Chapter 4
Methodology

Women have contributed to the economy by simultaneously being an inexpensive source of labour and consumers of products. With increasing education and employment of women several demographic and social indicators like age at marriage, participation in decision making, autonomy, mobility, access to resources have undergone change. The increase in age at marriage, greater involvement in decision making, freedom of movement and greater access to resources enables women to achieve higher standards of education which make them suitable for the global market. The exposure to new work environment without restrictions and control and economic independence gives these women a prospect to rework their identities.

The objective of the study is to unravel the various levels and processes of how women exercise their agency. The study will also examine the interplay of economic and cultural factors and how cultural changes are embedded in each other. This entails understanding of the multilayered process which can only be understood by the subjective meaning of the agent’s perspective in their context. The present study renders itself to a qualitative enquiry as the emphasis is on the creation of subjective meaning and explanation of the process. Qualitative research techniques have guided the methodology of the study. In order to understand the motivations behind the actions of individuals, qualitative inquiry was best suited as it allows us to look deeply into a problem, often with a small sample size (Bonache and Brewster (2001:146) and Ferner et al. (2004). Since the emphasis is on interpreting the meanings which single women who have migrated from smaller cities and towns to work in the BPO and media industry in Mumbai give
to their day to day experiences, qualitative research enabled me to understand how these women create meaning, how they explain their thoughts, decisions and activities, and how they behave. Also an effort has been made to examine in depth women’s subjective interpretation of use of their agency while navigating through personal, professional and social relationships in physical absence of a family structure.

Before starting the field work, several discussions and readings and also practical considerations suggested that snow ball sampling could be the only way to arrive at a sample for the study. Snowball sampling can be placed within a wider set of link-tracing methodologies (Spreen, 1992) which seek to take advantage of the social networks of identified respondents to provide a researcher with an ever-expanding set of potential contacts (Thomson, 1997). This process is based on the assumption that a ‘bond’ or ‘link’ exists between the initial sample and others in the same target population, allowing a series of referrals to be made within a circle of acquaintance (Berg, 1988). Since the aim of the study is primarily explorative, qualitative and descriptive, snowball sampling offered practical advantages (Hendricks, Blanken and Adriaans, 1992). Snowball sampling is used most frequently to conduct qualitative research, primarily through interviews. Also snowball sampling may be applied as a methodology for making inferences about a population of individuals who have been difficult to enumerate through the use of descending methods such as household surveys (Snijders, 1992; Faugier and Sergeant, 1997).

Since the respondents of the study were difficult to identify from the universe of women employed in both – BPO and media sector and I did not have any direct access to them either through their professional network or through their workplace, I assumed that snowball sampling
would help me overcome the problem of concealed population. Also snowball techniques, can be used to work upwards and help us locate those on the ground who are needed to fill in the gaps in our knowledge on a variety of social contexts. In this sense snowball sampling can be considered as an alternative or as a complementary strategy for attaining more comprehensive data on a particular research question (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Therefore, snow balling was adopted to arrive at the sample which will give enough variation and heterogeneity on parameters like – job profile, education, city or town of origin, class, caste, religion and age.

After making in-roads and getting contacts for the first two interviews, I was sure of my choice of snow ball sampling technique for the study. However at the end of the interview, both the respondents were asked if they know someone who is also a migrant and is working with them or is living with them, to which the reply was in affirmative. The follow up question to this query was ‘would you want to refer your friend colleague acquaintance for this study’. Both the respondents after admitting they know someone who is a migrant and is working in BPO or media industry in Mumbai and also that there are a many girls like them, were not sure about sharing the contacts or referring me to the next-in-chain. This lead me to ask them the reasons for their apprehensions, which they tried evading at first and on persistent effort assured me of sharing their friend’s coordinates, but only after taking the friend’s consent. Since it is more ethical to receive an individual’s contact details after receiving her consent, I agreed to follow up with the respondents. Even after several follow ups, when I did not get any details, I as a researcher started to question my ability to assure them of confidentiality and their lack of faith in me. It was only when one of them in our later meeting said
'It’s nice to know that there’s someone who’s beyond my professional and personal network of people, with whom I can share my life, without the fear of spoiling my image. It’s quite reassuring coz I know you will never spill the beans.'

