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Hegde, Radha

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10 Spaces of Exception

Violence, Technology, and the Transgressive Gendered Body in India's Global Call Centers

Radha S. Hegde

As India defines its place in the global economy as the high-tech solution center for business operations, new forms of work and work environments have emerged in the communication and information-technology sectors. These new work environments have radically altered the social and cultural experiences of everyday life. The outsourcing phenomenon, which casts India simultaneously as a threat, a cost-saving option, and an irritant, has occupied a spectral presence in the Western imaginary. However, unraveling on the ground is a complex transnational narrative about the neoliberal framing of flexible work, enabled by the presence of new forms of mediated connectivity. The high-tech environments of India provide a site from which to examine the dynamics of globalization as it unfolds and to see how local realities of work are embedded within global frames. As global capital is instantiated in everyday practices, it plays on local instabilities and hierarchies.¹ In this process, a series of hot buttons are pressed, especially as women find their place in the neoliberal economy and face a grid of old and new power structures. This chapter explores how the growing influence of new media technologies and networks has created conditions of labor for women that disrupt everyday life and entangle the categories of the national and transnational, the private and public.

Call centers with rows of young people working the phone lines have become iconic of India's global presence. With time rearranged to service the Western world, call centers come alive in the middle of the night, when the computer screens light up and phones start ringing. What do these newly scripted jobs and work practices mean for the everyday life of Indian women? Hired for their English-speaking skills and/or technical competence, call center workers provide a variety of services for typically U.S., British, and Australian customers. The media in the United States and India glamorize these jobs and depict the employees as enjoying their fiber-optic journey into a new identity. A popular thread of reportage claims that call-center jobs have liberated Indian youth and turned them into avid consumers, thereby providing a necessary nudge to the traditionalism of Indian society, especially with regard to women.² However, the ways in which gender issues are set into motion by globalization are far more



Fig. 10.1. Colleagues and friends remember Pratibha after her brutal murder. (Aruna Raman)

complex than these linear trajectories suggest. This chapter examines how new media technologies are reorganizing labor practices and everyday life for women in India. How does the binary of tradition and modernity get deployed and reworked in the context of technological change?

In December 2005, Pratibha Srikantamurthy, a young woman employed in a multinational corporate call center, was raped and murdered en route to her place of work, the Hewlett Packard (HP) Global Delivery application services. Around 1:30 a.m., a driver, one of many hired to transport employees to work, picked up Pratibha from her residence in Bangalore. The cab company, to whom HP had outsourced its transportation needs, later discovered that the driver who picked up Pratibha was not registered on their daily roster. Pratibha's husband, also a call-center worker, was not able to reach her on the phone at night and hence assumed she was busy. He began to panic when she did not return home at 11 a.m. the next morning. On calling HP, Pratibha's family was told that she did not report to work the previous day. After a day of waiting and police investigation, the driver who had raped and murdered Pratibha confessed to the crime. Her body was found in a ditch outside of Bangalore's technology corridor and had scratch marks, suggesting a struggle before her brutal rape and strangulation.³ Her death shook up her colleagues, who held prayer meetings in her memory (see figure 10.1).

The details of the case sent tremors around the country. The Indian media went into high gear, calling into question both the conditions of call-center work and the responsibility of multinational corporations for employee safety. It was a highly charged case that drew sharp responses from across the social spectrum, evoking discussions about sexuality, violence, modernity, and the erosion of tradition—all articulated within the binary of the national and the global. The topic of safety is one that arises quite frequently in conversations with call-center workers, and the “Pratibha case” is recalled as a moment of crisis in the recent life and history of Bangalore as India’s premier technological city. I use the events and responses surrounding this violent crime to describe the narratives that are mobilized around the global call-center worker and the labor through which she is drafted into streams of global connectivity. In the construction of these elite global workspaces, local and national processes are circumvented, leading to intraurban schisms and new twists on the familiar patriarchal discourse around rape and the nomination of the victim. A reading of the discourse surrounding this rape and murder in Bangalore reveals how the figure of the “globalized” woman is constructed as sexually transgressive.

