The 'digital others'

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BANGALORE enjoys the distinction of being called the IT capital of India. The city has become an attractive destination for all kinds of employment in the last three decades, enticing different classes of people from across India. The opportunities for work in the city have multiplied enormously due to its rapid growth and socio-economic transformation, driven especially by the IT (information technology) industry. Along with the global information technology industry, new kinds of jobs and modes of work (both 'formal' and 'informal') have emerged, especially in low-end support services such as hospitality, housekeeping, security and transport. The city's expanding service economy has attracted migrants from small towns and rural areas of Karnataka and different parts of India.

While the software services sector has dominated popular and academic discourses on the work culture of Bangalore, in this essay I focus on a different segment of the city's service sector and its diverse forms and modes of work, which are conspicuous but hardly discussed. Like work in the IT and ITES (IT enabled services) industries, the work culture I describe also revolves around digital technology, but of a different kind: the modest, yet the most desired media object of contemporary times – mobile phones. The workers who deploy this technology and their media practices are quite different from middle class engagements with digital technologies.

Popular and academic narratives about Bangalore have been centred so much on the IT industry and the new consumer culture that this image has become synonymous with the city itself. Similarly, both academic and popular media discourses on leisure and recreation in the city also focus on the same category of corporate executives, the new middle class, and the affluent elite. Malls and multiplexes have received the most attention as the prime new spaces of leisure and entertainment, perhaps because of their glaring visibility. Such large real estate developments not only dominate the visual landscape of Bangalore but also our mental space, shaping how we perceive and understand change. However, changes in both work culture and recreational life in the city are more far-reaching and varied than what is indicated by these obvious shifts in consumption practices or large-scale infrastructure development over the last couple of decades.

The majority of workers in Bangalore today are employed in the service sector, which includes growing industries such as transport, security services, housekeeping, and hospitality, as well as high-end software services, business process out-sourcing and the like. These low paid and precarious jobs have attracted workers from across India, from Orissa and the northeastern states to Rajasthan and Kerala.[1] The service economy consequently has become 'ethnicized', as people from certain regions tend to predominate in particular kinds of jobs – Odia and Bihari migrants in security services, Kannadigas in transport, young men and women from the Northeast in hospitality and personal care services, and so on.

Many new migrants have started small businesses, such as 'hotels' or eating places with mess facilities catering to the diverse culinary requirements of cosmopolitan urban life. Many of these migrants are men who have come to the city from rural areas in search of a steady alternative source of income to supplement earnings from agriculture. They usually migrate without their families and live in accommodation provided by their employers. In addition, a significant section of this new workforce are youth in search of temporary employment to fund their higher studies. These diverse categories of migrant workers provide a range of support services to the city's burgeoning middle class and the corporate sector, enabling the smooth functioning of the city.

However, we know very little about their everyday lives. Without a detailed understanding of work and everyday lives of this section of the urban workforce, our discussions on urban space and the city's changing economy and social fabric remains incomplete. In this essay, I fill this gap in a small way by drawing on my field research among autorickshaw and taxi drivers, security guards, cooks, helpers and cleaners in hotels, and others, showing how the arrival of mobile phones in the last decade has changed how they experience work and life in the city.

The working conditions of the categories of workers I study differ starkly from conventional service jobs such as in high-end retail shops or restaurants. Personnel in such establishments usually have fixed working hours and are strictly supervised. In contrast, the types of workers I discuss here (such as drivers and security guards) often work independently, may have long and 'flexible' working hours, and consequently usually have long stretches of idle time during their 'work hours'. For them, occupying themselves during this empty time is very important, especially for those who work at night such as security guards. Since the advent of mobile phones, it is these devices that usually provide such workers with the entertainment needed for 'time-pass', to fill their long hours of non-work or 'waiting' while at work.[2]

For example, security guards usually work 16 hours a day with night shifts every alternate day. During night shifts they have little work to do once they lock the gates and ensure that the place is secure. Then they are faced with the problem of filling the empty hours. As a security guard narrated to me:

'I need at least two films to spend the night and keep myself awake till 3 a.m. I watch every film I get from other guards at least four times. Whenever I get bored of watching the same stuff, I visit a person whom I have befriended in the nearby mobile phone shop. He not only downloads old Odia films that I like, but also loads them on my phone. I don't know how to download and I don't have a touch phone.'

