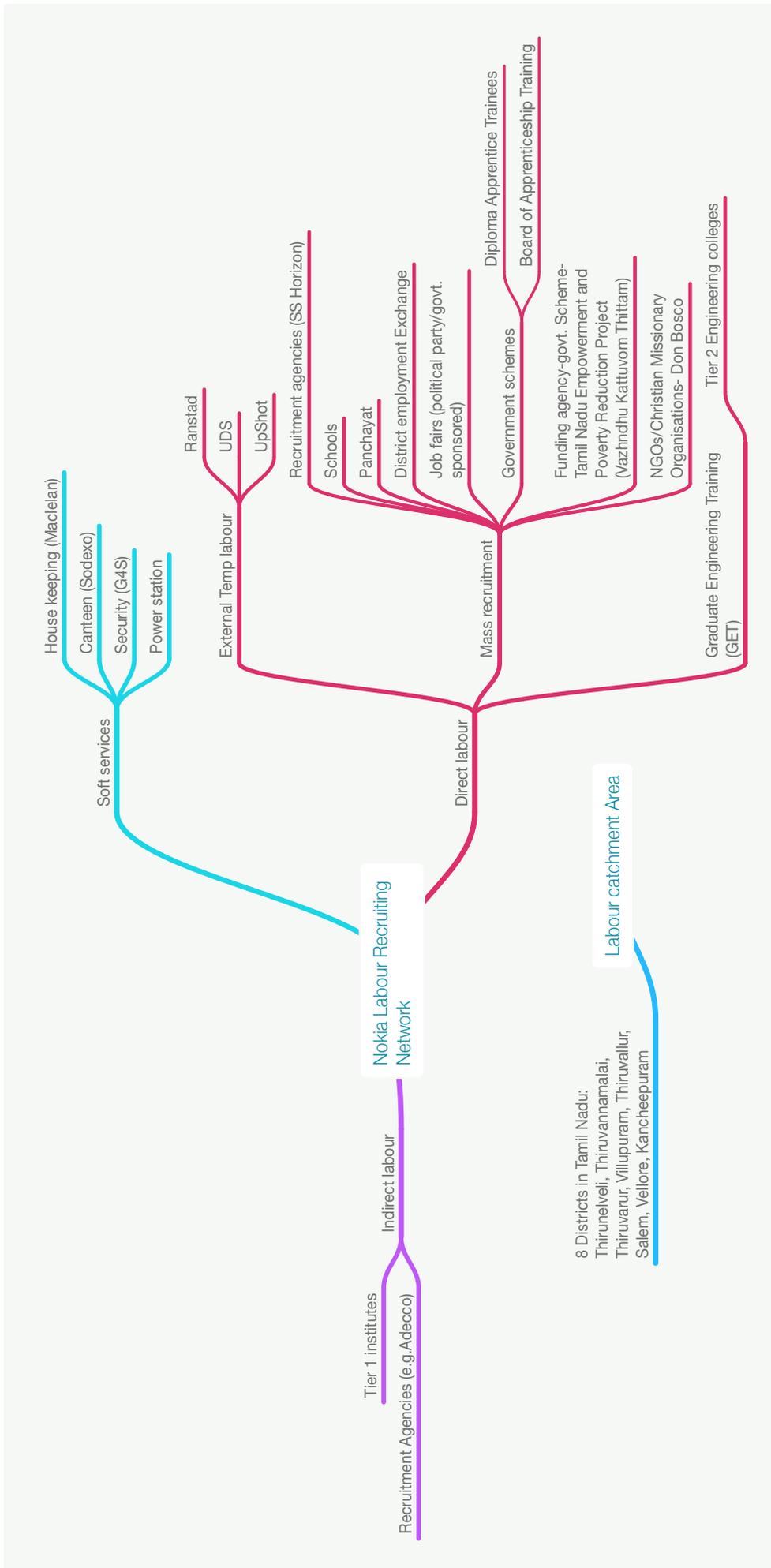
<sup>35</sup> I conducted an interview with the Director of the Livelihood (skill) Development officer of the Vazhaledu Kattuvoam Scheme 'This is a state government-World Bank funded project for the most backward, most poorest of households. For direct employment, we organize job fairs for 50-60 youths, the VPRC (Village Poverty Reduction Committee) organizes and mobilizes the whole thing. We invite 10-15 companies like Hyundai, TVS, Nokia, we organize the fair in a government school, each company is given a separate cabin (room) where they make presentations about the company, conduct tests and on same day selection of candidates are done. So far two lakh people have been trained and employed in these last 6 years. Some are earning even Rs 20,000. Most of the people, 80% are from SC/ST families, 'really touching the needy people'. Interview dated 2/9/2013.

and sometimes the help of District Collectors is also taken' said executives of SS Horizon'.

(Interview with SS Horizon executives, Chennai, August 16<sup>th</sup> 2013)



**Image 6:** Job fair in Srirangam, Trichy, Tamil Nadu. It is Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Smt. Jayalalitha's electoral constituency. In the second image, District Collector of Trichy, State Labour Commissioner and State Labour Minister are seen attending the job fair.



**Diagram 2:** Nokia's labour recruitment network.

Source: Diagram based on information given by HR (recruitment) Manager.

Diagram 2 shows the elaborate labour recruitment network that Nokia established through state and private agencies, including government schemes, educational institutions and charitable organisations, to hire both permanent and temporary workers. According to the SS Horizon agents areas with more government schools were preferred. The agents said 'We collect information on how many government schools are there, how many pass outs. We prefer government schools, they mostly have BPL (Below Poverty Line)<sup>36</sup> students. Private (school) students won't come to work for Nokia'. Besides poverty, the educational background of the parents of potential candidates was also a factor that the recruitment agents carefully scrutinized, which they usually got from the *Panchayat* presidents. The logic being 'educated parents won't send their children to the factories to work' and would 'prefer' them to enter higher education. The other determinant for recruitment was the academic scores of students in their school passing exams. 'If they get high marks, we don't prefer to hire them, since attrition is high. We need people with lower marks, we conduct fair after the students have finished their school exams...if we conduct job fairs then, we can get 100-200 people to come for the fair', said the SS Horizon agents. They reasoned that students who got higher marks after joining the factory soon quit since they 'aspired' for higher education or better jobs. Therefore certain characteristics of labour were predetermined in the recruitment strategies of the managers and recruiters who deliberately targeted groups whom they imagined could be easily controlled, based on the assumption about their disadvantaged position in society. There were also locational preferences in that workers from immediate surroundings were not preferred since 'local people make trouble. If there is something in the factory, they can make trouble with local support from villagers', said SS Horizon agents.

Both Nokia and SS Horizon maintained that they did not have any 'particular caste preference', however as the recruitment agents explained:

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<sup>36</sup> Below Poverty Line is an economic benchmark and poverty threshold used by the Government of India to identify individuals and households in need of government assistance and aid.

'People from forward castes, backward castes, other castes do not come (or send their daughters) for night shift work. People from most backward caste (MBC), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) come for night jobs...its because of the economic situation. Sometimes even other caste people will also come if they are economically very deprived. Only 2-3% people from well off family come for these jobs. We get more people from Thiruvannamalai—SC/ST people there, also Perambalur, Virudhanagar. Sometimes Nokia tells us where to get people from.

(Interview with SS Horizon executives, Chennai, August 16<sup>th</sup> 2013)

While there may not be any 'stated' caste preference in the recruitment strategies of Nokia, it is significant that BPL families and candidates with lower marks whose families are less educated or who are socially and economically disadvantaged, were perceived as the ones who would send their daughters to do factory work or night shifts. Also the recruitment agents indicated that in certain areas with larger Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes population, there was more likelihood of recruiting workers.<sup>37</sup> In their study of the nature of the social fragmentation of labour in northeast districts of Tamil Nadu (for instance in Villupuram from where Nokia used to hire as well), Isabelle Guerin et al (2015:124) also noted that in recruitment strategies 'one rarely recruits someone who is higher up in the caste hierarchy'. Therefore, in the Indian context, caste plays a defining role in labour recruitment where jobs are often determined according to castes (see Carsell, 2013; Harriss-White, 2003; Harriss-White, Gooptu, 2001; Kannan, 1994; Thorat, 2007). Even though in my research I found a silence around caste on the shop floor and womens' rented rooms, which I discuss further in Chapters 6 and 7, caste did play a role in recruitment strategies (for entry into 'undesirable' factory work that others didn't prefer), as we see in the accounts of the recruitment agents and even in the preferences of the HR manager.

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<sup>37</sup> Both Nokia and SS Horizon refused to divulge any details on caste of workers saying that they did not maintain any caste profile.

## *'Temps'*

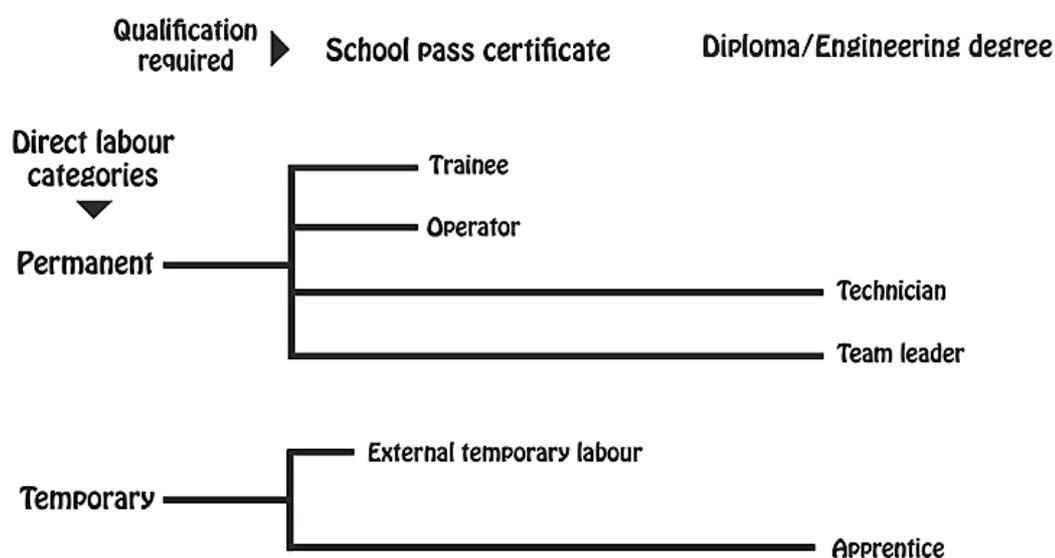
The ETLs (External Temporary Labour) were the 'flexi' workers who were 'resourced' through labour sub-contractors or 'vendors' as the HR manager called them. 'Vendors are given week-wise resourcing orders at the beginning of each month. They recruit and supply ETLs to the company', explained the HR Manager (Interview with Resourcing Head Nokia India Pvt Ltd, Chennai, August 14<sup>th</sup> 2013). Nokia had three labour 'vendors' - Randstad India, a subsidiary of Dutch multinational recruiting agency Randstad Holding NV and two Indian agencies—Upshot and UDS. Unlike the process described above, the temporary workers did not have to undergo any skill tests or interviews and the recruitment agencies brought them to the factory where the HR team of Nokia only checked their age and qualifications (school pass certificate).<sup>38</sup> They also did not undergo a 36 month training period like the permanent operators. They were put straight onto the assembly lines. Many of the ETLs also ended up working for a number of years in the Nokia factory without being made permanent. The HR manager said that ETLs who had worked in Nokia preferred to come back to the company 'for brand presence is very strong in India, in TN (Tamil Nadu) everybody love(s) to work with Nokia...they are contract labour...they can quit the job anytime and jump (back) into work anytime.'

The HR manager also had big plans to create a 'captive' supply of 'flexi' / 'temp' labour by recruiting young migrant women from the North Eastern states and housing them in a dormitory nearby the factory to 'cut cost' and build a 'dedicated workforce'. He explained 'even if you call them for over time...they are all there...their dedication will be something different, their attendance will be something different (from the Tamil workers)...they will have 100% rate of attendance...because it's a group, a community, right? ...a highly committed (work force)' (Interview with Resourcing Head Nokia India Pvt Ltd, Chennai, August 14<sup>th</sup> 2013).

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<sup>38</sup> As per the Contract Labour Act, Nokia is the principal employer, but all the practicalities including paying of wages, registration with Employees' State Insurance Corporation, Employees' Provident Fund for the ETLs is handled by the contract agencies.

There was another category of ‘short-term’ workers who got recruited through a government sponsored scheme - Diploma Apprentice Trainees (DAT). Under the scheme, diploma holders from government polytechnic institutes with certificates in mechanical engineering or telecommunication, are employed for a year as an ‘apprentice’ in the company through government organized job fairs or ‘campus drives’. ‘This is all customized. So under the scheme government pay(s) 50% of the cost. So we pay a salary, say Rs 10,000 per month to these diploma holders, then get 50% reimbursed from the government. They are employed under this scheme, my costs get addressed, my technical needs gets addressed...government is supporting, I am getting benefitted’, explained the HR manager (Interview with Resourcing Head Nokia India Pvt Ltd, Chennai, August 14<sup>th</sup> 2013). In 2012, Nokia recruited 100 workers through this DAT scheme.



**Diagram 3:** Showing the different categories of ‘direct labour’ with required educational qualifications. \* Operators are hired as trainee operators for 36 months during which time they are considered as ‘management’ staff and cannot become members of the union. The contract signed by TOs clearly mentions that after the completion of 36 months employment as a permanent operator is not guaranteed. Source: Illustration based on information provided by HR (recruitment) Manager.

In summarising this section, I quote Elias (2005:216) who notes that multinational corporations 'can be viewed as a site of both globalised and localised gender cultures' where a 'globally significant actor (the multinational corporation) operat(es) within local states and societies....play(ing) a key role in the construction of women as a low wage, diligent and, more importantly, 'docile' workforce'. In the case of Nokia, we find gendered recruitment practices and discourse intersecting with local caste and poverty indexes to predetermine a certain kind of labour suitable to meet the production logic of the company. Couched in the language of women's 'ability' and 'skills' to perform certain tasks better than men, the managers of Nokia reproduced the globally circulating 'myth' of the third world women's body that meets the expectation of capital both in terms of accumulation and also a disciplined workforce. Specific targeting of areas and groups was involved in order to recruit labour that was educated enough to work in a global manufacturing site, but should aspire for less, whose disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds made them opt for work that no one else desired. Targeting students with lower marks, government schools and areas with larger population of scheduled castes/tribes were strategies that the managers perhaps assumed would give them a workforce that would have less influence in the shop floor, and could be easily controlled to meet the expectations of production. We see a network of local state agencies, political parties, NGOs, *panchayats* and private recruiters along with government schemes to be part of the recruitment strategies of the global firm.

In the next section, I discuss briefly the practices and perceptions of the junior managers on the shop floor who were the key link or actors tasked with the job of implementing managerial expectations in the shop floor. The job of the managers didn't end with recruitment. They also had to ensure that the 'new army of transglobal labour fitted to global production' (Ngai, 2005: 78). A combination of practices and perceptions went into the production of a workforce that was expected to meet the capitalist production logic. I describe in detail the processes adopted to produce working bodies in Chapter 6. In the section below I discuss the perceptions of young shop floor managers that created the everyday worker subjectivities in the shop floor.

### 3. Perceptions and practices of shop floor managers

I speak about two sets of shop floor managers - the Team Leaders (TL), sometimes referred to as cell assistants (CA) and the shop floor HR coordinators. The daily interactions of these young managers with the young workforce in the shop floor, intersected with caste, gender, class, age in ways which produced the everyday politics and subjectivities. In transmitting the 'expectations', the young and aspiring shop floor managers, many of whom were also from the upper castes, brought their own perceptions and prejudices to the shop floor. Their perceptions of the young women and men from rural areas created a discourse that constructed the workers as 'unfit' for work in the modern factory environment (Ngai, 2005:79). Two statements below capture the general perceptions of the shop floor managers of the workers:

'They mostly come from (the) villages, 12<sup>th</sup> standard pass (high school). After coming to Nokia, they get higher education, slowly they adapt. Their life style has changed. But their maturity level are low, they are adolescents. They are sometimes playing in the shop floor, pinching each other and all...'

(Informal conversation with Janani, HR coordinator, Shop floor HR Help, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2013).

'You treat them like kids, they don't know anything, you teach them how to behave'.

(Informal conversation with Naga, HR coordinator, Shop floor HR Help, September 25<sup>th</sup> 2013).

The shop floor managers described the workers as 'young' and 'immature' despite themselves being women of almost similar age as that of the workers. Both Janani and Naga were newly-married in their mid-twenties who talked of balancing their married life with the shift work in the factory. On different occasions while listening to the experiences of female operators and the female junior shop floor managers, I felt that as women they often faced similar gender

prejudices at home and at work, but perhaps differences in their other social and economic relations created deeper divisions, despite what they had in common as young women in the society. As Raju (2011:43) notes 'class, caste, ethnic and other locations intercept their (women) gendered locations significantly', resulting in complex inequalities (McDowell, 2008). For instance, McDowell (2001: 450) points out how full-time work for women is 'strongly class differentiated' (related to educational credentials). Her study of gendered work patterns in the post-Fordist British economy of the 1990s showed 67% of women in managerial and professional occupations worked full-time, as compared to 6% of women in unskilled jobs, thereby 'opening up a significant gap between women in their life chances' (McDowell, 2001: 450).

### ***Frictions***

There were three kinds of TLs in the shop floor. There were the ones who had become TLs after being assembly line operators with the knowledge and experience of the work (and obtained a diploma certificate while on the job). Secondly there were the ones who were recruited directly from technical institutes with a diploma and the new 'introductions' under the GET (Graduate Engineering Training) programme who were engineering graduates. The HR manager proudly said that GET was his idea and a 'new concept in Nokia' to bring in 'frontline leadership...and new knowledge' (Interview with Resourcing Head Nokia India Pvt Ltd, Chennai, August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013). While all of them had a common designation of TL, there was a difference in their salaries, and the added status of being diploma holders and engineers. A few of the engineering graduates (GET) I interacted with all belonged to upper caste groups, having studied in expensive private engineering colleges.

The young engineers came from different parts of the country and also brought with them their privilege, knowledge and class arrogance. While I was doing my research in the shop floor, a group of young graduates from an engineering college from Punjab (North India) were recruited and put in the production lines as TLs. One young man from the group told me that he did not speak the local

language (Tamil), but also didn't want to learn it since he wanted to 'maintain' a distance from the operators. 'I speak to them (operator) in English, I don't want to learn Tamil, it will spoil my English', the young manager said. He wanted to bring in 'professionalism' and maintain a hierarchy in his line by communicating in English to the key operator. He refused to speak to other line operators. Cross (2014:106) notes similar attitude amongst the managers on the shop floor of a diamond polishing factory in south India 'Managers invoked their own achievement in the field of education to establish a social and cultural distance from workers and assert their 'right' to occupy positions of relative power...'. Radha, the key operator in his line had complained —'there are 34 people in the line, but this new guy from North India only speaks with me in English, he does not know Tamil and asks me to do things'. Radha was also upset that 'this new guy' was causing problems for her in the line, including with her friends. Radha said:<sup>39</sup>

'He asks me for names of operators to 'reshuffle'...I fought with two pregnant girls yesterday, they accused me of being insensitive....they say I am biased in giving their names. Smita knew the operators and how to handle the situation. This guy doesn't. It creates tension for me in the line'.

Smita was a former female TL in the line where Radha was the key operator. 'Key' operators are not an 'official' categories, but informal designations for experienced operators who are skilled at every stage of the assembling and can also train other operators in the line. Radha felt that the new male TL did not know how to 'manage' workers.<sup>40</sup> She said that he would ask her why the women operators 'kept going to the restrooms all the time'. There were frictions between the other TLs (not just the engineers) and the operators as well. Naga, the HR shop floor manager said it was because the 'operators have 4 to 5 years of experience, whereas the team leaders may have only 2 years of experience, so

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<sup>39</sup> I met Radha when I had visited the shop floor for the first time on 25/9/2013.

<sup>40</sup> For a factory with a mainly female workforce, Nokia had more male managers than female. In one of the production areas (ESOP/SOP) where more than 70% of the operators were female, only 6 team leaders were female out of 118 team leaders.

the operators refuse to listen to the TLs. Also the salaries of the operators have gone up after the wage settlement (unionization). So the salaries of operators have become more than the supervisors in some cases (more than diploma holders)' (Interview dated 25/9/2013 in the shop floor HR Help Desk).

This was a complaint I also heard from one of the TLs as well. Nawab, a TL in Bay 7 in the assembly area, who after working as an operator for 5 years became a TL through internal recruitment within the factory said 'My salary is lower than that of the operators. I earn about Rs 11,000 (£110) a month, whereas they earn between Rs 15,000-16,000 (£150-£160) after the new wage agreement. They get a hike of Rs 3000 (£ 30) a year, we get only Rs 1000 (£10). I sometimes wish I had not become a TL' (Unrecorded interview with Nawab, TL Bay 7 ESOP, September 27<sup>th</sup> 2013).

Nawab listed out the 'issues' he faced in the line with the operators, despite his own shared experience previously as an operator:

'Sometimes they don't do the visual checks properly. They 'roam' around, if 3 operators are doing similar work, they will just adjust amongst themselves and take long breaks, sometimes half an hour to go meet friends in different lines; sometimes there are issues when operators are reshuffled to a different cell if there is a need for manpower. They would be reluctant to move, will ask someone else to move; and then there are inter-personal issues within teams, cell members. There are relationships, break-ups-someone would be looking sad, I will enquire, they say there has been a break up.

The TLs and shop floor HR managers 'expected' the operators to behave in certain ways and obey orders, but complained that the workers had become 'bold' after the formation of the employees' union. Senthil, one of the HR coordinators on the shop floor told me:

When they are trainee operators<sup>41</sup>, they are very polite and talk nicely. But when they become operators they do not show 'respect', their tone becomes different, they don't listen. After registering the union, they don't listen. If you say something, they complain to their union reps and the union reps go straight to HR front desk.

(Interview with Senthil, Shop floor HR Help Desk, September 18<sup>th</sup> 2013)

He pointed towards some workers near the HR Help Desk and said - 'All these people you see working on lines are trainee operators, those people roaming around are operators', indicating that unionization has emboldened the workers to disobey orders and take breaks at their own will. Ngai (2005:79) observed similar perceptions amongst Hongkong businessmen, who perceived 'these working bodies...to leave their work position at will, and even worse, to destroy the production machinery'. Senthil also thought that women operators, particularly the pregnant women, were unwilling to do work 'Pregnant women are exempted from working in night shifts, there is a resting area for them. They come and sleep for 8 hours in the resting area.... if you ask them to come and work, they refuse and complain to Nayagi ma'am (senior HR manager)', he said. I often heard of the 'unreasonable' behaviour of the operators from the junior managers. As Janani said:

'They (operators) only making problem, they complain about food. If sometimes there are *insects in the food*, very rarely, or food is not good, they start shouting in the canteen itself. If they don't like the taste of *sambar* (lentil), they will start shouting. Sometimes people would swipe their cards several times and get more *vadas* (snacks) and the canteen would run out of them, they will start shouting over it'.

(Informal conversation with Janani, HR coordinator, Shop floor HR Help, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2013).

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<sup>41</sup> When a new operator joins the factory, they have to undergo 36 months of training and are called trainee operators. They are considered as management staff and can't join the employees' union, which only represented the permanent operators.

The workers were also seen as 'unreasonable' when they wanted to sleep on the bus back home after shifts and demanded the lights should be switched off in the company buses or when they complained if the buses picked them up late from bus points, Janani said. That the junior managers perceived the work to be 'easy' and called the workers 'lazy' - "*erumai maadu*" (buffalo) or "*saakku moottai*" (sack of rice) if the output was low. Taking 'long' breaks, going to the restrooms, chatting with friends, demanding decent food or wanting to sleep in the buses were seen as 'unnecessary' and 'unreasonable' behaviour by the workers. 'Love affairs' on the shop floor were seen as 'immature' and fickle behaviour by the young workers.

'Oh love affairs are monthly things, teenage people, male teases female, say double meaning things, they are '*kochcha pasanga*' (immature youth). They fall in love, break up, cry....come to us. We tell them it is not good. Usually they will be in the same shift pattern or same line. After 6 months, the shift pattern changes and the affair breaks up....', said Naga (Informal conversation with Janani, HR coordinator, Shop floor HR Help, September 25<sup>th</sup> 2013).

Senthil had been dismissive of the female operators. 'These are young people, they get jealous of a man, then they will form groups and say bad things about each other, they ask for a line change, the team leader would bring this issue to HR...lots of these cases happen, these are young people, right out of school.' There were also incidents of serious nature, for instance of a TL killing himself over a love affair with an operator. These behaviours disrupted managerial expectations of disciplined and efficient labour, and the 'myth' of a docile workforce, leading to frictions on the shop floor between workers and shop floor managers.

To summarise, this section shows how the perceptions and practices of young managers became entangled with their own personal aspiration to become professional managers, producing an image of workers that is 'unfit' and 'unruly'. Everyday frictions are produced by the expectations and aspirations of young

managers as they try to discipline the workers on the shop floor. In the process some of the managerial expectations are fulfilled and some are not. Social relations of gender, caste and class create a disjuncture in the expectation of global capital as local social registers are reproduced on the shop floor through the practices of the shop floor managers. It is not a straightforward process of the expectations of capital being fulfilled, but instead a negotiated terrain of everyday social relations between the managers and workers that produces production relations and workplace politics.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In a nutshell, this chapter looks at the preferences and strategies of corporate managers in labour recruitment and at the everyday perceptions/practices of shop floor managers in order to understand how managerial expectations driven by production logic are translated and mediated in the factory. The chapter shows the gendered nature of recruitment, intersected with local social realities such as caste, poverty etc., to predetermine a certain kind of labour that is assumed to be 'suitable' to meet the production logic of the company. It shows the enduring nature of the social stereotypes and prejudices that circulate amongst the global corporate managers seeking out 'docile', 'disciplined' third world female working bodies (Elias, 2015; Elson, 1981; Ong, 1987; Wright, 2006). The managers targeted areas and groups who were educated enough to work in a global manufacturing site, but would aspire for less and whose disadvantaged social, education and economic backgrounds made them opt for factory work that no one else desired. Targeting students with lower marks, government schools and areas with higher numbers of scheduled caste/tribes were strategies that the managers adopted, perhaps assuming it would give them a workforce that would have less influence on the shop floor, and could be easily disciplined. The interplay of local social inequities, state and political party sponsorships and local institutions created conditions for global capital to hunt for 'efficient' and 'controllable' labour.

Like Elias (2015:210), I too note that the everyday practices of international businesses constitute mechanisms through which 'localised social inequities' are reproduced in global firms. Worker subjectivities are produced through the superior sense of status of the higher caste and the more educated young shop floor managers reflect some of these prejudices. However, as we see from the accounts of the young managers, the 'unreasonable' behaviour of the workers disrupts these subjectivities and expectations. The aspirations, expectations and inexperience of young shop floor managers produce everyday frictions on the shop floor, disrupting the smooth narratives and strategies of senior managers seeking a disciplined workforce that can meet the demands of just-in-time production logic. Therefore, even though managerial expectations are met to some extent in these hyper-efficient workplaces, it is not without contestations or negotiations of local social relations and practices. This Chapter has showed how a global corporation like Nokia and its corporate managers try to accommodate and reproduce local social inequities in the labour recruitment in order to create optimum conditions for capital accumulation.

In the next Chapter, I write about the motivations of labour to enter waged work in order to understand how complex social relations at home and women's own desire for change creates certain conditions that intersect with some managerial expectations. The politics of everyday work is produced and reproduced through constant negotiations between managerial expectation and labour's motivation. To understand how expectations play out locally, one needs to look at the local processes at the site where global corporate capital locates itself, and how it negotiates local realities through the practices and prejudices of corporate managers creating conditions of work and labour processes.

## Chapter Five: Labour's Motivation

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### Introduction

*'I had clearly two reasons to come out. First to escape my father and second to support my family' –Kalpana, 24 years.*

*'Escape my husband, my family...future will be good' –Buela, 25 years.*

*'It didn't matter to me what I was going to do...my family is in such situation. I wanted to work and thought Madras will be ok, that's how I came here' –Pooja, 27 years.*

*'They didn't ask me about my decision, whether I wanted to go or not. They decided themselves that I must go. My mother. She told me to go and didn't ask me at all. Asked my uncle to come from Chennai to take me' –Lakshmi, 23 years.*

*'I did not come here for that (poverty), my uncle, aunt....all are doing good work, but I didn't study, no? So I had feelings...so I came here...nothing else' –Jyotsna, 24 years.*

*'I didn't come here because there is no money in the village, I came to visit with my sister...met all these girls from Orissa and decided to stay back and work' – Kalpana, 23 years.*

This Chapter is about the motivations of young women to enter factory work. The Chapter foregrounds the explanations offered by the women for entering waged work, motivations that often get obscured in larger debates around women's participation in formal employment. From the above excerpts we can see that women had multiple reasons for choosing to leave home in search of work in the factory. While for some poverty, oppressive households, violence, difficult childhoods, unpaid loans, responsibilities of taking care of siblings or

illnesses in the family were the reasons for entering waged labour, for others it was a personal sense of failure or a desire to be independent that drew them out of their homes. Through a discussion of the life stories of some of the young women workers I look at the processes that motivate them to leave home to become workers in a factory. While each is a specific life and experience, they tell us of a troubled story of intersecting social relations within which the lives of women workers are enmeshed and which influence their decisions to enter waged work. Exploring the life stories of some the women workers, this chapter tries to understand the 'nature and value of [women's] labour' (John, 2013: 177) in their lives without essentialising them or claiming them to be representative voices. These life stories illustrate women's constant negotiations of patriarchal and capitalist structures, and their everyday resistance of other social structures such as caste, family and communities. While there are overlaps in the stories in terms of women's encounters with oppressions or discriminations, there are also nuanced differences in how women experience these. The stories also reveal that decisions or motivations are not necessarily static. They shift as life circumstances alter, sometimes perhaps in contradictory ways.

As we see in Chapter 4 (Capital's Expectation), the managerial preferences for recruiting young women had to do with the logic of production and labour control, whereas the life stories of women reveal a very different reasoning behind why women chose to enter factory employment and what their expectations from it were. While earning wages was an important factor no doubt, that was not the only reason for making the decisions. These personal stories, I argue, 'uncover the multiplicity of meanings embodied' (Kabeer, 2000:87) in these decisions. Through these stories it is possible not only to understand women's decisions to enter waged work, but also to contextualize women's responses to the factory work and their everyday experiences in the workplace and migrant living spaces, which are discussed in Chapter 6 and 7. I contend that memories of 'home' produce everyday responses and experiences in places and spaces 'away' from home – in factories and in the rented rooms. Laslett (1999:392) argues that life narratives can have both spatial and temporal elements to them: 'They look back on and recount lives that are located in

particular times and places...narratives themselves are produced in particular times and places'. In the life stories that young women narrate to me, they recount their childhoods and adolescence, looking back into their lives in the villages and homes. In the process of recounting their life stories, 'agency emerges cognitively from the telling of their stories' (Lal, 2011: 555), explaining their decisions to leave home. For Laslett (1999:401) life stories or personal narratives are 'not just another research technique' but combine 'emotional engagement' with analytic reflexivity in doing research. My interest in life stories is both 'emotional' and analytic. The personal stories of the young women, their decisions to come to work in a factory and becoming waged<sup>42</sup> workers, reveal a process where terms were negotiated and new meanings (decisions) emerged through processes of consensus or conflict.

The life stories in this chapter are concerned with particular phases in the lives of these young women. However, they tell a larger story within which lives are situated, where everyday social relations of gender, caste, poverty and access to resources influences decisions. Using life stories, I write about the different processes (motivations) through which women arrive at the decision to enter factory work. I argue that in a factory space, while many times worker's responses to work may seem aligned with that of the interests of the owners by working hard or competing for greater outputs (Burawoy, 1979), the motivations and expectations of workers are not however the same. To understand why the women consent to work in hyper-efficient and exhausting work regimes, one needs to look at the other structures of social relations (other than just waged work) that women have to negotiate and struggle with everyday. The life stories of the young women show that work is more than just about wages. It is also about the possibility of changing life situations and resisting the circumstances that women find themselves in. In each case, I try to understand the roles played by the women themselves in making the decision to

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<sup>42</sup> I put an emphasis on '*waged*' because it is important to recognize the fact that women have always 'worked' inside and outside of domestic spheres to sustain their families and themselves, often unrecognized and unpaid or under paid. In this particular context, these are narratives of women who entered the formal recognized waged labour market.

enter waged labour and the process involved in forming those decisions. While each story is different, they are bound in some ways by experiences of childhood and adolescence often marked by violence, poverty and adult responsibilities. Their life stories reveal a checkered journey into the world of waged employment, and perhaps indicate the formation of a new working class of women whose families depict a pattern. This includes the failure of men as traditional 'family wage' earners, non-land owning families and the presence of an alcoholic male member in their lives, which is also specific in the context of Tamil Nadu. I have grouped the life-stories, as narrated to me by the women, into different sets of motivations – to escape an oppressive household; to fulfil the role of family breadwinner; to add to the family income; and of freewill to experience a different life. While we may find over-lapping themes in the stories, narrating them distinctly helps to unravel the themes and their roles. I look at these life stories as the 'small scale geographies' (McDowell, 2015:2) of women's lives and spaces that they inhabit as workers, whether it is domestic or outside, that help us to understand the different processes that engender women's decision to enter factory work and their expectation from the work.

### **1. Motivation: 'Escape'**

Kalpana and Buela entered waged work before they came to work in the Nokia factory. They were from the scheduled caste (SC) community (dalits) and came from large families with many siblings. Their families didn't own any land. Their stories capture the troubled relations at home, which often took the form of violence. Both of them struggled against male members of their families, who used violence perhaps as a way of hiding their failure to play 'normative roles as providers and protectors' (see John, 2013: 202), besides struggling against stigma, poverty and caste oppression. They entered factory work in the hope of escaping their life situation.