Transnational Exceptions and Gendered Transgressions

Violence against women is certainly not new to urban life. However, the fact that Pratibha’s rape and murder drew the level of media attention it did was precisely because it instigated discussion about the conditions of public life in the context of global economic transformation. Both the local and national media went into a reporting frenzy, prying open details about new forms of work in the outsourcing industry. Reports claimed that her death offered insight into an unseen world of work within the glass and cement citadels of globalization.⁴ In these offices, where access is highly restricted, young people solve problems at night for geographically remote customers. An aura of secrecy and global allure envelops both the work and worker within the call centers in urban India, which are cordoned off both symbolically and materially from the local environment.

The state also plays an active role in managing the intersection of national and transnational interests, which, in turn, intensifies the contradictions posed by these highly technologized workspaces. The information-technology industry advertises its jobs as exciting and offering opportunities to learn global competencies through interactions with international customers. The global call centers are compared to American college campuses, and the larger call centers pride themselves on being modern, egalitarian workplaces where gender discrimination is a nonissue.⁵ According to a study of the vulnerabilities of labor in the new economic order in India, the emergence of this new type of work has effec-

tively enabled the industry to maintain a “productively docile workforce within a changed framework of human resource management.”⁶

Call centers within the information-technology corridor in Bangalore pride themselves on offering world-class facilities and state-of-the-art technology. This visible separation from the local environment establishes the call centers as distinct islands of hypermodernity on the global fast track. Responding to demands of global capital, the state government of Karnataka has provided various forms of juridical relaxations to maintain Bangalore’s magnetic draw as a technology hub. Aihwa Ong argues that neoliberalism, as a technology of governing, relies on calculative choices to produce conditions and possibilities for governing and for optimal economic productivity. Departing from the formulation of sovereign exception, in which the subject who is deemed excludable is denied protection, Ong argues that neoliberal exceptions are often decisions to include selected populations and spaces. Market-driven calculations, for example, are invoked in sites of transformation to create “spaces of exception” that in turn enjoy extraordinary political benefits and economic gain.⁷ Spurred by the logic of the marketplace, the state strategically flexes its policies to make the local environment conducive to the flow of capital. Illustrative of this move is the creation of spaces in India designated as Special Economic Zones, which are advertised by the state as “hassle-free environments” promising various types of incentives for foreign investments. In order to encourage the growth of the information-technology sector, the state government of Karnataka notes in its “Millennium” policy statement that “the State is committed to simplify all the relevant enactments for the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector. The barriers including employment of women at night, flexi-working hours and mandatory weekly off have all been removed by necessary amendments to the relevant Acts to create an optimal environment for the growth of the BPO sector in the state.”⁸ Through these exceptions and governmental suspension of policies, urban spaces of privilege are created as Bangalore is emplaced within technocratic globality.

What do these spaces of global optimization mean for reorganizing the politics of women’s work life in the technology sectors of Bangalore? Call centers have reversed the work day in order to take advantage of the twelve-hour time difference between India and the West. This does not translate into conventional understandings of flexibility or other worker-negotiated models of work. Rather, there is a clear switching of the time span of work to nighttime hours in order to reap the benefit of international time differences between India and its customers in the Global North. The very presence of women in call centers was made possible due to the suspension of a state ban on nighttime work. In 2002, the state government of Karnataka, with its eye focused on economic growth, gave the information-technology industries an exemption from section 25 of the state’s

Shops and Commercial Establishment Act, which prohibits the employment of women and young persons during the night—twelve consecutive hours between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m.⁹ This exemption was contingent on corporate employers meeting certain conditions concerning the provision of safe transportation to women employees. The original ban, which restricted women's mobility and choice, was justified by the state's appeal to a gendered politics of protection. The new amendment caters to the emerging industry under the premise that the work paradigm in the information-technology establishments requires flexibility and cannot be stipulated according to traditional time slots or even weekly holidays. This exemption from legislative control with regard to the temporal context of women's work was specifically intended to nurture the growth of global outsourcing and to make Bangalore attractive to foreign investors. Both the existence of the archaic law and its subsequent removal, for the purpose of preferential treatment of the information-technology industry, consolidate the state's patriarchal stance with its neoliberal leanings.