I realized that my respondents were treating these interviews as a train journey where they were talking to another individual, who showed interest in their lives and their opinions, but in no way was threatening their social or professional position. The focus on them as people in control opened them up to talk about issues which often at the end of the interview would be described as ‘things I have never told anyone, not even my best friend’. However, this left me with no leads to get in touch with single migrant women whom they know working in either BPO or media industry.

The next plan was to try and gain entry through the Human Resources department, since they have all details of their employees. This seemed to be a Herculean task, as even after writing and meeting with the HR officials of several BPOs and media houses, most of them did not respond or the ones who did out rightly rejected the proposal, as they are not allowed to share their employee database. Here I must mention my experience of the security systems which are employed to control and monitor the work of the employees. Although the spaces outside the office are buzzing with young men and women, the office itself is quiet and restraining. No one can enter the office space without registering themselves at the reception and have to visibly wear the Visitor’s card around their necks. It is mandatory for the employees in international BPOs to deposit their bags at the counter and while at work do not have access to any social interaction not even through mobile phones. There is constant and high surveillance through cameras, computer technology and the hierarchical arrangement within the organisation. This description conjures up an image of ‘electronic panopticons’ and ‘cyber sweatshops’ as described
by Fernie and Metcalf (1998), and these features make this population invisible and difficult to reach.

In a scenario where the respondents are single migrant women who work in an industry which does not welcome any prying eyes and are confidential about their employee database, I was left with no scientifically robust method of sampling my respondents. The only alternate I could imagine was to ask every woman who comes out of the office, to assess whether she was eligible to be part of my study. It was easy to identify catchment areas of BPO industry as the government has developed several ‘Special Economic Zones’ (SEZ) to promote BPO industry in Mumbai. Similarly most corporate media houses are stationed in and around a few localities in the city.

I decided to take the un-tread path, in a city which does not take kindly to women loitering without a purpose (Phadke, 2005). Even before I reflect on the women working in the BPOs, I would like to reflect on how I treaded the ‘forbidden’ path of ‘loitering’ in the area. In this highly vibrant scenario, I had assumed that my presence in the area would not be evident, as it was not difficult to blend with the crowd; but this lasted only for two days. The recurring visits and men’s gaze compelled me to appropriate certain markers. I confess that I consciously appropriated these markers to communicate a social position to gain acceptance among the working crowd. I started carrying a notebook and a pen to avoid the gaze of the vendors and also to justify my presence outside the workplace. As one of the vendors after getting a satisfactory answer from me exclaimed:

‘...hum soche aap yahan naukri dudhne ati hain.’ (I thought you are searching for a job here)
The inference was a result of the assessment based on appearance i.e. western dressing, English speaking, material of utility and also interaction with the BPO crowd. As Speier (1935: 51) argued ‘for honor to arise it is essential that there be bearers, bestowers and observers of honor’. Although gender and class (along with other factors like religion, power) simultaneously work towards assigning ‘status’, while individuals try to assign ‘perceptual cues’, the class one assigns is subjective and not discrete (Lenski, 1954).

While I was loitering around the BPO hub, for ‘recruiting’ my respondents, in the suburbs of Mumbai, it was evident that women in the industry have a very special place. During certain time bands there were either equal or more number of women on the streets. Often I would be around the area from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m., and it was interesting to observe how identities and status are performed or as Form and Stone 1 7 say ‘appropriated’. I chose to ‘loiter’ between this time, because during this time there are maximum number of people who are either in the transition (change of shifts) or are out because they have been allowed the breaks. Most companies have 2 shifts of 8 hours, with a total of 1 hour break allowed during the day. The precious ‘1 hour’ is divided into 3 – half an hour lunch break, and two 15minutes breaks. Often the breaks are subjected to the volume of work and also discretion of the manager.

While I was observing women at the BPO hub, I realized that it was relatively easy to differentiate between married and unmarried women. Most married women would have a definite marker of marriage, but it was interesting how these markers have also turned into fashion statements (part of popular imagery used by most TV serials) for middle class women who are part of the workforce. Several women were seen wearing a big bunch of red and white
bangles ‘chooda’ which is usually worn only by newly married brides in certain north Indian communities along with ‘mangalsutra’- black beads with a pendant worn by married women. None of the women wore traditional ‘mangalsutra’, rather used them as exquisite pieces of adornment, worn discreetly to mark them as married but overall dressing makes them part of an undifferentiated lot of young women in western clothes. Infact, these markers of marriage helped me in identifying the respondents and eliminating those who were apparently not single.