#### ***Kalpana***

Slightly built, dark complexioned, long thick hair tied neatly in the back in a plait, Kalpana was waiting for me at the 'communist office', as she referred to the local branch office of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), in Sriperumbadur. She had come to meet me after finishing her morning shift in the factory. Eldest amongst nine children, Kalpana had learned very early in her life to take on family responsibilities. Her father did odd manual jobs in town and mother worked at home taking care of the house and the children. Her family belonged to the *Adi Dravidar* community and lived in Thularankurithi village in Jayankondam in Ariyalur district, about 250 kilometres south of Chennai city. The family did not own agricultural land and had a homestead. Apart from daily wage work in the agricultural fields and a local cashew factory, there wasn't much opportunity for 'waged' work for women in or near Kalpana's village. At a very young age Kalpana saw her mother being abused by her father, memories of which she carried with her even after she had moved to town. She had said:

'I did not have a good father. He would drink all the time and borrow money from everyone and wouldn't return the money. He would beat my mother, I even made a police complaint against him once. Those who lent him money would come to our house and harass us'.

When Kalpana was writing her higher secondary school exams, her father left home, leaving the family to pay off the debts and a pregnant wife. It fell upon Kalpana to take care of her mother and siblings. At the age of 15, she had not only to take on the responsibility of managing the house, but also took decisions about her mother's birth control by convincing her mother to undergo surgery to prevent pregnancy. The adolescent phase in her life was thus cut short by her father's absence, having been left with shouldering the responsibilities of a large family. After finishing her school exams, Kalpana went out to work as a daily wage worker at different construction sites or did some waged work under the government's 100 days *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee*

*scheme*<sup>43</sup> near her village. Her younger sister worked in a cashew-processing factory three kilometres away from the village, where work was hard. Her sister's hand would be covered with blisters and sores from the astringent cashew oil that seeped out while shelling the nuts. The wages were paltry - Rs 16 (£0.16 pence) for a 1 kg bag of cashews<sup>44</sup>. Kalpana would sometimes go to work in the cashew factory to earn extra money, or her sister would work with her at the construction sites. Between the two of them they managed the house and also paid for their younger brother's college education. In 2008, Kalpana was selected by a Christian charitable organization, the Velicham Trust, working in her village with members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC/ST) community, to do a 'women's leadership training' programme for a year. However, Kalpana faced stiff opposition from her mother when she decided to attend the training.

'*Amma* (mother) did not want me to go as there would be no one to take care of the children. I quarrelled with her ... 'isn't all the care that I have taken till now not enough?' I said to her. I want to study, I am going and I left'.

During her training period with the NGO, Kalpana met a *dalit* social activist 'Santhana Mary'<sup>45</sup> who deeply "inspired" her and initiated her into *dalit* identity politics. She also participated in political protests in support of Tamil *Eelam* in Sri Lanka<sup>46</sup>. These experiences left an indelible impression in her young mind

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<sup>43</sup> In 2005, government of India passed a legislation titled National Rural Employment Guarantee Act as a measure to provide at least 100 days of unskilled paid work to adult members of rural households to ensure livelihood and social security.

<sup>44</sup> The wages were piece rate or per kg bags. The wage went up from £0.16 to £0.20 in last two years. The same was sold in the market for at least Rs 500/kg (£5/kg). It took almost a whole day's manual work of 8 hours or more to shell 16-18 kgs of cashew nuts. When Kalpana visited home she too would go to the factory with her sister to help her shell cashew nuts and together the sisters would shell 20-22 kgs of cashew nuts.

<sup>45</sup> Santhana Mary is a well known dalit social activist and is the district President of Tamil Nadu Dalit Women Association.

<sup>46</sup> In 2008-09, Tamil Nadu was in the grip of protests by various political, civil/human rights groups and women's organizations against the war going on in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese state and the fighters of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, in which over 70,000 civilians were killed.

about which she often told me.<sup>47</sup> 'I would have been married and had children by now if I had not met these people', Kalpana said. During her training period, whenever Kalpana went home to visit her mother and siblings, she worked in the cashew factory to earn extra money for home. She felt empathetic towards her sister who was left with the responsibility of running the house in her absence. After finishing her leadership training and returning home her father turned up. He took her away to the city promising to get her a government job. Once there, Kalpana realized that her father had lied to her, and in fact had brought her to cook meals for some contract workers who worked with him in a coconut grove.

'My father tortured me a lot...beat me badly...with a broomstick on the streets and would use very bad language... he tortured me a lot..'

While narrating her father's abuse, Kalpana who was otherwise a strong and confident woman, broke down in tears several times. She told me many times that she couldn't erase the memories of her father's 'humiliating' behaviour<sup>48</sup> and after a particular violent episode of beating she decided to leave him.

'This was the time when Nokia was also hiring people in my village in Jayankondam. *Periyappa* (father's elder brother) called me saying that they were hiring people who had finished plus two (school pass certificate) and asked me to join. So I came [back to the village]'

Kalpana was successful in her written test and interview and was offered a job in Nokia. 'I was waiting to get out of home. It was a great thing to escape home...you can call it a caged parrot set free', Kalpana had said. Kalpana's life story illustrates the struggles of a young girl growing up in a poor lower caste household, exemplifying Lal's (2011:555) observations about the

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<sup>47</sup> A few years later in 2011, Kalpana quietly decided to convert to Buddhism (without the knowledge of her family), a religion which Dalit leader Baba Saheb Ambedkar encouraged dalits to embrace in order to break free of the discriminatory caste practices in the Hindu religion.

<sup>48</sup> In January 2015 when I spoke to Kalpana over the phone from Durham, she told me that she was consulting a psychiatrist because she still suffered bouts of depression from her childhood experiences of living with an abusive father.

'precariousness of women's traditional rights and social entitlements in the family among the impoverished and working classes'. Her story reveals the failure of families to fulfil their responsibilities towards daughters and wives. It also shows 'places occupied by labour in a life story' (John, 2013:177) which for women, as we see in Kalpana's case, begins at a very early age and is intermeshed with the social structures of gender, caste and poverty.

## **Buela**

Buela invited me to her house in Ambattur, an industrial suburb located in the north-western part of Chennai. She is a scheduled caste (SC) Christian. A single mother, she lived in a small two room rented flat with her eight year-old son and her younger sister who had left her abusive husband and was staying with Buela with her two small daughters. Buela herself had left her abusive husband and had been living on her own for the past few years. Two of Buela's older sisters, who worked in the garment export factories located in the Ambattur Industrial Estate, lived nearby. Buela's mother died when she was about ten years old. Her parents had nine children and after her last child was born, Buela's mother fell severely ill and eventually died. Her father, according to Buela, was irresponsible and did not care how the children were raised.

'My father drank a lot. He won't do anything for the house. There was no proper income. He will not care about us children or that we need to study. We grew up in such a situation'.

Buela's eldest sister and brother, who were barely 17-18 years old, worked in a garment export factory and a small garment store to keep the house running. Their small wages helped in buying food, taking care of the younger siblings and paying rent, since the family's only significant asset, a small house, had been sold off by their father to pay off debts. By the time Buela finished her school certificate exam, her elder siblings had got married and moved out of the house, and two of her younger siblings were sent to hostels. Only Buela stayed back

with her father in the house and as soon as she finished her school final exams, Buela had to look for work.

She worked as a contract worker in nearby garment export factories. 'I worked in almost eleven companies in that period of six months. Wherever I got a job I worked there. There was no monthly income at home. We weren't able to manage even Rs. 500 (£5) rent a month at that time. My father was as usual. He would fight with me every time I returned from an interview without getting a job', Buela had said. Although Buela's father had a small daily income from buying and selling fish in the local market, he spent all the money on his drinking. In 2002, Buela finally managed to find a job as a 'temp' in an automobile factory in Ambattur. The salary was Rs 1000 (£10) a month, with compulsory four hours over-time daily. By working 12 hours a day with no time off, except for a Sunday off once a month, Buela managed to earn at least Rs. 2500 (£25) 'as the highest salary' per month. Buela's job was to assemble and visually inspect auto parts.

'It was a very hard job. My hands would bleed. The materials would be so sharp, it would cut my hands. We were all such young kids and our hands were soft. The materials would be heavy and very difficult to lift. This was no salary for how much we struggled at work, but we did it anyway because there was nothing else at that time'.

Her father took all her wages and gave her only the daily bus fare to travel back and forth from the factory. It was in the factory that Buela met a young man who was sympathetic to her and she fell in love with him. Meanwhile, unable to bear her father's ill treatment, and feeling humiliated after a fight, Buela decided to leave home to stay in a working women's hostel. This infuriated her father, who came to the factory gate one day, beat her up and tore her uniform (*saree*). Humiliated and frustrated by her situation, Buela decided to get married to her co-worker. Her friends advised her that a man would 'protect' her from her father and 'restore' her dignity. Buela went to a temple and got married. 'I didn't even leave home to get married, I didn't have any plans of getting married', Buela

had said ruefully. It was an inter-caste and inter-religion marriage<sup>49</sup>. Buela was a scheduled caste Christian and her husband a Hindu *Telegu Chettiyar*, a backward caste (BC) in Tamil Nadu. Her husband's mother opposed the marriage and soon after Buela went to her husband's home, a new cycle of abuse and humiliation started against her. She was stigmatized for being poor and a scheduled caste. Her mother-in-law asked her to earn wages since she didn't bring any dowry with her. Buela had to quit her factory job post marriage due to a company policy that didn't allow a husband and wife to work together and took a job as a saleswoman in a car showroom for Rs. 2000 (£20) per month. After working in the showroom for a few months Buela quit the job because of the 'bad attitude' of the employer. She also got pregnant in the meantime and stayed at home. This increased her trouble with her mother-in-law and eventually she had to move out with her husband to another house.

Buela's personal woes continued even after she moved to a different house with her husband, who was an alcoholic and sexually abused her. 'He forced himself on me every day. Even when I was unwilling and ill. It was unbearable', she had said. Her husband eventually stopped earning, did not go to the factory and got into a relationship with an older woman in the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, Buela gave birth to her son in 2005. Unable to bear the humiliation of her husband and her constant battles with her mother-in-law, whose house she had moved back after her child was born, one night in 2007, Buela tried to kill herself by swallowing a handful of sleeping pills with her baby sleeping next to her. After she recovered, Buela started looking out for work again and joined a computer training course to improve her chances of finding work. It was here that she met a few women workers from Nokia factory who told her about Nokia's recruitment. 'The salary was Rs 4000 (£40) a month back then. The company was new and was hiring more people. They said 'your future will be

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<sup>49</sup> Buela sought help from me to get her a divorce from her husband. I took her to a family lawyer practicing in the Madras High Court. The lawyer told us that her marriage was 'not valid' under the law since it was an inter-religion marriage which has to be registered under the Indian 'Special Marriage Act, 1954'. Buela had gotten married in a temple and had no evidence except a few photographs. Therefore Buela's marriage and a child born out of the 'wedlock' did not have a 'legal sanctity' and therefore 'no protection'.

good'. Buela did not hesitate 'I went and joined Nokia. It was September 2007, I was the 5<sup>th</sup> batch of workers'. Soon after joining the company, Buela left her husband's home.

Kalpana and Buela's stories are rooted in structures of oppression, caste, gender violence and poverty. Both confront oppressions within their own families and from male members who hold positions of authority in the family as a father or a husband, and yet had abandoned their roles as traditional breadwinners. As they struggled to change their life situations, they faced stiff opposition, as we saw in Kalpana's case where her mother, who herself struggled against an oppressive husband and is left to take care of a household, still tries to stop Kalpana from leaving home. In the case of Buela, she struggles against oppression from both male and female family members and her life became more complicated with an inter-religion marriage and status as a single mother. There are overlaps and differences in the stories about how both women experience oppression and make their 'escape' from their specific situations. They clearly articulated their active decision to enter waged work, their expectation from work being more than just wages, but an escape from an oppressive life situation.

## **2. Motivation: Breadwinner**

Shalini and Pooja belonged to the scheduled castes community and their stories share similarities with those of Buela and Kalpana in the sense that they too had to shoulder household responsibilities in the absence of a 'male breadwinner'. They were not driven to work to escape an oppressive or physically violent household. They entered waged work in their struggle against poverty and were responsible for the survival of their families. In a statistical analysis, Maitreyi Das (2011) looking at the patterns of women's participation in waged labour by caste and education in India, has shown that dalit and adivasi (tribal) women form the majority proportion of women who 'labour out of necessity' as compared to middle and upper caste women.

## Shalini

I met Shalini during the course of making the union film 'Disconnecting People', much later into my fieldwork<sup>50</sup>. She invited me to her home. It was a very small room with an asbestos sheet roof in one of the poorer localities near Poonamallee in northwest Chennai. The room was partitioned by a curtain and a Godrej *almirah* into a small kitchen and a bedroom cum living room. A single folding cot, two plastic chairs, a few framed photos on the wall and a small TV filled the room. Shalini lived there with her mother and father. She was 22 years old and was born in Chembur in Mumbai. Shalini's parents were second-generation *Tamil* migrants in Mumbai having migrated from Chidambaram district of Tamil Nadu several decades back. They were scheduled caste Christians. After Shalini's birth, her father went off to Saudi Arabia to work as a mason on a construction site. When Shalini was six months old, a fire broke out, crippling her for life and burning down the house. Her father beat up her mother for her 'carelessness, but 'it wasn't her fault' maintained Shalini. After her father went to Saudi Arabia, trouble started between Shalini's mother and grandmother. Eventually her mother left the house with her three daughters and came to Chennai.

'I was just an infant, barely one year old. I had to be carried all the time, I couldn't walk, my legs were badly burnt. Even now I cannot kneel down, I cannot stand or walk for long, I cannot run. My knee is burnt, I cannot bend it. It pains even now, but if I tell that to my mother she will worry. So I don't tell her, but my mother knows'.

With the help of some relatives, Shalini's mother found a job as a cook in a convent in Chennai and lived there with her three daughters. Shalini and her sisters studied in the school run by the convent. She was keen to study further and took to arts and crafts. Meanwhile, her father came to Chennai to live with them, having spent all his money and started 'drinking' heavily. He would do some odd jobs and spend all the money on buying alcohol. Shalini's mother

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<sup>50</sup> I write about the film making in the methodology section.

saved money from her wages as a cook for her daughters. During the time Shalini was preparing to enter college, her father took a private loan of Rs. 60,000 (£600) and left it to his wife to pay off the debt. Besides there were loans taken for Shalini's sister's marriages that had to be paid off as well. Shalini decided to earn instead of going to college to share her 'mother's burden'. She worked in a small medical shop for small wages of Rs 2000 (£20) a month, working twelve hours a day. It was a standing job, she found it hard, but she said 'my thoughts were all about that (paying off the loans)'. It was then that she heard about Nokia's recruitment from her friend who was working in the company.

'I entered Nokia for the first time on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2009. Since the bus and food were free, I thought, okay fine, it will be safe for me to work there. There weren't any problems. My only problem is that I can't stand for eight hours. It would pain a lot. I had to keep alternating my weight over two legs.'

## **Pooja**

Pooja came from Salem district, located about 300 kilometres south west of Chennai. A quiet and shy young woman, she was 27 years old, oldest amongst the other women that I met during my research. I met her in a rented room in Kancheepuram town where she stayed with other women workers from the factory.

'*Appa* (father) died in 2010. He was an electrician. He had an alcohol problem and this made his blood pressure rise. We admitted him (in the hospital), he died suffering. After that, the family runs on my salary'.

Pooja's family consists of her mother and two sisters. After her father's death, Pooja's mother suffered from depression and came to live with her in Kancheepuram for a short while. Pooja has been supporting the family since she was 18 years old, right after her school. 'I was working in various small jobs....as

a sales person in a clothing shop, then in an export company'. She said her father was a 'good man' and not violent to her mother or his daughters, but 'drank himself to death'. Alcoholism amongst men in the family emerges as one common issue in all the stories so far, and is a known problem in the state of Tamil Nadu.<sup>51</sup>

When Pooja saw a newspaper advertisement about Nokia's job recruitment in 2007, she applied for the job. She had no idea what the job would entail as finding waged work to run the family was the key concern.

'I came for the interview, got selected and joined. I just knew Nokia was a company. Only after I joined, that I knew it made mobile phones. I was just focused on working. It didn't matter to me what I was going to do. My family is in such a situation. I wanted to work and thought Madras (Chennai) will be ok, that's how I came.'

Both Pooja and Shalini's entry into the factory was driven by a sense of responsibility in a situation where the 'traditional' male breadwinner had abandoned that role. Shalini expressed deep anger towards her father for being 'irresponsible' and frustrating her dreams of studying. She showed me her diaries in which she wrote short poetry, most of which were addressed to god and spoke of hardships. Shalini was deeply religious. Pooja had seemed more resigned to her faith, taking consolation in the fact that even though an alcoholic her dead father was not a 'violent man'. These stories resonate with what Saraswati Raju (2010:iv) had noted while mapping women's labour in India, saying that women particularly bear the 'disproportionate/added burden because regardless of entering the formal/informal labour market, they remain primarily responsible for the basic survival needs of the family'. The stories of

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<sup>51</sup> There have been widespread protests in Tamil Nadu over rising alcoholism amongst men in the last few years and against TASMAL, a state government owned marketing and retail company that has a monopoly on alcohol sale in the state. Sale of alcohol through 2500 TASMAL shops are one of the biggest revenue generator for the state and therefore no political party in the state has addressed the issue of alcoholism in the state (Countercurrents, 2013).

the women below are also about 'responsibilities' but there is a slight shift in them in the sense that they are not necessarily driven by 'survival' needs, it was more to add to the household income or a kind of crisis response by the families.

### **3. Motivation: Adding to the family income**

In this section I briefly narrate five life stories of women whose entry into formal waged work was part of the larger household strategy to add to the family income or in response to a crisis. In some cases the women were active participants in the decision-making and in some were reluctant participants. The women in this group were from Other Backward Castes (OBC) and none of their families owned land. Besides the differences in caste from the women discussed earlier in the Chapter, these women said that they had happy childhoods and as such never felt any pressing financial crisis in the family until emergencies such as a medical crisis led them to seek waged work for the first time. Unlike the stories above, these women did not speak of oppressive households or alcoholic male members in the family.

#### **Abhinaya**

Abhinaya was from Salem district, the eldest of two siblings and belonged to the Nadar caste group. After finishing school, she went to college to study commerce and it was during her first year in college that her father fell very ill.

[The] financial situation at home became very difficult. They (doctors) told my father to take a year-long bed rest and not to work. My younger brother was in school. I didn't understand what to do just then'.

It was during this time that Abhinaya's younger brother saw a notice about job recruitments for Nokia being organized by *Vaazhendhu Kaatuvom Thittam*<sup>52</sup>. Abhinaya decided to apply for the job and cleared all the tests and interview. After she was offered the job, her parents were reluctant to send their daughter

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<sup>52</sup> Government poverty alleviation scheme funded by the World Bank.

to a distant place to work in factory. While not explicitly stated, sending 'out' daughters for waged work could also mean publicly acknowledging the male member's inability to fulfil the stereotypical role of 'protecting and providing for women in their family' (Kabeer, 2000:99). It also shows the precarious financial conditions in many such rural landless households, especially belonging to scheduled castes or other backward castes groups, where a medical emergency can seriously impact upon the household's ability to sustain itself.

'They (parents) asked me if I needed to discontinue my studies and go that far. My mother felt that I won't be able to stand such travel, she said I can't go. I told my mother that I will go and that she doesn't need to be scared just because I am a girl. I can definitely go and manage this. I had that confidence'.

When I met Abhinaya in Kancheepuram, she had been working for over six years and was doing a computer course along with the factory job because she was hoping to progress to an office job one day with her new IT skills.

### **Lakshmi**

Lakshmi came from Paramakudi in Ramanathapuram district and belonged to the politically powerful *Thevar* (OBC) caste community in the district.<sup>53</sup> She had an elder sister and a younger brother. Lakshmi's father worked for a short while in Mumbai, where she did her primary schooling and then moved to Paramakudi.

'When I was in 10<sup>th</sup> standard, my mother had an operation and was taken to Chennai. Until then I did not know the difficulty of running a family, only when they took my mother, I learnt about it.'

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<sup>53</sup> Paramakudi had seen major caste violence between members of *thevar* and scheduled caste communities. Even as recently as 2011 when several dalits (scheduled caste) were killed in police firing after a caste riot between the two communities.

The situation became tough at home financially after her mother's illness, so Lakshmi's sister entered waged employment first to add to the family's income. After finishing school, Lakshmi joined college for a short period but then there 'wasn't enough money' at home. While in college she was interviewed and selected for a job in Nokia in 2008 through a job fair organized by '*Vaazhendhu Kaatuvom Thittam*' in the college. It was Lakshmi's mother who asked her to attend the job fair. 'They didn't ask me about any decision, whether I wanted to go or not. They decided themselves that I must go.... It's my mother, she told me to go.' Lakshmi left for the city to work in the factory not quite sure what the work was going to be like or what it was to live outside the village. She had not expected to have to leave her village to earn wages, and was initially hesitant to leave her mother's home.

### **Satya**

Satya was 22 years old. The youngest daughter of a handloom weaver from Thiruvannamalai district, as a child she had aspired to join the police force. Both her parents worked as weavers but didn't generate much income. To add to the family's income, Satya and her sister started working for wages after finishing school. It was part of a larger household decision that motivated Satya to enter waged work right after school. 'First I worked as a salesperson in a super market, then in an export company, then a cotton mill in Chengelpet and finally in Nokia in 2010 as a contract worker', Satya said. She aspired to get a government job. Even after she joined Nokia, she pursued her dream of becoming a policewoman. While in the factory, she spent her own money on doing a Bachelor's degree through Distance Education in Tamil Literature. When I met her, she was learning typewriting in preparation for a job interview in a government clerical post.

These three brief stories perhaps capture a process of decision making that is more common, that involves family's consensus in women entering waged work, sometimes in response to a crisis such as medical emergencies, or as we see in Satya's case due to loss of income from traditional occupations.

## Radha

Radha belonged to the *telegu* Naidu community (originally from Andhra Pradesh). The eldest amongst four sisters, she spent her early childhood years in Bangalore city where her father worked as a driver for Tata Steel Company. When she was about five years old, the family moved to Chennai. Radha didn't remember anything remarkable about her childhood, except for the financial difficulties at home as she was growing up.

'My father's salary was very low about Rs 4000 (£40) per month. We had to manage food, household expenses and school fees in that amount'.

When Radha was about ten years old her father lost his job. It was a difficult time until he found some work in a logistics company in Chennai. In 2004 Radha was married off to her cousin, the son of his father's stepsister. She was 18 years old, barely out of school. Her husband was working as an 'office boy' (office assistant) in a private firm in Bangalore. 'My aunt had told my parents that he was a good man and will take good care of me', said Radha. But it turned out otherwise. After marriage, Radha found out that he was an alcoholic and had a 'doubting' nature. He would cast aspersions on her: 'He kept doubting me, accusing me of having affairs. It was difficult relation', Radha said of her marriage. After marriage, Radha started working as a saleswoman in a shopping mall in Bangalore and later as a member of the housekeeping staff in a private firm in order to add to the family's income. Watching people sitting at desks and working, Radha dreamed of getting an office job in HR. In 2005 she got pregnant and gave birth to a girl child. In 2007, Radha returned to her parent's house in Chennai with her small daughter, unable to bear her husband's alcoholism and attitude towards her. Radha later found out that her husband had remarried, although he was still legally married to her. The child remained with Radha.<sup>54</sup> In 2007 Radha joined

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<sup>54</sup> When I interviewed Radha in November 2013 and also later in our numerous conversations, Radha never revealed her troubled relationship with her husband or that she was actually staying with her parents. She always maintained that she was staying with her husband and child and that her mother lived close by and helped her with childcare. Radha also told me that she supported her parent's household financially

Nokia as an operator, but never gave up on her dream of getting an office job. Her mother minded her child, often reluctantly, while she went to the factory. It was 'expected' that Radha would have to earn to bring in additional income to the household. While working in the factory, she had joined various training courses. She had a strong desire to get into an 'office job' which she thought was more 'respectable' and would be easier than working in the factory.

Radha's story depicts how patriarchal families on the one hand fail to fulfil their obligations towards a woman (as a daughter or a wife) but then expect them to contribute to the running of the household through their labour (waged and unwaged) and also lead respectable lives.

### **Nisha**

I met Nisha in the factory. She was introduced to me by one of the senior HR managers. Nisha was a Muslim girl and stayed with her parents. It wasn't easy to access Nisha in her home. She once told me 'It's not easy, I can't just meet you like that. I have to take permission from my mother, I will let you know...'. I found out that I had to negotiate through her immediate and extended family to speak with her. After almost four months of trying to meet her outside the factory, Nisha finally invited me to her house in Uthukottai town in Thiruvallur district. Nisha stayed with her parents and two younger siblings in a rented flat of less than 400 square feet, which had two tiny bedrooms, a very small kitchen, a sitting room and a bathroom. Unlike the other women whom I met, Nisha's life was more 'controlled' by her family, perhaps because she was staying with her parents. This was typical of several other women, for instance Jamuna, Manimeghalaya and Anitha, all of whom I met on the factory shop floor but could not meet outside because they stayed with their parents and there was strict control over whom they could meet outside of factory.

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without revealing the fact that she was actually staying with her parents. It was only over the phone when I had called her to wish for the New Year (1/1/2015), that she revealed some of these facts. I was very intrigued about why she chose to 'reveal' the truth to me.

'Her name is Khairunisha, not Nisha', Mohammad Shoukatullah, Nisha's father had informed me. A pleasant man in his mid-fifties, Shoukatullah ran his own enterprise of buying 'ladies goods' from the wholesale market and selling it door-to-door himself. A quintessential salesman, he even tried to sell me some of his products.<sup>55</sup> Both of Nisha's parents expressed a sense of discomfort about Nisha's work in the factory, which they expressed as Nisha's 'destiny'. As Nisha's mother said:

'All that is not in our hand, all in *Allah's* (god) hand. What we think, does *Allah* do that? We think something, Allah does something else... I wanted them to study well, do well...all *Allah's* wish, what 'He' wished we did. I was very upset. For night shift, we had to think about it...for general shift it is ok. But for night shift, there was a bit of worry. Also coming back after doing night shift, she can't sleep properly, won't eat properly. Gets very tired after working. She gets tired even now.'

Nisha mother was trying to convey her discomfort with Nisha's entry into the waged work outside home, but she didn't say it directly, instead invoking *Allah* (who *chose* Nisha's destiny) to express her 'uneasiness' about Nisha's factory work. Her husband's earning wasn't enough to run the household and the family depended on Nisha's salary to add to the family income. 'She earns and gives to me only. We spend it for home expenses, keep some for her also (savings). We do not save in the bank', Nisha's mother had said.<sup>56</sup> After finishing her school in 2005, Nisha volunteered for a year in a nearby charity hospital before joining Nokia in 2006 after seeing an advertisement for recruitment. Her family didn't oppose her decision, it was a consensual decision. Nisha told me that her entire family, including members of some of the extended family accompanied her to

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<sup>55</sup> Shoukatullah was a typical sales man. During my time in the house, he tried several sales pitches with me trying to show off his 'products'- stone studded bangles, hair clips etc. I was hesitant to even ask him the price for the items since I feared that he would think that I wanted to buy them and start bargaining with me.

<sup>56</sup> Nisha's mother was reluctant to talk about expenses and savings. She mentioned that she invested Rs 5000 every month on chit funds. At the time of the interview, Nisha's salary had gone up to Rs 16,000. When Nisha had become a permanent operator in 2007, her salary was Rs 3500.

the Nokia's job interview in Chennai. There was overall consensus within the larger family that she should take on waged work. Nisha was the first woman from the family to work outside the home for wages. During my conversations with Nisha, she hinted indirectly at the 'role' played by her mother's family in influencing decisions and also financially supporting her family. Nisha's mother came from an influential landed Muslim family in the area. They spoke in *hindi* mixed with *urdu* (not in tamil). Nisha was very fond of her maternal family and also took me to meet her '*nani*' (grandmother) and extended family in Kottai, a village in the outskirts of Uthukottai<sup>57</sup>. While her family was not necessarily very tightly controlled by social or religious norms, women were expected to 'behave' and remain within 'limits', Nisha told me. These 'limits' were not defined, but there was an unspoken 'code of conduct' for women. However, I saw Nisha quietly breaking the 'codes' several times in the shop floor and in her house when she secretly made calls to the man she was engaged to be married to.<sup>58</sup> She even managed to give her parents the slip and spent a day with him on the beach and cinema on her birthday.

In the life stories of Abhinaya, Lakshmi, Satya, Radha and Nisha we see the larger household's role in making the decisions for the entry of the young women into waged work, although women themselves also participated in the process. We also see in these stories, the discomfort of families in sending their daughters 'out' to work in some instances since that could be seen as a 'failure' of the traditional male breadwinner. The labour of women described above was seen as something 'supplementary' that added to the family's income. Raju (2010:58) points out that women have become 'shock absorbers', but are perceived as 'supplementary workers' in a way that does not fully recognize their labour and struggles'.

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<sup>57</sup> I had gone back to meet Nisha again at her Nani's house in Kottai on 4/3/2014. Her parents were away in Chennai preparing for Nisha's wedding and Nisha had come to Kottai to arrange some money for the wedding.

<sup>58</sup> Nisha was engaged to be married to a young man working in an IT firm in Chennai's TIDEL SEZ park. I was invited to Nisha's engagement ceremony and wedding. However, Nisha told me several times that her 'would be' husband did not like her speaking to me or meeting me. My interaction with Nisha reduced after she got engaged to be married.

#### 4. Motivation: Free will

In this section I write briefly about the motivations of the out-of-state migrant women from eastern/north-eastern states to enter waged work. These women were contract workers in Sodexo, a French multinational company that Nokia had outsourced for canteen services in the factory. I write about them separately from the *tamil* women mentioned above since they reveal how women choose differently to narrate their life stories and motivations to enter waged work; while the *tamil* women spoke about their struggles within households, the roles of families, the out-of-state migrant women chose not to do so. What this tells us is about the 'place and value of labour imposed upon very different women, the kind of conflicts and problems they articulate and find worth telling' (John, 2013: 178-9), and 'what is sayable, for whom and why' (John, 2013: 179). Firstly, none of the out-of-state migrant women were too keen to speak about their childhood or 'homes'. Most of my conversations with them had been about the 'present', which as one of them described was about – '*khao, piyo, enjoy karo* (eat, drink, enjoy yourself)'. From the conversations that I had with them, the young women expressed multiple reasons to migrate to find waged work – better prospects of earning; to support family members; or to experience a different life. None of them, except one woman from Assam, expressed poverty or survival needs as the reason to work. Since the women were not very keen to speak much about their homes, it was not possible to understand the other factors, social conditions that might have informed or influenced their decisions besides their own stated choices.

Meena Gopal (2013:246) has noted that migrants, especially women, in situations that do not have social approval, do not always want to talk of the past. For instance, in Gopal's work with Mumbai bar dancers, she found that the bar dancers came from stigmatized castes and occupations before they migrated to Mumbai. The dancers were reluctant to speak of their past as they sought out 'alternatives to the caste- based occupation—away from disrepute and stigma.' It was the 'prospect of job, imagination of a better life and a way out of their

present deprivation', that Gopal (2013: 239) noted were the motivations for the women to migrate to the city.

However, the women I interacted with did not necessarily come from stigmatized castes or professions. For instance, Santoshi Behra, from Koraput district of Odisha said she was from the Brahmin caste and had moved for better job prospects. Kalpana's brother in law worked in the Nokia canteen and got her a job with Sodexo when she was visiting her sister in Chennai. Chanda was an orphan from Assam, she needed to earn for herself and her bedridden brother, whereas Jyotsna, another girl from Koraput said:

When my grandfather died, I didn't give the school exam, all my friends went ahead, studied more...I remained (behind), then I didn't feel like studying...rest of the family (relatives) studied, became big people, only I didn't, so I came here....Sodexo was doing interviews in Koraput, *panchayat* (local village administration) made announcements-'Sodexo is hiring'. Both my brother and me came to work here, brother worked for 8 months and went back, I stayed. I liked it here. I did not come here for that (poverty)...

Most of the women said that they hadn't revealed the nature of their work to their families. 'Our parents think we are working in a mobile company.... none of the families of these girls know that they do 'service' work.... if my parents knew what work I do, they wouldn't let me come here', Santoshi had said. I felt that the reluctance of the women to reveal to their families that they served food in the canteen, which was similar to the kind of work that they perhaps did at home, was a likely reason for such discomfort. This perhaps added some sort of stigma in revealing to their families the nature of their work in the new place. In the case of Santoshi, there might have been an added shame of being an upper caste (Brahmin) woman serving food to other castes, a practice that may not be socially acceptable in her family or village. McDowell (2015:3) has noted: 'as women leave home for work, they are recruited into feminized employment sectors....the task that they undertake paradoxically remains the same, and as they are defined as women's work, they are poorly paid'.

Out-of-state migrant women expressed free will and almost casual entry into waged work, but they chose not to speak much about their past or families. The place of labour in their stories is a casual one, perhaps masking a struggle that they face in changing their life situations. A sense of shame in telling their families about the work they do reveals their struggles against a structure that devalues their labour, therefore they adopt a carefree attitude towards life and labour, or at least they chose to present it as such.

## 5. Conclusion

John (2013:177) asks the important question ‘what makes all the work that women do in a country like India elude worth and value?’ She is referring to the intermeshed patriarchal and capitalist structures that devalue women’s labour in society, which women have to negotiate as they try to create a sense of self worth and gain control over their lives and bodies. In the above life stories, we see a multiplicity of reasons that motivated young women to enter waged work – escape, breadwinning, ‘supplementary workers’, free will. All of them came from low-income families, with no land holdings<sup>59</sup>. In the case of the *tamil* women, while we see family responsibilities and a ‘need’ to supplement family incomes or escape from an oppressive household as reasons to enter waged work, they were layered with personal aspirations and a desire for a change in their personal circumstances. The case of the out-of-state migrant women was slightly different where they expressed their own decisions and desires to migrate and enter waged work. Their reluctance to speak about their homes or circumstances leading to their migration, perhaps concealed social stigmatization both at home and in the migrant space. They led relatively ‘atypical independent lifestyles’ (Lal, 2011:555) in the new place, which their factory employment enabled them to do, they were not interested in being reminded of their lives back home.