While the amendment to the labor laws opens up opportunities for night work, it does not change existing systems of power or change perceptions about women in public spaces.¹⁰ The popular conception that night work has ushered in a social revolution is at best facile.¹¹ In a calculative choice, the state has repurposed the rule to fit the demands of the twenty-four-hour global economy. Gender roles and sexuality are naturalized within a discourse of protection attuned to the larger economic rationale. In the context of the new digital economy, the lifting of the ban does not automatically translate into women's agency or freedom to choose their hours of work. Instead, as A. Aneesh suggests, "technologies of virtual mobility are increasingly made to penetrate into local times, and thereby reconfigure local contexts and the social times of people's lives."¹²

The public and private life of young women like Pratibha, employed in Bangalore's call centers, revolve around the transformed rhythms of night work.¹³ With the emergence of these new technology-related jobs, the networks of global commerce reconfigure the types of mobility permissible at night within the cityscape. The crossing of conventional time and space boundaries confers on women in call centers an aura of independence and new form of sexualized visibility. At the same time, when women are exploring new employment options enabled by media technologies, there is a heightened surveillance of sexuality and its performance. Debates on sexuality have consistently been mobilized in the saga of modernization when anxieties about transformations are tacked onto discussions about purity, morality, and sexual behavior. As the postcolonial society rewrites itself within the cosmopolitan discourse of neoliberal globalization, we have to take pause at how gendered positions are inducted into the global imaginary—

more specifically, as Arvind Rajagopal states, at how new gendering processes are braided with existing ones.¹⁴ The opening up of night work brings into full view the gendered dynamics of power and social contradictions embedded within global capitalism and the information society.¹⁵

Bangaloreans talk about call-center workers as a breed apart—young free spenders with questionable sexual mores and a worldview influenced by their mediated exposure to the West. With their youth and earning power, they are drafted into the growing new middle class and emerge as economic subjects of globalization.¹⁶ As women are actively recruited as workers and consumers by the new global economy, there is a noticeable shift in the ways in which public discourse on sexuality is constructed. Advertisements and billboards across the urban landscape produce new fields of desire for the new Indian woman who is young with disposable income, thereby producing the Indian global woman, in Janaki Nair's view, both "as a consuming subject and as object to be consumed."¹⁷ This consumer savvy, prized in the marketplace, takes a different inflection in everyday life, leading to stigmatization of the labor that operates by a different set of rules. The new female worker is now marked as sexually transgressive. As one newspaper reports, "A female Indian call centre worker who works late nights and chats to strangers for a living is not the kind of girl you bring home to your mother."¹⁸ The responses that followed the rape and murder of Pratibha demonstrate the cultural contestation that takes place over the terms of global change and, in particular, about women's role and mobility. Consider this statement from the Joint Commissioner of Police in Bangalore: "Why was this girl (Pratibha) so careless even when she learnt he was not the regular driver? She went and sat with the driver in the front seat. She did not maintain the normal protocol and distance. For a criminal she became an *easy target*. In the past, call centre employees have been mugged, but this is the first time such a heinous crime has taken place."¹⁹ The city police in Bangalore also issued guidelines which recommended a dress code and suggested that women employees refrain from dressing provocatively and interacting "freely" with male colleagues in front of the drivers, as this might send wrong messages about women.

The case opened up the ways in which the politics of gender is reinscribed within overlapping discourses of modernity and tradition, under the watchful eye of the neoliberal economy. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan writes, gender becomes an issue usually as a crisis, a problem, or a scandal and when women are conspicuously visible in spaces of modernity; they are treated as having chosen the "risk" of harassment voluntarily.²⁰ The call-center worker, hypervisible and marked as contaminated by global exposure, becomes the easy target made eligible for violence.

Thresholds of Techno Space

The movement into globality is hinged on a series of highly localized processes, and hence transnational sexual politics is played out within these scalar disjunctions. Customized webs of services that meet the needs of the global technology industry hold together Bangalore's status as a global technology hub. Alongside the visible growth of the elite spaces of the new economy, there is a development of an informal labor network, resulting in a visibly tiered urbanism.²¹ The outsourcing industry, which has built its very existence and transnational identity around the collapse of space and time, remains deeply dependent on support services that are highly bound and constrained by local conditions. The technology-enabled neutralization of geography rests on the access and customization of a complex infrastructure connecting the flow of laboring bodies, electricity, roads, and transportation. Bangalore is a standing example of Saskia Sassen's argument that the tasks that manage and coordinate the flow of capital are place bound, in contrast to the hypermobility of the capital they service.²² This case study reveals the inherent tensions that inhabit the ways in which the global is accommodated within local contexts and structures.