Similarly, cooks and helpers who work in small eateries usually work from 8 a.m. till 10.30 p.m., and are expected to stay at the workplace although they are busy mainly during breakfast, lunch and dinner timings. Since many of them live in or near their workplaces, they are vulnerable to

constant exploitation by their employers with little time left for themselves. One of the cleaners I interviewed mentioned how *sahib* (the employer) keeps 'pestering' him with odd jobs unrelated to his work and makes him run personal errands. But such workers are often not fully occupied during their working hours with cooking or cleaning; hence it is not unusual to see them enjoying entertainment sessions, watching a regional language film or listening to songs as they cut vegetables or when there are no customers to serve.

Bangalore's transportation system is heavily dependent on independent autorickshaw and taxi drivers, especially because the state-owned BMTC (Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation) buses do not operate between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. Moreover, public buses and the new metro system do not connect all areas of Bangalore, opening up opportunities for private players. The number of private taxi and autorickshaw drivers (both independent drivers and those who work for travel companies such as Meru or aggregators such as Ola and Uber) operating in the city has increased enormously in the last decade, catering to the transport needs of an ever-growing urban population.

Given the large numbers of vehicles on the road, taxi and autorickshaw drivers usually spend a lot of time waiting for passengers. When a passenger hires the taxi for the entire day the driver spends much of his time waiting. Taxi and autorickshaw drivers who work for Ola or Uber have considerable idle time when they are online and available, depending on the time of day. Moreover, when an auto driver or taxi driver works at night, there is more spare time with fewer passengers available than during the day. As an autorickshaw driver explained:

'Twenty years ago, Bangalore did not have an active night life. The city used to shut down by 8 or 9 in the evening. However with the coming of IT people, the late night in the city is lively. I work during nights as I can charge double at night. Usually I get fewer passengers but the ones I get are totally worth the diesel spent. Most are long distance passengers. But the biggest challenge is to be on beats around pubs, railway and bus stations. The silence of the night puts one to sleep I listen to songs on my mobile phone while on a beat or driving back after I drop a passenger. Without mobile phones it feels very lonely especially at night.'

Thus, my research revealed that mobile phones are predominantly used as entertainment devices – for watching video clips and films, listening to songs or radio, and so on, in addition to their uses for communication and work (in the case of drivers). Perhaps because they depend so heavily on these devices, most informal sector service workers I interviewed invest heavily in their phones. Many auto drivers have fancy phones, and those who do not know how to use smartphones have good feature phones with multimedia options. Several security guards had loaded their phones with music albums and films in their own regional languages, which they source from their home states as it is difficult to procure in Bangalore. When workers visit their home towns or villages, their friends from the same region request them to bring back the latest films on memory cards along with local foods.

The more tech-savvy workers, especially young men who have come to Bangalore to earn money for their education, have the know-how to download content which they then circulate among their friends. Younger workers also teach older ones how to navigate the features on the phone. Those who are not able to download what they want and are unable to get it from their peers, may pool in money to buy content from mobile phone shops where they can get a regular supply of films and music in their own language. In particular, they approach shops where they have friends from their own region working.

Many small mobile phone shops in Bangalore run this extra-legal multimedia content business on the side, although it is not apparent to casual customers. These shops load 'pirated' films, songs and video clips on mini-SD cards (memory cards) and thumb drives which they sell for a small price. Some workers also bring film and music DVDs and get the content copied onto their memory cards for a minimal charge.

Not only have mobile phones shaped the way people work in Bangalore's service economy, they are also central to how they experience their leisure time. Many migrant workers do not have access to any other source of entertainment, especially since their living and working conditions do not allow them to move around the city easily or often. They are mostly restricted to the crowded rooms and shacks where they stay, or to their workplaces where they work for 12 to 16 hours a day. Some do not even have weekly holiday. For mobile workers such as autorickshaw and taxi drivers, their mobility itself is a constraint to engage in other activities as they are plying the streets for 12 to 14 hours a day.

