Chapter 1

Introduction

Liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 initiated economic reforms which had profound effect not just on economy, but also social life. The focus of the economic restructuring was on opening for international trade and investment, deregulation, initiation of privatisation, tax reforms, inflation-controlling measures, increasing foreign direct investment, reducing deficits and increasing growth rate of the economy. The shift from a public sector oriented socialist economy to market driven capitalist economy was hailed as a means to achieve industrialisation of the economy and high economic growth which would lead to well-being of the people (Low, et. al, 1998). The move beyond domestic and national markets to other markets around the globe, thereby increased the interconnectedness of different markets However, the debate on the impact market liberalisation has had on Indian economy continues. The supporters (Kulkarni, 2005; Goyal, 2006; Nayar, 2006; UNCTAD, 2008) showcase the constant growth in the country’s GDP whereas the critiques (Balakrishnan, 2002; Sengupta, 2005) draw attention to the uneven growth across sectors and also large populations left out of the growth story as a result of being a global economy.

The process of liberalisation of Indian economy lead to globalisation of Indian markets which saw a surge of multinational corporations. Globalisation can be understood as a complex series of economic, social, technological, cultural and political changes seen as increasing interdependence, integration and interaction among people and companies across the globe. Giddens (1991: 64) defines globalisation as ‘the intensification of worldwide social relations
which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.’ Globalisation is a multi-dimensional process of economic, political, cultural, and ideological change. The world is increasingly interconnected through economic integration, technology, communication and political transformation (Friedman, 1997; Held and Mcgrew, 2002). The manifestation of these processes can be experienced in the lives of individuals and their families. Since the family (different types of family structures) remains the primary arrangement that meets certain social, emotional, and economic needs of individuals, it is within families that decisions about work, care, movement, and identity are negotiated, contested, and resolved. With the ever growing communication, information technologies, job opportunities, the access to other individuals and cultures is unprecedented. These relationships of individuals with family and others are accompanied by either new conceptualizations or arranging the old conceptualizations in new garb of appropriate lifestyles, identities and ideologies (Bahira, 2010).

The impact of globalisation on women has been complex. On the one hand, it has led to increasing violations of women’s economic, political, and cultural rights due to the curb of welfare state, the feminisation of poverty, the expansion of religious fundamentalisms, and new forms of militarism and conflict (Taber & Batra, 1996; Wangari et.al. 2006; Subhalakshmi, 2012). On the other hand, aspects of globalisation have provided women with increasing opportunities to work in solidarity at national, regional, and international levels to demand their rights (Madhok and Raj, 2008). Change in international economic environment and restructuring of market mechanism in India has created more industrial resources and employment opportunities in service sector thus increasing the scope of employment for women. In
contemporary India, globalisation presents new possibilities and avenues for young, educated, urban women. The emerging urban centres in India are witness to changing economy and normative culture.

It has been observed that women’s participation in non-agricultural labour force has increased universally in high growth developing countries because of growth in manufacturing trade and export processing from developing countries in the era of globalisation (Standing, 1989; UN, 1999). Women are preferred over educated males due to gender wage differential and are also perceived to be more productive thus feminising the labour force (Braunstein, 2008). The informal slogan of Decade of Women observed that ‘Women do two thirds of the world’s work, receive ten percent of world’s income and own one percent of the means of production’¹

Globalisation in India has resulted in a revolution in communication technology. This teamed with cheaper labour has made India a preferred destination for multinational corporations. With the advent of these companies a surge in increasing opportunities for men and women has been observed. Although there has been a massive loss of jobs and livelihoods because of the multinationals, the opportunities which have been generated for educated English speaking youth cannot be overlooked. With new jobs, the opportunities for higher pay and more freedom are seen as by products. The expectation is that it can in turn promote equality between the sexes and uproot the traditional treatment towards women to afford them an equal place in society (Subhalakshmi, 2012).

¹Richard H. Robbins, Global Problems and Culture of Capitalism, Allyn and Bacon, 1999: 325. (quoting Martha Ward in ‘A World Full of Women’ 1 : 221)
Women are working in occupations ranging from high end jobs which require high education, knowledge and skill like developing software technology to low end jobs like Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) that only require basic education and English language skills. This group of women working in international BPOs usually falls in the age group between 20-30 years with 15 to 17 years of formal education. They earn salaries of a varying range between Rs. 12,000 to Rs. 100,000 per month depending on their skills and experience. Educated, graduate and post graduate young women with English language skills, find the liberal and flexible labour market environment conducive to work for attractive salaries. It also gives them the opportunity to develop a new sense of wellbeing and autonomy in the personal decisions and choices and transform the cultural, moral, and religious norms that have traditionally defined women’s gender roles. It has also made way for them to make choices and take decisions in various aspects of life like career, marriage and family. Women are pursuing non-traditional careers that entail frequent travel, working at unconventional timings, moving out of the family, prolonged absences from family and home and adopting non-traditional lifestyles. Work helps women to move from periphery to a relatively more central and visible role by helping them improve their economic and social status significantly (Kabeer, 2000). There is considerable debate on the effects of pay and conditions on women’s livelihoods and well-being, particularly in the longer term. Some researchers have argued that the overall effect for women is positive given the choices they face in their given contexts. They contend that earning a wage increases women’s bargaining power and ‘status’ within their households as well as providing resources to meet household needs (Lim, 1990). Other researchers have emphasised the poor wages and working conditions, the precariousness of the work and the fact that mainly younger women without
children are given these opportunities (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Pearson, 1998). The longer-term benefits for women are even less clear.