In the new high-tech world of Bangalore, there is a clear demarcation between those who are included within the citadels of capital and those who service it from the margins, at the threshold of globalization. This space of the outside is served by a complex transportation system which ferries employees back and forth from home to office—from the peripheries to the center, from the local to the transnational. Transportation to the work sites is a key operation in the information-technology spaces of Bangalore. Due to the late work shifts, corporations advertise transportation to the work sites as one of the perks of the job. The unreliability of public transportation makes this offer very attractive to the employees. A human-resources manager in Bangalore mentioned to me, "We have to be on time to start as soon as the workday in America begins, so we cannot take chances with the Bangalore buses. We would rather pick our employees up and ensure they are on time." Transportation hence becomes another piece in the mechanisms of worker control, circumvention of public services, and the private customization of infrastructure.²³

Outside the large call centers of Bangalore, it is commonplace to see a line of vans and minibuses parked (see figure 10.2). There is a flurry of activity as the cabs pick up employees from their homes, starting from the late evening into the night, and then drop them back home, in the early hours of the morning. The drivers have hectic schedules shuttling employees according to the time demands of the countries they service. Call-center vans speeding through the city are a familiar sight, as they pick up the employees from various parts of the city



Fig. 10.2. The transportation scene outside call centers. (Radha Hegde)

and suburbs and head toward Electronic City, Bangalore's technology enclave. These vans have notorious accident rates, earning them the name "rogue" cabs.²⁴ The drivers, according to some reports I received, log over fifteen hours of driving a day. They are also sleep deprived, snatching winks of sleep in the car or even dozing off at the wheel. At the gates of the larger call centers, food stands sell chai and samosas. In these outside spaces, it is a familiar sight to see drivers playing cards and wiling away their time, since a significant part of their job and daily routine is simply waiting between shifts. In contrast to the new technology-driven, distanced interactions happening inside the call centers, outside, one hears local inflections of Indian languages, mostly Kannada and Hindi, against the background hum of vehicular noise. The drivers are routinely monitored by their companies through mobile phones and other more immediate and direct forms of surveillance. The drivers stand at the entrance of globality—denizens of a vernacular world, unassimilable yet necessary for the production of a global modernity.

Confessing to the rape and murder of Pratibha, the driver Shivakumar stated that he had set his eyes on women working in the Hewlett Packard offices. He had been randomly calling women from the employee list maintained by the transportation office with the hope of luring one of them. Before calling Pratibha, he had telephoned two of her colleagues who were already on their way with their regular cab drivers.²⁵ In the middle of the night, an unsuspecting Pratibha

got into Shivakumar's vehicle assuming that he was a legitimate replacement for her usual driver. Later investigations revealed that Pratibha had also attempted to reach her husband on her cell phone after she left home. Ironically, the driver also stole her credit cards and her mobile phone—the symbols of her commercial presence and cultural identity. Thereafter, Shivakumar simply moved his contractual services of shuttling employees to another global corporation in the vicinity.

It is revealing that Shivakumar had specifically targeted call-center employees of a multinational corporation. To the driver, the female call-center worker represents a globally exposed and available body—one who works at night servicing strangers in distant lands. The consumer identity ascribed to call-center employees accentuates the stereotype of the Westernized, sexually available woman. Call-center workers, particularly women, are routinely associated with being “call girls” or are considered sexually permissive and “Westernized.” As A. R. Vasavi notes, girls are viewed as being particularly susceptible to a culture of Westernization.²⁶ This eroticization of the woman worker who offers, in this case, her ear to an unknown public nominates her as the right victim. The violence met by Pratibha has to be contextualized within the emergence of Bangalore as a global city and the particular economic and cultural routes through which women's labor is made visible. Doreen Massey notes the very characterization of cities as global makes the part stand in for the whole, with the city being defined by its elite.²⁷

Following the murder, there was intense public discussion about safety and accountability, during which the various players and their agendas collided. The corporate world blamed the police and attributed the tragedy to the growing crime rate in the city. The police in turn chastised the young women for their lack of morals and cultural values and then focused on the individual pathologies of taxi drivers at large.²⁸ A Bangalore police chief recommended a set of rules for call-center employees, with the warning that he was not engaging in moral policing:

All of us should understand that drivers come from a certain socio-economic background. Their standard of education is lesser. These people cannot digest a girl talking to a boy freely in a cosmopolitan society and wearing a particular type of dress. They form certain opinions about the persons based on their dress and behavior and crime follows.²⁹

These comments from a senior police official capture the contradictions and divisions that accompany the global reorganization of work and labor practices. Hierarchies of gender and class are first redrawn and then mobilized in ways that pit groups against each other. The drivers provide essential material labor to prop up the dematerialized product of technological services that are offered within the temples of technology. The life of the drivers, who provide transportation on the outside, and the call-center employees, who labor within the technology

centers, are vastly different and kept apart. Linguistic hegemony of the English-speaking technology call-center agents compounds the class divide between various strata of workers. In *Electronic City*, drivers are merely instruments of transportation who cannot claim admittance into the portals of technology or the community of transnational workers. The driver enables transportation from home to the workplace but also stands outside, literally, as the embodiment of risk and terror that lurks in the liminal space between the local and the global. Shivakumar the driver is the private face of shame that stands in contrast to the public image of globality. The drivers represent localized raw energy incompatible with the West—the constitutive outside of global cosmopolitanism.³⁰

The violence is interpreted as an interruption from the local world, an aberration that disrupts the smooth operations of the high-tech world of the information industry. In a strange reversal, work spaces are depicted as safe spaces requiring no protection, and the real problem lies in the process of getting through local infrastructures. The spaces of globalization are represented as places of order, control, and predictability, in opposition to the chaos, disorder, and violence of the local. When asked what precautionary measures have been taken, Som Mittal, then chief of Hewlett Packard, responded that the question was akin to asking, “What precautionary measures can be taken against a suicide bomber?”³¹ The transportation companies asserted that this was a stray incident and that the driver in question was just one bad example in an otherwise flawless system. This claim, also echoed by the technology industry, either downplayed or summarily dismissed the politics of sexuality set in motion by the transnational mediatization of work. Pratibha’s murder, with its gory details, was sensational news that rocked Bangalore briefly, but it remains a glaring example of the violence underwriting these urban transformations brought about by the culture of technology and outsourcing.

New Salve for Old Wounds

In the aftermath of Pratibha’s murder, public attention turned quickly to the quality of life and security in urban spaces. Bangalore, the city whose name has gained notoriety as a verb in the global lexicon—the pride of the Indian information-technology industry—was now a tarnished brand name. In media discourse, the city which signified code and computation had publicly revealed infrastructural loopholes. The city was abuzz with speculations about how the incident could have been prevented and even predicted. Far from approaching the gendered violence and classed oppression within the larger systemic structures, the response focused on fixing Bangalore through the reassertion of old ideologies of safeguarding women’s morality, fused with projections of a digital nirvana.

The outrage and anger about Pratibha's rape and murder soon morphed into an obsessive focus on technology and informational devices. The speculations offered by the industry, the police, and the media focused mainly on how the city and its citizens should be viewed, read, marked, mapped, arranged, or recorded in order to prevent such incidents. The accounts asserted that this was a freak incident that happened due to a systems breakdown and that if only the technological infrastructure had been in place, the violence could have been prevented. In short, the city had to be rearticulated in technological terms in order to make up for its machinic lack. In a studied move, the discussion veered away from material bodies and their locations within new time/space configurations. The industry used technology as an opportunistic salve to respond to the issue of violence against women.

The fact that Pratibha was driven to a remote, inaccessible area of Bangalore was used in public discussion to establish the fact that parts of the city remain outside the visual and virtual radar and, hence, fall outside the safety net or the regulatory gaze of technology. In general, the response and speculations adhered to common assumptions about the relationship between modernity and technology.³² The first is a belief in the linear trajectory of progress guaranteed by technological growth; machines that can map, hear, and scan people will create utopic living conditions. Next follows the assumption that security and predictability can be achieved by drawing in more domains of everyday life into the realm of code, networks, and databases. Various types of gadgetry and informational devices were suggested as solutions to manage the uncertainties of urban life. As a symbol of the new economy, Bangalore was asserting its digital muscle with promises to deliver systems that would regulate mobility and track social interaction.