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<sup>59</sup> The latest census talks of rural landlessness as one of the key indicators of deprivation in rural households with 5.4 crore rural households being landless (Times of India, 2015).

All the stories above revealed that whatever might have been the circumstances of the women's entry into waged work, they did illustrate the women's 'capacity for autonomous economic agency' (Gopal, 2013: 246). As Ngai (2005:61) observed, while there remained an enduring image of Chinese women as 'victims of structural configurations', it is also the case that 'Chinese women are still far from being 'family puppets', rendering their fates for someone [else] to decide. Although powerless, they have been tactical agents in negotiating their own lives and in manipulating those exploitative forces for their own ends in the daily struggles'. There has been academic discussion about the 'diffused manner in which wage earning women workers experience oppression' (Swaminathan, 2012: 10), with some arguing that waged employment may increase the 'vulnerability' of the women, and that 'gender inequities not only persist, but also exhibit a measure of resilience' (Swaminathan, 2012:11). However, I argue that we need to understand women's own motivation to join waged work and the processes they negotiate to make these choices and create their identities as women and workers. This then can perhaps provide us with a more nuanced lens into the world of women's labour and their struggles against various forms of oppression, both within and outside waged employment. In the later chapters, when I discuss the everyday work life inside the factory, consent and dissent, negotiations in living spaces, and the 'emotional' responses to the closure of the factory, these 'motivations' of women will help us in contextualizing the varied responses of labour.

The life stories narrated above show the multiple social structures that women negotiate as they entered waged work. While there are overlapping themes, there are differences in the lived experiences of the women. Through these life stories, I have tried to foreground women's explanations for entering waged work and the multiplicity and diversity in their decision making process. I argue that it is important to pay attention to these processes to develop a more grounded understanding of labour's agency. On the shop floor when we see women consenting to a labour regime that appears to be exploitative, it is important to understand other complex relations that women negotiate in the everyday as they enter the social relations of waged work. To conclude, I argue

that labour geography needs to pay attention to these 'small-scale geographies' (McDowell, 2015) of labour, the various spaces of work, domestic and outside, that intersect with social relations of gender, caste, class in order to understand how workers imagine and shape their geographies of work, what conditions motivates them to do so and how expectations develop around work in a life course. This would help labour geography to develop a more grounded understanding of workers' agency, grounded socially and historically.

## Chapter Six: Life inside the factory

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### Introduction

*'Seven of us were hunched over my laptop. The late afternoon sun dimly lit the small room. Clothes and handbags were hanging from the hooks on the wall. We were sitting on the floor watching Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times. I peered into the faces of the girls. They were watching intently. On the screen Chaplin was trying hard to tighten bolts on the small metal plates coming fast on a conveyor belt. He couldn't keep up with the speed and was running along the moving conveyor belt. A supervisor was shouting at Chaplin for not being fast enough. Next frame. Chaplin goes to the restroom to sneak a quick smoke break. Boss watches him from a hidden camera and shouts at him. I quickly glance at the girls, they are laughing nervously.'*<sup>60</sup>

*'Send, send, send it fast! We need output. I worked on the S 30 model when I joined as a contract worker in Nokia. It will be really fast like Charlie Chaplin. Since he has to keep doing it...he will move with the line and do it. It is just like that here. You have to do it fast. You have to keep doing or they will keep shouting –'where is the GB [gift box]? Give the GB, do it, do it!'*Gaja had said. (Discussion with Gaja, permanent operator in Nokia factory on February 14<sup>th</sup> 2014).

Gaja was one of the girls in Muthu's room. She was barely 19 years old when she came to work in the 'big factory', daughter of a handloom weaver from Porur village in Thiruvannamalai district. Like Gaja, thousands of young women from rural and semi-rural areas of Tamil Nadu migrated from their homes to work in the 'factory'. They were recruited by Nokia (transnational capital) in the hope of

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<sup>60</sup> In Muthu's room we often watched films before or after our discussions. On 5/12/2013 we watched Chaplin's Modern Times. It was a suggestion I had made after I attended a screening of the film in the CITU office (on 30/6/2013) where only male workers were present. There wasn't much discussion amongst the men after the screening in the CITU office, but in Muthu's room after we watched the film our discussions lasted for hours over two visits.

creating a 'new army of transglobal labour fitted to global production' (Ngai, 2005:78).

In this chapter, I write about life inside the factory, arrangement of production, managerial techniques to produce 'working bodies' through spatially arranged bodies in lines, 'tuning' them through time-tables and tasks and creating a sense of social order. As Foucault (1979:26) states, 'constitution (of body) as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection; the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body'. The young bodies, perceived to be 'infantile', 'immature' and 'rural' needed recasting to 'fit' into a system that could, for instance, assemble 600 phones an hour.

The chapter also looks at the responses of the women to the managerial strategies, their consent and dissent, and how they cope with the production arrangements and their own perceptions and experiences of the work and life inside the factory. I argue that to understand the everyday agencies of women on the shop floor, we need to 'reconnect' it to the social structures in which their lives are situated in the wider society (Coe, 2013). Bodies, both in the workplace and out of it, are more than just the product of the power of being subjected to tasks. As Ngai (2005:78) says, instead of seeing the responses only as 'defiance' or 'compliance', or bodies as 'docile' or 'tactical', it is useful to see female bodies in a 'structure of contest' which tries to use 'situational opportunities' to protect themselves.

This chapter contributes to the literature on labour and gender in India with 'thick descriptions' of the relations in production which is 'largely missing' in Indian labour and gender studies 'mainly because so little ethnography of this kind has ever been done' (Parry, 1999 cited in De Neve, 2005: 135), with a few exceptions (see Fernandes, 1997; DeNeve, 2005; Cross, 2014).

The chapter is organized into three sections: production arrangements; production of working bodies; and production of subjectivities and counter

subjectivities. The chapter shows how arrangements of work and interactions between managers and workers, and amongst workers themselves created everyday social relations of production and politics on the shop floor. It shows the gendered nature of the labour process where women were preferred and placed on certain sections or stages as they were believed to be more disciplined and could perform those tasks better than the men. Women responded to these perceptions in different ways - by coping, resisting, consenting. The shop floor was a fertile ground of experimentation of industrial relations where managers constantly came up with strategies to 'engage' workers in the process of production. These were multiple strategies that were not just about disciplining or power of subjection, but also about incentivisation and creating a culture of shared participation. Different forms of power relations circulated on the shop floor that produced the everyday relations of work that I try to capture through shop floor ethnography.

### **1. Production arrangements**

The core elements of the production system in Nokia were characteristic of the global manufacturing practices - 'a leaner version of mass production paradigm, that is, a Taylorist/Fordist mass assembly production system combined with lean production techniques' (Zhang, 2015:83). Sophisticated 'scientific' techniques such as 'hand-time analysis' combined with Japanese industrial efficiency known as '*Kaizen*' ('continuous improvement') were amongst of the management strategies deployed to manufacture millions of mobile phones in the Sriperumbadur factory. They combined these 'techniques' with a young (predominantly female) workforce, working in three shifts, to 'maximise output' and 'minimise waste'. Workers were 'encouraged' to compete and rewarded for giving 'ideas' for making work processes efficient.

'As far as Nokia is concerned... OTD... On Time Delivery... is very important.... that is their policy... they follow it very strictly....'

(Interview with Tikkaram, operator and general secretary of Nokia India Tozhilalar Sangam on January 8<sup>th</sup> 2014).

Tikkaram's description of 'On Time Delivery' captures the way production was organised in a factory that had a capacity to produce 650,000 mobile phones a day. It was Nokia's 'highest volume' factory. I was informed by one of the managers that it took 1024 components and roughly 53 operators for the final assembly of a single mobile phone handset. The Sriperumbadur plant manufactured two 'models' or 'series' of Nokia phones - the S 30 series, which were cheap and popular basic phones and the S 40 series, which were feature phones sold in the marketplace as the *Asha* series. During the period of my fieldwork, approximately 4100 people worked per shift on the shopfloor, including operators—permanent, trainee and temporary; apprentices; technical trainers; technicians; team leaders and group leaders (management category). 'Machine, people, process (software)—combination of these things makes the phone', explained Karuna, the suave senior quality manager in Nokia (Interview with Karuna, Quality Manager, Nokia on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2013).

Each department had a Shift Line Manager (SLM) who was in-charge of the production in each shift, then Group Leaders (GL) who managed specific production areas in each department. There were approximately 31 GLs at the time of fieldwork. Under the GLs there were 4-5 Team Leaders (TL) who directly supervised the production lines in each department. There were 169 TLs, each supervising 2-3 lines. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the operators, trainee operators, temporary workers and apprentices. Diagram 4 gives the labour arrangement in the shop floor for different departments, both for permanent and temporary operators. While I do not have the male-female ratios for departments, the figures show that the overall male-female percentage for permanent workers was 48.4% male and 51.6% female (for July 2013).



**Diagram 4:** Labour arrangement in the shop floor

*Note: The above diagram is based on data provided by the Nokia's HR department for July 2013. There were fluctuations in these numbers especially for temporary operators. It's also not clear whether Trainee operators (1464) and Apprentice (72) are included in the above data for permanent operators (called 'directs'). These figures do not include the service workers in the canteen and housekeeping. Source: Diagram based on information given by the HR department of Nokia.*

The factory had a grade-wise hierarchy corresponding to wages, roles and responsibilities. For managerial categories these were linked to educational qualifications, work experience, skills etc. For workers/operators there was one basic educational criteria of school pass certificate and 18 years of age (formal employment age).<sup>61</sup> Workers were drawn from different labour markets via recruitment strategies that I have described in Chapter 4. Permanent workers (women and men) had formal employment contracts. The contract included benefits such as Provident Fund (PF), Employees' State Health Insurance (ESI, a contributory health insurance scheme), paid maternity leave for three months, annual earned paid and casual leaves. There was also possibility for the permanent operators to apply for jobs as TLs through Internal Labour Market (in-house recruitment scheme) after acquiring diploma certificates. However, for the contract workers and the trainees, the terms of employment were provisional and none of the benefits given to the permanent workers were extended to them, except PF and ESI. The contract workers had separate contracts with the contract agencies who often did not meet the basic requirements such as paying minimum wages or timely payment to the workers.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> For operators/workers, there was also the criteria of age and gender, about which I write in Chapter 4.

<sup>62</sup> I attended one of the audit meetings of a service provider agencies that supplied security guards to Nokia. During auditing, it was found that the agency G4S, an American multinational agency, was not only not paying minimum wages to its

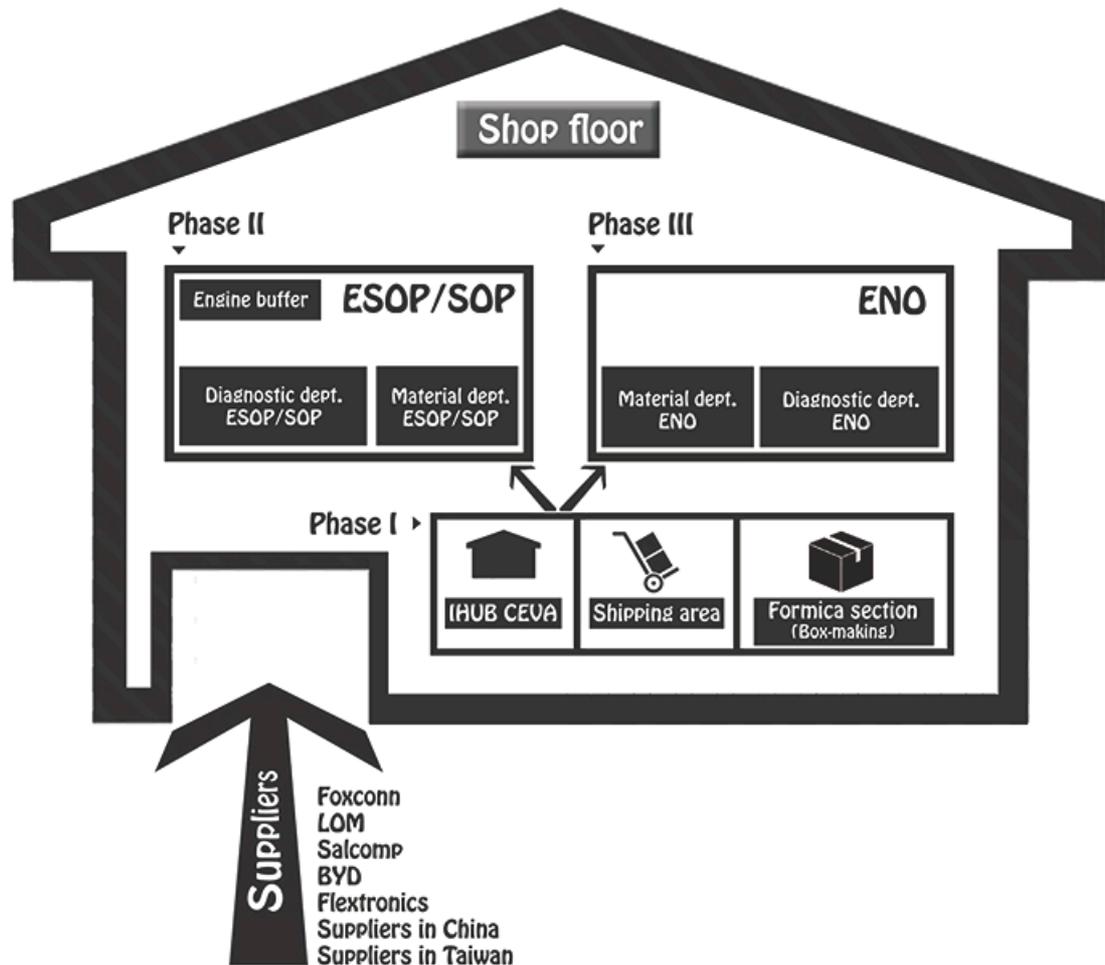
## Shop floor

The shop floor structurally resembled a huge warehouse of approximately half a million square feet area divided into three sections or 'phases'. Phase 1 was divided into two sections- a warehouse operated by an outsourced logistics company called CEVA and the Shipping area and Formica section<sup>63</sup> (where printed cardboard sheets were folded into gift boxes). Phase 2 and 3 housed various sections: phone assembly sections – Engine Operation (ENO) located in phase 3 and Supply Operation (SOP) located in Phase 2; material sections; diagnostics departments. Diagram 5 illustrates the arrangement of the shopfloor showing different departments and the process flow for the various stages of phone assembly.

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employees, it was also forcing workers to work overtime and also took away their original school pass certificates. The agency called it's 'job retention' strategy so that the workers could not leave their jobs 'easily' and apply for jobs elsewhere, since they would be required to produce their school pass certificates while applying for new jobs. All these labour control practices are illegal under the provisions of the Indian Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970 and Rules 1971. (Observation from an audit process in the factory dated 13/09/2013).

<sup>63</sup> I noticed mostly women workers in the Formica section. As the boxes came out of the machine, workers quickly stacked them into neat rows on trolleys. 'Women stack better than men, they are faster', a junior HR manager commented while pointing to a woman who had more number of stacked boxes than the male operator on the next machine. Dated 13/8/2013.



**Diagram 5:** Arrangement of production in the shop floor.

Source: Diagram based on observations of the shopfloor and discussions with the shopfloor production and HR managers.

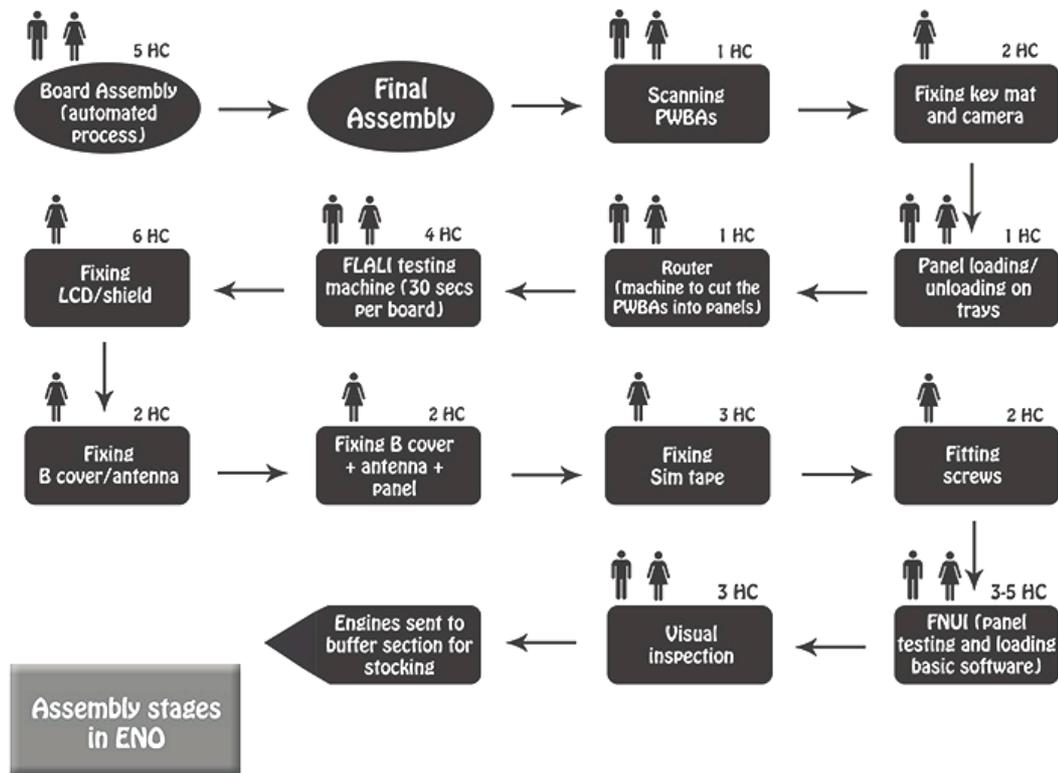
There were two assembling processes – Modular Production (MP) and Integrated Production (IP). Broadly it meant instead of one long assembly line for assembling a phone, stages were divided into separate modules. The factory had recently introduced integrated production methods where some stages were integrated into a module. The idea behind modular production is to build flexibility into the process in order to be able to produce different phone models. Using components like microchips, circuit boards, panels etc., a core phone model was assembled which then was customised with a variety of other external components and features to make different types of phone. The two main assembly modules that were used in the factory were: Engine operation (ENO) and Supply operation (SOP). In ENO section the core model was

assembled and in the SOP the customised models were assembled. There were also smaller modules or 'sub-assemblies' within these modules. Similar assembling techniques are adopted even in automobile manufacturing factories because they are meant to increase 'efficiency' and 'flexibility' and also to 'cut costs' (Zhang, 2015:84).

There were 22 ENO lines, which were straight lines stretching from one end of the big hall to the other end. Each line had forty workers. The lines were serialised in combination of alphabets like IM, IN, IO etc. Each line had two main sections-Board Assembly (BA) and Final Assembly (FA). Board Assembly was an automated process where small components (microchips and connectors) were loaded at various stages in the machines. There were five workers in this section who stood next to the machines to feed the components. A sensor flashing red-orange-green lights at the beginning of each line indicated the status of the line—red (line stop), orange (assistance needed) and green (line running). After the printed boards were mounted with small components, they were unloaded in trays arranged like racks on a trolley. These boards were now called Printed Wire Board Assembly (PWBA). After the board assembly, the PWBA's were trolleyed to the next stage in the line by a worker for the Final Assembly. Diagram 6 shows the different stages in the ENO Assembly line, along with the distribution of workers (women and men) at each stage.

In this section most of the work was done manually, and except a few stages, where workers could sit to assemble components, most of the stages were done standing. It was mostly the women workers who did component assembling such as fitting key mat, camera, antenna etc., while men worked in the testing stages. There were thirty nine workers in this section. A conveyor belt moved continuously between each stage, where workers picked up the panels, fixed a small component in a few seconds and placed it back on the belt to move to the next stage. There were workers who did 'offline' sub-assembly of some component parts. There were also offline Diagnostic Technicians who tested the panels that had failed the FNUI test and an offline operator who would manually unscrew the failed panels. After passing the inspection at the final stage, the

panels now called ‘engines’, were stacked in trolleys (pallets) and taken to the ‘buffer’ section for stocking. Each trolley or pallet held 3000 or more engines.



**Diagram 6:** Assembly stages in ENO line and distribution of workers at each stage (HC-head count).

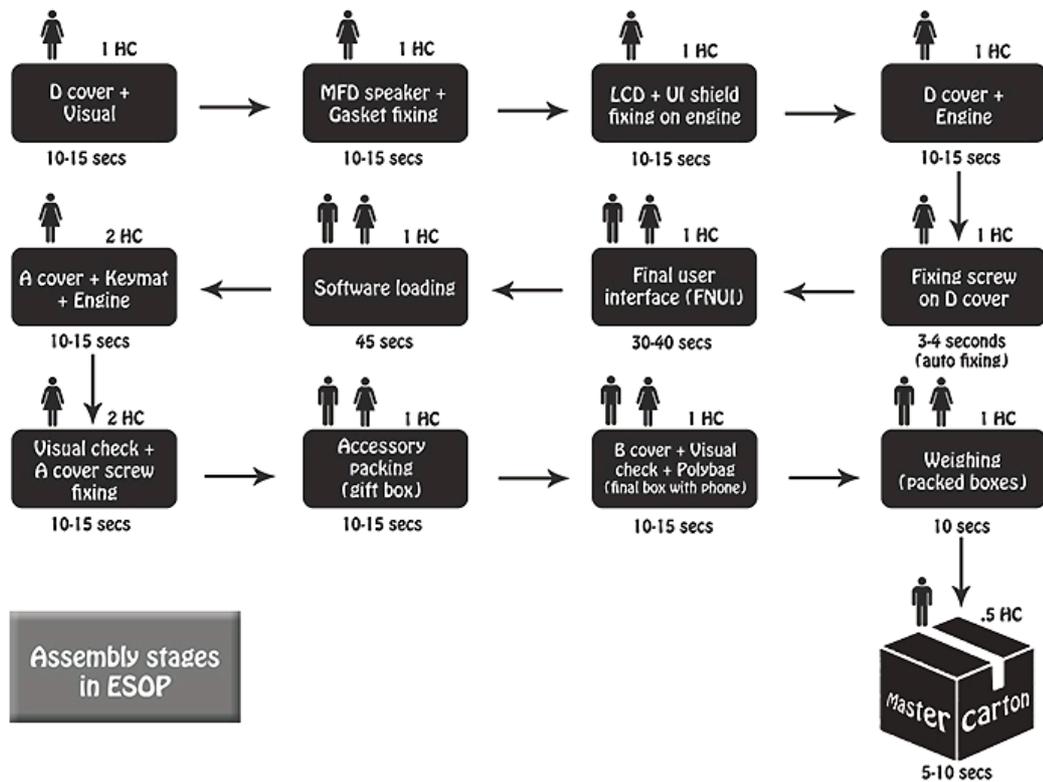
Source: Diagram based on observations of the ENO line and discussions with Team Leaders and workers.

Unlike the ENO lines, where the core part of the phones were assembled, work in the SOP (supply operation) section involved customised assembling, where external features were added to the core phone and then packed in boxes to be shipped out. Workers called the department ATO – ‘Assembly To Order’. I remember HR manager Gopalan’s casual remark about the work in the SOP section ‘We call it the *dabba* (box) section, they just put things in the boxes here’, he had said with a slight hint of derision, his perception of the work being ‘mindless’ and ‘easy’. I had a very different impression of the work to the managers. All stages here were done standing. The majority of the workers, approximately 75% workforce in the factory, worked in this section and were mostly women workers. Unlike ENO, where there was one long line running from one end to another, SOP assembly lines were divided into smaller lines

arranged in 'cells'. There were 62 cells in SOP section which was compartmentalized into seven 'bays'. Workstations were two long tables of approximately 20-25 feet in length running parallel to each other. Women and men stood in close physical proximity to each other while assembling the phones. Each cell had on an average 14 workers with numbers going up to 14.5<sup>64</sup>. In some cells, there were even 17 workers depending on the production arrangement and customer order. For instance, if the order was from a 'domestic' customer, meaning from within India, then an extra worker was allocated to the line to stick the customer's stickers on. It was an additional stage in the accessory stage and therefore an extra 'head count' was assigned for the job. The SOP area had two production arrangements - ESOP and SOP. They were similar processes except that ESOP had few stages that were combined with ENO (part of the Integrated production system). Diagram 7 gives an illustration of the different stages in ESOP line for particular model - 'Diana' that was being assembled at the time of fieldwork.

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<sup>64</sup> 14.5 workers meant one of the operator worked in two cells. The operator who handled the master carton was usually was the one shared between two lines.



**Diagram 7:** Assembly stages ('Diana model') in ESOP.

Source: Source: Diagram based on observations of the ENO line and discussions with Team Leaders and workers.

*Note: I have computed the above table based on my discussions with the TL, workers and my own shop floor observation of the tasks in ESOP line for Diana model. The stages, head count and timings will vary slightly according to the models being assembled. The timings are approximations. For the Diana model, it took approximately 3.15 minutes to assemble and pack one phone in the ESOP line. The output target for A shift was 200 phones/hour.*

Diagram 7 shows different stages in assembling the phone in ESOP. The assembly process was divided into two sections: Final Assembly I (FA I) and Final Assembly II (FA II). At the beginning of each 'cell' there was a circular cardboard cut out with names and colour codes to indicate which country the phones were destined for. The language on the stickers, key mat, 'sales specs' were according to the country of destination, for instance, in Russian, Spanish, Arabic, English etc. A customised Display Document (DD) was brought to each 'cell' at the beginning of a shift. The document, which was in English, gave specific instructions for phone assembly as per a 'Production Order Number', which was a specific number given to each model of phone that was being assembled at any particular hour or shift as per customer order.<sup>65</sup> It gave details

<sup>65</sup> The factory shipped phones to international retailers across the globe.

of assembling stages through illustration and texts. It also gave the 'head count' (workers) required and time to be taken for assembling a particular model. For instance, DD for 'Diana' model, said that it would take 14.5 head count (workers) to assemble 480 phones in 3 hours and 18 minutes. Each DD had to be customized according to the customer's requirement.

Work was minutely divided into multiple stages in the ESOP and SOP. In some of the lines, the production output was as high as 600 phones an hour. Hands never stopped moving in these lines. Workers didn't lift their eyes up as their hands moved rapidly fixing covers, inserting memory cards, sticking labels. I noticed that in quite a few stages visual checks of component parts had to be done before assembling. Workers had their heads bent over the workstation most of the time while they spoke or joked with each other. The work was repetitive, eyes and hands were in continuous motion - taking components placed on the shelves in the front of the table, assembling them and passing the device on to the next stage. Workers had to stand at all the stages of the work. I wondered why some of the same stages when done in the ENO (FA) line could be done sitting down, but in ESOP they had to be done standing. In fact, I had an impression that most of the assembling work in both ENO and SOP could be done sitting down if the workstations were designed ergonomically. Even in the electronics assembling plants in China which otherwise are notorious for hard work conditions, workers sit on chairs or stools while working on assembly lines. To stand and work for eight hours a day was a particularly hard condition of work that workers in Nokia often complained about.

In 2010, a young female worker was killed in one of the ENO lines when a sensor fitted to the scanning machine failed to work and the worker's head got stuck inside the machine as she was trying to fix the jammed conveyor belt. At that time, workers had blamed the accident on high production pressures, since workers would take such risks rather than waiting for the technicians to fix the fault, as waiting meant losing output targets.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Details of the incident: <http://kafila.org/2011/01/21/ambikas-death-madhumita-dutta-venkatachandrika-radhakrishnan/>

### ***A day in the line***

The first day I was on the ENO line 'IM', it was 'running' the *Luyan SS* model. The model names used in the shopfloor were different from the market names. For instance *Luyan SS* model, a feature (touch) phone is sold in the marketplace as Nokia Asha 201 series. It was morning shift and the target output was 5355 assembled 'engines'. It was explained to me that different names were used to 'protect' the confidentiality of the models being assembled in the factory.

'Targets depend on (duration of) shifts. So A shift is longer, it is eight and half hours, whereas C shift (night) is 7 hours. Also on the type of the model. Different models may have different assembling process, some extra components, accessory packing requirements will be different. The head counts and target outputs depend on these factors...,' explained Smita Singh, a 25 year old Team Leader of the IM line (Informal interview with Smita Singh, Team Leader on September 25<sup>th</sup> 2013). Smita was new to the factory, only two months into the job. Although she had worked previously in an electronics component manufacturing factory, mobile assembling was new to her. She didn't quite know how the different stages worked, and had to often rely on information provided by senior female operators. Smita complained:

'Earlier there used to be two TLs for ENO line, one for Board Assembly and one for Final Assembly...now we have only one for the whole line. I just keep running from one end of the line to the other...my legs and body pains...,

I noticed Smita speaking fluently in slightly accented *Tamil* with the operators and asked her how she managed with the language given that she was from the *Hindi* belt of Uttar Pradesh "...had to learn it for survival" was her response.

I met Radha on the ENO line. She was working 'offline' unscrewing the assembled panels which had failed the test. She was looking at me curiously as I

was trailing behind Smita up and down the line. She was quite fair with sharp features and would smile slightly every time I passed her. At one point, Smita left me standing close to where Radha was working, in order to answer the beep on her 'DEK' phone given to the TLs by the company. I moved closer to Radha and she turned around and smiled at me broadly. 'Hello ma'm, do you speak *tamil*?' she asked me in English. '*Kunjam kunjam*' (little little), I had replied. Radha and some of the other women standing around the line broke into giggles and some just stared at me curiously.

There was a lull in the line, panels were coming slowly from FLALI. Workers called it 'momentum'. I noticed some of the operators chatting at the stage where the LCD and the shield fixing were done. I asked them if their PON (production order) was finished, they smiled and said "*just momentum*", meaning slow moving. Radha helpfully explained that the production volume was low and that 'momentum' depended on the model being assembled. 'If it was Coral line (basic phones) then you wouldn't see them talking like this, they will have to produce 14,000 phones per shift, but in *Luyan SS*, its less(er) number(s)'.

My lower back was aching and I had a slight headache as I stood around watching the assembly work for a few hours. I asked Radha and another young woman standing next to her 'how is work?' They just looked at each other and smiled. Then Radha said very softly - 'its hard...it used to be (even) harder two years back'. About 27 years old, Radha has been working for almost six years in the factory. She was a 'key operator', meaning someone who knew all the stages of the line and could train other workers (more about Radha in Chapter 5). Radha explained that most assembly stages were manual when she first joined the factory:

'It was (all) manual, the screws had to be done manually, like I was doing now while unscrewing the panels. For last two years, fixing screws has become automatic. When I started working, blood used to come in my fingers when I used to put the screws manually, I was not used to it. We were given one month training in that hotel opposite the factory, then

came out on line. I was a trainee operator for 15 months before becoming an operator’.

When she went back home from the factory and her child wanted to play with her, Radha said she couldn’t play because her right shoulder and arm would pain. She said:

‘I have been doing ‘rework’ and have to continuously turn on my right side to pick up the panels and work on them. I feel tired. Continuous work, two hours of travel, more heat in the body. Work is hard, sitting for eight hours is hard, standing for so long is hard too, back pains. There is competition between lines for more output. TLs (team leaders) tell the operators how much better production the other line has given’.

As Radha was chatting with me, Smita came back to the line. Radha went back to unscrewing the panels. Smita’s view of the assembling work was quite different from Radha’s ‘Oh its easy and simple’ is how she described it.

### ***Incentivisation and ‘culture of participation’***

As I was walking away from the ENO area, I saw white boards displaying the performances of each line - target and actual output<sup>67</sup>. These were logged by the workers or Team Leaders on an hourly basis. Performances of lines were linked to a scoring system that determined the yearly increments for the TLs. These were bonuses added to the annual wages of the TLs based on monthly performance audits of the lines under their supervisions, which included output targets, quality control, manufacturing failure etc. For workers, ‘best line’ awards were given every month for meeting targets and quality control. These were mostly in the form of small home appliances or kitchen utensils. This sort of incentive based work is not uncommon in shop floor that drives work pressure.

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<sup>67</sup> I noticed some boards showing shortfalls in output in a couple of shifts. For instance, for the Luyan SS model in C-shift (night) the target was 5931, but the actual production output was 2029. A shift (morning) target was 6566, but output was 5441. I had asked Smita what happens if a line doesn’t meet their target. ‘The TL has to explain the reason for not meeting the targets and also scores are given for performance, wage incentives are linked to the score’, she had explained.

Each board had interesting names, such as 'Team of Mountain', 'Team of River', 'Team of King Kattambomman' (an 18<sup>th</sup> century Chieftain from Tamil Nadu who had opposed and fought the British colonists), 'Alexander the great', 'Shivaji' (a chieftain from Western India), 'Indian Premier League (cricket) Team' 'Hercules'. Some of them even had hand written 'motivational' quotes such as - "*The runner says its possible....but its difficult, the winner says its difficult, but its possible; always think like a winner*". Another quote that was written in several places around the shop floor was "*Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success*". I also noticed small posters hung on strings along the lines where operators were standing. Some said "100% accountability, 0% loss, 0% discrepancies". A few had images of former Indian President Abdul Kalam or Bollywood musician AR Rehman or former Indian cricketer Sachin Tendular (which said 'Team work'). Posters were in Tamil and English. These were part of the management's 'motivational' messages for 'promoting' *Kaizen* (continuous improvement) on the shop floor.

