

# A reflexive account of participatory video action research: The stories that middle-class women in urban India don't want to share

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# Context

- Research Project:
  - **Middle Class Educated Women in India: caught between dichotomies of globalization and a patriarchal social matrix**
- Reflect on the methodology of this research project
  - chose *participatory video* as the main research method.
  - a group of middle-class, university-educated women in urban India: feminist perspective
- Theoretically at crossroads of education, globalization, and class mobility
- India: social and economic transformation
  - poised to embark on a dramatic transformation: with a burgeoning middle class
  - the headlines of India's growth are all about consumer markets from high-end cars to designer clothes
  - and a potential middle class (MC) of half a billion in the next two decades which will offer immense economic opportunities
- What has this meant for MC women?
  - profound changes such as substantially increased access to education, a wide range of professions, technology and consumer goods
  - impact has been dichotomous in that despite higher overall education and employment levels
  - traditional influences of a patriarchal system have become more deleterious
  - education and professional advancement of women have not led to enlightened social attitudes and practices
  - instead - further entrenchment of oppressive traditions.



# Objectives of the research

- Aimed to shed light on the challenges that women face
  - in the rapidly changing social order brought by global markets
  - in hopes of informing social policy in Indian society
  - increase in the education of women:
    - meant access to a wide range of professions & consumer goods
    - technology jobs and service industries attract a lot of women
    - large number of urban MC women join the information technology (IT) sector
      - It is the fastest growing sector and women have consumer power like never before
      - Upwardly mobile urban MC women- gender and class work together to construct cultural nationalism
      - New India is global in scope yet Indian in essence – make a *global Indianness, specially for women*
        - Delicate balance of Indian home life/ global professional life across contexts of personal struggle



# Research Questions

- MC can mean a very diverse group of people:
  - Our focus on the upwardly mobile groups because they face more contradictions than the established educated upper middle class
  - The large part of the fast-growing middle class is from the hitherto less affluent groups
  - Class structure is highly stratified and rigid
- Our target: female IT professionals
  - Q: how do they deal with the paradox between their positive perceptions of empowerment, earned through education and employment, and the confinements of preexisting patriarchal norms (especially in working class backgrounds);
  - Q: how do they locate themselves in a situation where they have higher education and salaries with which they live MC lives, but have family backgrounds where their parents are working class?
  - Q: how do they negotiate work and family and understand gender relationships in Indian society



# Methodological Framework

- Aimed to recruit 10 female IT professionals in two metropolitan cities
  - Each had undergone radical socioeconomic restructuring
  - Planned to contact various IT sectors to select 5 women (1st target group) in each city
  - Then to identify five more in a snowball sampling method
  - By asking the first group to suggest someone else who might be appropriate for and willing to participate in the study,
  - We believed, we could better track the population of research participants—women who come from very modest economic backgrounds, but had earned university degrees and are working in IT sectors.
  - We also believed that personal acquaintance might facilitate the participants' engagement in this study.
- Designed research methods in 2 phases: focus group and participatory video
- 2nd phase: topics raised by the participants in focus group discussions.



# Initial Research Design

- Initially, we chose *participatory video* as the main research method
  - a cutting-edge visual method
    - involves research participants in creating a video about their experiences or concerns together
    - maximize community engagement (White, 2003a; Yang, 2013)
    - gained popularity as an instrument for social inquiry in multiple disciplines, such as education, public health, and gender studies
    - potential for changing people's lives and their communities (Mitchell, de Lange, & Milne, 2012)
- Using participatory video
  - we intended to invite research participants to the process of data generation, analysis, and distribution
  - give voice to their experience in collaboration with them
  - the implication of participatory video from a feminist outlook is documented in Nair and White (2003)
    - they engaged a group of women in rural India in investigating community challenges through documentary video
    - compared a researcher-created video ('poor me' story) and the participant-generated video ("I am Me" story):
      - "When women could tell their own story, they carefully portrayed the reality of their daily life, without pity or apology" (p. 211).



# Methodological Barriers

- Based on literature on participatory video and the nature of the topic
  - Believed that focus groups should precede the participatory videos
- But we encountered serious challenges from the phase of recruitment to subsequent stages
- 1<sup>ST</sup> barrier emerged at the time of recruitment: it was very difficult to track down the population.
  - turned out to be interrelated with the very nature of the target population: *They opt not to talk about their social class backgrounds to people they interact with on a daily basis, including their colleagues, friends, and other social acquaintances*
  - *Individual backgrounds (critical in selecting the participants) were unspoken as a norm, so it was virtually impossible to track down the participants*



# Need to modify our methods

- Facing this unforeseen challenge, had to modify the recruitment process
  - Selected participants mainly through PI's personal contacts.
  - Snowball method did not work (same reason)
  - Through the contacts, we selected 14 participants
  - But did not get IT professionals with high salaries
  - Our participants were indeed upwardly mobile but holding jobs that paid much less than jobs in IT sectors
  - Among them are school teachers, bank workers, NGO workers
  - They constitute the work force of lower-middle class
  - Their parents and grandparents through generations have had no or low-paid jobs, namely as house maids, guards, or chauffeurs and had little education
  - The participants, however, are all university-educated
  - Most of them benefited from the affirmative action taken by the Indian government and some had attended highly privileged schools through the quota system.
  - They have entered the middle class by virtue of getting the jobs that only educated women can access.





- Due to their work schedules and home responsibilities they had very little time to meet
- Focus groups were not possible to arrange due to busy schedules
  - collaborative video making was not possible
- We asked individual participants to record on video their daily lives or monologue as if writing a diary
  - Video diary would give them voice and enable them to reconstruct self-images
  - But they opted out of this video method. When asked to record their daily lives, the participants' common response
    - they are willing to tell their stories anonymously, but do not want to record them in video. One of them said that her mother would throw her out of house if she saw her daughter recording anything negative about her experience at home
  - Some agreed to be video-taped but were not successful in unlocking their reflections:
    - Skype worked better



# The need for Participatory Visual research in Women's Studies

- Despite the potential of participatory video suggested in the literature
  - as a feminist method to access or instigate women's experiences and feelings deeply etched in their daily lives (Waite & Conn, 2012)
  - it was extremely challenging to engage the participants in the process of video making—either collective or individual—in this project
- the series of methodological barriers we dealt with
  - strongly connected with the nature of the target participant group situated in Indian society – women from working class backgrounds in middle class mileaux
  - participants do not want to share their experience of upwardly class mobility obtained through education
  - uncomfortable about their background, they choose to remain silent about it.



# The need for flexibility

- The interview data suggest
  - the obstruction, once considered impediment in data generation, was a necessary process to negotiate with the participants about research methods
  - by resisting focus group and video making, they raised an implicit objection to the pre-planned research methods
  - to respect the choice they made and protect their privacy, it was inevitable for us to modify the research methods of the project
  - consequently, the manner of their participation in this project may be considered less active and participatory than the form of participation frequently featured in the literature on participatory research
  - yet, it is active in the sense that they played a pivotal role in making research methods more culturally appropriate
  - in conducting research in participatory framework, inquiring into participants' non-participation is as important as their participation because failing to do so can lead to discard potentially significant aspects of the research (Milne, 2012).



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*Thank you!*