With increased dependence on surveillance technologies, cyberspace, according to David Lyon, is being mapped onto physical geographies.³³ Prompted by the need to provide an around-the-clock workforce for transnational corporations, the information-technology sector furnished easy justifications for scanning and cataloguing personal information and records. After the incident, private firms marketing security devices were quick to point out that "the eye in the sky"—referring to global positioning systems, or GPS, that were used mainly for distance tracking—could now be mined for its profiling and security potential.³⁴ One corporate official in Bangalore noted that the need of the moment was to accelerate the possibilities of moving scanned sensor data from one place to another using wireless network. Others speculated whether modest technologies, such as a text message from the company and the taxi service detailing the vehicle number, could have saved Pratibha's life.³⁵ Various suggestions followed for the institution of control rooms, help lines, digital cameras, digitized rosters for

drivers, data bases compiling drivers' criminal records, and other informational devices to strategically monitor the space and movement of both technology and transportation workers. It was also suggested that speed control devices should be installed and radio frequencies should be shared with the police.³⁶

Technologies of surveillance use a calculus of risk to identify certain individuals as potential threats to urban security, leading to forms of surveillance-as-social-sorting.³⁷ The industry and police also added cautiously that software cannot plug all stops in the security system or, in particular, capture criminal pathologies. A corporate representative lamented, "We can monitor the cars, but how can we stop the driver from committing the crime? By the time we manage to track an errant driver, it might be too late." Or as the owner of a car service added, "How can we guess what is in someone's mind? Police can only give a certificate about a person's past, but what about the present and future?"³⁸ Therefore, the ultimate solution, cited by police and industry alike, was to institute rules along gendered lines: no female employee will be dropped last or picked up first on the route, and she will always be accompanied by a male employee or a security guard. In addition, as cited in the media, both police and members from the industry encouraged women to carry camera phones and to try and have a male friend accompany them.

The machinic solutions to security serve as new regulatory mechanisms that operate within existing gender ideologies. Security is another infrastructural problem that has to be managed in order to streamline corporate operations and ensure that there is no foreseeable disruption of services. The focus on technological devices isolates gendered violence as a breakdown, which can be predicted through the production of an informational hum around the city.³⁹ A predominant assumption is that the more the city is wrapped up in software and information, the more the city and its inhabitants can be monitored and hence be more secure. Surveillance is never neutral, and social relations between those with power and those without are constituted by technologies of surveillance. In the call centers, the movements and performance of employees within the workplace have also been monitored digitally.⁴⁰ Now post-Pratibha, the strategy shifts to extending the reach of the surveillance assemblage outside the workplace, thereby recuperating modernist claims about techno-efficiency and discipline. Gendered lines of power are now digitally incorporated into the infrastructure. Pratibha's tragedy exemplifies how capital with the aid of technology restrains and tethers the laboring body to the global infrastructure of the city.

Damage Control and Laboring Bodies

The tragedy in Bangalore was followed by other, very similarly scripted acts of violence in other Indian call-center locations, in Delhi, Pune, and Mumbai. The events that unfolded around the rape and murder of Pratibha exposed a series of disjunctures in the fabric of everyday life which were set into motion by the modalities of transnational work. The insistence on technological explanations using corporatized language of best practices and efficiency narrowed the window of public discourse and altered the very conception of the citizen-subject. When the imperatives of consumption and the market forces are in place, the first casualty, notes Henri Giroux, is a language of social responsibility.⁴¹ What happened in Bangalore was an active depoliticization of the events, rendering the violence as an aberrant event that happened because an employee was careless about her transportation arrangements. A brand consultant asks, "Why should the murder of someone working in another BPO firm affect and bother you?" Because "crises will come and go but brands will remain," and hence the consultant concludes that "every crisis represents an opportunity for a brand."⁴² In this discourse of gadgets, brands, and damage control, any political discussion about material conditions of work, transnationally defined power structures, or the question of responsibility in global work environments were strategically avoided.