At the entrance to the shop floor, a small area was demarcated as the *Kaizen* area where exhibitions and short documentaries were shown and workers were regularly given 'talks' and encouraged to come up with '*Kaizen* ideas'. I also witnessed an award ceremony, where 'teams' who came up with best ideas were given a small memento and a certificate. Goger (2013:2637) terms these management strategies the 'cultural politics of a lean production' that produce 'learning-oriented workplace culture' as companies reorganize workplaces and labour process to achieve lean production and maximum efficiency. I also see these strategies as different forms of power – disciplining, incentivisation, motivation, competition, participation, scoring system, awards – that interact with each other to produce a work culture on the shop floor. A 'cultural politics' was produced alongside phones on the shop floor through these various forms of power. It was the combination of sheer hard physical labour and a 'culture' of work that went into the manufacturing of phones that Radha had alluded to when she spoke of the pain in her limbs and line competitions between the workers (See Burawoy, 1979). In this section I tried to convey the nature of work as felt in bodies and minds by the women on the lines as they worked hard to

meet the production targets of the company. The lines gave rise to intense feelings – both of pride and resentment towards the work that left their bodies exhausted.

### **Line culture**

Assembly lines were sites of fierce competitions. This was driven by managerial strategies for increasing output – incentives, gifts, persuasion and workers’ ‘feelings’ for their work or pride in doing the work well. As Abhinaya and Lakshmi recalled, after they joined the factory they liked the ‘new’ (factory) work, which was very different from what they had experienced or seen back in the villages. Also ‘incentivisation’, ‘awards’ evoked strong line competition amongst workers to out perform each other. Burawoy, 1979:27 argues that ‘consent’ arises in the way activities are organised on the shop floor that presents the workers with choices—‘as though...with real choices’ and ‘it is participation in choosing that generates consent’. The company gifted phones to workers after the Chennai factory produced 500 million phones in “just five years”. Kalpana had said:

‘We have run the line on empty stomachs. We’d compete and run our lines. If there are two teams, both will want to be the best team with the best performance in the bay. When workers wanted to take a break, they would send one person to the canteen to queue up because the canteen would be crowded, meanwhile the rest of us will finish the scanning and visual stages and then go join them halfway in the queue. The workers will quickly eat and return to the line. We’d split in teams and work so hard’.

(Interview with Kalpana, operator Nokia, July 7<sup>th</sup> 2013)

A ‘line culture’ gripped the workers as they competed with each other to achieve the highest ‘output’. It was more about ‘our line’ and ‘our team’ and not so much about ‘our factory’, Kalpana said. There was pressure from the TLs to ‘out perform’. ‘You know what our previous CA did? He would go see the next line

and if they had made 500 more than us, he'd come, stand in the same place and say - *work fast, work fast*', Satya, said (Discussions in Muthu's Room after watching Modern Times on December 5<sup>th</sup> 2013). The competition between lines would be so fierce that workers would even check the production boards of other lines to 'out-perform'. Production boards were prominently displayed at the beginning of each line and created intense competition amongst the workers. While the women were aware that this was 'to get us to work', they participated in the process, often enthusiastically and innovatively to achieve the 'target' and more. There was an immense sense of pride in recognized as being a 'Smart operator'. Kalpana said:

'Gifts....to encourage us. If we have given the most output, without any cross audit or rejections... the team will be given a small gift as 'Smart Operators'. They will give to all the workers in that team. When they do that, we want to get more. Some feel that if their team is getting, why can't our team get? They will then compete and work'.

'Lines' would compete with each other to get the 'best line' award every month. Buela said with pride - 'We will compete to reduce scrap and achieve high quality in production'. She was proud of the fact that her line was awarded 'best line' for four months in a row (Interview with Buela April 21<sup>st</sup> 2014). For the TLs, the higher output of their lines was linked to financial incentive 'Because if we give more output they get an incentive in their salary, right?' Satya said. In some departments like 'Materials', individuals were given gifts and not 'teams', therefore women felt there was a lot of 'favouritism' and 'kissing ass' in those departments since TLs nominated the best operators. I felt that being appreciated, possibly for the first time in their lives for doing something well, partly drove their enthusiasm.

Workers also did '*banking*' (Burawoy, 1979) when they produced more than the hourly target output to stock up for the next hour to gain extra break time. 'We would produce more but we won't tell ... if break hour is half an hour then we will take 45 minutes...if we finish 250 pieces before the break then we will retain

about 40 numbers and deliver it in the next hour' (Interview with Kalpana, operator Nokia, July 7<sup>th</sup> 2013). It was more of a strategy to gain extra time during the lunch break when there was a rush in the canteen and workers had to hurriedly queue up, get their food, eat and get back to the line. There wasn't much time to go to the restroom or just relax a bit with friends. So they would 'steal' an extra 15 minutes by 'banking' up for the next hour. The TL's were aware of this but 'didn't care' as long as the hourly outputs were met. The logic of assembly line production and targeted outputs, combined with incentives, awards and a certain 'pride' in the work, created a line culture where workers worked hard, competing to outperform each other to meet targets, and in the process participated in the process of accumulation.

## **2. Producing working bodies**

Positioning bodies in assembly lines, disciplining them through rhythms of work in shifts and time tables and producing 'social order' were some of the shop floor techniques employed to produce 'working bodies' suited for a hyper-efficient manufacturing process. On a shop floor of over half a million square feet, these techniques sought to arrange young working bodies to produce 500,000 mobile phones a day.

Watching Chaplin's antics on my laptop that afternoon in Muthu's room, the women talked of the initial years on the shop floor. As I sat listening to them speak amongst themselves discussing the film, of how their bodies reacted to the 'shifts', 'line' and 'speed', I realized that maybe for the first time or at least after a very long time 'memories of work' were being 'evoked'. In the everyday routine of things, there was no time to think about it. Most of the women had been working in the factory for past 5-6 years and their bodies were now 'used to' the rhythms of the work in the factory.

## Shifts

Bodies were 'tuned' to the rhythm of work through time tables and shift work patterns. Shifts reworked body clocks and the daily practices of workers not just inside the factory, but even their lives outside the factory. Their everyday or daily practices were tied to the shifts and determined the times they would eat, sleep, have leisure time, do household chores, socialize or visit family. I too had to 'tune in' with the shift patterns to meet the women. The factory ran its operation day and night in three shifts. Workers worked for six days with one day weekly off. Timetables were planned by the minute. Team Leaders (TLs) were the ones who were assigned the task of keeping time. They were the conduits through which disciplinary power circulated in the shop floor, transforming the 'unruly' rural bodies to 'working' bodies suitable for global production. They kept time and ensured workers met targets. A few of the TLs were former operators who progressed their careers through internal job market.

'Useless', 'virus', 'mental torture' is how the operators described the TLs. 'Children', 'immature', 'adolescents', 'need to teach them how to behave' is how TLs described the workers. Mistrust ran deep between the two groups of young people—workers and TLs. TLs were nervous of the workers, especially the experienced permanent operators. Both groups exerted powers over each other. 'If 10-15 operators join together and complain against a TL, then the TL will be in trouble. TLs come and tell us that operators are not listening to us...' Janani, shop floor HR manager said (Informal conversation with Janani, HR coordinator, Shop floor HR Help, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2013). TLs used incident reports (IR) and warning letters to discipline the workers. The women felt these were being used more since 2010. They linked it to the formation of the employees' union. Abhinaya had said 'Before this, they won't use it, they will just scold us. After the strike, just because a few workers were having fun and the camera caught them playing

during the night shift, they took them to the HR (in the morning shift) and raised an incident report.’<sup>68</sup>

There were seven shift patterns in the factory with shift changes every week. The head count planning managers arranged workers in ‘teams’ of A-B-C in each line. The ‘teams’ worked in various permutations and combinations in different shifts every week that changed every six months when the teams were reshuffled and the shift patterns changed. Table 4 gives details of the shift timings.

**Table 4:** Shift timetable

<b>Shifts</b>	<b>Timing</b>
<b>A Shift</b>	<b>6.15am - 2.45pm</b>
Bus in	6 am
Punch time card	6-6.10 am
Pre-shift meeting	6:10 am
Line start	6.15 am
Breakfast/Tea break	7.30-7.45 am (15 mins)
Lunch	11.45 am-12.15 pm (30 mins)
Line stop	2.45 pm (5 mins post shift meetings)
Punch time card	2.45-2.55 pm
Bus out	3.30 pm
<b>B Shift</b>	<b>2.45 pm - 10.45 pm</b>
Bus in	2.30 pm
Punch time card	2.30-2.40 pm
Pre-shift meeting	2.40 pm
Line start	2.45 pm
Evening ‘tiffin’/Tea break	4.30- 4.45 pm (15 mins)
Dinner	7.30-8pm (30 mins)
Line stop	10.45 pm (5 mins post shift meetings)
Punch time card	10.45-10.55pm
Bus out	11.30 pm

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<sup>68</sup> After the 2010 strike, 63 workers were suspended from work for six months. Purportedly ‘strike’ was not cited as the reason for their suspension but some ‘mistakes’ that were made earlier or previous warning letters were used to suspend them after the strike. After the suspended workers returned to work, they weren’t placed in their original departments. Discussion with Abhinaya and Gaja in Muthu’s room 14/2/2014.

<b>C Shift</b>	<b>10.45 pm -6.15 am</b>
Bus in	10.30 pm
Punch time card	10.30-10.40 pm
Pre-shift meeting	10.40 pm
Line start	10.45 pm
Tea break	12-12.15 am (15 mins)
Breakfast	3-3.30 am (30 mins)
Line stop	6.15 am (5 mins post shift meetings)
Punch time card	6.15-6.25 am
Bus out	7 am

Source: Based on information gathered during fieldwork inside the factory

If there was one thing about the factory work that the women disliked the most, it was the night shift. They resented it and feared it would affect their health, as the discussion below amongst the women illustrates.

**Rekha** – Night shifts are a great torture.

**Gaja, Sangeetha** – Definitely

**Rekha** – They say that fetus doesn't stay for many because of the night shifts. There are many married couples who don't have babies. The doctors say that you have that problem because you work night shifts. When doctors ask them to stop night shifts, some people switch shifts to A or B shift.

**Sangeetha** – (laughs) Everyone has problems. Women have more problems.

**Muthu** – But they generally say that women and men mustn't work night shifts.

**Gaja** – It leads to impotency. We saw it in the news. Divya was telling us in our line. She said that since many people were working night shifts, their marriages are getting delayed and the pregnancy doesn't stay healthy. The reason is night shifts because it causes impotency.

**Rekha** – We got to know about impotency and so on only after being told now. Night shift is generally difficult for everyone. We have to work

through the night and then come sleep in the morning. We get up by two in the afternoon.

**Sangeetha** – We won't eat properly. This is why I became fat (laughs).

**Muthu** – That is her trouble.

**Sangeetha** – I was 46 kgs when I joined this company. Now I am 64 kgs.

(Discussions in Muthu's Room after watching Modern Times on December 4<sup>th</sup> 2013)

Despite being torturous, women claimed that they had 'jolly' time during night shifts when most of the management staff were not in the factory and it was easy to 'bend' rules, alluding to the 'slippages' and temporal nature of power that circulated in the shop floor. There were also certain places on the shop floor where women bent disciplinary rules. A restroom in the ATO section was a particularly favourite place for women workers, where they sneaked out and slept on the stairs during night shifts, and sometimes also took quick rest during the day shifts. There were as such no places for the workers to sit and rest.<sup>69</sup> When production volumes were low, workers would often sit on the floor, play games (specially during night shifts) and quickly stand up if they saw a HR manager walking past. Workers were also aware of the 'electronic eye'-the surveillance cameras fitted on top of each line and almost in every section of the shop floor, silently watching them. Defying 'discipline' was part of their coping mechanism on the shop floor.

The other thing that was most resented was 'reshuffling' lines. This meant 'teams' would be rearranged, 'friends in line' would no longer be working together and the possibilities of even meeting each other would be remote. It was a "torture" according to the women. A junior manager had once jokingly said – 'love affairs break up with the change in shift patterns'. Kalpana said:

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<sup>69</sup> There was a rest area for pregnant women. If anyone was feeling sick, they couldn't rest there, but had to go to the medical centre. So women wanting some rest would sneak to the toilets to rest. For men there were no rest areas. They too took refuge in the toilets.

‘Yes, it (reshuffle) is difficult. If we are one team and we are all together, we would like to move somewhere together. Our legs pain when we stand and work. We workers will be commenting at each others and laughing. If we laugh and work, we won’t notice the difficulty. But if they split as two-two people and put us in different lines, even if we want to take a restroom break that manpower will not adjust with us. [In the new line] the workers won’t even talk to each other. Then the difficulty will be noticeable. You will be waiting for the shift to end!’

For women (and men) having friends in the shifts and line, being able to chat, joke and laugh was part of the ‘coping’ mechanism that enabled them to stand and work for 8 hours. Kalpana narrated a typical ‘line’ conversation:

‘Someone will say they missed a TV serial because there wasn’t any electricity in their house, someone else who had watched it would then tell the story. Since we’ll be feeling sleepy, some people will do comedy and make us all laugh. Cheenu and Amala will begin the comedy. We’ll be happily making jokes and laughing. When we are working in the line, it will be like this’.

(Discussion in Muthu’s room about work life in factory, Kancheepuram, November 20<sup>th</sup> 2013)

Change in shifts also meant ruptures in ‘line’ solidarities. Gaja narrated an incident when her whole ‘line’ came to her defence and stopped the line when she was threatened with an incident report by her supervisor because she had forgotten to sign ‘Bills of Material’, a list that every worker has to sign before starting work. So while ‘shifts’ and ‘lines’ were on the one hand managerial disciplinary techniques, they also were the sites of solidarities, friendships and subversions for the workers.

### **Line and speed**

The first few years in the factory, the women dreamt of work in their sleep. The repetitive motions of their limbs were etched deeply into their memories.

Roommates would tease each other the next morning for speaking of the 'line' in their sleep. Watching Chaplin's hands move involuntarily making circular motions of tightening screws as he walked away from the line, women started recounting their dreams. Lakshmi said:

'When I first joined, I was in ENO. The line will run fast. The conveyor will run as it pleases and we have to load the boards fast. Since we were working so fast, our hands will automatically move like that (gestures). We will sleep and the hands will continue working. Our minds will stay there in the beginning. Now I have got used to it'.

Ngai (2005:86) has described the movement of the conveyor belt in the assembly line as the 'movement of power'—'like a chain, it coupled an individualized body with a specific position, but at the same time it linked the individuals to form a collective social body devoted to the singular aim of maximizing profit'.

'In our line there are 15 people. If you start from engine loading there will be people up to accessory (stage). One person for loading, one for A-cover fixing, if there is screwing then one person there, first accessories, second accessories, if there are many UG (user guide) then one person just for that and one to put the charger in, one for scanning, visual one person, LCD one person, MC (master carton) one person .....'.

(Interview with Kalpana July 30<sup>th</sup> 2013)

The statement above illustrates how each task was broken down minutely; sometimes a single task was broken down in multiple stages with three to five workers just for a single stage. Each movement of the body was micro controlled by 'hand-time analysis' produced by the Industrial Engineering (IE) department that 'scientifically' dissected the work into specific tasks, time, headcounts for each stage of the assembly line. Workers joined as trainee operators and after a period of 36 months became permanent operators. Skill levels were kept to a minimum. Workers learnt 'on the job' pretty fast. Young recruits quickly picked

up 'skills' for different stages of assembly from senior operators. For instance, Kalpana mentioned 'whenever there was a buffer in the line, I used to go to the seniors to learn a new stage, I learnt all the stages like this'. According to the workers it did not require 36 months of training period to become 'skilled' in all the stages. The longer 'training period' was more of a technique of labour 'control' – the trainee operators could be paid half the wages<sup>70</sup> for doing the same job as the permanent operators, and had no rights to collective bargaining through union representation.

Managers had gendered notions of the different tasks. For instance a male Team Leader told me that 'women do A-cover assembly, screw fixing, stickers, all minute work better...men are mostly in accessory and packing...'. He further said that senior operators did not like doing these stages—'they complain of backaches...so mostly trainee operators or ETLs (contract workers) do this work'. He had 20 ETLs on his line. (Unrecorded discussion with a line Team Leader, November 19<sup>th</sup> 2013). Elias (2005:215) noted similar notions of amongst managers in Malaysian garment factories, where men were given less 'meticulous' work as they were 'unsuited...and got bored easily'. This meant that, as Elias (2005:215) observed, women were assigned the minute and monotonous work, which women resented and that led to high turn over and absenteeism in those departments.

'No one (wants) to stand in the A cover stage. It is hard to fix. So no boys stand there....it is difficult because you can't move from that stage...only women, men won't come there. I have tried saying that I won't stand there and get some of the boys to do it, (but) no man has come', Gaja had said.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> While the wages for permanent workers was Rs. 14,500/- per month (£147), the trainees were paid Rs 6925/- per month (£70). Information provided by Nayagi, Senior HR specialist. 10/9/2013. The amount mentioned is not 'net' salary.

<sup>71</sup> This conversation took place with Gaja on 14th February 2014 after Nokia changed its shift pattern from 3 shifts to 2 shifts and dismissed almost all the temporary workers. Only permanent and trainee operators were on the shop floor. Permanent/senior operators did not have much choice but to work on all stages, which they had earlier managed to assign to temporary workers. In a way they played a part in creating

(Discussion with Gaja in Muthu's Room on February 14<sup>th</sup> 2014)

Gaja was 'fixed' to that stage and hated it. Women often complained of pain in their fingers, specially thumbs, since 'A' cover fixing required exerting extra pressure. In some models in S 30 series, for instance 'Garnet' where output was 600 per hour, at least four women stood at the 'A' cover stage to make sure that there was no delay.

Depending on the model, touch phone or camera phone (S40 series), certain stages were faster so that the line would run continuously. Even though the process was continuous, work at each stage was different, and therefore it was not possible to 'unify the speed of each process' (Ngai, 2005:91). Gaja had said:

Even if you can't do it, you have to keep picking up speed and do it. Just like how we saw in the (Chaplin) film. We have to work according to their speed. I said I have just joined...they will say no you can do it, so pick up your speed. Work fast, you can do it.....

Gaja explained that in touch models, the line runs continuously from 'loading' stage to A cover and further on - 'if the 'A' cover stage slows down a bit, the output will drop down. 240 output will become 150 or 160'. As Ngai (2005:91) had noted - 'in relying on human elements to create the homogenization, the process was subject to uncontrollable human differences'. I asked Gaja what happens if the speed decreases?

They will put audit fail. There shouldn't be even one extra bin than 120. Not even one. It is a big thing if there is even ten numbers of buffer in between 'A' cover and 'scanning' (stage). It has to be that fast, that hard.

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difficult conditions of work for the temporary labour who did not have any negotiating power in the shop floor.

Gaja explained that since each stage moves fast, there were times when the operators in 'A' cover stage or visual stage would miss noticing a 'spec of dust' or a slight dent on the component. If the quality team later detected it, then the whole batch of assembled phones would be sent back to the 'A' cover stage – 'they will come and directly give it to us. The 'A' cover stage will need to clean and give it (back). They will tell us if it is a *failure*....the piece is rejected. This is like a *black mark* on us, it has been rejected', Gaja had said. There was a sense of personal failure amongst workers when the quality department 'failed' a batch (See Burawoy, 1979). There were instances when speed had to be recalibrated and small changes in stages made when frequent 'mistakes' started cropping up, for instance in the fast moving S 30 line, where the output was 600 per hour.

Bodies reacted to the speed and line controls. Women narrated incidents of breaking down in tears, fainting or complaining of stomach pains in order to slow down the lines and take a break. Or they simply refused to do an assigned task. These illustrate embodied experiences of work. Researchers working in export production sites have also noted women choosing various forms of language and 'cultural idioms' to challenge the "hegemonic representation of their situations" (Ong, 1991:298). For instance, workers in Mexican *maquila* sites engaged in covert resistances like *tortuosidad* (working at a slower pace in response to pressure to speed up); or 'spirit attacks' of Malay female workers on shop floors forcing production shutdowns (Ong, 1991: 300-301; Elias, 2005: 211-212). Ngai (2005:92) recorded 'collective illnesses' and 'jobs pile up like hills' in the electronics assembly lines in China. Abhinaya narrated the following incident after we watched Modern Times. She had been an operator for over 7 years in the material department:

'On that day I couldn't. My stomach was aching. How can I tell him that? I said I couldn't do it, but he said that I have to. He said that he is my supervisor and that I have to listen to him. He said this is the work I have to do. And I said 'no'. I really wanted to cry, so I cried. Everyone in my department was called for a meeting and we went to the HR'.

Similarly Gaja narrated an incident after she had just joined the factory when a battery went missing in her line. 'Battery went missing.... I cried so much that day that I fainted, they kept asking me for it'. I had noticed an unconscious young woman being wheeled out of the shop floor by some male operators one day. When I mentioned this to a junior HR manager, he was quite unconcerned 'Oh, that's very common, this happens daily in each shift. In 'A' shift at least 10 women will faint, 'B' shift 5 women, and night shift 20 women. It's only the women who faint'. I asked him 'why'? He replied- 'they don't eat properly before shifts, they work on line and suddenly fall down. They go to the medical centre, rest and come back to work'. (Informal conversation with Yusuf, Junior HR manager, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013).

What stands out starkly in these anecdotes of 'fainting' is the conditions of work in the assembly lines. 'Fainting' on lines represented both the hard working conditions and rebelling bodies. It was hard to stand (or even to sit) for eight hours doing repetitive monotonous work under pressure for meeting the 'output targets'. Kalpana, for instance, frequently complained of pain in both her feet, especially on her soles. She would often limp or walk without any footwear because of the pain. She also complained of recurrent headaches and eye pain, she was in the visual stage in the assembly line. When I met Radha in the ENO line, she too complained of shoulder pain due to repeatedly turning around while unscrewing the 'failed' engines. Body pain was generally a common complaint for most of the workers in the assembly line. This section showed the embodied nature of work, where managerial strategies of shifts, lines and speed to discipline the bodies were met with pain, fainting, refusals and crying by the women who tried to gain control over their bodies. As Ngai (2005:78) said female bodies need to be seen as 'structures in contest' that try to use 'situational opportunities' to protect themselves.

### **3. Producing subjectivities and counter-subjectivities**

On the shop floor, there was another form of 'control' that was at play besides the bodily disciplining — the creation of a familial feeling through 'workers

engagement' (see Elias, 2005). In the next two sections I discuss the production of subjectivities created by managerial practices (see Goger, 2013) and counter-subjectivities produced by the workers in the shop floor.

'Tata's have an advertisement 'we also make steel'—that typically applies to Nokia-'we also make phones', it's a good 'social' phone, social company, just not manufacturing phones.... engaging employees and making them worthy citizens is company DNA...(it is) in Nokia globally'.

(Interview with Sundar, Head, Employees Relation, HR on August 7<sup>th</sup> 2013) <sup>72</sup>

The HR manager emphasised that it was more than 'just business' in the factory. There were striking similarities in the language and even terms like 'company DNA' used by the HR managers in Nokia and the managers in Sri Lankan apparel factories studied by Goger (2013:2639). Another manager said 'See these workers are all young, vulnerable and violent. We need to calm them down. We need to engage with them and transform their brains to good things... People are our strength and also our risk. People's behaviour is risk, process is non-hazardous, but risk is high in Nokia' (Interview with OSH Specialist, HR team on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2013). Most of the senior and middle level HR managers referred to the workers in a parental tone including one who described the factory as a 'college...they are young, have come straight from school.'<sup>73</sup>

Sundar's expressed his desire to give the workers a 'real time life'. He imagined recreating some of the 'real life' experiences in the factory. He explained that the workers were young with 'lot of aspirations' and imagined college life as 'golden days' ('having watched in the movies') which they could not attend since they came to the factory to work. A mix of traditional managerial practices were used along with various 'employees engagement programmes' to produce familial feelings in the factory (see De Neve 2001; Lynch 2007; Hewamanne 2008;

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<sup>72</sup> The name of the HR manager has been changed as he requested anonymity. The interviews were all recorded after gaining permission.

<sup>73</sup> In a conversation with one of the HRD training coordinators in the canteen inside the factory while having lunch. She was looking around at the workers eating lunch while watching *tamil* movie songs playing on the television screens hung along the canteen walls. 12/8/2013.

Wright 2006). For instance, Sundar told me that one of programmes was 'wishing the newly wedded couples', where the management organized a function for newly weds with 'festoons and balloons and traditional lunch on plantain leaves' followed by tour of the factory. The idea was as Sundar explained - 'not just engaging them to be keep them in (a) happy mode', but also to 'manage expectations'. Sundar spoke of 'familial expectations' that the workers 'may' have developed' for the company. One of the training programmes conducted by the HR team was 'emotional intelligence' and 'work-life balance', besides 'inspirational' and motivational' sessions. This was specially organized for married women workers. 'After marriage problems with mother in law, father in law, children... how to handle all these....some of the personal problems they bring to the line without knowing, it affects the production, their performance and everything..., Sundar said. Sundar spoke of 'family days' when families of workers were invited to visit the factory.<sup>74</sup>

'We started it two and half years back. We have 'listening to you' survey and accordingly to it our employees were telling us our families are keen to know, visit the factory, can you do something? Yes, of course we said. It is part of that action. I mean they are all *our family*, typically in a family they ask these questions and we engage them, and we take all their questions...its not enough to build confidence with employees but also with their closer families'. (emphasis added)

(Interview with Sundar, Head, Employees Relation, HR on August 7<sup>th</sup> 2013)

HR managers of Nokia also attended weddings of not just the workers but sometimes even of their siblings. Sundar claimed families 'desired' the presence of Nokia in social functions like marriages. Therefore, a 'Nokia Social Group' was formed with the workers who would go on behalf of the company to perform 'cultural events'—songs, dance, rangoli, *mehndi* (henna) at the social functions.

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<sup>74</sup> Elias (2005) observed similar managerial practices in the multinational garment factories in Malaysia where HR managers organized 'family days', 'non-wage based awards', visiting homes of workers etc. to 'secure the loyalty of employees' which takes an 'overtly gendered dimension through a familial/paternalistic discourse' (Elias, 2005:210).

The manager expressed the keenness of the management to retain the women workers after their marriages and child bearing because the factory wanted to reduce the attrition rate (see Goger, 2013:2635). The company had crèche facilities in the factory and also an educational assistance programme (EAP) for workers to pursue long distance education.

A programme that almost all managers talked about was 'Women of Worth', which Sunder claimed to be his brainchild:

'This is an idea that came into my mind. We have 55-60% of employees (as) women. And they are very daring girls, young age, wanting to achieve, wanting to prove the point you know we are equal to men...how do we encourage them is the question? We say we are a democratic factory...it must be seen in practice, so we recognize women as a unit and you form a team, you form your committee, you meet, we give you permission to officially meet once in a fortnight or month whatever, conduct your meetings and share things....something very personal, something only women talks (*sic*), something only for women...and it is a power, when you are united you are power (*sic*)...we created a platform for the women to celebrate the womanhood first of all'.

I interviewed some of the women workers who were 'leaders' of WoW. They told me - 'we empower, enlighten, engage'. I asked them how did they do that. They explained that they wore WoW badges on their uniform and women employees on the shop floor could bring up any issues or problems to them, which they would then communicate to the HR managers, who would 'resolve' the issue. WoW conducted several 'women oriented' training activities like –beautician course, *saree* painting, embroidery etc. WoW also organized 'shoppe carnival' around festival times where women workers were invited in groups to set up stalls and sell products like clothes, food etc. The idea was to create 'entrepreneurial skills' in them.<sup>75</sup> Programmes such as WoW or EAP and even

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<sup>75</sup> One of the HR managers organized a meeting with 3 WOW members in the HR meeting room where these women told me about WOW. In my later interviews with

keenness to 'retain' women workers after their marriage was perhaps producing a slightly different discourse to the 'disposable third world woman' (Wright, 2006). It suggested 'an antidisposability logic' (Goger, 2013: 2635) similar to what Goger (2013) observed in Sri Lankan garment factories. However, most of the activities were stereotypically 'feminine' and couched in the language of 'empowering' the women. The HR team organized *rangoli* (traditional motif drawings on the floor with rice powder and colours), painting and poetry competitions. The logic behind such engagements as the HR manager explained was – 'to give them (workers) the feel of doing something they are happy about....these talents are completely outside the diligence and dexterity that we require for our production, but in order to engage them'.<sup>76</sup>

I asked the HR Manager Rajan (name changed) about management's interest in organizing such events. A charismatic person with long years of working as a HR manager in different companies, Rajan had once been an active member of the Communist Party of India's student wing Students Federation of India while in college.

'Purely common sense, listening, maybe I have 'listened'....we have respected employees, because they could have done better things outside, (but) they have *volunteered* to work with us, that's the belief I have, every employee has *volunteered* to work with Nokia...so when they are here, we have to treat them better, respect them as humans and give them the right status as a employee...', said Rajan. (emphasised added)

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some other women operators when I mentioned WOW they were quite dismissive of the idea and the only thing they could associate with WOW were the food/product stalls during festival time.

<sup>76</sup> Sundar gave me a booklet where the winning entries were printed by Nokia. One of the paintings that won a first prize illustrated three panels-the first showing a woman coming out of a hut in a village, second showing her entering 'Nokia' factory, the third showing her entering a modern looking house in a small plot of land with a garden. In September 2013, after Microsoft bought up Nokia, the CEO from Finland visited the factory to 'talk' to them about the merger. The local HR organized a *rangoli* competition amongst operators on the theme of MS-Nokia merger but with instructions to express 'happiness'.

(Interview with Rajan, General Manager, HR, Nokia on August 29<sup>th</sup> 2013)<sup>77</sup>

As per Rajan, the 'engagement' with the workers started after two major strikes by the workers in 2009 and 2010 that had brought production to a halt for a few days.

'2009 and 2010 ruckus happened, they (workers) felt that none of them (management) is listening to me, so let me get my identity by creating an issue (strike). So the 'identity' (as employee) was not shown to them. So after 2010, when (I) took on their engagement, we showed them about values, about behaviours, things changed...now their behaviour have (sic) completely changed, they are wearing the Nokia hat in their social life also...so Nokia created a lot of pride for them. Actually they carry a lot of pride working for Nokia and it's in their heart'.

Rajan described workers as having a 'family like attachment' to the company stating 'it's a very *emotional* brand for each one of us'. Rajan felt that Nokia had created 'high level of aspiration' amongst the workers who believed that they 'will grow with the organization' and that it was an 'asset' that Nokia should 'capitalize'. Over a period of eight years, the shop floor of Nokia became a fertile ground for experimentation of industrial relations where 'imagination' of the Indian HR managers and the expectations of global capital worked together seeking to manufacture an 'engaged' workforce. However, some of the former senior managers of Nokia did not care much about 'employees engagement' schemes of the HR department.

'It 's all a spiel, all these fancy charts, workers engagement etc., making them feel they are part of it, end of the day we need production-profit. For a company, it's the engineers who are most important, they run the factories, not workers. Workers implement what is being planned.'

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<sup>77</sup> I had over a period of 6 months, conducted several interviews with Rajan, the Head of HR of Nokia factory. I have changed his name here as per his request.

(Informal conversation with an ex-Nokia senior technical manager who had worked for over 20 years in Nokia on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013. He spoke on condition of anonymity)

However this rather candid view of workers by a former technical manager of Nokia was not something that the current HR managers agreed with. Gopalan, HR Employees Relations, blamed some of the earlier 'troubles in 2009' on the previous HR and production managers who came from 'different schools of thoughts'. Besides the former management, the current HR managers blamed 'external' unions for the strikes in 2009-2010.

For their part, workers participated in the management's 'engagement' strategies, but were clear about what they wanted. 'It's fine that they are giving us all of these things. But what we need is an increment, a better salary. We are working for that. But at increment time, we won't get what we ask for. We have to fight for it. So far, we have got all our increments after fighting' (Interview with Buela on April 21<sup>st</sup> 2014). In 2011, the permanent workers of the Nokia factory formed an independent employees' union - 'Nokia India *Thozhilalar Sangam*' (NITS). The union was formed amidst demands for higher wages and right to associate, which the management had resisted despite longstanding efforts by the workers. It was a significant achievement given that the factory was located inside a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). It took employees almost six years before an independent employees' union could be formed. 'The time between 2005-2010 was full of struggle...daily fights, even a slight tension and we would stop the line', said Suresh ex-treasurer of NITS indicating a tense relation between the management and workers (Interview with Suresh and Ezhilarasan, ex-office bearers of NITS and Udaya Kumar, advisor to NITS on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2014). The formation of the union was counter to the management's imagination of a docile and obedient workforce that they wished to produce through 'familial feelings'.

### ***'Familial feelings'***

There were other reasons too why the young women participated in 'engagement' programmes. In March 2014 when I went to Muthu's room I found the women practicing dance steps and discussing clothes in preparation of the annual day celebration of the factory on 11<sup>th</sup> of March. There was much enthusiasm for the 'company function'. Satya said – 'women like us, we can't dance everywhere, but here we can be free, play and dance'. And there will be 'flirting' with men too. 'How can that not happen?' asked Abhinaya. Women in Muthu's room had bought new dresses for the function. I had asked them why was the function such a big 'deal'. 'It's the company's function. We all attend it as if it is a function happening at our homes. That is why we all pick new dresses', Abhinaya had said. Pooja had added, 'Definitely it is like family, because we spend the entire day there, we have left our family and we are here. When some people leave (the company).... they feel very bad... we have been so happy here'. The women formed attachment to the company for very different reasons.

'As we are working, we speak to each other and find out things about each other. Like who's in your family, what do they do? What is your background? People will ask you these things. This way we get to know each other, we share both our difficulties and happiness'.

(Discussion in Muthu's room with Abhinaya, Lakshmi, Satya, Pooja on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2013)

Most of the friendships were forged on the 'lines'. As Pooja said 'Work and the money is needed, but people matter the most, they (co-workers) take care of us like a family—our friends. If I am unwell, they take care of me and ask me to take some rest. If I am not eating, they scold and ask me why I haven't eaten'. I had asked Pooja what she thought of management's idea of 'company as family', she had replied: 'They (management) say it in the meetings. We should all be like a family, do team work like a family for this company....they say this to make us work...we want to laugh when they say this'. For the women, the familial feelings for the factory grew from relationships of everyday care for each other, shared experiences of life-work and a sense of self worth that they drew from the work in the factory.