Though women are becoming more visible in urban spaces and nightscape\(^2\) which they are usually barred from, concerns regarding their safety, modesty and degradation of Indian culture are being raised. Several instances of molestation, rape and even murder of women, out for work at night brought them in focus. Unlike the aftermath of other molestation and rape cases in the country where the girls’ dressing or time at which she was in public space was blamed, it raised concerns of safety for these women who were part of the work force. However, on the other hand incidences of women being harassed or beaten like that in the 2009 attack on a Mangalore pub was an attempt to tame these women who were out in the public space i.e. drinking in a bar. The leader of outfit ‘Sri Ram Sene’ that had attacked these women, said in an interview to a national daily (The Indian Express, February 2009)

*These girls come from all over India, drink, smoke, and walk around in the night spoiling the traditional girls of Mangalore. Why should girls go to pubs? Are they going to serve their future husbands alcohol? Should they not be learning to make chapattis [Indian bread]? Bars and pubs should be for men only. We wanted to ensure that all women in Mangalore are home by 7 p.m.*

Although there is acceptance of women being part of the workforce there is resistance to women crossing over into men’s territory. The intolerance to women in public space and moral policing in the era of globalisation when the national dynamics is undergoing rapid changes – including changes in the characteristics and aspirations of women gives rise to conflict and the contradictions (Moghadam, 2003).

\(^2\) Reena Patel in her work ‘Working the night shift’ 2010 uses the term ‘nightscape’ in context of women working in transnational call centres at night due to the time difference between India and US
There is enough indication to suggest that young women from traditionally conservative families with restrictive norms on mobility and sexuality are increasingly vying for their freedom. Changes seen in the group of educated working women were notably in the areas of education, values related to income management, consumerism, mobility, employment, career advancement, decisions related to choosing life partners, aspirations and expectations from personal relationships. However, little is known about how women living and working in global cities away from home act as an agent to bring about change in the normative social culture. In a culture of moral policing and growing intolerance to women in public spaces, it will be interesting to understand the dynamics of the contradictions in Indian society.

Literature on impact of globalisation and changing economy posit women as victims where women are objectified, victimized, consumed and sexualized. This poses the danger of considering women as passive recipients within a welfarist framework. Using the framework of agency, I would like to explore within the context of globalisation, how women choose to act between various alternative actions and act or refuse to act thus taking the responsibility of their actions. How women are acting as agents of change and challenging the gender relations in the context of contradictions where globalisation of economy and cultural fanaticism are trying to homogenize the dominant culture? How women who migrate from homes to work in information technology enabled sectors (ITES) negotiate their freedom, sexuality, respectability and safety within family, at work and in other social relationships and how they are creating new values or redefining the old values within the normative social culture? This study posits the context, framework, relevant questions and women’s narratives around these issues.
The study is divided into 7 chapters. Chapter 2 traces chronologically the evolution of ideology and body of knowledge vis-à-vis women’s education and work. It sets the academic and policy context in which women’s education and employment has evolved over two centuries. The shift from being passive beneficiaries of welfare policies to being active partners in development, women as active agents have been acknowledged in the recent past. Chapter 3 ‘Conceptual Framework’ is a review of body of work around the concept of agency and the ‘structure-agency’ debate. This chapter helps in understanding around what constitutes agency, the influencing and mediating factors. The development of a conceptual framework for the current study was based on the existing knowledge and was reiterated as the study progressed.

The use of appropriate methodology to answer the research questions is imperative and thus chapter 4 on methodology discusses the choice of sampling and data collection method and the challenges faced in the field. Chapter 5 and 6 are a detailed analysis of the narratives of study respondents vis-à-vis various domains of their lives. These chapters highlight how women articulate and enact agency regarding family, work, romantic relations, city; in a normative society within the context of global economy. The last chapter, Chapter 7 discusses these findings with respect to the theoretical understanding and conceptual framework which was proposed at the beginning of the study. It highlights based on empirical work the gaps in the theoretical conceptualization of agency especially with regards to single women who have migrated to work in new types of jobs.