Also, it is interesting to note the change of shift brought in a change in demographics of the BPO hub. Women working in night shifts were largely women without markers of marriage. It would not be a fallacy to assume that most of them were single. This also indicates that single women find it easier to adjust to flexible hours of work and demands of job.

In the view of lack of access through formal channels, I had to resort to talking to women without markers of marriage randomly on the streets. Although this process was not scientific in any way, but it was developed in its natural setting, where I established direct contact with the subjects and situations under investigation. Simultaneously the design was constantly open to new focuses, constructions and interpretations and reiterations which are characteristic of qualitative methodology. At the same time, I conceived the technical part as an accommodative element within the multiple and often conflictive realities that I sought to explain. Furthermore, it was meant to be sensitive to the interaction between the researcher and the subjects of the study.

Although there was suspicion about my intentions, it was not difficult to get the respondents’ consent for scheduling the interviews, by establishing my identity as a student. My appearance -
age, western casual style of dressing, use of English language and my institutional identity card had considerable influence on their decision of agreeing to be interviewed. However, it would be misleading to acclaim appearance as the only reason for the respondents’ consent. To ensure that the relationship between researcher and the researched is non-hierarchical, I acknowledged these women as agents of change and bestowed them with admiration for being able to break the shackles of a restrictive society and also gave them the context of the study and the ways in which it will help build knowledge around issues related to them. As one of them expressed her desire to be part of the study by saying

‘Anything for the sake of knowledge’ (Gitanjali, 32 years, Voice and Accent Trainer)

My identity as a student and dependence on them for completion of my degree helped them gauge their contribution and gave them presumably a sense of power. I was able to make them more comfortable by acknowledging and respecting their right to decide the place and time of interview. They seemed assured by the end of a five to ten minutes face to face conversation with me, as they shared their mobile number for setting up the meeting along with specifying the most conducive time to receive a call.

Since my relationship was not mediated through any formal channel, I believe it was easier for me to gain trust, openness and willingness of these women to share their lives voluntarily, without any coercion. The direct contact and access which I had to them without mediation was based on being ‘like us’ as some of them expressed. The shared characteristics gave them more confidence in me as compared to oath of confidentiality (Finch, 1993).
For some, it was a sense of *déjà vu* but with a role reversal. Owing to their job they often find themselves in a position of powerlessness, within the work space and also outside because of the way their experiences are socially constructed. They are seen as victims who are exploited by the multinational companies (Basi, 2009; Ehrenreich and Hochshild 2002); but this was their chance to be in control and voice their opinions and their experience.

Interview is a method which provides factual information along with the meaning which the actors entail (Kvale, 1996). Interviews help in gaining insight into lives of actors without getting an opportunity to observe their everyday lives closely. The interviews detail out the context along with substantive content which the actor reveals. The interviews seek to create and construct meaning and understand personal position of the actor with reference to ‘what everybody knows’ Cornish, 200 . Interview helps in understanding of the construction of interviewee’s perception on themselves and their world through their lens Farr, 1 2 Duveen Gilligan, 2004).

However, interviews are critiqued for its question answer approach in which power lies with the interviewer as the structure, themes, language and sequence is decided by her (Bauer, 1996). As Bauer (1996) suggests in his paper on Narrative interview

‘*To elicit a less imposed and therefore more valid account of the informant's perspective the influence of the interviewer should be minimal, and the setting should be arranged to achieve this minimizing of interviewer influence. The Narrative Interview goes further than any other method down in avoiding restructuring in the interview; it is the most consequent attempt to go beyond the questions-response-type interview. The narrative interview uses a specific type of everyday communicative interaction, namely story-telling and listening, to reach this objective. The rules of engagement restrict the interviewer to avoid restructuring of events/problems as far as possible.*’ (Bauer, 1996; pg. 2-3)