'Feelings' towards the 'company' were linked to the social contexts within which the lives and experiences of the young women were embedded. For instance, for Buela and Kalpana, the factory was an escape from oppressive situation at home – 'We worked even if we hadn't slept. There would be so many issues back at home, I felt it was *better* here than going back there (home)', Buela said. When Buela first came to the factory, the 'big company' awed her, her 'unfree' past made this new place a 'dream' of sorts:

'The companies I had been working before were all small. This was big. It was beautiful to even look at. There was a canteen. There were (company) buses. The bus looked super. It was stylish. We would stylishly get on and off (the bus). When I compared this with that (past), I like it now. I can eat whatever I want in the canteen. I have so many friends, then there was *Tejas*. I like to dance a lot. I didn't get such opportunities in school. But I got the chance to dance when I joined Nokia'.

(Interview with Buela on April 21<sup>st</sup> 2014)

Sexuality was part of the everyday in the shop floor: in the lip gloss slipped inside the apron pocket to the time spent in front of the restroom mirror grooming one's hair. The desire to look desirable was part of being young and 'jolly' in the shop floor. And it was true for both women and men. Restrooms in front of the HR Helpdesk on the shop floor, where I sat sometimes, buzzed with constant flows of workers coming in and out. A surveillance camera fitted right outside the door of the toilets didn't bother them. During my own trips to the restrooms, I sometimes had to squeeze past the young women standing in front of the large wall mirrors fitted over the washing basin. I could see men in front of the mirrors combing their hair in the men's toilets as workers kept opening and closing the door to the men's toilet.

In her ethnographic work of an electronic 'maquila' (export-processing industry) in the US-Mexican border, Leslie Salzinger (2000:68) noted 'sexuality is an integral part of the fabric of production, an essential aspect of the process

through which labour is transformed into labour power....within this context, there is nothing out of the ordinary about sexuality on the shop floor’.

Often the junior HR shop floor managers would comment on the ‘time spent’ by the workers inside the restrooms. ‘Every hour you will see women coming to the toilet to tidy their hair, wash their faces...they all carry combs in their apron pockets’, Janani had commented (Informal conversation with Janani, HR coordinator, Shop floor HR Help, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2013). A quick visit to the restroom to ‘tidy’ up after shift was part of the everyday ritual. The walk from the shop floor to the bus point (where company buses were parked) offered possibilities of flirtatious ‘encounters’ between women and men. Abhinaya laughed and said ‘everything is there...love affairs, friendships, it depends on their hearts, they will do as they choose’. Kalpana spoke about women and men ‘checking out’ boys or girls from other lines and departments including ‘visitors’. In fact I too often became the subject of ‘checking out’ when I was on the lines.

### ***Love on the assembly lines***

Falling in love or being jealous was as much part of the *living* process inside the shop floor as was the assembly of mobile phones. The day I was in the shop floor with Smita, the Team Leader on the ENO line, she pointed out a young woman to me who was working in one of the final assembly stages and said:

‘She is Meenakshi. Her parents called last week to ask about her whereabouts. She had not gone back home for three days. HR called me and asked for her, I am the TL. I told them that Meenakshi had telephoned me a few days back asking for an unplanned leave for a week since she wasn’t feeling well. After I got a call from the HR, I enquired with the girls in the line. They told me that Meenakshi had eloped with another worker and gotten married, her parents had not approved of the guy’.

(Informal conversation with Smita Singh, Team Leader, Nokia on September 25 2013)

During my time in the factory, a TL killed himself. As per the women in Muthu's room, it was a "love problem". The TL was having love affair with two women operators in his line. Love affairs between workers and supervisors were not uncommon. Kalpana spoke of 'Karthikeyan supervisor', a married man, who fell in love with a female worker in the line and married her. I had asked Lakshmi and Abhinaya if they ever fancied someone. 'We have wanted to (laughter)... but whatever happens, our family is our priority', Abhinaya had replied. Both of them knew their families won't consent 'our family will not accept it and (we know) what our family is like' Lakshmi said. According to the women in Muthu's room most of the 'affairs' in the factory were 'time pass'.<sup>78</sup>

'Marriage' figured prominently in my conversations with the women. Abhinaya had said it was the 'most important thing at this stage in life'. Satya had nodded her head in agreement. Kalpana mocked them and said 'they believe a woman cannot live alone, without the support of a man'. Satya was clear that she wouldn't 'have an arranged marriage....I am in love, I will have love marriage', she had said. She planned to marry a co-worker from the shop floor, but was fearful of her parent's disapproval. The 'boy' was from a different sub-caste 'We are both BC (backward castes). I am Chettiyar and he's Mudaliar'. She hadn't told her parents yet. Kalpana had laughed and asked me if I hadn't noticed from Satya's ring tone that she was having a love affair - 'Didn't you know by her phone's ringtone? I found out that the girl's in love by her ringtone itself' (Discussion during recording of Radio Potti in Muthu's room).

Love affairs and marriages between people including from different castes groups wasn't uncommon in the factory. There were several cases of 'elopements' due to caste opposition from families. The management called them "Nokia couples". In fact, workers were given Rs 10,000 as gifts upon their

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<sup>78</sup> 'Time pass' is a very common phrase used in India that conveys the 'period of waiting' that people undergo as they wait for something to change, which could in the above context mean waiting to be married or 'settled'. The term briefly captures the moment of waiting and how people experience it, what they do during these periods of waiting. It can have both negative and positive connotation depending on the context in which it is used (See Jeffrey: 2010).

marriage and if both the man and wife were from the factory, the couple got Rs 20,000. To receive the 'gift', the workers had to produce marriage photographs or wedding invitation cards as evidence. I met a few of the 'Nokia couples'. Usha and Silambarasan were one of them. Usha was from the backward (BC) Nadar caste and Silambarasan was a Christian Scheduled Caste. They had 'eloped' when Silambarasan's parent's fixed his marriage with another girl of the same caste. Silambarasan himself had 'helped people to elope and register their marriages.... 50% of marriages in Nokia are inter-caste marriages. Parents oppose either over caste or they have fixed up their marriages elsewhere' (Interview with Usha and Silambarasan, Nokia workers on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2014). Rekha, another senior worker from the factory visiting Muthu's room had commented that the work and wages gave the workers the confidence to elope and get married. Rekha herself had married her co-worker.

'Love' and 'familial feelings' produced counter-subjectivities to the management's engagement programmes that sought to create a social order in the factory. These lived processes illustrate that shop floor is not just a 'productive' space but also a 'reproductive' space where friendship, nurturing, familial feelings, care, love, sexuality co-existed with production of commodity. Work in factory is not just about wages and livelihoods for the women, but also about social relations that are reworked by the new found freedoms that factory work offers both materially and socially. It shows the multiple forms of power that circulate on the shop floor. Some overlap and reinforce the disciplinary power, and some are contradictory and are subverted by workers in their everyday practices and social relations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The work in the factory was hard. Workers stood for eight hours, performing repetitive, monotonous tasks assembling minute components. Each stage was minutely divided, sophisticated hand-time analysis documents produced by industrial engineers determined the exact number of workers and time required per stage for assembling different models of phones. The production process was

a combination of a Fordist/Taylorist mass assembly production system with the addition of some 'leaner' techniques. The labour process was gendered, with women being preferred and placed in certain stages of work as they were perceived to be better at particular tasks. Tasks in sections such as SOP, where most of the female workers were placed, were perceived to be 'easier' and 'mindless' by the managers. Rhythms of work created through shifts, lines and speed tried to manufacture working bodies, combined with the managerial strategies of HR managers. It was a site of 'experimentation' of various human and industrial relations where the lines between coercion and consent often got blurred to generate oppositional forces. A contested terrain where both capital and labour try to create and negotiate space for its 'interests'. At times these 'interests' intersected and there was a 'harmonious' relation, but often it was not. It is clear that capital doesn't have a free run in the shop floor.

Workers felt the work in their bodies and minds. They complained of pain, stress and fear for their health. They responded bodily to the work, not just by performing the tasks, but also rebelling against it, by 'fainting', 'crying', 'sleeping', 'chatting', 'stopping the lines', 'non-cooperation', 'counter-complaints', 'counter-subjectivities'—through everyday forms of coping and resistances. These were some of their strategies to 'rework' (Katz, 2004) relations of production and gain control over their bodies. Multiple layers of relations were produced with the everyday rhythms of the work – friends, solidarities, love, jealousies, shared experiences of work-life in the factory. These relations created a complex 'web of relations' in the shop floor where women troubled the boundaries of productive and reproductive spaces by their everyday responses. I argue that these were not just the 'production' of the shop floor in response to the managerial controls, but are linked to the everyday contexts in which women's lives are located in the wider society.

The previous Chapter on 'Motivation of labour' speaks of the context of life that perhaps helps us understand some of the everyday responses of women on the shop floor. The 'strategies' or 'coping mechanisms' produced by women in the shop floor are linked to the experiences outside the factory gates as much as they

are produced inside the shop floor. What may seem 'weak' or 'self-defeating' are perhaps women's everyday agencies that help them to gain control over their bodies and labour process 'inside' and 'outside', in 'public' and in 'private'. The experience of 'work' inside the factory therefore needs to be understood within the wider context of women's work-life in the society. This Chapter tells us that 'factory employment' is not just about wages, but also about the multiple possibilities that it offered the young women. The Chapter also reveals the utility of an ethnographic focus on the nuanced nature of labour.

The next Chapter on 'life outside factory' speaks of their everyday agencies outside the shop floor and how their lives are intricately connected to different spaces –work and living spaces. For labour geography to fully appreciate how labour shapes its work geographies, it has to consider the multiple responses and spaces that labour inhabits as workers, women and social subjects.

## Chapter Seven: Life outside the factory

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### Introduction

**Pooja:** In these teashops, we (have to) stand outside and drink. Passers by see us.

**Lakshmi:** They will be full of men.

**Satya:** It will seem like all the men are looking at us.

**Lakshmi:** Right from the beginning, 'they' have said women should be like this and men should be like that. Women are still not able to pull themselves out of this. Women should be here (inside home), like this, 'they' have taught us. You should not stand on the road. You shouldn't walk with your head upright. You must always keep your head bowed and walk. You must not speak to the boys. The culture has grown like this. Some women in the city have been progressing in the last few years but women in the villages have not progressed. That's how they continue living. You shouldn't stand in the teashop. Some people don't even send their girls to the shops round the corner. Even me, when I go home, they will tell me I can't go to the shops. They will say 'Why are you going? Your brother is there, he is a boy, let him go'. But see, they have sent me here [to the city] to work.

(Excerpts from our first recording of the radio podcast series titled The Mobile Girl's Koottam<sup>79</sup>)

We were sitting in 'Muthu's room' in Kancheepuram. We were discussing how life was outside the factory: their experiences of migration from their mother's homes and living on their own in rented rooms in towns. My interest here was to explore how the everyday spaces looked for the young migrant women 'imbued' as they were with 'meanings', 'feelings', 'differences' and the practicality of the daily routines? How does it help us to understand labour when we look at

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<sup>79</sup> I write about making of radio programmes in the methodology chapter. Radio Potti The Mobile Girls' Koottam, episode 1: Tea Stalls - accessed on <http://radiopotti.com/category/conversations/page/4/>

different spaces in which lives are situated? Through looking at spaces outside the formal workspace, I try to understand if waged work helps women to create 'new' or different spaces that are aligned with their interests, aspirations and desires? Do these new spaces create possibilities – for 'disruption' of the dominant narratives and norms (Wright, 2006)? Does it change gender and other relations? Or as Katz (2004:247) said does it allow them to 'rework' their social relations - 'challenging the system on its own term' even though they may not necessarily agree with the social relations (Coe, 2013: 216). These questions have broader implications for labour geography that needs to look outside the workplace to understand how gender, caste, neighbourhoods and everyday spaces play a role in shaping experiences, perceptions and responses of workers. Linda McDowell (2015:18-19) called for labour geography to pay more attention to the 'consciousness and identity of workers, to their everyday embodied experiences, and to the connections between home, family, and community, and the sites and locations of labour' to develop 'deeper explanations of both contemporary and historical patterns of economic change'. Adding to this, I argue that these details would help labour geographers to develop a more grounded understanding of labour's agency and responses within certain contexts.

Our discussion in Muthu's room starts with experiencing public spaces such as the ubiquitous tea stalls found on almost every street corner. Why were these 'male spaces'; and how and where does the process of exclusion begin - at homes, within families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, private and public spaces? I argued in this chapter that women's waged work is not a straightforward story of 'women's emancipation' but is a more circuitous story where under different conditions (including that of migration), social and material, women are able to define and re-define relations which can both 'liberate' them and at the same time paradoxically tie them down with more responsibility and roles. It is a story of constant negotiation of space—reworking gender relations, fulfilled and frustrated aspirations and most importantly of a desire for change. Life inside the factory is linked to life outside it, and it is through 'troubling' these

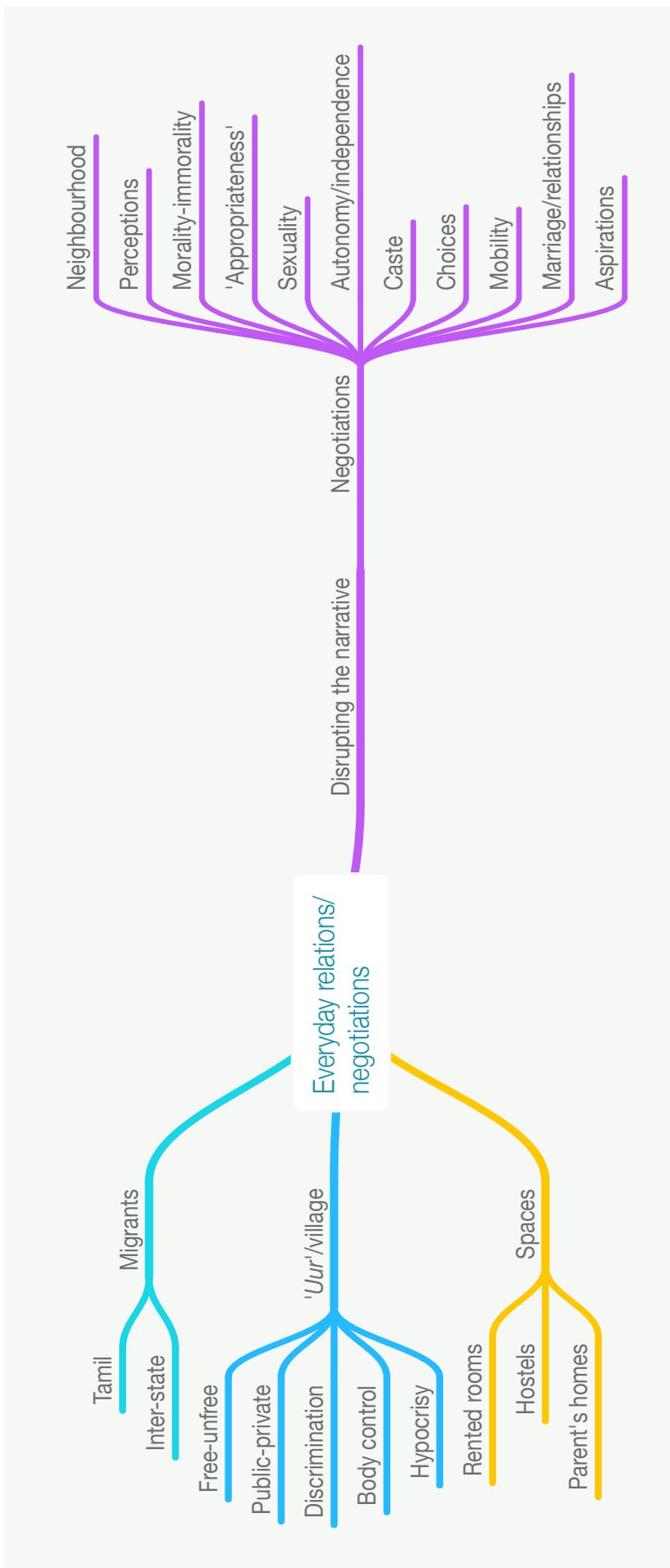
boundaries of the inside-outside that we can situate work-life of the young women to understand the everyday experiences and politics of labour.

In this Chapter, I narrate the experiences of young women as they migrated to join factory work, their experiences of finding rooms to stay, forging friendships and bonding, their sense of responsibility towards themselves and their families and their constant negotiations of relations with their families back in '*uur*'-villages (Lal 2011). The referral point of social relations for most of the women was their mother's home, of which I have written in Chapter 5 - Motivation of labour. These experiences, as I will illustrate in this chapter, can be very different for different sets of migrant women (intra and inter-state migrants) and are often linked to their lives back home, their motivation to join waged work and their terms of employment.

The 'living spaces' that I discuss in this chapter were 'connected' and 'layered'. They were connected to the social-material life in the factory, life in the villages and in towns and cities. They were layered with social relations of gender, caste and class. As Massey argues, it is important to conceptualise 'space and place in terms of social relations' (Massey, 1994:2). And the 'everydays' in these spaces—practices that 'constitute or make up daily life' (Rigg, 2007:17) were intimately embedded in the social and cultural milieu of the place, what Massey (1994: 3) calls 'existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism'. This, Massey (1994:3) argues, is because 'space' is experienced 'differently' and is 'variously interpreted by those holding different positions as part of it'. For instance, I observed that the young women from Tamil Nadu and Odisha, an eastern Indian state, produced and experienced contrasting spaces. In case of the *tamil* women, they seemed more 'conforming' to the social milieu and quietly negotiated the social relations through friendships and familial relations in the neighbourhoods, while the *oriya* women negotiated the terrain by exercising their sexual autonomy in ways which enabled them to survive in an alien city. For *tamil* women, being located in the same state, they experienced more cultural and social restrictions, often self-imposed. They were also visited

by their relatives and were more closely connected to their villages. Whereas for the *oriya* women, being far from their families and in a different social and cultural context, the social restrictions did not work in the same ways. Their struggles as inter-state migrant women, working as contract employees, poorly paid, living in rooms provided by their employers, often dependent on male colleagues or supervisors for economic support created different kinds of control and power relations.

I have organized this chapter into two sections: experiences of migration and experiences in living spaces to explore the different spaces that women encounter and shape or rupture through their everyday practices. These were rooms (rented by workers and contract agency), family homes, neighbourhoods. Each of these came with their own set of characteristics. My concern here is not so much the material nature of these spaces but of the relational nature that made them more than *just a room*. As Lefebvre argued 'space' is a 'social product' (Lefebvre, 1991: 26) that is not abstract – 'it is mental *and* material' that needs to be combined to fully appreciate it. I will argue in this chapter that the young women, through their everyday practices, both rupture and conform to the social relations they are immersed in and in the process, as Pearson (2014) notes, there is both 'decomposition' and 'recomposition' of gender and other social relations. The 'spatial' gets created by their everyday ordinary actions. I argue that whatever may have been the initial impetus for migration, the process of migration and waged work created possibilities for the reformulation of social relations in the lives of the young women (see Lal, 2011). Through diagram 8 I illustrate these relations and negotiations, which I then elaborate in the following sections.



**Diagram 8:** Everyday social relations and negotiations.

Source: Diagram based on my discussions with the women.

## 1. Experiences of migration

I begin this section with a few stories about the experiences of migration of young women who came from far away districts to work in the factory. They stayed in private hostels or rented rooms in the nearby towns of Kancheepuram, Thiruvallur or Chennai. Usually the recruitment agencies gave information about the hostels to the women during the job interviews in the villages. Sometimes women preferred to share rooms with others from their own areas whom they might have met only in the factory. Making and breaking friendships in the new town was easy. Young women had to frequently change rooms within short spans of time, old and new friendships formed and continued, some were lost when women got married and left work in the factory. The first few months in the new places were always difficult.

Kalpana recounted her first few months in the women's hostel, where her brother dropped her one night in 2009, as tough. Life in hostel was about bad food, over crowded rooms, few toilets and a 'controlling' warden. Rents were high in the hostel, Rs 1700 (£17) per month, which included "half cooked bad food". But in the hostel, Kalpana also made new friends from the factory. There were over 300 girls in the hostel, many from Nokia. For the first six months after coming to work in the factory, Kalpana stayed in the hostel. She described it as a big house with a large hall, several rooms and few bathrooms. All the girls in the hostel worked in the factory and had to go for different shifts. Kalpana had said:

'We had to reach the bus point by 4.20 am. There was a note book in which we had to sign out when we left for our shift and sign in when we came back...She (warden) said that to go anywhere other than factory we needed to take her permission and also of our family. I didn't care at all about that.'

Kalpana disliked these 'rules' and would often get into trouble with the warden. These were 'new modes of subjectivation to public patriarchies' (Lal, 2011: 555) that women faced after they moved out of their private (homes) spaces to public

(hostels, rented rooms in towns) spaces. After constant battles with the hostel warden over bad food and her 'nasty' attitude towards the girls, Kalpana and six of her roommates decided to move out to a rented room in an independent house in Sriperumbadur town closer to the factory. 'We rented the room through a friend. It was a small room with a kitchen, big enough for us. The rent was Rs 500 (£5) per person'. But the girls couldn't stay there for too long since there were men renting the other rooms. And although the young men, mostly all workers in the nearby factories, did not trouble the girls, when relatives of one of the girls visited them and saw men staying in the same house, the girls were asked to shift out. Kalpana and her friends had to move to a new place after living there for only 4-5 months. During this time, two of the roommates got married and moved out of the room. A new girl joined the group in the new room.

'Her name was also Kalpana... we were three Kalpanas in the room then. They called me blacky, blacky because my skin colour is black<sup>80</sup>. The other girl was Kalpana *akka* (big sister)...we called her *kalai* since she smiled all the time. The third Kalpana worked in Perlos factory and so we called her 'Perlos Kalpana'. Perlos Kalpana left. So now we are Blacky Kalpana and *Kalai* Kalpana'.

(Interview with Kalpana in Thiruvallur room on July 30<sup>th</sup> 2013)

But soon they had to vacate the house and move to Thiruvallur town, at a distance of about 25 kms from Sriperumbadur, after fighting with the new house owner who over charged them. But then in the new room one of the girls faced harassment from a male factory co-worker who helped them find the room, and then slowly most of the women left the room. So in a very short span of time, Kalpana had shifted rooms four times. In fact most of the women I met in the factory, except those who lived with their parents, had shifted rooms several times for various reasons—roommates getting married and leaving the group,

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<sup>80</sup> In Tamil Nadu as in other states of India, much importance is attached to skin colour, especially for women. Skin colour is also associated with social caste order in Tamil Nadu with upper caste being associated with fairer skin and lower caste with darker skin.

trouble with the landlord, increase in rent etc. Each time the women shifted, they made new groups and friends, while some of the old friendships continued or were lost. Kalpana described this process quite philosophically:

'I enjoy a lot with my friends in the company. We will fight and then be happy. I keep gathering new experiences. I have met so many people only after stepping out of my home. I face things in this society as an independent woman and make new comrades and friends. The friends and the families I have made through them are much stronger than my own family. They support me in everything. *I got most of these things only after stepping out of my home.* I have so many friends today. Even if I feel bad when someone leaves, I don't let it bother me too much because not everything will stay with us as time goes. Change will happen. So there are more friendships on my way and *I am journeying towards them...*'.  
(emphasis added)

(Interview with Kalpana in Muthu room November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013)

For Buela, although not a migrant from different district, but being a married woman with a child living separately from her husband and family, finding a safe place to rent was challenging. Half of her monthly salary of Rs 4000 (£40) went into paying rent in the working women's hostel where the living conditions were very bad. Dogs would roam inside the hostel, food quality was bad, often with dog hair in the *chutneys* and rice. Buela shared a room with three other women. After a year she moved to a rented room in Ambattur, a suburb of Chennai city, with another hostel mate, but soon had to vacate after some misunderstandings with her roommate. A male colleague from her former factory found her the room, since for a single woman to find a room on her own wasn't 'easy'. He introduced Buela to the house owner as his younger sister and didn't reveal that she was married as that would raise a lot of questions. Separated from her small son, Buela stayed alone in the room for two years. Except Buela's friend and his wife, no one visited her in the room. She forged strong friendships in the factory that kept her going. Factory became 'my life' she said. A friend from the factory

even pawned her jewellery when she fell ill with *Chinkungunya* to buy food and medicines for her.

A life as migrants was not easy for the women as they negotiated everyday patriarchies and caste structures in the towns. For instance, after Kalpana's roommates moved out, she shifted to a room in a village near Thiruvallur town called Sudharanpet. The village was dominated by the other backward caste (OBC) Vanniyar caste and Kalpana was from scheduled caste (SC) community. Kalpana did not reveal her caste to the house owners. 'This is a Vanniyar village', she had said, which meant that she being a scheduled caste will not be allowed to rent a room in the village.<sup>81</sup> She told them she was a MBC (most backward caste) without specifying her caste. To avoid detection of her caste identity, she refused to show them her ration card since that would have revealed her caste identity. Nearby villages had 'SC colonies'<sup>82</sup> and there were caste related fights between these communities. The fact that Kalpana chose to stay in a vanniyar village without revealing her caste identity showed her desire to 'rework' her social status even though it continued to be 'enfolded in a hegemonic' structure (Katz, 2004).

Abhinaya spoke about local people's perceptions of factory women while searching for rentals. She said:

'We got one house near Pullaiyarpalayam (a village near Kancheepuram town). We went and saw the room. The house owner said okay...they knew that we worked in some company. We didn't tell them which company. They said okay on the first day. They asked us to bring our roommates to see the place and to pay the advance. So we went the next day. When we went there, they asked us if we worked in Nokia. They said something wrong was written about 'things' happening inside the Nokia

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<sup>81</sup> *Vanniyars* are part of the Most Backward Castes in Tamil Nadu where there is huge caste hostility between the Most Backward Castes/Other Backward Castes and the dalits—both groups that have been historically oppressed.

<sup>82</sup> Most villages in Tamil Nadu are spatially segregated with one section where dalits/SCs live and the other where the 'caste *hindus*' (MBC, BC) and other upper castes live. It is fairly common to refer to the place where dalits live as 'colonies'.

factory in the local newspapers and that (Nokia) girls were 'not proper'. The owner said women go for three shifts in the company...they are going for night shifts...they are not *proper*. Nokia workers can't get houses'.

(Discussion in Muthu's room on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013)

These perceptions were borne out of the fact that Nokia was the first factory in that area that hired young women from different districts and states in such large numbers, and where women worked in the night shifts.<sup>83</sup> Before Nokia set up its factory in the area, the existing companies such as automobile and other manufacturing plants in the area did not hire women in the main factories. Women mostly worked in the farms or did some odd contractual jobs in the factories.<sup>84</sup> Nokia's entry into the area suddenly made visible the presence of young migrant women in the neighbourhoods and streets, alone or in groups, in rooms and buses. And with it came the perceptions about the factory women. A social activist, active in land movement in the area and living in Sriperumbadur for over a decade casually referred to the factory girls as 'rented wives'. He mentioned unverified reports of abortions in the local clinics 'these women are factory workers only...I know from local people, these girls are from Nokia' (Interview with Perumal, VELs, Sriperumbadur on October 30<sup>th</sup> 2013). Even local labour organisers had similar views although they looked at it as 'sexual exploitation' of young women whereas the local people saw it as 'easy virtue' of migrant women (see Kabeer 2000 for similar perceptions of migrant Bangladeshi garment workers in Dhaka). Women were aware of these perceptions and resented it. Lakshmi said:

'Inside Nokia, everyone's a good girl. Only if we go inside and see what is happening, we will know why and what it is like inside. But the idea is formed by some people's mistakes'.

(Discussion in Muthu's room on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013)

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<sup>83</sup> Places like Tirupur in western Tamil Nadu, known as 'knitwear capital', has a large population of migrant women workers who work in night shifts.

<sup>84</sup> As an activist I have been working in the area since 2006, specially around the issue of land (land use and forcible land acquisition), labour and SEZs. Therefore I am aware of some of the changes in local labour profile over the last few years.

Perceptions about factory women's bodies as sites of 'easy' morality are not so uncommon. Their working bodies are considered 'public' and subject to 'public' scrutiny and surveillance (Ong, 1987; Healey, 1999; Elias, 2005). In some ways, the young women quite openly challenged the idea of an 'appropriate behaviour' by appearing in 'public' with men - in the buses, bus stops, streets, working nightshifts (Lal, 2011). They were challenging their families in how they related with men. With the increased mobility of women and men and the many possibilities of 'encounters' between them in the shop floor, towns and neighbourhoods, a new context of 'sexual possibility' was emerging that was challenging the dominant idea of morality and social norms (Anandhi, 2002). Lakshmi had said:

'My parents tell me, you shouldn't speak to the boys. I tell them, the line I am working in, eight of them are men, only three or four of us are women, shall I quit? My *Amma* (mother) will say 'Why are you speaking like this?' I will persist - *Amma* don't you trust me? She'll say 'Will I send you that far without trusting you?'

(Discussion in Muthu's room on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013)

However, male friends from the factory very rarely visited the rooms of their female colleagues. Most of the rented rooms were located within households where the house owner's family also lived. Often the women and the families shared a familial relation, sharing food or going out for shopping together. The family members would keep a watch on the visitors to the room. 'The house owners where only girls are staying restrict the coming of men to the house', Kalpana said. In Kalpana's room in Thiruvallur town, an old woman on the ground floor kept watch on the visitors to the top floor room occupied by the 'factory girls'. It was difficult for Kalpana's boyfriend Dinesh to visit her room. 'He can come only when she (old woman) is not around', said Kalpana. The seemingly 'friendly' neighbourhoods were watchdogs of sorts, where people knew each other, women and children sat on the front porches, chatting across the lanes, noticing every visitor. Everyone seemed to know what was happening inside each others homes. Even my presence in Muthu's room was queried by a

friendly 'akka' (big sister) next door. The surveillance was 'friendly', couched in the familial language of care and responsibility. The young women negotiated the perceptions and scrutiny by 'conforming' to certain 'acceptable' public behaviour and 'self regulation' (Siddiqi, 2009:157). For instance, they did not hang outside the rooms and made sure their men friends from the factory didn't visit them in the room. They also went to the markets in groups. This illustrates not just the everyday struggles that women face in migrant places, but also their ability to negotiate various forms of gender and caste relations in these places. I argue that these negotiations form new gender politics that the women script in their new found autonomy as working women. As Lal (2011:555) notes, in the 'absence of familial protection, women's paid employment facilitates their ability to navigate various forms of dislocation (...abandonment or escape) from their families...in some cases, factory employment provides the resources necessary to challenge the normative gender order'.

We see that migrant experiences of women tell a story of 'constant moves', 'new rooms', 'new friendships' and 'active negotiations'. Friendships were often 'temporary' in these 'new places', and new 'groups' formed with every new room, the women were aware of the 'temporariness' of their 'living out'. In the new migrant spaces, women actively created 'sisterhood networks' (Ngai, 2005:61), for instance forming and living together in groups, creating familial feelings, to protect themselves. This illustrates women's grounded agencies to negotiate gender and caste in migrant spaces. I argue that it is important to pay attention to these 'lived' relations that shape labour's geographies, their everyday agencies embedded in the social structures. To understand the 'emotional' attachment to work and workspace, about which I write in chapter 8, it is important to understand the context within which lives of women are situated and their struggles over and reworking of social relations.

### **As wage earners**

One of the factors that enabled the young women to negotiate social relations within the family and outside was their position as wage earners which made it

possible for them to make 'strategic choices with newly found earning capacity' (Kabeer, 2000:362). Scholars researching women's waged work and migration indicate these changes are 'pushing up against the boundaries of old structures and helping to reconstitute them in more enabling ways' (Kabeer, 2000:362). However, the experiences and processes can be uneven and varied for different sets of women.

The young *tamil* women in the factory mentioned that while major portions of their wages were regularly remitted back home, they also managed to keep some for themselves to spend or invest as per their decision. For instance Lakshmi earned Rs 12,500 (£ 125) per month, she remitted Rs 10,000 (£ 100) home to her mother. And after paying room rent of Rs 600 (£ 6) and setting aside Rs 800 (£ 8) towards food expenses, she had about Rs 500 (£ 5) in hand every month to spend on herself. Even this small amount gave her some freedom to choose to spend the way she desired. For instance, she was able to lend it to her friends in need and buy dresses or things she fancied. She also joined a typewriting course locally for Rs 100 (£ 1) a month and was able to pay the course fees from the cash in hand. She was planning to take an exam for a 'grade 4' state government job, where typing was an essential skill. Lakshmi said:

'When I am at home, I won't have any money. If I'm here, I always have more than Rs. 100 (£ 1) in my hands. Even at month's end, if someone asks for Rs. 500 (£ 5) or Rs. 1000 (£10), I will be able to give it. I could even borrow from others and give. But if I am at home, I won't even have a fifty paisa on me'.

(Discussion in Muthu's room on February 20<sup>th</sup> 2014)

Abhinaya's salary was Rs 14,800 (£148). She remitted about Rs 8000 (£ 80) to her mother or to younger brother every month through net banking. After paying monthly rent and food bills, which came to approximately Rs 2000 (£20), she invested money in chit funds in the factory, which workers ran in each line. She had three chit funds worth Rs 1000 (£10) each. With the balance cash in hand, she spent it on personal things like buying dresses, jewellery, make up. She

had also joined a computer course, hoping for a 'better job' in an office or teaching in a computer institute. And while Kalpana didn't regularly send money home, she supported not just her own family members in need, but also her boyfriend's. Kalpana said:

'You can say that I am taking care of three families now. I have to manage my family, my problems at my room and Dinesh's family. Only Dinesh's father works (as a farmer). In farming, you make money only if you sell all the crops. If they have problems, I support them and they support me when I have problems'.