Moreover, while the population of service and informal sector workers is growing in Bangalore, spaces of recreation and leisure are becoming more and more exclusionary. Although there are no statutory restrictions for people to enter the new 'public' spaces of leisure in the city, but many such places (malls, multiplexes) are not welcoming for working class people, who in any case cannot afford to visit them on a regular basis. Several scholars have written about the sanitization and gentrification of urban spaces, trends that may deprive the working class not only of places to live but also opportunities for leisure and recreation.[3]

Although Bangalore has a rich cinematic culture and screens films in several Indian languages other than Kannada, especially Tamil and Telugu, in addition to Bollywood and Hollywood films, the existing cinema theatres cannot cater to the city's ethnically and linguistically diverse population that is also spatially spread across the city. The Majestic and Gandhi Nagar area (the heart of the transport system) is the hub of Kannada cinema, while Shivaji Nagar remains a popular destination among Tamil film enthusiasts. Over time, many of the single screen theatres closed down as they could not compete with the multiplexes that have appeared across the city, or because their land was too valuable to house only an old movie theatre. This means that the entertainment sites that earlier catered to all classes of people are disappearing.[4]

Under these circumstances, many workers resort to mass media, especially television, to satisfy their need for entertainment. While this is true for those living with families or who have their own living space (however small), migrant workers who live in small shacks or rooms provided by their employers cannot even access television. Such men huddle around mobile phone screens at night to watch movies. Pornographic videos have special value for such groups of male colleagues and friends. When they do not want to watch films together, individuals may start playing games and withdraw into the mobile phone. As one security guard said, 'It is my lifeline to everything that connects me to home in a city of strange people and languages.' Such workers are so reliant on mobile phones that they cannot imagine their everyday lives without them.

Corresponding to these changes, informal media markets of Bangalore, especially those in the Majestic area have witnessed a transformation by increasingly catering to the demand for digital multimedia content by this new working class population. Almost all the shops in the National Market area which, till early 2000s, used to sell pirated DVDs of various language films, have been replaced by mobile phone shops offering used phones and mobile phone accessories and 'pirated' content, as described above.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, National Market (a market for pirated or black market goods like Palika Bazaar in Delhi) used to cater to the cosmopolitan interests of middle class cinephiles. Such markets provided access to scarce international films and other media content. Now this segment of consumers procures content from Internet sources such as online peer groups and torrent communities, from where they download films and music, while the erstwhile 'grey' market places have transformed into hubs for mobile phones and digital content business. There is also a thriving second-hand market for used smartphones in the area, while basic feature phones (sometimes even used ones) continue to be in demand, particularly from lower economic groups. Mobile phones have become a universal replacement for all sorts of media goods which were once sold in these informal markets, among others, imported radios, VCRs and DVD players.

Thus, the new consumption practices of working class consumers in Bangalore have brought about far-reaching changes in terms of media goods, media content, media markets, and the modes of circulation. Popular 'pirated' vernacular content has replaced international media content, representing a shift in the social consumer base of these markets, as affluent and middle class consumers go online to procure entertainment goods while working class consumers access different networks via mobile phones and mobile phone shops.

In summary, mobile phones form an entire media infrastructure which is replacing the earlier media infrastructure of the city, particularly for informal service sector workers. The cinematic culture in Bangalore has changed drastically, becoming linguistically and ethnically diverse with the widespread access to digital infrastructure via mobile phones. The parallel changes in the informal media market has both built on and catalyzed this transformation. Thus the digital

culture of India's Silicon Valley can no longer be discussed only in terms of IT and high-end tech work. The heterogeneous use of mobile phones as a digital medium by low-end service sector workers compels us to revisit received ideas about work, leisure and technology in the city.

Footnotes:

1. See: K.V. Ramaswamy and T. Agarwal, Services-led Growth, Employment and Job Quality: A Study of Manufacturing and Service Sectors in Urban India, Indira Gandhi Institute for Development Research, Mumbai, 2012 (unpublished report); S. Roy Chowdhury, et. al., Migration, Informal Work and Welfare: A Policy Perspective on Karnataka's Cities, Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore, 2013 (unpublished report).

2. Many workers I interviewed, especially migrant security guards, mentioned that they cannot remember a time when they did not have mobile phones with them during work hours. Indeed, this new workforce emerged around the same time as mobile phones became accessible to most sections of urban society.

3. For example, see A. Athique and D. Hill, *The Multiplex in India: A Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure*. Routledge, London and New York, 2010. The authors discuss the rise of multiplex cinema under state patronage through tax exemptions and their adverse effects on single screen theatres.

4. Lakshmi Srinivas has written about the experience of various classes of people who frequented such single-screen theatres in Bangalore. See L. Srinivas, 'Cinema Halls, Locality and Urban Life', *Ethnography* 11(1), 2010, pp. 189-205.