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The assumption in narrative analysis is that the interviewee’s use of spontaneous language reflects her perspective and her ‘world view’ and the language which she uses reproduces and reveals that world view. The narrative interviews which I conducted with my respondents did not prescribe a language, but the respondents had already chosen their preferred language as English, in their introductory meeting with me. Therefore, I decided to use a mix of English and Hindi with them depending on how and in which language they decided to narrate their life story. The interview guide was semi structured which specified the broad areas of questioning along with some specific questions which were critical to seek answers to the research questions. The broad areas covered questions around women, their family, workplace, romantic relations, management of finance, aspirations:

- Background information on their families, native place of residence, education and work, living and working conditions in Mumbai
- Reasons for taking decisions related to the above mentioned aspects of their lives and other influences on their decision making ability
- Roles, aspirations, priorities, social support systems, romantic liaisons, barriers and challenges of negotiating the city and strategies to overcome barriers

Simultaneously women referred to a broader spectrum of issues related to gender relations. The topic guide provided only a starting point for the discussions. The narrative interview which entails short questions, acted as a trigger for the respondents to narrate their life story, and reconstruct their experiences of moving out of their natal family, entry in an unknown city and industry and their negotiations at every step. Thus, interviews took a story telling format with very limited interference from me. The interference came seldom, in form of short questions to
fill the gaps in the narrative or to understand the intent behind their actions. The interviews turned out to be very detailed life stories of women which lasted for an average of four to five hours. I must admit that although it gives an impression that the interviews were lengthy and strenuous; but contrary to that most women admitted having enjoyed the long conversation.

While seeking an appointment, I would clearly mention that the first session would be about 2 hours and depending on their convenience we will plan a second session based on the need of it. I was completely taken by surprise, when my first respondent invited me to her paying guest (PG) accommodation and then spent almost 7 hours discussing several of the issues mentioned above, till her PG mate knocked to remind her that they need to get some work done. The subsequent interviews also extended to anywhere between 2.5 hours to 6 hours, even when I offered to stop the interview after about 2 hours. Out of 30, 27 respondents were happy to share not just their experiences but also intimate details of their life, extending over several cups of coffee and lunch or dinner. I am confident of data quality because of the contributions made by my respondents in terms of time, detailing their lives and also trusting me with personal and intimate information. Bauer (1996) suggests that the length of the narrative interview correlates highly with the variety and substantive content.

Although the interview broadly followed the pattern of narrative interview which follow four phases – Initialization, main narration, questioning and small talk, it was most often found that main narration and questioning were intertwined. The respondents had to be encouraged in sharing their experiences and gain insight into the intent behind their actions and decisions.
However, most often this encouragement was given with non-verbal or short verbal cues like then, how, why.

As mentioned earlier, almost all respondents gave a very positive feedback on their experience of being interviewed. This was part of the small talk which ensued at the end of the interview. Almost all wanted to know some details about my life – education, marital status, why this study; and termed their experience as fun and great to talk to someone about issues which they can never discuss with anyone.

As in qualitative studies sampling is theoretical and tries to achieve a heterogeneous sample from within the specified population, I also wanted to achieve that. However, since the population to study was difficult to reach it was difficult to formulate a strategy to arrive at a sample which was diverse and had scope for variation. Although the aim was never to arrive at a representative sample, I believed that if my sample is random I would be able to achieve the required heterogeneity and should be able to stop as I saturate the sample and also start getting repetitive information. The sample which I achieved was not representative of the single migrant women working in the industry, but surely was reflective of the mix of demographics. In my sample of 30 single migrant women – 23 were Hindus, 3 Muslims and 4 Christians from all parts of the country – Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, Karnataka, Kashmiri (migrated to Bihar), Goa, Gujarat, Orissa, West Bengal, Manipur and Maharashtra; varied job profiles – customer care executive, trainer, training manager, HR manager, programmer, analyst, executive producer, line producer, assistant director, creative manager; diverse educational backgrounds – graduation, post-graduation, diploma, vocational course.
I hope to provide in depth understanding of the narratives in my sample. The interpretation of these narrations remain embedded in and refer to the context where the data has been collected and therefore not meant to be generalized or directed from the particular to the universal. The validity of the results derives from the interaction and interdependence between the researcher and the subjects under investigation, leading to a shared perception and mutual legitimization.

Since the interviews were conducted by me, I did the transcriptions of the interviews personally after each interview. The transcripts then became the playing ground for me. I started with colour coding around emerging themes and constructing the coding frame which opened up the data for interpretation. The content in next chapters is based on interpretive analysis of the data.