(Interview with Kalpana on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2013)

She also invested in 'gold jewels' as part of schemes that big jewellery shops announced periodically. So while she tried to secure her own future by investing in chit funds and buying gold jewellery, major portions of her salary were spent on paying off family debts or in her brother's education. Satya sent 80% of her salary to her mother and kept the rest for her expenses in the city and doing some vocational courses. All the women claimed that they sent money to their mothers whom they considered to be more responsible with money than their fathers. While it was not possible for me to enquire into home budgeting and the intra-household economic relationship, the ability to earn did bring them a sense of autonomy—to set aside some money to spend on themselves, to invest in chit funds or building small assets like buying gold jewellery, to lend money to friends, to invest in learning new skills to be able to progress to 'better jobs'. While earning wages did increase their financial responsibilities towards their families (Pearson, 2013), it also enabled them to make some financial decisions on their own.

In contrast to the *tamil* women, the women from Odisha did not remit money regularly to their families or did it intermittently. The wages of these women, who were all contract service workers in the cafeteria inside the factory, were much lower than the *tamil* women discussed above who were all permanent workers in the factory. Santoshi sent Rs 6000-8000 (£60-80) every two to three

months to her family. Her roommate Jyotsna said 'I didn't come here for that (poverty)...I occasionally send money home in lump sum like Rs 20,000 (£200)' (Discussion in Santoshi's room on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014). However, girls like Chanda, who came from the eastern state of Assam, regularly sent money to her brother for his medical treatment. The women in Santoshi's room said they didn't save any money on their own but 'believed' that a portion of the money that they occasionally remitted home was being saved by their families for their marriages. The few times that I visited the rooms of the *oriya* women, they gave a sense of carefreeness and living in the moment and not as much in the future as the *tamil* women. In both the cases of *tamil* and *oriya* women, while there were difference in their spending or saving strategies, partly based on wage differences, it was fairly clear that the women were able to 'maintain relatively atypical independent lifestyles' (Lal, 2011: 555) due to their wage earning employment.

## **2. Experiences in living spaces**

In the following section, I now specifically discuss two spaces –Muthu's room and Santoshi's room, two sets of migrant women, one from Tamil Nadu and the other from Odisha. Through these two examples I argue that spaces are created and experienced differently by women and that waged work doesn't necessarily produce uniform experiences. Differences between women create hierarchies, and also differences in the ideas of 'acceptable behaviour' and as Linda McDowell (2015:20) points out: 'gender and ethnicity are not only organisational categories, but they are also normative devices in a relational process... so they are mechanisms that regulate the goals and aspirations of women'.

### ***Muthu's room***

I will refer to this place as 'Muthu's room' - a small room rented by five young women who worked in the Nokia factory in Sriperumbadur. They travelled to the factory everyday by company buses working three shifts. They all had been working in the factory for past 5-6 years and were permanent operators. I used

to travel 80 kilometres from Chennai, changing three buses, to reach ‘Muthu’s room’ on the days when the women had their weekly days offs. It was my research ‘hang out’ space. We spent many afternoons drinking tea, eating, chatting, interviewing, recording, watching films, making radio programmes, playing cards in Muthu’s room. And when the afternoon heat got unbearable, we would lie down on the cool floor and take a nap. It didn’t matter what time of the day it was.



**Image 7:** Playing cards in Muthu’s room one afternoon.

The ‘space’ I describe above sounds ‘free’. Within its confines, inhabitants were free to do or be as they wished. In some sense perhaps it was an *exceptional* space for the women - exceptional in the context of their *Uur* (homes in villages) and lives back home. Social hierarchies of gender, castes, being a migrant or a ‘local’, waged or unwaged, rural or urban, play an important role in how different ‘spaces’ are produced and experienced by different sets of people. Muthu’s room was a ‘space’ where some of these social relations were disarticulated and new relations re-articulated through the everyday practices of the women. As Doreen Massey (1994:2) notes: ‘social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic’. Therefore by that definition, spaces are not “still” or constant either. They change and are shaped by changing social relations, by human desires and

aspirations. Gillian Rose (1999:248) notes that 'space is practised, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative, its forms and shapes produced through the citational performance of self-other relations'.

'Muthu's room' had a small television (TV) set perched on a shelf in one corner of the room. I would often find the women lying on the floor with a pillow under their head watching TV. The TV was never turned off, even while we were chatting or recording. It was put on mute if I protested too much. At times in the middle of our conversation, some of them would suddenly stop speaking, their eyes glued to the TV listening intently. The rhythm in Muthu's room was clocked with the factory shifts. My time with them was on their weekly day off, therefore my account of some their 'practices' in the room are of days when they were 'relaxing'. In speaking about their experiences in rented rooms, the women always referred back to their homes in the villages—their reference point being their mother's home. Abhinaya had said:

'When we are in our room, we go to sleep and get up at twelve.... but if we are at home (in village), they strictly wake us up at 6 am in the morning. Or they'll wake us by 5.30. If you wake up at 6, they'll say, 'Why does a girl need so much sleep? Wake up!' But if it's a boy, they won't even ask a question'.

(Discussion in Muthu's room on February 20<sup>th</sup> 2014)

As a little girl when Abhinaya had once asked her mother 'why must I wake up early?' pointing to her brother, who was sleeping, her mother had replied 'He's a boy, no one's going to say anything if they see him sleeping. What if someone comes and sees you like this? Wake up and come now'. When it came to doing housework, her mother would say 'he's a boy, you are a girl. You are going to get married and go to some other home. You have to learn do all of this'. At a young age, Abhinaya, like most other little girls was being 'trained' and 'skilled' at home to become an efficient and disciplined 'worker' (See Elson, 1981).

Abhinaya's experience of her 'mother's home' as a girl child is emblematic of the unequal gender relations in the Indian households. However, feminist scholars have pointed out that these relations vary across caste, class and regions (see Kabeer, Subrahmanian, 2000). And these unequal relations are not just confined to the family, but are built in the labour markets, state and judicial institutions. In the routine of their daily lives in *Uur*, the women faced these inequalities.

In Lakshmi's case, she was not only 'unfree' in her mother's home, but was also 'invisible'. Lakshmi had said:

'No one even knows that I *exist* in my house. I have one elder sister and one elder brother, many people still think my mother has only two children....my extended family, they will ask my mother if I'm her sister's daughter. I will just give my mother this look - 'You've kept me at home all this time and no one even knows I exist'. Even when I go back now, they don't send me out anywhere. If they're going out, they'll lock me up at home and go...I am used to it now',

(Discussion in Muthu's room on February 20<sup>th</sup> 2014)

But the irony was not lost on Lakshmi - 'See, they have sent me here (to work). But when I go home, they will tell me I can't even go to the shops'. Visiting home also meant restrictions on speaking on mobile phone to friends. 'They imagine I am speaking to a boy....I can't even type a message, this is one constant tension in the home'. But in the town, Lakshmi was travelling with men, working with men, she had many male friends. When Lakshmi questioned her mother, she was told that while she was at home, she was under the 'protection' of the family, but when she was in a distant town, the family didn't know 'what you are like or what you do or where you go'. Lakshmi was deeply aware of this hypocrisy and laughed at it. For her visits home usually ended up arguing with mother and planning 'not to return home again'. Abhinaya was not 'locked up' at home, but ended up doing all the housework when she visited home. She felt empathetic towards her mother's daily drudgery and felt it was her "duty" to do all the housework when she visited home.

Satya's household had no male siblings. She felt that her experience was 'less unequal' than the other women because there were no 'boys' in her house, except for her father. Her father told her and her three sisters that they - 'have to be both like boys and girls. *We should be as free as boys and as controlled as girls.*' So while she could be 'free', there were 'boundaries' she was not supposed to cross as a girl. A few months after our conversation, Satya was 'punished' for transgressing the 'boundary' when she told her parents that she was in love with a co-worker from the factory whom she wanted to marry. He was from a different sub-caste. Her father came to town one day and took her away to the village after making her resign from her work.<sup>85</sup>

'Unequal' gender relations at home also included control over bodies through social practices such as menstruation rituals—discipline mapped into female bodies through ritualistic practices. In states like Tamil Nadu, sometimes, these take rigid forms across castes. The control over bodies also meant controlling mobility. In 'Muthu's room', we once watched a Tamil documentary film called '*Madhaveedai (Menses)*' about the rituals practiced by young girls in a *dalit* village in southern Tamil Nadu. The young girls had to stay in isolation, in most basic and difficult conditions – sleeping on bare floors, dark rooms with little natural light, no toilets, avoiding any outside contact except for older female family members like sisters or mother or aunt. Most of the women in Muthu's room had similar experiences. They were kept in isolation in a thatch hut or a separate place away from their homes. Their isolation lasted anywhere between seven to thirteen days as per the reading of their horoscopes. Kalpana was made to sit outside her house for 15 days and was allowed inside only after a "bramhin" (upper caste) male priest performed her '*punyasthaanam*'. Kalpana belongs to the dalit community, but a male member of an upper caste Bramhin community performed her 'purification' ritual. The irony was not lost on her.

These ritualistic practices were meant to instil a sense of self-disciplining in the young girls. Most of the women talked about their 'shyness' that came 'naturally' around boys in schools after they attained puberty. They didn't quite understand

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<sup>85</sup> This happened in May 2014 when Nokia announced VRS scheme for the workers.

how it happened. Everything that the menstruating girls used was burnt and the clothes that the girls wore during menstruation were given to '*dhobis*', a dalit sub-caste (*untouchables*) who wash clothes of the higher castes. The end of the 'isolation' was marked by a feast and a function where the girls were given gifts of new clothes and jewellery. Satya had laughed and said 'its like marriage, but without the groom'. The lavishness of the ceremony depended on the caste and economic status of the family.

Much has been written and debated about the rituals and the notions of 'purity', 'impurity', 'caste' around menstruation by feminist activists and scholars (see Chakravarti, 2003; Gopal, 2012). Through our discussion in Muthu's room we were trying to understand how these practices or rituals at 'home' shaped the lives of young girls to 'produce' disciplined and controlled bodies; how women's bodies were rendered 'invisible' and 'devalued' through such practices. Social structures and practices produced unequal spaces for women in their own homes, their labour taken for granted and devalued. In Muthu's room, women didn't practice any such 'norms' nor did they have the time for it. Their families too seemed to have come to accept these changes and didn't put restrictions on them when they visited home. It was both a practical choice, given that women had a hectic factory shift schedules, and also perhaps their 'gender refusal' (Lal, 2011: 555) where women were challenging the 'normative gender order'. These were significant changes in the lives of the women, which gave them some control over their bodies and mobility, enabled by their new role as wage earners.

### **Reading into caste silences**

Speaking about caste was not easy: I sensed a reluctance to discuss caste both at the factory and also in the rooms. Kalpana said that in their 'day-to-day life in town' caste was not an issue. No one had asked her about her caste in the town. It is sometimes unclear how caste tendencies change in the context of urban or industrial neighbourhood. How 'caste' matters in migration is often unclear or may not have a clear answer (Informal discussion with Tamil social historian

and feminist writer V Geetha<sup>86</sup>). From my field work I observed different caste members co-habiting rooms, cooking and eating together, working together. Even the house owners in towns where they rented rooms, seemed to accept the co-habitation of different caste members. Once when Kalpana bought some 'beef fried rice' to her room in Thiruvallur town, there was no objection from rest of the roommates or members of the other family living in the same house. Beef eating is an 'identifier' of Kalpana's caste as a dalit. Kalpana was called 'blacky' by her friends because of her dark skin colour. She didn't seem to mind it. 'Sometimes people think I am *tamil* Christian or Muslim because of my skin colour', she had said. Kalpana mentioned that *Kalai* Kalpana from her earlier room in Thiruvallur was also from the Scheduled Caste (SC) community, but she was 'stylish, puts on make up, and doesn't *look* like other SCs, she is not dark' (Interview with Kalpana on March 14<sup>th</sup> 2014). Dark skin colour was another 'identifier' for SCs. Kalpana said that in her room caste was not discussed or caste backgrounds.

Women generally were not so bothered about caste in their everyday relations in rooms. Gaja said:

'We don't know, we don't ask caste, we don't talk about it. There are only two caste (in the factory) 'men and women'.... Ok, we can tell you in this room..So we are all BCs (backward castes). I am (Gaja) Telegu chettiyar, Abhinaya is Nadar, Lakshmi is Thevar, Satya is Odiyar and Pooja...I don't know'.

(Discussion in Muthu's room 14/2/2014)

It was interesting to note that Gaja denied any knowledge of Pooja's caste background, who was the only SC girl in the group. I had wondered whether it was a denial or refusal to acknowledge co-habitation with a SC girl, a sort self imposed silencing or was it acceptance? In Muthu's or even in Kalpana's room in Thiruvallur, there were no evident caste practices. The women stayed and ate

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<sup>86</sup> V Geetha is co-author of '*Towards a non Brahmin Millennium-From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*', (1998).

together, often sharing plates of food, sleeping on the same floor mats. Once during one of my visits to Muthu's room, when I casually asked about the sharing of housework between the roommates, Abhinaya replied – 'I cook, Lakshmi helps around in the kitchen, Satya arranges the plates and food and Pooja washes the dishes'. I had wondered why Pooja 'washed the dishes' and how the division of work decided in the house? Did caste exist in quiet ways that was not obvious, or was caste articulated differently in such spaces? Pooja had smiled and had said that she 'liked' washing dishes (Discussion in Muthu's room before Radio Potti episode on Menstruation on March 6<sup>th</sup> 2014).

While caste may not have been an issue in the everyday in the rooms, 'caste awareness', like knowing each other's caste seemed common, an acceptable practice. The presence of caste was more overt in the villages and homes of the women. Both Gaja and Kalpana faced stiff oppositions from their family members for 'loving' men from different castes. Not overtly, but in underlying ways caste seemed to be present in the everyday consciousness and stereotypes both in the rooms and factory. Kalpana said:

'In the company nobody is going to announce that they are such and such a caste.... we generally get to know... some people even hesitate to reveal their caste, some workers have told me that they are SCs, but they don't *look* SC. I look like an SC. You can see it in my face-cut.... if people see me they will know I am an SC...from my face itself'.

(Interview with Kalpana on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2013)

There were instances of love affairs breaking up due to caste differences. 'There are men who abandon girls because they are from a different caste (in the factory)... they will come up to the level of marrying and then refuse to do so because of caste....' Kalpana had said. But then there were also many instances of inter-caste marriages and love affairs in the shop floor. So what does it mean to read into the 'silences' around caste in the everyday living spaces of the young women? It may not be very apparent or obvious how caste mattered or operated in the 'migrant lives', but what was clear was that there were subtle encounters

with caste in the everyday which may impact their lives, especially in their interactions with the world outside their rooms. Even within their own 'rooms', the presence of caste was through 'awareness' of the caste backgrounds of roommates or 'silences', conscious or unconscious stereotyping of 'SC looks' and division of chores in the household maybe part of the every caste.

In summation, we see the women in Muthu's room create a space that while conforming to the social milieu, also creates possibilities for them to push the boundaries of gender and caste relations. This could be due to their new found, perhaps temporary, autonomy as independent wage earners living on their own. While in some cases transgression of certain boundaries, as we see in case of Satya and Gaja (desire to marry out of caste) met with stiff opposition from families, the women managed to gain some control over their bodies, decisions and choices in their everyday lives.

### ***Santoshi's room***

I now turn to a different space from those I have been narrating so far. These were the rooms of the migrant women from other states who worked as contract service workers in the factory. The fact that they were inter-state migrants and contract workers made their migrant lives quite different from the women from within Tamil Nadu. Santoshi and her roommates were all employed by Sodexo, a French multinational company, which was contracted by Nokia for running its multi cuisine cafeteria. The company had rented rooms in Shubhadra Nagar, a small neighbourhood located across the SEZ to accommodate its workers. Santoshi's room, provided by Sodexo, was in Shubhadra Nagar on top floor of a three storeyed house. Scholars (Prasad, 2011; Rogaly, 2006) have noted that often contractors/employers provide accommodation to migrant workers as a means of labour control. There were seven women staying together in the room, six from the Odisha and one from north-eastern state of Assam. The Tamil house owner lived with his family on the ground floor. Unlike Muthu's or Kalpana's room, there was no 'familial' or neighbourly relationships between the women and the house owner or in the neighbourhood. It had a very different character

to the neighbourhoods I have described in the above section. The area was once agricultural land which had very rapidly and haphazardly been turned into a residential neighbourhood mainly to house migrant workers and junior officials from the factories around the area. There were dormitory type quarters and houses with owners staying in the same building. The area did not have proper streets or drainage and was water-logged most of the time.

The first and second floor of the house where Santoshi's room was located was rented by Sodexo to house its female staff. Men stayed in separate buildings rented by the company. Sodexo had a rule restricting men from visiting the rooms where the women stayed, although the women said that they had visited their male friends in their rooms. Most of the out of state women migrants who worked for Sodexo were from Odisha and some from Assam, while the men were mostly from the eastern state of Bihar.

On a Sunday morning, when I went to Santoshi's room for the first time, she and a new girl from Assam were in the room. 'All the girls have gone out with their boyfriends, today is a holiday', Santoshi informed me. I asked her how come she hadn't gone. She didn't say anything, just smiled. While Santoshi went for her bath, I chatted with Uma Rani, the girl from Assam. She told me how she landed up in the factory:

'I am from Rongia, Assam. I came here three months back. I started working with Sodexo for a month and a half. When I came here, I stayed with my elder sister. Her husband is a security guard for G4S in one of the factories inside Nokia SEZ. My father works in the farm, we have land....most people in the village do farming. We can grow enough food to eat. I came here because I did not study. I only studied till 7<sup>th</sup> standard, I was just sitting at home, did some farm work. So my sister called me here, said there is work here. So I came. My brother-in-law got me work with Sodexo'.

(Informal conversation with Uma Rani on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013)

While speaking to Santoshi and Uma Rani, I noticed how meticulously both of them groomed themselves. Carefully oiling and combing their hair, taking out little containers of creams and powder and *khol* from plastic packets and applying them standing in front of a small mirror in the kitchen. In my subsequent visits to Santoshi's room, I had noticed that all the women dressed quite trendily, wore pants, short tops and applied make up. Gaetano (2008:633) found similar 'desires' for 'makeover' from 'rustic peasant to modern girls' amongst the young women from rural China who had migrated to the city to become '*dagongmei*' (workers) in factories.

During holidays, Sodexo sent one meal to the rooms and at other times the workers bought food from a small *dhaba* (road side eatery) from the main road. I noticed how neat the room was. Shoes kept neatly in rows in the hall, shelves with neatly piled clothes. Little idols of gods arranged with the clothes, make up kits and biscuits on the shelves. I also noticed motivational quotations written on papers and pasted on the walls. Santoshi said it was her roommate Sunita who had pasted them.



**Image 8:** Bare and neat 'Santoshi's room'

I had met Sunita in the factory and had on several occasions tried to meet her outside the factory, but she had always avoided me. When I mentioned this to

Santoshi, she said- 'Oh, she is different. She is educated. She has two *mamas*'. Husbands are often referred to as *mama* in Tamil Nadu. One of Sunita's '*mamas*', Santoshi informed me, was a technician in the shop floor and the other was a supervisor in Sodexo. Santoshi said - 'He (supervisor) has children of her age. But he helps her with money, gives gifts, so what's the problem'. Pointing to a big box of crackers 'that big box of crackers (for Diwali), he only gave her'. Santoshi mentioned that Sunita's '*mama*' was leaving the company soon, which was making Sunita very sad.

I realized that I had mistakenly thought of '*mama*' as a boyfriend. A '*mama*' in this context was a male benefactor, and at times a male at a position of power in the company can be of great 'help'. It was not easy to discuss the exact nature of the relationship between a '*mama*' and a young migrant woman. Santoshi herself had good 'relations' with some of the supervisors. This resulted in her getting 'good' work, as she told me:

*'mere ko accha kaam de diya* (I was given good work). I used to do service (serving food) in the canteen, but was moved to coffee vending machine and delivering food to the officers'.

(Interview with Santoshi November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013)

Delivering food to the managers was considered 'better' work than serving food to the workers in the canteen. It was certainly easier work than lifting heavy vessels with food, arranging food counters, standing and serving food for hours and listening to tirades by workers about the poor quality of food in the factory cafeteria. She also mentioned how one of the HR managers of Nokia 'loved' her— '*bahut pyar karte hain*' (loves me a lot). He would speak to her nicely and ask her to eat with him while he was in the canteen. Sunita would tease her saying – '*tera mama hai who*' (he is your *mama*). All the women in Santoshi's room had '*mamas*'. In my subsequent meeting with Santoshi roommates- Jyotsna, Kalpana, Chanda, Sangeeta, all of them spoke openly about having boyfriends. They were quite proud of having '*mamas*', 'lovers', 'boyfriends'—as they referred to them. It was quite a contrast from Muthu's room where women were too shy to speak

about boy friends or spoke of the social restrictions around hanging out with men.

Santoshi explained to me why women had *mamas*:

‘See right now they are ‘doing love’, whether they will marry or not who knows—its only *time pass*. See most of these girls have *mamas* because then there is someone to look after them here. We have no one here. Everyone is busy...I am scared to have a *mama*, *kuch galat kaam hua toh* (if wrong stuff happens)?

Santoshi’s statement alluded both to the sexual nature of the relation with *mama* and also it being need-based - to have someone in an alien city who will ‘look’ after you. These women did not have other social support networks of neighbourhood or relatives like the *tamil* women. I narrate the following incident that makes this clear. In November 2013, when Santoshi fell sick, she was left to fend for herself. She called me one night, crying over the phone ‘*Didi* (big sister in Hindi), I am very sick, can you please come now?’ She sounded desperate. She had asked me for Rs 500 (£ 5) a few days before that call. When I went to see her, she was alone, lying on the floor, had not eaten properly for two days, and had a high fever. No one took her to the doctor or was there to take care of her. Her roommates had gone to work, the supervisors from Sodexo were annoyed with her for taking time off from work and she had no *mama* to ‘protect’ or look after her. In contrast, her roommate Jyotsna had a ‘*mama*’ (a fellow worker from the company) who took care of her when she fell sick a few days back, took her to the doctor, bought her food and gave her money. I became Santoshi’s only support in the city for a short while.<sup>87</sup>

Unlike the girls in Muthu’s or Kalpana’s room, I felt the young women in Santoshi’s room were less ‘together’. There was a sense of ‘temporariness’ in

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<sup>87</sup> I took up Santoshi’s case with Nokia and Sodexo and this led to her being shifted out of the Nokia campus to another factory site. I wrote a formal email to the Nokia HR manager regarding Sodexo’s treatment of its workers and conditions of living and work. Subsequently I received a phone call from one of the HR managers of Sodexo who promised to make amends. I could not follow up further on the company during my fieldwork period.

their 'friendships'. I wondered whether the fact that the space they were inhabiting, a room rented by the company, which was monitored and controlled by Sodexo supervisors, had any role to play in this sense of 'alienation'. The 'room' was regularly visited by Sodexo supervisors, who purportedly came to check the 'state of the rooms' but were also 'checking on' the women. Once a supervisor had pulled up Santoshi for spending a 'night out' with her male friend. He had scolded her by saying 'you girls are like this, stay properly', Santoshi said. Santoshi's room had a sense of rootlessness, transience where the inmates were more interested in living in the moment, reluctant to discuss either past or future, maintaining a somewhat independent personal lifestyle. However, as their experiences and practices suggest, the 'alterity' that they produced was within the 'heteronormative gender order' (Lal, 2011: 555).

Santoshi also said that caste was not a matter that concerned them in the room. After meeting me a few times no one was interested in meeting me or even speaking to me over phone except Santoshi. I realized that they were not keen to discuss their lives or experiences at work or home and their connections with families back in Odisha distant and sporadic. Most of the women in Santoshi's room said that they hadn't revealed about the nature of their work to their families. 'Our parents think we are working in a mobile company.... none of the families of these girls know that they do 'service' work.... if my parents knew what work I do (serving food in canteen), they wouldn't let me come here..', Jyotsna said. While most the women maintained that they as such had no pressing compulsion to earn (see Chapter 4), they still preferred to stay back and work in the factory. Their discomfort to reveal to their families of the nature of their employment is perhaps linked to the fact that it is the same kind of work that they would have done at their homes, there was no change in the nature of work. Perhaps they felt embarrassed by this fact and therefore let the families think that they were doing something 'new'. As Linda McDowell (2015:3) notes - 'While growing numbers of women enter the social relations of employment, the tasks that they undertake paradoxically remain the same, and as they are defined as women's work, they are poorly paid'.

I had limited opportunity of interaction with the *oriya* women in their rooms, partly because I feared my presence might put them into trouble since the rooms were rented by Sodexo. Due to this constraint, I couldn't develop a relationship with them to understand fully how they were negotiating social relations at work or home. But what they all maintained was that at that moment they wanted to 'enjoy life' even if the work they did wasn't something they desired or were proud of. Therefore, the nature of the space that they produced or experienced, which I argue is linked to the nature of their employment, (wages, workplace conditions, relations with supervisors/other workers), seemed more temporary and *in the moment*, than what I observed in Muthu's room.

### 3. Conclusion

In this chapter I speak of young women travelling 'out' of their homes to do waged work in a distant place, and in the process experiencing a life that is different and yet connected to their lives back home. Full of twists and turns along the way—meeting strangers, making friends, living together, falling in love, losing friendships, negotiating perceptions, disrupting practices, they created a spaces they could claim of their own. From having no experience of the 'outside' world, they negotiate the landscapes (social and physical) of their migrant spaces. Their actions and responses, I argue, are rooted in a social and historical context, informed by their past struggles at home and villages. Their reference points in the new migrant spaces were their mother's homes that they had experienced. While their ability to earn a wage to support their families added to their responsibilities, it also gave them a certain amount of autonomy to make their own decisions, maintain a relatively independent lifestyle and think about their future. They did not wish to go back to their lives in their 'mother's home'. As Ngai (2005: 63) notes, 'although far from an abrupt reversal of the patriarchal structure, this active participation in economic roles did provide room for renegotiating women's power in the family....their wage-earning experiences in the factory granted them new power and freedom to balance their lives between work and family'.

Women negotiated relations at different scales—with their families, in the neighbourhood, and within the room. While not always apparent, there were subtle challenges to the gender relations that women posed through their daily practices. While some actions can be seen as ‘conforming’ or ‘contradictory’, other actions were openly radical. How the shifting of the ‘social geometry of power’ (Massey, 1994:3) takes place in the everyday may not always be very obvious. In this chapter we see that spaces are not uniformly produced or experienced. While women in Muthu’s room and Santoshi’s room were migrants, their interests, their conditions of living and employment, their relation to work/workspace, their social ties and relations with homes and neighbourhoods were different. The intersection of all these relations produced differences in how women imagined and sought to create spaces/networks that enabled them to take control of their lives in a migrant place.

In conclusion, I argue that the experience of migration and living out is not a black and white story of exploitation and hardships, nor is it all about ‘breaking free’ and autonomy. The story lies somewhere in between. It’s about women’s ability to create spaces through negotiating social relations that at times converge with their interests and at other times don’t. What might seem contradictory to us, may not be so in the context of the complex web of social relations within which women’s lives and labour are situated, and which forms the basis for choices and actions. Moreover, these choices or actions cannot be understood with the notion of ‘woman’ being an ‘always already constituted category’ (Butler, 1990; Mohanty 1991 cited in Fernandes, 1997:5), but has to be understood in relation to other social differences and diverse experiences of women. For women, experiences of work in the factory are linked to the multiple spaces that they inhabit and their struggles with various social structures. Coming to work is often a gendered process that is determined by factors like domestic responsibilities, cultural expectations of employment and family priorities. I argue that labour geography needs to pay attention to the situated and grounded nature of worker’s agency, especially women workers whose lives are intersected with multiple relations of gender, caste, age, poverty.

In the next Chapter, I write about emotional attachments to work and workspaces and the responses of workers during the closure of the factory. To understand the responses of the women, which at times seemed contradictory, I have argued that the meaning of 'loss' of labour needs to be linked to the spaces and lives that women created as waged workers, which gave them a sense of themselves as women and as workers.

### Introduction

*When all our futures had become uncertain, they left with great struggle....*

*Our Company! I'm feeling so bad that I left our company. There is nothing else like our company.*

*Our futures are question marks.*

(Interview with Sarvanan Kumar, President NITS on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014)

On 11<sup>th</sup> May 2014, Sarvanan Kumar, president of Nokia India Thozhilalar Sangam (NITS), tried to kill himself by drinking from a bottle of household insecticide in the parking lot of the Nokia factory. His union colleague, Ezhilarasan, who saw him drinking the poison, quickly grabbed the bottle from his hand and threw it away. Sarvanan was rushed to a nearby hospital and survived.

Sarvanan had worked in the factory for eight years and was a 'trusted' leader. His oration in union meetings inspired his co-workers, who believed in his leadership after years of struggle with the management to form a union. In 2008, Sarvanan was a member of the company's first Works Committee that eventually formed the shop floor union in Nokia in 2011. When I met him three months after the incident in his house, I asked him why he did it? He replied:

'I didn't know what to do at that point of time. Everything was negative. Employees were no longer in our control after a certain point of time. We approached everyone in the government and no one gave us a positive reaction. The employees kept asking whether they should take the VRS amount or not. We didn't know how to answer that. I was very upset at that point of time... I didn't think about anything. All my thoughts disappeared.

(Interview with Sarvanan Kumar, President NITS on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014)

We were sitting in Sarvanan's modest one room house, his little daughter was playing near his feet, his young wife was making tea. Sarvanan's 60 years old father sat quietly in one corner of the room listening to our conversation.

Four days after Sarvanan's drastic action, 4800 workers 'quit' their jobs, opting to take the voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) offered by the company. Sarvanan's action was met with scepticism by the same workers, especially women workers, who once 'trusted' and adored him. Some called it a 'drama' and some said, 'we would have given him real poison and not *All Out* (name of the insecticide)' (Interview with Ezhilarasan and Suresh, NITS on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2014). Sarvanan himself felt 'it was a very big mistake and I shouldn't have done it'. He felt his decision had 'changed many people's outlook', which other union members felt had a 'negative impact' on the morale of the workforce. 'Thousand workers gave VRS application after this incident', Ezhilarasan had said.

In April 2014, Nokia offered a VRS package to the workers announcing that it will close down operations in the Chennai factory by end of the year. A series of events took place in the factory from the beginning of January 2013 that eventually led to the final closure of the factory in November 2014. It started with an income tax raid in the factory, charges of tax evasion against Nokia both by the central and state governments, followed by the global sale of Nokia's Devices Division to the US based Microsoft Corp. Nokia went from being a lead firm to a contract manufacturer for Microsoft. In Appendix 3 (Nokia' tax troubles), I chronicle some of the events related to Nokia's tax problems with the government of India and Tamil Nadu government, which were 'projected' as the key reason for the eventual closure of the factory. While the 'official' narrative of how the events unfolded leading to the closure is 'linear', for the workers it wasn't a linear process, it was confusing and chaotic.

Perhaps Sarvanan's story is the most dramatic one in the final story of 'loss' that the workers experienced in the months before the factory closure. It illustrates the embodiment of the 'loss' felt by the workers that was more than just about

losing wages. Or perhaps it illustrates the fragility of the protective 'skin' that Walkerdine (2010) refers to that is formed by shared experiences of work and workspace. Did Sarvanan's statement: 'Everything was negative. Employees were no longer in our control after a certain point of time', indicate a 'rupture' in the 'containing skin' that held the workers together? This 'containing skin' was formed with 'work' at the centre, friendships and solidarities 'knitted' around it through everyday rhythms of work and practices and collective struggles within an aggressive hyper-efficient capitalist production space as they pursued their dreams for a 'better life'. With the collapse of the centre - 'work' -, was the skin then ruptured by the collective trauma of the workers and emotions 'spilled' out? Can we then understand Sarvanan's action, the cynicism of workers as 'annihilation through spilling, the dissolving of the containing boundaries of the skin?' (Walkerdine, 2010:111)

The cynicism expressed by the workers about their leader's extreme action has to be understood within the larger meaning of what the work in the factory meant for them, especially for the women workers. In Chapter 5, Labour's motivation, we see the complexities behind women's decision to enter waged work and the importance of locating it within the wider context of women's work-life in the society. The life stories of women and also experiences of work in the factory and in the migrant spaces (in chapter 6 and 7) shows women's everyday negotiations of social relations that are linked to their work and their identity as waged workers. Therefore, closure of the factory evokes strong emotions that are perhaps driven by a sense of loss of a space that has given them some control over their lives.

In my position as an activist-researcher, this was also perhaps the most difficult period of my fieldwork—watching the disruptions in the lives of young women and men. This was a chaos was created by the uncertainty of capital, fear for the present (and future), emotions ranging from disbelief to anger, anxiety to bitterness. It was driving deep wedges into the 'collective' that had once stood united facing the state and corporation. It was an emotional moment for me as well, and I got involved with their struggles to make sense of the changing

situation and to seek justice (See Chatterton et al 2007; Kobayashi 2004). While doing work with asylum seekers in Newcastle, geographer Kye Askins (2009:8) expressed a similar need 'to do something about it':

'Because I *feel passionately* about these issues, because I feel it *in my gut*...anger, frustration, desire, hope, outrage...and because I can't disconnect these emotions from my everyday life, my family, my past and my future: we carry our emotional reactions to issues/situations/encounters with others across space; these reactions reverberate spatially and temporally, feeding back into different parts of our lives, our worlds...'(emphasis in original text).

Like Askins, I felt a range of emotions as 'we' grappled with the rapidly changing situation in the factory that threatened to change the world of women and men in the factory. I had not anticipated that this would happen while planning my fieldwork. My own personal background as a labour activist got entangled with the emotions and struggles of the workers, I got angry and sad, strategized with the union, participated in the protests and made a film. I became fully immersed in the struggle against the closure, emotionally and actively. What I write in this chapter are moments from a period that was often difficult to comprehend and emotionally charged for *us*. It captures a very different experience to those that I have described in the previous chapters about work and living spaces. The experiences and emotional responses that I write about here are deeply connected to these spaces especially for women workers who drew new meanings of life from the work and living spaces. Liz Bondi et al (2005:2) emphasise that as geographers we must 'try to express something that is ineffable in such objectifying languages, namely a sense of emotional involvement with people and places, rather than emotional detachment from them'. Bondi argues that 'emotion' plays an important role in 'maintaining geography's critical edge' (after Kay Anderson and Susan Smith 2001).