The question of accountability—how it was distributed, deferred, or side-stepped—assumed significant public attention in the aftermath of Pratibha's death. The demands and interpretations of feminist and trade-union activists stood in sharp contrast to explanations from the industry, whose main goal was to ensure continuity of services for the global corporations. The violent incident opened up the call-center industry for public scrutiny, and feminists and trade unionists wanted to pry open the case and all the overlapping issues. The industry, however, was mainly preoccupied with damage control to preserve the brand and value of their services.

In a protest staged symbolically near the statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Bangalore, banners called for safer working conditions and for justice and punishment for the rapist. Despite the rounds of text messages, the turnout at the rally was small, and by some reports many of the protesters were not employees of the call centers but rather interested union activists and feminists. K. S. Vimala, a spokesperson of the All India Democratic Women's Association, attributed the poor response to the apolitical, individualistic focus of the "me generation" in India.⁴³ The feminist organization forcefully condemned the corporations for negligence and emphasized that transportation services have to be managed by the corporation directly, since outsourcing this key operation puts employees at risk, with no structure of accountability in place. Adopting an antiglobalization



Fig. 10.3. Scene of the protest in Bangalore following Pratibha's death. (Aruna Raman)

stance, the feminist groups wanted a guarantee of security and accountability without restricting women's places and times of work.

Trade-union activists blamed the information-technology industry for blocking any type of collective bargaining or union organizing of their employees. Information-technology firms, they claimed, were pampered with special preferences by the state instead of being treated as profit-oriented companies. To them, the death of Pratibha served as a catalyst to address serious problems related to material conditions of work in the call-center industry. While the trade-union groups stressed the need to establish grievance-redressal machineries, management argued that unions were essentially an anachronism. The new information-technology environments, as claimed by the industry, were designed from the outset as highly democratic and employee-sensitive workspaces. Kiran Karnik, president of the National Association of Software and Service Companies, pointed out that unions made sense when worker exploitation was a reality at individual and collective levels: "None of these conditions apply in the case of the IT worker." In his critique of union activism after the Pratibha case, Karnik stated, "Some people fish in troubled waters. This incident should not be used as a peg to drive agendas."⁴⁴ After two and a half years, the state of Karnataka's Supreme Court did rule that the police could in fact prosecute the

chief executive officer of Hewlett Packard for not providing for the safety of women employees, which led to the violent death of Pratibha. Though it was a token and weak gesture by the Indian state, it was intended to send a message to the global corporations. At the same time, the information-technology industry seized on a local proposition which suggested curbing women's work hours as a safety measure. Karnik opposed it vehemently, using the opportunity to brand the industry's position on women's rights: "We believe this will be a retrograde step and everyone including women have a right to work any time they want."⁴⁵ Ironically, all the players, from different vantage points, spoke to the issues of security, trying to beat each other in their role as protectors of women. The discourse around the Pratibha case stayed firmly within the two registers of technology and protection.

Blots and Brands

Pratibha Srikantamurthy's murder is marked as the first blot in the otherwise upbeat story of brand Bangalore and global outsourcing in India. When I spoke to people in Bangalore, they would inevitably connect the incident either to the crassness of drivers or the immorality of the women in call centers. What I have tried to show is how diverse actors and social logics are set into motion in the context of the new technology-enabled economy. Violence against women and the discourses around it remain part of a larger story. First and foremost, the myth of a seamlessly connected globalized world came apart as the various folds of the story unraveled. For an industry that prides itself on transcending time and collapsing geography, this incident underscored how transnational work environments are firmly tied, even violently so, to local geographies and temporally bound cultures. Ironically, Pratibha met her violent end in the very process of traversing space for a late-night shift in order to be present in another time zone and cultural context.

This case shows how the deterritorialization of work reorganizes social life in ways that are socially disruptive and often violent and yet necessary for the transnational circuits of capital. The layers of this narrative speak to Sassen's argument that global-economic features such as hypermobility and time-space compressions are not self-generative but have to be actively reproduced and serviced.⁴⁶ Women in India's global call centers come into public view in hyperexaggerated terms as either docile gendered bodies of a new service economy or transgressive bodies contaminated by transnational night labor. It was the intrigue of a call-center crime involving a multinational corporation and the new software generation of India that drove the massive coverage about the Pratibha case. Rape and murder are too chaotic, ugly, and political for the new technological spaces

of exception, which are showcased as apolitical islands of progress, nourished by transnational capital flow and technological connectivity.

NOTES

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