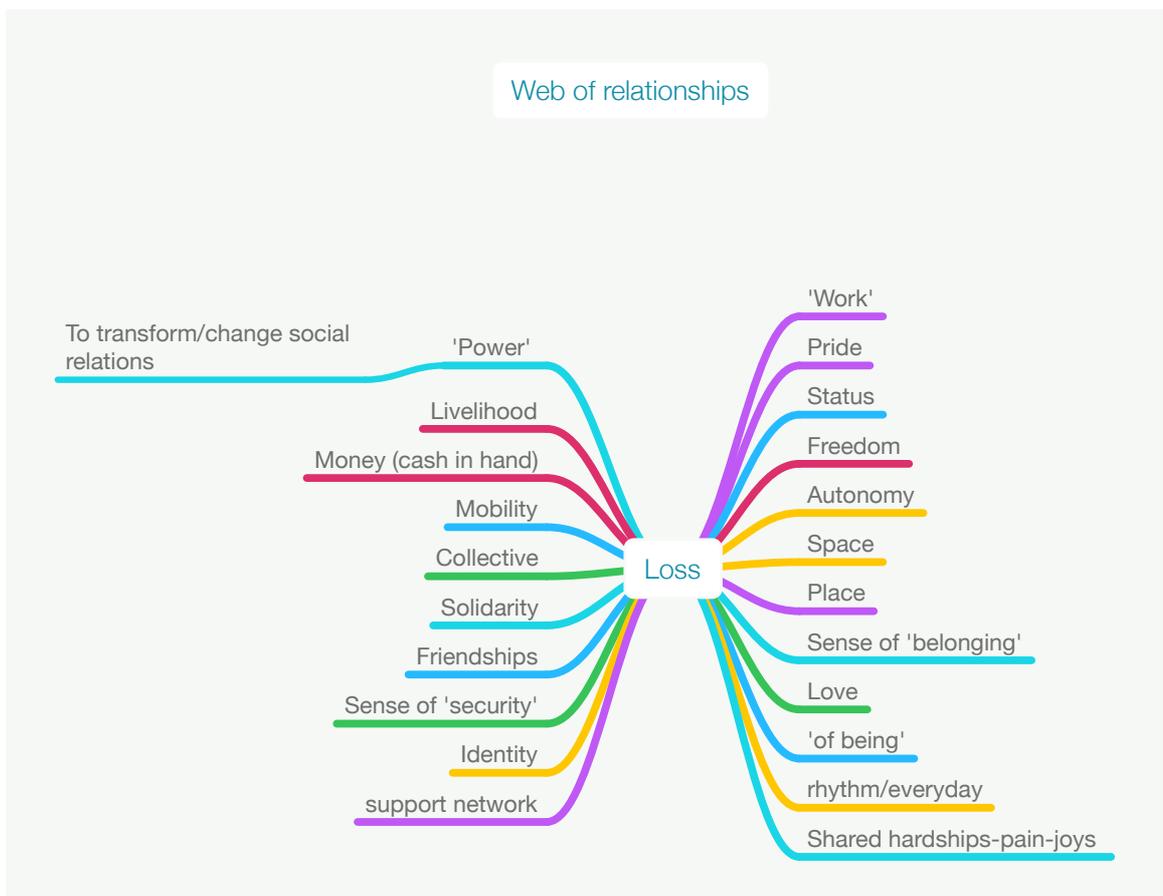
## 1. Web of relationships and loss

Reflecting on my own research with the workers of Nokia factory and their experience of the closure, I have created a diagram that illustrates the non-linearity of the meaning of loss, the multiple, tangled relations connected to work, place, people – a web of relationships (Diagram: 9). Based on my conversations with the women workers (and men) over a period of time, that began much before the factory closure, I have tried to capture something that may not be possible to capture in its entirety, since these are dynamic ‘emerging’ living processes. They change with changing contexts. Unlike the ‘traditional’ manufacturing plants, the workers here worked in a mobile phone assembly plant, part of a global production chain. They were all young, mostly women, migrants, different social context and the factory operated for only eight years.

In previous Chapters, I narrated the experiences of women in their work and living spaces, their journeys and wanting to ‘escape’ from home, their ‘desire’ for autonomy and freedom, their sense of ‘identity’ as women and workers in relation to the place they inhabited together. I have created a diagram (Diagram 9: Web of relationships) to depict the inter-relations and connectedness between the various aspects of life that are linked to the places, which are ‘threatened’ to be lost by the closure of the factory. As historian Steve Hugh (2007:93) points out ‘place identity’ (as per Doreen Massey) is ‘constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together’.

The use of the term ‘loss’ is not to portray the women as victims, but to convey the multiple relations connected to work, which was more than a ‘job’ or only about ‘wages’. It was also about shared aspirations, friendships, possibilities of change, for a better life. I was personally ‘haunted’ by Sarvanan’s statement: *“When all our futures had become uncertain, they left with great struggle...”* For the women workers, work in the factory gave them a confidence and an identity of their own, not just as workers but as independent beings. The wages in their hands gave them the autonomy to make their own decisions. For instance, how to spend the money, where to live, who to live with, to love or marry, and

mobility. I remembered Usha, one of the women in Lakshmi's room, once said 'because they (workers) have their salaries, they can run away (when there is opposition from home) and get married'. This meant that there were possibilities for challenging some of the norms around marriages or castes with the financial autonomy and the confidence offered by work. So the 'loss' can be understood more as *loss of possibilities* – to change, to transform situations. These are relational to the place, located within the social context. Through the 'Web of relationships' diagram, I try to convey this aspect of the 'loss' as I understood it.



**Diagram 9:** Web of relationships

At one point of time, the workers made their emotions public through a film. It was an appeal to mobilize public 'sympathy' about their 'loss'. It could be seen as an example of, what Webster et al (2008) cited in Coe (2011: 223-224) call 'symbolic power' to 'attract sympathy from general public', action from the state

and to prevent the factory closure. I give a few transcripts from the film<sup>88</sup> to illustrate the emotions expressed by the workers:

*'We treat each other like family, if there's no job, all of us will have to suffer, we will feel bad to separate from them'.*

*'I don't have the heart to leave this company. Its very difficult to get a job like this, but when Nokia makes us struggle like this, its makes me sad'.*

*'Nokia must take the responsibility for us, we still depend on Nokia'.*

*'This is what gives us courage, all of us depend on this company'.*

*'No chance, I can't manage, I don't have a husband, I take care of my child with this salary, I can't even think about my life....if I am courageous, it is because of this job'.*

*'This job is the reason I am alive. That's what I depend on, my life is this job'.*

*'We have worked so much for the company's development. This is our company'.*

*'Our arms and legs ache the most. We work for nine hours, we worked very hard, night and day. If they suddenly ask us to stop, how difficult that it is for us'.*

While the excerpts convey a sense of grief and loss, the material dependency on the job, they also convey a strong sense of 'indebtedness'—'*Nokia must take the responsibility for us*'; the appeal was embodied - '*Our arms and legs aches, we worked very hard*', '*don't have the heart to leave, 'my life is this job...'*' There was a

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<sup>88</sup>NITS asked me to make the film and arranged for the resources for making it. A young professional filmmaker, me and my field interpreter made the film with support of NITS and the workers. NITS paid for the time and other expenses of the filmmaker and interpreter. The film is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1UejPMJZZA&feature=youtu.be>

strong feeling that the company ‘owed’ them not to be treated this way. The workers strongly disapproved of the company’s decision of closure—they did not ‘consent’ to it. In some sense they demanded their rights by drawing on a language of responsibility and indebtedness.

For its part, the local English and Tamil media played its role in building a narrative of ‘loss’, representing workers as ‘victims’. While most of the media reported Nokia’s tax issue and court cases, articles with catchy headlines like ‘orphan factory’ or ‘death of a dream’ started appearing, whipping up emotions—almost foreclosing any possibilities of hope.



**Image 9:** Collage of media reports of factory closure

Thinking through ‘loss’, I am also reminded of Laurent Berlant’s (2011:1) *Cruel Optimism*, a relation she describes that ‘exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food....it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project’. Berlant (2011:3) explains that these ‘optimistic relations are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you

to it initially'. It's like a 'double bind', where the work in the factory offers 'a promise' for a better life and yet it can be an obstacle in achieving it.

In the film Bhagyaraj talks of his 'dream' of becoming 'at least middle class', which he perceives to be 'a better life'. He is 'drawn' to the job perceiving it to be the *only* means of realizing his dream. If the job stops the dream has to be abandoned. He doesn't see any alternative:

'Newspaper, television talked about its (Nokia's) grandness. Nokia buses were going here and there in every small lane. When I saw this, even I wished, *won't I be in that bus someday?* My life could also be good. In this desire, when I got the job in Nokia, I discontinued my studies and everything and went to work in Nokia. We were obsessed with Nokia, Nokia...we left the thought of searching for other jobs. I came to this work because we should at least become middle class in life'.

(Excerpts from the film 'Disconnecting People')

Bhagyaraj expresses anxiety and disbelief and finds it hard to accept the changing situation. Some of the previous struggles by the same workers when they felt 'cheated' by the company for not paying them their promised wages or making them permanent, is lost in this moment of distress, where the 'factory' becomes the sole purpose of existence. Berlant (2011) asks very important questions here:

'Why is it so hard to leave those forms of life that don't work? Why is it that, when precariousness is spread throughout the world, people fear giving up on the institutions that have worn out their confidence in living?'

There was a sense of disbelief in what was happening to 'their' company. The Income Tax raid in the factory was an unwanted intrusion into 'their' space that the media made 'public' the next day, it was a 'shock' to the workers. In their

'attachment' to the space, the fact that it was a capitalist production space became obscured (see Meier 2012).

## **2. 'Company is us' - Worker's response to closure**

'Company is not villain. Company is us, friends, our work, our factory. It is the management, it is the villain. The HR'

(Lakshmi in Muthu's room in Kancheepuram on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014)

In this one statement, Lakshmi seemed to capture the emotional attachment that workers felt towards their work place. The 'us' created through network of relationships is a powerful binder, stronger than the capitalist logic of production. In trying to understand why workers respond in certain ways, it might be important to start with the more basic question - What does work mean to the worker? And their answers can be very different and intersected by multiple factors of gender, caste, poverty, migration and terms and conditions of employment etc. In this section I write about the various collective responses of the workers through their union to the events that unfolded before the closure, which were often entangled with deep emotional responses.

In 2013, when the state government of Tamil Nadu delayed issuing a Government Order (GO) to 'refund' the amount of Value Added Tax (VAT) to Nokia, as per the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the company and the state government, Nokia threatened to 'pull out' of India (Indian Express, 2013). The employees' union went to the labour department and demanded that the state intervene to protect their jobs. The management had to appear in the labour department to assure the Union that there would be no manpower reduction. Similarly, the union intervened several times in the High Court of Delhi and the Supreme Court of India to protect what they called their 'future'. Sometimes actions like these by workers can be seen as developing 'proprietary interest' (Hugh, 2007:99) or 'siding with the capitalist', but then this would be too narrow an interpretation of workers' actions. Strong 'attachment' of workers to their workplace has been scoffed at, but as labour geographers have argued - to do an 'a-spatial class analysis', would ignore 'certain feelings' or a 'sense of

place' that workers may have (Herod, 1998). And it is important to understand that 'feelings' do not necessarily 'depoliticise' a process, but can help us to understand the complexity of people's responses under certain conditions.

In September 2013, when Nokia suddenly announced Microsoft's take over, it had set in motion a series of feelings – anxiety and anticipation, fear and hope, perceptions and actual experience of change. Sarvanan had said:

We were shocked. We had been Nokia employees. After working in Nokia for so long we didn't want to go to Microsoft.

The workers had already noticed the change in shift patterns from three shifts of eight hours to two shifts of nine hours with two days off per week from January 2014. The change in shift was seen as a sign 'of things to come'. Married women workers were leaving the factory after the change to nine hour shifts. Gaja said: 'around 45 (women) workers (have) resigned...they are all married. There were problems at home. They didn't reach home on time. Women resigned within three days (of the shift change).' Kalpana described the shift change in one word "*kashtam*" in Tamil, meaning painful. Apart from standing for nine hours and reaching home late, losing friends was the hardest part. With the change in shift patterns, workers in the assembly lines had been reshuffled and the new work arrangements had moved friends to different lines and shifts. Meeting friends on working days had become increasingly difficult. The familiar rhythm of the everyday was changing. Gaja said:

'In this (new) pattern, we come, eat, go to sleep and leave again. It feels like the mind is always tense. So we can't really concentrate on work. The extra one-hour of work is like torture. It is difficult to stand for nine hours....to do it for an extra hour. I feel like 'ah, when will the shift end? We can't even speak to our friends'.

Besides changes in the shift pattern, there were frequent 'production days off' in a week. This caused a lot of anxiety and speculation amongst the workers. In

Muthu's room, women stayed in their rooms and didn't go to their villages during production days off. Adjusting to the change was difficult. The women anticipated the new arrangements were in preparation for the Microsoft takeover. But the management explained that the 'rearrangements' were part of the 'regular' business reorganization. Rajan, the HR manager said:

'We are realigning the workforce.... because Hanoi (Vietnam) factory (is) coming up.. ..therefore we transferred some (volume). We are cutting down one shift, and moving to two shift patterns, we will be saving on electricity, transport...(volume demand has gone down to) 7-7.5 million phones per month, the work can be done in 18 hours instead of 24 hours'.  
(Interview with Rajan, HR Head 8/10/2013)

Between November 2013-January 2014, when the company was laying off contract workers (ETLs), the permanent operators, although anxious, didn't quite expect a similar thing to happen to them. They were convinced that management 'will not touch (lay off) the company staff' (Discussion in Muthu's room on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013). Their hope was NITS, the shop floor employees' union that represented their interest. Lakshmi said - 'If it is contract workers, no one can say anything (since they don't have a union). They will remove all of them' (Discussion in Muthu's room on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013). Within the 'containing skin' the women had felt 'protected', whereas for the contract workers the situation had always been precarious. Even while there were uncertainties, there was also hope of 'continuity', of 'new' possibilities with the Microsoft takeover. Satya, who was the youngest of all the women in Muthu's room, was excited about wearing a 'pant-shirt uniform' and Nisha dreamt of becoming a 'smart worker' when Microsoft took over.

However, in December 2013, Nokia announced that the Chennai factory might be left out of the 'Microsoft deal' if the tax issue was not resolved and if the freeze over the transfer of its assets imposed by the Indian IT department was not lifted. At the beginning of December 2013, the employees' union of Nokia

actively intervened in various court cases, press conferences and public protests in order to try to protect their jobs.

‘Since this had made our futures in to question marks, for our job security we (the union) spoke to all the workers and pleaded with the management at the Delhi High Court to unfreeze the assets, saying that the management won’t be the only one, but the workers will be affected’.

(Interview with Sarvanan Kumar, President NITS on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014)

The Delhi High Court agreed to unfreeze Nokia assets, which the union felt was partly due to their intervening in the case as an ‘interested’ party. Sarvanan said: ‘We were all happy with that judgment because we were sure we would become Microsoft employees. We clearly told them that we have struggled so much to save the company and such a judgment has arrived’. The employees’ union’s decision to intervene in the court case can be interpreted as social action by the workers—their ‘spatial fix’ in their attempt to create conditions appropriate to their own needs in a given time and location (see Herod 2001:35). In the following months, the union got involved in further court cases, including trying to intervene in the Supreme Court when Nokia decided to challenge the Delhi High Court’s order. Nokia lost its appeal in the Supreme Court in March 2014 (Economic Times, 2014). The workers felt isolated and let down by the judiciary, the state and the central government. Sarvanan said:

‘The (Microsoft) deal date of March 31<sup>st</sup> was nearing. Since the courts had abandoned us, we approached everyone at the Labour Department, Labour Commissioner, Industries Secretary, Industries Minister. We wrote a petition and sent it to the Finance Minister (union) and Prime Minister. But we never got a reply.

(Interview with Sarvanan Kumar, President NITS on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014)

Soon after a series of meetings with different officials the management informed the union about the possibility of laying off of 1000 permanent workers because production was being scaled back in the factory (Hindu Businessline, 2014).

Meanwhile, on 27<sup>th</sup> March 2014, the union organized a press conference in Chennai to oppose the 'job cuts'. Soundararajan, the union's honorary President, a member of the state legislative assembly was careful in his statement to the press about the company's responsibility to pay the taxes to the government while 'protecting' the interests of the workers.<sup>89</sup>



**Image 10:** NITS Press conference, Madras Press club. 27/3/2014

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014, NITS conducted a hunger strike in Chennai city where over 3000 workers, mostly women, participated. Union representatives from other factories in Sriperumbadur also joined the protesting Nokia workers. This was the last public action by the workers to save their jobs before the situation changed completely.

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<sup>89</sup> NITS press conference, Madras Press Club, 27/3/2014. However, given the impending general elections in India in April 2014, Soundararajan expressed his and NITS' inability to conduct public campaigns due to the 'model code of conduct' that prohibited any public campaigns by political parties or its candidate or campaigners. But then NITS was not a political party and nor did this 'ban' strictly apply to them. This also exposes the limitation of political party based trade unions that have been long debated in India.



**Image 11:** Kalpana, a Nokia worker addressing co-workers at the hunger strike, Chepauk government guest house, Chennai, 31/3/2014. She was the only woman worker who addressed a gathering of mostly women workers. The rest of the speakers were male members of NITS or other male trade unionist, who came to support the strike.

Two things happened in quick succession after the hunger strike that finally saw workers quitting the factory in a large number within a matter of month. Firstly the announcement of a time-bound Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) and secondly Microsoft-Nokia's decision to leave the Chennai factory out of the 'deal'. These two announcements, even though anticipated, came as a shock to the workers. On 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014, management announced a Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) for the workers. While for the 700 Trainee operators and technicians it was a 'compulsory retirement scheme', for permanent operators it was purportedly 'voluntary'. The scheme announced financial severance packages for the different categories of workers and set a deadline of one month, from 14<sup>th</sup> April-15<sup>th</sup> May 2014, to avail the scheme.

### ***Rifts and rumours***

With the announcement of the severance scheme, the management started indirectly putting pressure on the workers to resign by telling them that bus transportations to the factory would be stopped, which would be a major obstacle especially for women workers to come to work. Sarvanan explained the

management tactics deployed to pressurize women employees to accept the retirement scheme.

'We had put a common notice that we were completely against it (VRS). But everyday pressure was created in different ways, like cutting the bus route. Since majority of the employees are women, they started putting pressure on them by threatening to cut transport to the factory. They (management) said there will be many NPDs (non production days) and that salary will be given only for fifteen days in a month. They started passing such messages amongst the employees and pressured them a lot'. (Interview with Sarvanan Kumar, President NITS on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014)

In the days to come, there was confusion and tension and a chasm engulfed the workers. They were losing 'trust' in their Union leadership. Rumours about some of the office bearers of the union being 'close' to the management and 'cutting' deals were rife on the shop floor. Even within the union office bearers, the group was split. There were internal rifts within the union leadership and, with the fast changing situation in the company, the rift was widening (Unrecorded conversation with Uday Kumar, NITS Advisor on April 12<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 2014). The fragility of the '*containing skin*' was perhaps becoming evident. Permanent workers were initially hesitant to take the VRS offer. Some wanted to 'wait it out' to see if higher amounts could be negotiated by the union, while others simply rejected the offer, demanding jobs instead. As the date for the completion of the Nokia-Microsoft deal was approaching (25<sup>th</sup> April 2014), the company announced that the Chennai factory will enter into a 'service agreement' with Microsoft, meaning it will become a contract manufacturer for Microsoft and not part of the 'deal' given the unresolved cases in the court with the IT department (The Hindu, 2014). The management made it 'clear' that the factory would operate as long as orders came in from Microsoft. On 21<sup>st</sup> April, the workers went on one last hunger strike inside the factory canteen, which wasn't even reported in the media. There were no public protests since it was just before the general elections and the union didn't get 'any permission (from the state)' to organize public demonstrations. On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2014, the Nokia

management closed the VRS offer. Around 4800 workers took VRS and 850 workers opted out of it and remained in the factory until its final closure in November 2014.

To summarise the above section, I ask a few questions. How do we understand the complexity of the responses of the workers as the factory faced closure? If the workers had staked their jobs several times earlier to demand for fair wages, and to form a union, then why did they not 'force' their 'collective' to take action beyond legal cases or appeals? Why did their sense of 'loss' and 'belonging' to the 'space' not transcend into larger class politics? Were they too insular in 'protecting' their space and interest? Did the process of 'collectivization' (union) lead to a form of institutionalization that bounded the limits of actions to institutional mechanisms of negotiations and actions? What is the implication of this for labour geography?

As Bergene et al (2011) notes, in order to understand labour's response, it is important to understand labour's agency as part of their everyday struggles, shaped by its relationship to capital and the state. This 'relation', or the nature of it, changes with the changing local-global processes, dynamics between state-capital and how labour then tries to create its own space within this contested relational space. While, it is now well established that 'geographical effects of capitalist production are always spatially uneven' (Cumbers, 2008: 373), the 'restructuring logic of capital' (Harvey, 1982 and Smith, 1990 in Cumbers et al 2008: 373) produces conditions where workers in different places and times can or are able to extract concessions from capital or labour is able to 'improve its share of surplus value' (Cumbers, 2008: 370). However, this then perhaps creates contradictions where the 'material interests' of a small section of labour coincides with those of capital for a period of time (Cumbers, 2008: 373) which then may not allow for the formation of larger class interests. Therefore, when the 'flight of capital' takes place in search for profitable pastures or as Harvey says for a 'spatial fix' (Harvey, 1982), workers may often find it difficult to form broader class solidarities or build unities.

### 3. After the closure

I have remained in touch with some of the workers and union members after the closure of the factory. In the immediate aftermath, besides planning what to do with the VRS money, which quickly got spent in paying back loans for many of them, workers were desperately looking for jobs.

'Over-age', 'over-qualification' and ironically 'no experience' seemed to hinder people's efforts to move into new factory jobs. Most of the workers were about 24-25 years of age, whereas the age preference in the nearby factories was for 18-22 year olds. Many of the workers had done their bachelor's degrees through distant education while working in Nokia. But the small automobile factories, which were the only ones with contract jobs which hired women, preferred school pass certificates. There were also unconfirmed 'rumours' that ex-Nokia workers were not being hired in local factories. Sarvanan said:

'We think this feeling is everywhere, because wherever they (ex-workers) go for interviews, they stop them once they say that they are Nokia workers. Maybe they think that even if we don't unionize we will ask for our rights'.

Kalpana was refused a job in one of the Nokia supplier companies called Salcomp. Her cousin who worked in the company told her that she shouldn't have revealed her past employment with Nokia since – 'no one will hire Nokia workers, they had a union' (Unrecorded phone conversation with Kalpana on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2014). Most of the factory jobs around the Sriperumbadur area are in automobile supply chains with low salaries and long hours of standing work. 'They are offering only Rs 5700 (£57) per month as salary, how can we take this salary?' Lakshmi had said (Discussion in Muthu's room on May 16<sup>th</sup> 2014). It was less than half of what she was earning in Nokia after the wage settlements. Shalini, Priya, Anitha were all searching for jobs. Suresh went back to his village in Thiruvannamalai to start a small auto parts shop; Rajshekhar drives an auto-rickshaw in Thiruvallur town; Sarvanan is running a small labour agency

supplying part time security men to local business enterprises. In Muthu's room, Abhinaya, Pooja and Lakshmi decided not to go back to their villages immediately. They looked for jobs in nearby factories. Abhinaya and Lakshmi also joined a computer coaching school to improve their chances of getting jobs. Pooja waited to do a 'beautician' training course that Nokia was offering to the women ex-employees. Buela was desperate for a job and was hoping that perhaps a beautician course would help her start her own little 'beauty parlour'. Some of Buela's friends, who had worked in the 'diagnostic department' (where faulty handsets were diagnosed and serviced) managed to find jobs in Samsung's mobile service centres. But for most of the assembly line workers, finding jobs in other factories was difficult.

Kalpana now works as an assembly line operator in an auto-parts supplier company, where she earns one fourth of her earlier wages, has to do compulsory over-time and works on Sundays to make ends meet. Her siblings from her village now live with her. She invested part of her VRS money<sup>90</sup> in a small fisheries business. In these last few months, Kalpana has been suffering from depression and has even visited a psychiatrist. She is unable to understand her feelings 'I don't know why I am feeling like this, *rumba khastam* (very painful), I cry often'. I asked her if she has been in touch with her friends from the factory, she said yes 'It was so jolly (life in Nokia)' (Unrecorded conversation with Kalpana over phone on January 2<sup>nd</sup> and March 27<sup>th</sup> 2015).<sup>91</sup> Kalpana's depression possibly embodies similar 'feeling' of loss to those that Sarvanan had felt when he tried to kill himself.

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<sup>90</sup> The final VRS amount varied depending on the years of service and after deducting amounts for any outstanding loans that the workers had taken from the bank for which Nokia had stood as guarantor. Permanent workers received anywhere between Rs 4.5-6 Lakhs, Trainee Operators got about Rs. 1.5-2 Lakhs (£1681-£2242). Uday Kumar informed me that the final pay-out amount by Nokia was Rs 305 crores (£34 million) and the total number of people included 6000 including operators, Trainee Operators, Team Leaders and technicians. (2/7/2014). There was an additional amount of Rs. 1 lakh (£1121) given to the 850 workers who left the factory after the final closure in November 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Kalpana and I would speak regularly on phone after I returned to Durham after finishing my fieldwork. I have also been in touch with several of the women workers by phone. Lakshmi and Abhinaya talked warmly of their time with friends in the company.

#### 4. Conclusion

Today is Lakshmi's birthday. She turned 24 today. Abhinaya and she are going back home to their villages. Muthu's room will not exist anymore in that small street in Kancheepuram. They had been staying in the room with the other girls for over three years. This room was also 'my pad'. I would spend hours chatting with the girls there. We made our radio potti shows together, drank umpteen cups of *chai*, played cards. Sam and I would get off the shared auto rickshaw near the room, stop at the small *kadai* (shop) at the corner of the street, buy a pouch of milk, tea leaves and a packet of *Good day* biscuits and go to Muthu's room. This was a ritual I followed for every trip to Muthu's room over a period of 10 months.

Lakshmi said in a sad voice over phone 'Going back to village Madhu, will you come for my marriage?' I asked her if it had been fixed. 'No, not yet. But I will call you when it is'. Abhinaya, Lakshmi and Pooja had stayed back in the town doing typewriting courses and computer and beautician training for the past 6 months after taking VRS. They didn't go back home. Abhinaya even managed to get an instructor's job in the computer training institute where she did her course. They also went to many factories and offices looking for jobs. They were living off their VRS money, paying rent, food, everyday expenses. They were in no hurry to go back home to get married! Pooja left last week for her village, now these two. Have they given up on their dreams? Abhinaya said she will try to open a computer coaching class in her village.

I feel sad. A sense of loss for the world that they had carefully built and nurtured through friendships, through living and working together. They had generously welcomed me into their 'temporary' world.

Field Diary entry 11/10/2014, Durham, UK

This Chapter is about 'loss'. Loss of a 'living' space that was created through a web of relationships centred around 'work' in a factory that was closing down. I detail the process of the closure and responses of workers to it—individually and collectively. The chapter tries to illustrate the non-linearity of the process of closure as experienced by the workers. I argue in this chapter that workspace is an 'emotional space' and one needs to pay attention to the emotional attachment of labour to the space which is both a productive and reproductive space at the same time. The chapter foregrounds the creation of a 'space' through complex social relations that are formed by the everyday practices around 'work'—place identity, community, way of being, where work means 'more than just a job'. It highlights the relationality of a space that emerges as the relations between labour-capital and the state shifts. Labour's 'attachment' to this space is not necessarily unproblematic, and can become an impediment in the larger politics of labour. In trying to protect the 'space', workers can become insular. It also shows that this space is not necessarily experienced in the same way by all workers as there are internal divisions within, often created by conditions of employment and work.

Particularly I pay attention to the experiences and perceptions of women workers to the factory closure, and what the loss of a workspace that had come to mean more than just a job and wages would mean to them. I argue that loss of waged work for women is profound in terms of the loss of possibilities for change and to transform personal circumstances. Through the web of relationship diagram I have tried to show what work meant to them. It was about their shared experiences, aspirations, friendships and a greater sense of autonomy and mobility. It was also about reworking gender relations both at home and in the larger society. With the closure of the factory and the possibility of return to the villages, the everyday spaces and lives that waged work had enabled the women to create got ruptured. Workers, both women and men, responded to this disruption in their lives and possibilities of better future both individually and collectively through their union. While the union engaged in court battles and public strategies to reach out to a larger audience, individually workers struggled with their own sense of loss, which were economic, emotional

and social losses. While there was a difference in the individual and collective actions of the workers to the factory closure, they were interrelated in terms of their collective desire to protect their dreams for a better future that the waged work in the factory promised them. In this Chapter, I have also placed importance on 'emotions' in trying to understand the processes of changes and adjustments in people's lives while looking at industrial closure. I have emphasised that emotions do not 'depoliticize' the process but give a sense of the complexity of relations in a community (Butler 2004). I foreground that labour geography needs to pay attention to 'emotions' (Bondi, 2007) in 'spatial class analysis' (Herod, 1998) to understand labours' feelings and 'sense of place'.

The thesis examines the experiences of work-life of young women workers who had migrated from their villages to work in an electronics factory located inside a special economic zone in Kancheepuram district of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. This zone was once celebrated as a 'successful' outcome of India's export manufacturing policy bringing in investments, increasing exports and creating job opportunities for rural and urban youth. In addition, the zone was credited for employing young women in a context where National Sample Surveys (NSSO) data on employment showed a 'significant decline in women's workforce participation' in both rural and urban areas of India (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2014). In the imagination of the state and the media, the zone promised to transform the lives of young women and created a sense of anticipation and expectation. It became a showcase for other zones in the country. However, the zone was also a site of bitter contestation, seen as a space of capitalist accumulation and labour exploitation. The world over these special economic zones have been discredited as sites where a complex mix of 'labour relations and cultural systems' along with disciplinary techniques, constant surveillance, suspended labour rights and state subsidies create conditions favourable for global corporations to manufacture cheaply and make quick profits with minimum interference from the local governments (see Dutta, 2009; Gopalakrishnan 2007; Guha, 2008; Levein, 2011; McCallum, 2011; Ngai, 2005; Ong, 1991; Ong, 2006; Salzinger, 2000; Sampat, 2008).

However, this thesis moves beyond popular discourses or contestations of zones to look into the lived processes of work-life inside a special economic zone. As new manufacturing sites, the zones provide an opportunity to understand how these workspaces governed by corporate discipline and just-in-time production regimes on the one hand also generates aspirations and expectations amongst young workers seeking to transform their social and economic conditions through waged work. For the thesis, the zone as a research site revealed the everyday lived experiences of work-life in a hyper efficient global manufacturing site and how micro-stories of everyday experiences of labour in the shopfloor

are linked to the larger global economic processes, state's political and developmental ambitions and the social context within which lives are embedded.

In the case of Tamil Nadu, an early socio-economic shift brought about by the anti-upper caste political movement played a significant role in shaping the state's industrialisation patterns. Therefore, the context of setting up of the zone and the everyday politics of labour inside the zone need to be situated and understood within the larger social and political context of Tamil Nadu. Through my empirical research, I find that work in these new manufacturing sites of global firms creates expectations amongst young workers and also their identity as workers, for instance in their demands for better wages and formation of employees' union, without losing sight of the other impacts of corporate led industrialisation and neoliberal policies of the state.

The thesis enquires into women's everyday experiences and imagination of the work inside the zone, their expectations from it and role of work in shaping their sense of self. Looking at the arrangement of work relations inside the shop floor, the thesis links it to the broader social conditions of women's labour in the society. The thesis tries to show the complexities of relations *in* production created by the everyday practices and expectations of labour and corporate capital (Geert, 2005). The argument that the thesis makes is that women's entry into waged work cannot be seen as a straightforward logic of employment, livelihood, exploitation or emancipation, but as part of a process of women's constant negotiations of patriarchal and capitalist structures, and their everyday resistance to other social structures such as caste, family and communities. While working in the factory exposes women to new regimes of control and discipline, we also see that it produces conditions for articulating new gender relations 'to challenge the normative gender order' (Lal, 2011; 555). Pearson (2014:22) points to the paradoxical nature of women's waged work that she argues 'can decompose existing modes of gender subordination as well as intensify and recompose women's subordination'. While my own empirical findings contribute to the observations of feminist scholars, they also show that

the everyday lived experiences of work-life in the factory form a 'complex web of relations' (Massey, 1994) to which women grow attached and from which they derive new meanings of work. There are 'new sentiments' to work that develop with the 'newfound sense of worth and independence' (Lal, 2011: 559). As Ngai (2005:63) notes, 'although far from an abrupt reversal of the patriarchal structure, this active participation in economic roles did provide room for renegotiating women's power in the family....their wage-earning experiences in the factory granted them new power and freedom to balance their lives between work and family'.

This Chapter discusses the key findings of this research and how it has answered the three research questions mentioned in Chapter 1.

1. What are the expectations of capital and motivations of labour?
2. How is work experienced and perceived by women workers?
3. What does the loss of work mean to the workers?

### **1. What are the expectations of capital and motivations of labour?**

Chapters 4 and 5 try to answer this question by looking at the practices of corporate managers, recruitment logic and the creation of worker subjectivities in the shop floor, contrasting it with the motivations and expectations of young women who entered factory work.

In 2005, when Nokia started recruiting workers, its managers preferred to hire young women who could assemble mobiles in its largest production facility in the world. Gender, caste and class were key indices that influenced recruitment preferences. Using state agencies, regional political parties and private recruitment agents, Nokia penetrated the rural-urban labour market in different districts of Tamil Nadu. There was a preference for not hiring from within the surrounding villages for fear of support for the workers from the local community networks.

Melissa Wright (2006) describes this preference for hiring young women as a globally discursive 'myth' that keeps circulating amongst the corporate managers in these global firms, which seeks to create an assembly line worker who is young, preferably female, able bodied and docile. The preference also was for women whose 'social cost of reproduction' and 'domestic responsibilities' were minimal (Chhachhi, 1997:18). In the case of Nokia, the preference was not just for hiring young girls, but also specifically those who had not done well in school exams and studied in government run schools. The assumption was that the children from lower income (and lower caste) families (Below Poverty Line), studying in state subsidized government schools, would be more likely to look for low-skilled, low pay jobs in the factories and, being 'failures' (in school exams), would be more compliant and less aspirational.

Caste played a role in Nokia's recruitment practices, with preferences for certain areas with a higher proportion of Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe populations (Chapter 4). The logic being that families from 'forward caste or backward caste' do not send their daughters to work on nights shifts, whereas the lower and most backward caste families allowed their women to come for shift work. Isabelle Guerin et al (2015: 124) observed similar patterns in north-eastern districts of Tamil Nadu where they found 'one rarely recruits someone who is higher up in the caste hierarchy'. The role of caste as a defining factor in labour markets and recruitment practices in India is a well-documented fact (see Carsell, 2013; Harriss-White, 2003; Harriss-White, Gooptu, 2001; Kannan, 1994; Thorat, 2007). At the entry level itself, through recruitment strategies, workers were already 'predetermined' as bearers of inferior labour by corporate managers, marked by their caste, class and gender. Nokia's recruitment practices reflected the social inequities of the society. As Elias (2005:210) noted in her study of Malaysian garment export factories 'recruitment represents a highly gendered and racialised everyday international business practice and constitutes the key mechanism through which localised social inequalities and hierarchies are reproduced within the workforce of the firm'.

Chapter 4 also looks at the process of 'fitting' the 'new army of transglobal labour' (Ngai, 2005: 78) into the global production system through the practices and perceptions of the junior managers who were the key actors in translating the managerial expectations in the shop floor. Workers' subjectivities were produced by the everyday perceptions of the managers, who saw the young women workers as 'immature', 'unruly' and 'unreasonable'. The young managers, many from higher castes and classes with technical education, reproduced the social biases on the shop floor. As Cross (2014:106) has noted – 'managers invoked their own achievement in the field of education to establish a social and cultural distance from workers and assert their 'right' to occupy positions of relative power'. However, even amongst the shop floor managers there were two distinct groups. There was a group of young managers who had engineering degrees from expensive private technical colleges and who typically came from urban areas and from higher caste and class backgrounds, and another group of managers with diploma certificates who were either formerly shop floor workers or diploma holders from the state run technical institutes and were from small towns or villages. There was a social distance (and wage difference) between these two groups and also in the way they related with the workers (Chapter 4). The Chapter argues that the expectations of a global corporation were translated on the shop floor through the practices and perceptions of the young managers, often reflecting the social inequality prevalent in the larger society. We see in these practices, what McDowell and Massey (1984:197) noted as capitalism and patriarchy (and other relations of social inequity) 'articulating' and 'accommodating' each other in different ways in different locations to meet its expectations.

In Chapter 5, I look at the motivations of young women for entering factory work through their life stories without essentialising them or claiming they are representative voices. However, these life stories do have, as Lal (2011:559) notes – 'a broad reach that encompasses the multitude of factory workers....also reach deep into the psyches of women workers, as they generate new sentiments regarding work that culturally and emotionally normalize the role of work in working women's lives. These stories express sentiments that extend beyond

shame or bitterness about the necessity to work'. To understand why women consent to labour under hyper-efficient work regimes, it is important to understand the other structures of social relations (other than just waged work) that women have to negotiate and struggle in the everyday. The stories of the young women, while different from each other, were bound in some ways by experiences of childhood and adolescence often marked by violence, poverty and adult responsibilities. Their decisions to leave home to enter waged work were motivated by multiple reasons. 'It's wages and experience of stepping out of the house' that motivates women to go out to work, Kalpana said. For Kalpana and the other women whose life stories I narrated in this chapter, factory work offered possibilities for negotiating family relations and gave a certain degree of autonomy in their everyday choices. Although these expectations were not necessarily always met, they made it possible for women to be aspirational due to their waged employment. Both motivations for coming to work in the factory and the work itself produced expectations and aspirations in the women. I looked at the personal stories of the young women as 'living processes' where terms were negotiated and decisions emerged through processes of consensus or conflicts. The life stories revealed the formation of a new working class of women, whose patriarchal families depicted a pattern, where the male member of the family or the 'traditional male worker' (see Joshi, 2002; Lal, 2011; Neetha, 2004) had failed to fulfil his obligations towards his wife or daughters. Women are expected to contribute to the family income or for the running of the households but must do so by, as Lal (2011: 555) noted: 'carving out some kind of respectable life for themselves'.

In response to the research question, these two Chapters show the distinct logic that drive managerial expectations and the motivations of young women to enter waged work. On the shop floor these distinct expectations come together to produce a politics of work, which I argue needs to be situated in the complex relations that women have to negotiate and resist in their lives outside the factory and as they enter the social relations of waged work. The chapters argue that it is through looking at the 'small scale geographies' (McDowell, 2015) of women's lives and spaces that they inhabit as workers, whether it is domestic or

outside, that we can understand the different processes that engender women's decisions to enter factory work and their expectation from the work. Expectations are embedded in the local social registers as we see in the practices of corporate managers and in the life stories of women workers. I argue that expectations, whether of the managers or workers, do not automatically translate into desired outcomes. It is not a one-sided process, but a contested and negotiated process producing conditions for everyday shop floor politics.

## **2. How is work experienced and perceived by women workers?**

Chapters 5 and 6 try to answer this question by looking into the everyday lived experiences of work-life both inside and outside the shop floor. These chapters show that women's lives are connected to the factory as intricately as they are to their other spheres of life outside the factory gates, and that experiences of one are relational to the other. Pushing the boundaries of inside-outside, waged-unwaged, work-non work, home space-workspace, feminists have argued that these boundaries don't really help to explain women's labour and can in fact profoundly impact women's lives by devaluing their labour. I linked spaces of 'work' and 'living' by paying attention to the embodied experiences of work-life of young women both inside and outside the factory. The fact that the shop floor was not just a 'productive' space, but also a 'reproductive' space where friendship, nurturing, care, love, sexuality co-existed alongside the production of commodities calls for 'troubling' the boundaries between different spaces, at least conceptually. I have argued that the world of work, especially women's work, needs to be understood through the interconnectedness of different sites that women inhabit, as these are relational spaces created in contexts within which women's lives are situated. As Coe (2013:273) observed '(worker's) agency always has a geographical dimension.... in that it emerges in and from particular places'. Chapter 5 tries to 'reconnect' the 'agency (of workers) to the wider societal structures in which it is embedded' (Coe, 2013:272). By conducting ethnographic fieldwork, I explored the 'lively', 'dynamic' and 'contradictory' space of the shop floor. I contend that to understand the shop floor politics or 'game of making out' (Burawoy, 1979), space needs to be

stretched beyond the shop floor. It is useful to make connections with women's lives in the larger contexts of gender, caste, class, migration and other intersecting factors that influence their choices in order to be able to understand their shop floor actions and responses. The conditions that create women's consent or dissent to labour are relational to other spheres of life in the life course of women. I have argued that to understand how women perceive and experience waged work inside the factory, one needs to situate it in the context of women's labour in a patriarchal-capitalist society, about which Mary John (2013:177) has asked: 'what makes all the work that women do in a country like India elude worth and value?'

Chapter 6 specifically looks at the arrangement of production and people on the shop floor; managerial techniques; 'social relations *in* production' (De Neve, 2005:135); and the everyday politics that are produced as women try to maintain some degree of control over the labour process. This Chapter looks at the hard physical labour that goes into assembling mobile phones, the arrangement of work and how various disciplinary techniques and labour and cultural relations are deployed on the shop floor to 'tune' the untrained bodies of the workers into 'working bodies', suitable for 'just-in-time' production, and also to produce everyday relations of power in the shop floor.

In this Chapter, we also see that spacing of bodies into individual tasks, as part of the disciplinary power and production logic, also gives rise to workers developing feelings for their specific activity, producing 'line cultures' where workers compete with each other to out perform (Burawoy, 1979). Arranging workers into hierarchies of temporary and permanent categories is part of managerial strategy to optimize production costs and labour control and create different relations of power amongst the workers themselves that can impede the formation of common interests and solidarities amongst them. These divisive practices and at times contradictory responses of labour are a reflection of the unequal processes and practices in society. However, we also see that in the everyday experiences of the workplace, assembly lines can also become sites of solidarities and friendships that counter many managerial tactics and

disciplinary techniques. Women often responded bodily to the work discipline by 'fainting', 'crying', 'sleeping', 'chatting', 'stopping the lines', 'non-cooperation', 'counter-complaints' and 'counter-subjectivities'—through everyday forms of coping and resistances. These were some of their strategies to 'rework' (Katz, 2004) relations of production and gain control over their bodies that can also be seen as self-defeating. However, to understand these processes beyond contradictions, Ngai (2005:78) states that we need to look at female working bodies 'in a structure of contest' that uses 'situations opportunities and even hegemonic discourse to protect themselves'. This, Ngai (2005:78) says, allows us to see these actions in a more nuanced way. I contend that the coping strategies of women in the shop floor in response to managerial controls are part of their everyday struggle in the society and their responses are grounded in the context of their lives. Therefore as Coe et al. (2013:272) suggest, it is helpful to develop a more 'embedded' notion of worker agency, 'combined with reconnecting agency to the wider societal structures in which is it embedded'.

In their living spaces in migrant towns women were negotiating and forging new relations of gender, caste, and patriarchy, as I show in Chapter 7. They narrated their experiences of leaving their mother's homes to start factory work, staying in hostels and rented rooms, their first experiences of 'stepping out of home'. They carried memories of their homes to these new spaces layered with everyday relations and practices of living (Rigg, 2007). The experiences of these spaces were varied for women for as Massey (1994:3) argues, space is 'variously interpreted by those holding different positions as part of it'. For instance, I observed that the young women from Tamil Nadu and Odisha, an eastern Indian state, produced and experienced contrasting spaces. In the case of the *tamil* women, they seemed to conform more to the social milieu and negotiated social relations through friendships and familial relations in the neighbourhoods, while the *oriya* women negotiated the terrain by exercising their sexual autonomy as a way of surviving in an alien city. For *tamil* women, restrictions were often self-imposed as they were located within the same cultural and social context, even though they were not in their villages, whereas for the *oriya* women, being far from their families and in a different context, social restrictions did not quite

work in the same way. Moreover, their struggles as inter-state migrant women, working as contract employees, poorly paid, living in rooms provided by the employer, often dependent on male colleagues or supervisors for economic support created different kinds of control and power relations which they had to negotiate.

I argue that the young women through their everyday practices both ruptured and conformed to social relations and in the process, as Pearson (2014) notes, gender and other social relations were 'decomposed' and 'recomposed'. The experiences of the women showed that whatever might have been the initial impetus for migration, the process of migration and waged work created possibilities for the reformulation of social relations. Although the women did not necessarily see themselves as outside normative gender relations or doing anything out-of-the-ordinary, in their everyday practices there was however a shift in how they negotiated relations of caste or patriarchy in the new neighbourhoods. There was a 'silence' around caste in the rooms of the women. It is sometimes unclear how caste tendencies change in the context of urban or industrial neighbourhood. While caste symbols or markers such as 'SCs have dark skin colour' were part of the everyday caste politics that women encountered in their workplaces and neighbourhoods, I also observed different caste members co-habiting, cooking, eating and working together. I contend that while caste relations do exist in everyday consciousness, women (and men) do seek out friendships and companionship beyond caste. Caste certainly existed in their larger social milieu of family and villages.

Through looking at spaces outside the formal workspace, I have tried to understand if waged work helped women to create 'new' or different spaces that were aligned to their interests, aspirations and desires. Do these new spaces create possibilities – for 'disruption' of the dominant narratives and norms (Wright, 2006), and does this disruption change gender and other relations? How can these then help us in understanding labour and its implications for labour geography? Chapter 6 showed us differences in how women produced and experienced spaces—social relations that are linked to their conditions of

employment, nature of work, migration, social differences, diverse experiences and how they imagine their work-life. In the Indian context, some of these differences in experiences need to be understood in relation to other social differences linked to caste, land, and access to other resources, including education, health care and economic activity.

In response to the research question, these two Chapters have shown that women's experiences of waged work are located within the wider social context of women's labour in the society. Women's everyday practices on the shop floor, their responses to work arrangements and the disciplining tactics of managers produced everyday relations of power and politics in the shop floor that were linked to their experiences of life outside the factory. Even though they were first time factory workers, their gendered experiences of labour in their homes or villages informed their actions and perceptions on the shop floor – the thesis therefore argues that experiences need to be grounded socially and historically. Experiences of work have to be 'socially situated' to understand the varied responses of women. This would help labour geography to develop a much more grounded understanding of worker's agency, which is a 'core' element of the sub-discipline, but as Noel Castree (2007) points out it remains 'under-developed' and 'under-specified'. It would also help to explore the 'wider questions of how people live and seek to live' and 'voices and places' to which labour geography has paid inadequate attention (Bergene et al, 2010:5). For instance, Chapters 5 & 6 illustrate the varied experiences of work-life by different sets of women who were migrants, but their interests, their conditions of living and employment, their relation to work/workspace, their social ties and relations with homes and neighbourhoods were quite different. The intersection of all these relations produced differences in how they imagined and sought to create spaces/networks that enabled them to make decisions and take control of their lives in a migrant place what Massey (1994:3) describes as 'existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: crosscutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism'.

### **3. What does the loss of work mean to the workers?**

Chapter 8 tries to understand the meaning of loss of work by looking at the responses of workers to the factory closure, especially from the point of view of women workers. Workers, women and men, responded to this disruption in their lives both individually and collectively. Collectively through their union, workers engaged in court battles, with government officials, political leaders and developed public strategies to reach out to a larger audience, whereas individually workers struggled with their own sense of loss, which was economic, emotional and social. While there was a difference in the individual and collective actions of the workers to the factory closure, they were interrelated in terms of their collective desire to protect their dreams for a better future that the waged work in the factory promised them.

Drawing on from the earlier chapters on expectations and lived experiences of work-life in the factory and outside, this chapter illustrates that work in the factory produced new sentiments regarding work (Lal, 2011:559) and a web of social relations were created around the everyday rhythms of work-life centred around the factory. The chapter pays close attention to the 'production of space' (Lefebvre, 1991,1974; Herod, 2001) by workers by everyday practices, ways 'of being', belonging and identity. I have argued that workspace is a complex *emotional space* layered with the relations, feelings and memories that workers attach to it, producing consciousness of 'self worth'/ 'interests', and individual and collective identities. Women expressed 'attachment' to the work and workplace through friendships, attaching 'familial' feelings to the company. Lakshmi once described the company as - 'us, friends, our work, our factory'. The 'us' created through networks of relationships is a powerful binder. For the women, work in the factory gave them confidence and a sense of self, not just as workers but also as independent persons. For instance, Buella had expressed her confidence in walking out of an abusive household because of her wages, even though the process of 'moving out' was not easy and full of personal struggles. Women were able to exercise some degree of autonomy to make their own decisions because of their waged employment. Their everyday practices created 'counter narratives' that Lal (2011:554) termed as - 'repertoire of gender by

challenging conventional plotlines and by chronicling new structures of feeling about work and family’.

However, as stated earlier, the meaning and experiences of work may not be uniform for women, as we see in the different responses of the migrant women from Tamil Nadu and Odisha. In Chapter 7 I showed that various factors such as motivation for migration, terms of employment, nature of work, social ties and relations with homes produced differences in how women imagined work and sought to create spaces/networks that enabled them to take control of their lives in a migrant place. Work can mean multiple things for women and we need to understand these multiplicities of meanings by situating them within specific contexts or circumstances of women’s lives. I used the term ‘loss’ in this Chapter 8 to describe the sentiments expressed by the women to the factory closure that they feared would profoundly impact their material, social and emotional well-being. For the women workers the closure of the factory was not just merely the loss of a job, but also a loss of possibilities for change and transformations. Although I found that meaning or attachment to work did not necessarily transcend into larger politics of class/labour, it did certainly create possibilities of reworking gender relations for the women. As Ngai (2005:63) notes if not ‘abrupt reversal of patriarchal relations’, factory work certainly created space for renegotiations of gender and other social relations for the women. And therein lies the meaning of work for women and how these possibilities diminish with the loss of work. I contend that for women it is often difficult to regain their lost grounds within a patriarchal-capitalist society.

In summation, the thesis argues that even though the actions of women in their attempts to ‘rework’ their personal circumstances may seem ‘enfolded in hegemonic social relations’ (Katz, 2004: 247), waged work offered possibilities for women to renegotiate social relations in the *hope* of a lasting change. The research looked at the individual motivations of women who arrive at a capitalist production space, driven by their own personal circumstances and aspirations, and through everyday relations of work-life inside and outside of the shop floor produce a counter-narrative to the existing gender relations (Lal,

2011). The thesis pays attention to individual stories and tries to create linkages between their lives as waged workers in a formal workspace with their informal nature of work-life outside. It does not claim that women are able to transcend larger politics of gender or class or caste in their everyday practices or politics in the shop floor or living spaces, but does claim that women see possibilities of transforming their personal circumstances through waged work. It is perhaps difficult to come to a definitive conclusion about women's waged employment and their ability to transform the hegemonic relations of patriarchy and capital that marks their lives, but in their everyday as workers in a factory and in their lives as migrants in a city, they do create spaces, perhaps not always of their choice, but one that lets them gain control over their bodies and labour.

#### **4. Implication for labour geography and mapping the future research agenda**

'Unless we know how to recognize people, as they look and feel and experience the world, we'll never be able to help them recognise themselves or change the world. Reading *Capital* won't help us if we don't also know how to read the signs in the street' (Berman, 1999: 167-9).

This thesis is located in the sub-discipline of labour geography. It focuses its lens on workers, as they see themselves, as they imagine their lives, as social-political-geographic agents shaping spaces (relations), which may or may not always be of their choice. Paying attention to the 'small-scale geographies' (McDowell, 2015) of women's lives and labour - their experiences at homes, factory, migrant living spaces, the thesis has tried to link the different spheres inhabited by women and how these play a role in influencing their choices and expectations of work. Calling for troubling the boundaries of wage-unwaged work/productive-reproductive work, I have argued that women develop new 'sentiments' to work through their everyday experiences and practices both inside and outside the factory shop floor. Their everyday agencies are relational to the wider societal structures and need to be reconnected to the social contexts of their lives (Coe, 2013; Coe et al., 2011).

In my research I have drawn upon various strands within human geography (emotional, feminist, economic, labour) and other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, labour history to understand and map women's everyday geographies of work. Engaging with different sets of literature has not only helped me to understand how scholars from different disciplines have engaged with the questions of work, its changing nature and spaces of work, it has also grounded my own approach as I analysed my research findings, trying to comprehend the complexities of women's lives and labour. Based on my own experience of doing research, I argue that labour geographers need to look beyond the factory gates to make linkages between the formal and informal spaces of work-life of women to understand the nuanced politics of labour as relations are 'reworked' within a patriarchal-capitalist society. For future research in labour geography, I suggest paying attention to the 'small-scale geographies' of workers, their life narratives without losing sight of the larger struggles of labour and global processes, to develop a more grounded understanding of worker's agency and actions.

One of the key contributions of the thesis is in its methodological approach in researching labour that has implication both within and outside of the academia. As a scholar-activist, I was committed to taking a research approach that would enable women to tell their stories with 'an intimacy, complexity and force' (Pratt, 2000: 640), offering multiple views of factory workers experiences and dispelling stereotypes. I took a participatory and collaborative approach in working with the women so that they could engage actively in the research project. I was conscious of not 'forcing' participation (Cooke et al, 2001) on the women and letting the process 'flow'. And over a period of time, I developed a friendship with a group of women, who became interested in the project that led to the collaborative outputs and possibilities of working together in the future beyond the PhD project. There were two creative initiatives that emerged from our interactions – a series of radio podcasts and a play script. The use of creative methods and a collaborative approach opened up the space for reflections and conversations that encouraged women to come up with their own ideas,

thoughts and themes that became some of the key themes for the research project. This approach recognised their 'role' in the research process. I felt that taking a creative approach helped me to overcome some of the 'methodological timidity' (Thrift, 2000) in exploring the everyday lived experiences of work-life of women workers who could also actively engage in the process. It resulted in tangible products in the form of radio episodes that contained stories of young women workers, their experiences and their worldviews about work, patriarchy, inequalities in the society that are often not heard in the public. The participatory approach also brought in elements of fun and new energy into the research process where all of us looked forward to producing something together.

Two key insights from this methodological approach that I feel will be significant for future research on labour are: creativity in doing research and focusing on particular sites of research. For instance, I focused on rented 'rooms' where the women stayed in groups outside the factory. These small confined spaces contained multiple layers of relations, experiences and stories of workers that revealed the 'small-scale [everyday] geographies' (McDowell, 2015:2) of labour, connecting lives inside and outside the factory. Focusing on significance of non-workspace nonetheless is an original contribution of this thesis. This methodological approach means a new focus on the everyday, on how labour is as much lived as it is worked, for example by spilling over into social life as is evidenced in the conversations and everyday relations that develop in the rooms. I contend that while the factory floor is an important site of entry for labour geography, so too is an ordinary space like a room.

This approach is useful for both labour researchers and activists. Especially in labour activism, it is useful to think beyond the factory gates and to allow workers to play a key role in creating their own narratives and to help create spaces for voices of workers to be heard. This could be an important tool for labour organising for trade unions and labour organisers. Voices of workers will bring credibility to labour activism and help in garnering larger public support for workers' struggles. Producing and use of popular materials that dispel the

stereotypes, which can be disseminated in forms that are easily and publicly available, are important tools both for labour researchers and activists. For instance, the play script that emerged out of this research could be performed on the streets and theatres to reach out to different sets of audiences. I argue that Participatory Action Research creates possibilities both for labour geographers and activists to create spaces for workers to engage in research and activism in creative and innovative ways. It creates nuanced insights into the lived process of labour and work and recognises labour as an active agent in creating its own space. This thesis makes an important contribution to future research in Labour Geography by taking a methodological approach that both conceptually and in practice recognises the active agency of workers.

The research project hopes to go beyond the academic contribution to inform public and policy debates, especially around women's employment, development and the industrialisation agenda of the state, and also aims to inform the strategies of trade unions and labour activists. The thesis has shown that while on the one hand the state's active promotion of corporate led industrialisation policies promising employment and better future created aspirations and expectations amongst the young workers, on the other hand these policies are short-lived and impact negatively workers who stand to lose not just their livelihoods but even future possibilities of work. There is no corporate accountability or labour-centred exit policy factored into the state's industrial policies when state governments welcome private investments. Therefore, while corporations can quit operations at a point when it's no longer profitable for them to continue, for workers the impact of such closures are profound. They have very limited access to redressal mechanisms in the law or state agencies.

Even for trade unions, these issues should form part of their charter of demands as they agitate for jobs and wages. The research also hopes to inform the unionizing strategies of trade unions, especially in relation to women workers, where the unions and labour organisers need to think beyond the factory gates to appreciate the different spaces and social contexts that motivate and inform women's decisions to enter relations of waged work and its meaning to them

which goes beyond wages. I propose to write academic and non-academic articles and complete the play script (in collaboration with some of the factory workers) that we started during the fieldwork in order to disseminate the findings of the research to a larger audience.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Notes from the factory

I started with the nine-hour general shift (7.30 am-4.30 pm). Every morning I took the 'company' bus along with other management staff and 'in-directs' at 6.15 am from Chennai to come to the factory in Sriperumbadur. It took about an hour on the Chennai-Bangalore national highway on a good day with no traffic jams to reach the factory. In the morning, the traffic was mostly of company buses carrying workers from 'shift in' and 'shift outs'. I made a note of the names of companies written on the buses on my mobile phone - *Daesung, Hanil, Alstom, Sono Koyo Steering, Toshiba, Hwashin, Foxconn, St Gobain, Daechung, BYD, Caparo*, almost all of them Asian multinationals. There were also college buses ferrying students to private engineering or medical colleges dotted all along the highway in the outskirts of Chennai city - *Venkateswara Engineering, Pannimalar Engineering, Saveetha Medical college, King's Engineering*. It was interesting how the landscape changed from engineering colleges to factories as one speeded along the highway.

As the bus entered the SEZ, I noticed the sign board - 'Dos' and 'Don't' inside the zone - 'No photography', 'Display IDs All Time' etc. The bus bay was about 150 meters from the factory. Buses from the other factories inside the zone were also parked here. The factory shifts were arranged in such a way that the workers from different factories did not enter or leave at the same time. There was at least an hour's difference between the shifts between the different factories, therefore there was no opportunity for the workers from different factories to meet inside the zone. Is it a deliberate arrangement or purely logistical one I had wondered? For a place that had over 20,000 workers working in four factories at any given point of time, it was a strangely quiet place and felt deserted once people went inside the factories. The people outside the factories were security guards, bus drivers and gardeners. What struck me everyday was the music that would play on the PA system all along the path from the bus bay to the factory. Usually the music was 'light' Hindustani classical music. A 'friendly' 'relaxing'

atmosphere! There were security barriers and CCTV cameras along the way to the factory and ID cards had to be swiped twice before entering into the factory. Without an ID card it was difficult to move around in any part of the zone or the factory. One needed to swipe the card for almost everything - from getting food in the canteen to entering another part of the factory. Every time the ID card was swiped, a person's location got logged. Therefore movements could be easily tracked inside the factory. From the bus bay to the shop floor, I had to go through three security checks and swipe my ID card twice daily. My ID card said in bold 'External' on top with my photograph and 'Durham University, Chennai, India' written underneath it.

I was given a desk in the Human Resources (HR) room located in the ground floor of the factory building. It is quite a busy and seemingly 'friendly' place. Workers (operators) kept coming in to meet different HR managers. At the corner of the room, there was a photocopying machine, which operators were allowed to use. A side panel in the HR room was covered with photos of cheerful looking workers and managers participating in various company events titled 'Employees Engagement'. Next to the entrance, a bulletin board displayed the monthly data on 'head counts' (workers) illustrated with graphs and pie charts. Behind my desk, an electronic display board played in a continuous loop the monthly 'HR report'. In the first few days in the HR room, I had difficulty hiding my curiosity in reading the data displayed on the board and jotting them down in my little notebook. The display had fairly detailed information on the different categories of workers, male-female percentages in the workforce, rate of attrition, absenteeism, disciplinary actions, 'workers engagements', achievements, *kudos*, *kaizan* etc. In front of the HR room on the side of the corridor was a coffee/tea dispensing machine, which was also quite a busy place where union office bearers (operators), 'in directs' (junior office managers, new trainees) would hang out drinking tea or coffee. I sometimes stood their chatting with the migrant *Oriya* women staffing the coffee machine. They were employees of French multinational Sodexo, the company contracted for cafeteria service by Nokia. I visited them later in their rented rooms.

I was given an apron and special shoes to enter the shop floor. Shop floor HR managers were instructed to accompany me in the production area. In my first few days in the shop floor, I was taken for 'rounds' by the HR managers to 'observe' work. I was introduced as a 'student from London' to the line supervisors (team leaders) who were asked to explain me the work. It was a very odd and 'stiff' arrangement. I was a bit anxious being 'seen' with the management! Some of the supervisors were friendly but some were not and asked me to come the next day knowing well that they would be in a different shift. For the first one week, I 'endured' this process, but as I started spending more time in the shop floor, things became more relaxed, I made some 'friends' amongst the team leaders and I was left unaccompanied many times in the line or sat sitting in the HR cabin on my own. Sometimes I felt a bit comical walking around the shop floor in my white and blue apron, big blue ESD sandals, my notebook and spectacles, searching for a friendly face to chat with. I could never quite make out what the workers thought of me, maybe they didn't really care, but I was sometimes a bit too anxious to explain to them that I was 'not from the management'! I also went to restrooms used by the workers (mangers had separate restrooms) and to cafeteria with women workers in the line. During meal times, even though mangers and operators used the same cafeteria, they sat at different tables. I had quite a few occasions to chat with women workers in the restrooms and cafeteria. They found my Tamil accent very funny and were always curious about my age and marital status. I give below some excerpts from my shop floor notebook:

*Am sitting quietly inside the HR Help Desk in the shop floor. Listening to the sounds. A dull hum of machines and people around me—interrupted by beeps of sensors from the busy conveyer belts, a gentle hiss of a machine. I notice the blinking orange lights at beginning of a line, indicating its working. Have just come back from the ENO line. Was standing and watching the girls work. A dull ache in my lower back, have a slight headache. There is this smell of chemicals, not very strong but subtle. Maybe from the off gases from the plastic components or the solvents in the DT section....*

*Shop floor note book entry, 25/9/2013*

*Went for a 'round' on the shop floor with Janani (HR coordinator). "I go for rounds when I feel sleepy" she had laughed and said. I quickly went to the restroom across the HR Help Desk before going for the 'rounds'. Five or six girls were standing in front of the large mirror panels on the wall above the washbasin. A few were washing their faces with soap, some combing their hair...seemed quite relaxed, chatting with each other. They glanced at me a few times, but didn't pay much attention. A middle aged woman in dark blue saree and shirt, uniform for the Mclelan, the housekeeping company, was sitting on the floor. She could barely keep her eyes open, nodding off to sleep. Every few minutes she raised her eyes to look at the girls in front of the mirror, smiled gently and then her eyes closed for a few minutes. A toilet door opened and I went in.*

*Shop floor note book entry, 17/9/2013*

*Am at the SOP cell. Women and men standing, their heads bent, their hands flying. Each one assembling a part and passing on to the next, rapid movements of hands, non-stop, continuous. High target, 600 phones per hour, 4200 phones per shift. Individuals doing one specific work, but together through continuous movement of their hands they make one phone.*

*Shop floor note book entry, 27/9/2013*

**Appendix 2:** Details of meetings with labour unions and government officials

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interviews with CITU office bearers	6 interviews and many informal interactions
Development commissioner (DC) of Madras Export Processing Zone; Assistant DC MEPZ	2 interview
Secretary, Industries Dept., Govt. of Tamil Nadu	1 interview
Chairman, Tamil Nadu Industrial Guidance & Export Promotion Bureau.	2 interviews

### Appendix 3: Nokia's tax troubles

Date	Event
8/1/2013	Income tax (IT) department 'raids' Nokia's Chennai factory and corporate office.
21/3/2013	IT dept. issues Rs. 2080 crores tax (£219.43 million) demand (later changed to Rs. 2649 crores) on Nokia India Pvt. Limited (NIPL) on charges of evading taxes on 'software royalty' payments that it made to its parent company Nokia Corporation in Finland. Nokia's bank accounts are frozen by IT dept.
	NIPL moved Delhi High Court for dismissal of tax claim
17/3/2013	Delhi high court asks IT dept. to re-examine its tax demand, unfreezes Nokia's bank accounts Delhi high court sends the case back to IT commissioner (Chennai).
31/5/2013	Commissioner of IT (appeals) dismisses NIPL's appeal
3/9/2013	Nokia announces its 'deal' worth (£4.5 billion) to sell its Devices and Services Division to Microsoft including its plant in Chennai
25/9/2013	IT dept. freezes NIPL's movable/immovable assets
9/12/2013	Nokia offers (in Delhi high court) to deposit Rs. 2250 (£237.37) crores into an escrow account if its assets are unfrozen to enable it to complete its 'deal' with Microsoft by transferring its assets to Microsoft.
12/12/2013 and 5/2/2014	Delhi high court agrees to unfreeze Nokia's assets ordering it to deposit Rs. 2250 (£ 237.37) crores in escrow account and under the following condition - "Nokia Finland will be bound by the statement that they shall be jointly liable and shall pay tax demand determined and payable under Section 201/201(1A), interest and penalty thereon. Nokia Finland shall be liable to pay taxes including penalty and interest due and payable by them as determined under the Income Tax Act," the High Court had said.
12/2/2014	Nokia appeals Delhi High Court order (conditions) in Supreme Court of India
	NITS impleads in Supreme Court praying for--
14/2/2014	Tamil Nadu govt. (sales tax dept.) sends sales tax notice worth Rs. 2400 (£253.19) crores to Nokia for not paying taxes on domestic sales of mobile phones produced in the Chennai factory that company claimed to have exported.
14/3/2014	Supreme Court rejects Nokia's appeal and uphold Delhi High Court order
21/3/2014	Nokia moves Madras High Court challenging Tamil Nadu govt's sales tax notice. <a href="http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/now-tamil-nadu-dials-nokia-with-rs-2-400-crore-sales-tax-notice-114032101002_1.html">http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/now-tamil-nadu-dials-nokia-with-rs-2-400-crore-sales-tax-notice-114032101002_1.html</a>
March-April 2014	Nokia announces it will not transfer Chennai factory to Microsoft and will operate the Chennai plant as contract manufacturer for Microsoft

25/4/2014	Nokia completes transfers of all its global operations of Devices and Service division to Microsoft excluding the Chennai factory
14/4/2014	Nokia announces VRS for 4800?? Permanent worker, 700 trainee operators, technicians
1/11/2014	Nokia Chennai plant shuts down

Source: Information compiled from various news papers reports:

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3. [http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/now-tamil-nadu-dials-nokia-with-rs-2-400-crore-sales-tax-notice-114032101002\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/now-tamil-nadu-dials-nokia-with-rs-2-400-crore-sales-tax-notice-114032101002_1.html) accessed on 21/4/2016
4. <http://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/nokia-to-shut-down-its-chennai-factory-from-nov-1/article6478317.ece> accessed on 21/4/2016