Work without labor: Consumption and the imagination of work futures in India*

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abstract

How do consumption practices reconfigure work into an aspirational undertaking? This note considers how changing economic priorities, attitudes towards material progress, and labor relations in post-liberalization India produce a valuation of privatized, individualized forms of work imbricated with consumption, over older forms of labor. The realities of laboring and of labor relations are increasingly obscured by the recasting of work as both path to and mechanism of consumption. At the same time as consumption establishes the parameters for the imagination of the good life, it becomes the means by which to claim the value of work itself, thus nurturing what Appadurai has dubbed the 'capacity to aspire'. This note relies on the case of the Nokia manufacturing plant in the Sriperumbudur SEZ in order to study these processes. It reveals how work in the new economy invisibilizes labor realities, which are starkly and ironically revealed once again in the face of capital flight.

Introduction

One hears a lot of exuberant talk these days about the futures of work. Offices will be scaled back, we're told, as employees work from home or the networked coffee-shop of their choice. Work will be parceled into micro-tasks that can be

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outsourced and crowdsourced, done by lots of dispersed people in lots of dispersed places. Mobility and freelancing will become the dominant metaphors of our multi-tasking flex-ruled times – a fallback for conventional job instabilities and a route to more fine-tuned control over life, leisure, and employment choices. Workforces will become '3D': 'distributed, discontinuous and decentralized' (Ullekh, 2013). Peer-to-peer networks will replace old hierarchies. We will demand of our work and our employers more than we ever did before; we'll even teach them a thing or two about what technologies make work efficient and enjoyable. In general, millennial sensibilities will rule.

Few of these forecasts are localized for India, but global enthusiasm reverberates disproportionately and faith in the capacity of technology to widen work futures is immensely strong (PWC India, 2014). Such realities make it difficult to ask, following William Gibson's celebrated observation (that 'The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed'), what futures are already present, and what the consequences of their uneven distributions might be. While it is true that some younger office crowds in Indian metros can contemplate and even demand flex-futures shot through with millennial whimsy, bare laboring realities still exert themselves, and forcefully. The contrasts are especially hard to ignore in India: running in parallel to prized 'office work', there is casual work, self-employment (including street vending and domestic work), un- or semi-skilled labor, daily-wage labor on construction sites, seasonal agricultural labor, factory work, sometimes even specialized artisanal work that has long since been downgraded to manual labor – much of it low-wage, bereft of much possibility of reinvention.

While there is a substantial corpus of academic writing on informal labor (Breman, 1996; Hill, 2010; Joshi, 2003; Nair, 2011), there are almost no accounts of how the hopes, aspirations, and exultant neoliberal forecasts given to some types of work percolate into others, setting the parameters within which workers then constitute themselves (Agarwala, 2013 is an exception). The question of how to reconcile contrasting but overlapping narratives of work, some with anticipated, emancipatory futures and others without any apparent future but their own stubbornly menial presents – or, of how to understand 'work' as produced in the ebbing and flowing interactions of neoliberal capital on the one hand and the patronage and protectionism of old Indian welfare models on the other, remains an open one.

This note explores this theme by looking first to Arendt's distinctions between work and labor for an analytical framework. The next section briefly reviews how labor practices central to governance in the decades after India's independence were supplanted by future imaginings built around consumption. The third

examines the emergence of a new class of Indian workers alongside the much-vaunted, globally-coveted new Indian consumer, whose labor had perforce to be masked in order for the promises of 'work' in the new economy to become realizable. The final two sections use the case of the 2014 Nokia manufacturing factory closure near Chennai to examine how the mythologies of consumption conceal labor-in-work – and then how labor re-emerges as a set of relationships in the face of capital flight.

Arendt and the labor of work

At least in conventional narratives of upward mobility, the operative distinction is between 'work' and 'labor', where labor is – verily as Arendt has described – that relentlessly repetitive 'activity which corresponds to the biological processes and necessities of human existence' (1958: 7). Life depends on labor in Arendt's account – but because we labor to survive biologically, laboring means being 'enslaved by necessity' (*ibid.*: S3). Labor is thus is by definition a less human and more animal activity: those who labor are *animal laborans*. What it produces 'is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent' (*ibid.*: 87), whereas work involves the use of tools to command natural forces and create durable objects of transcendent value. Work is 'the fabrication experience' which transforms *animal laborans* into *homo faber* or working man, thereby establishing usefulness and utility 'as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men' (*ibid.*: 157). In this formulation, laboring is private, hidden, and unrecompensed, whereas work produces worldly artifacts that pay, show, and endure.

And yet, Arendt characterizes ours a 'society of laborers', for the common understanding of work as the prerogative to 'make a living', or fulfill the basic need to subsist. Whereas Marx was concerned with elevating labor to the status of work, Arendt is intent on reminding us of the inherent laboring character of work itself. As work becomes automated, mechanized, and numbingly repetitive, it bears ever more the 'unmistakable mark of laboring' (*ibid.*: 125). What it produces, however, is not use-objects, but an abundance of consumer goods for use. Labor-in-work now feeds the 'ever-recurrent needs of consumption', and consumption becomes the desired outcome of work itself. For it is in the world of durable objects, Arendt writes, 'we find the consumer goods through which life assures the means of its own survival' (*ibid.*: 94) – consumption becomes the overriding means of subsistence. Work not only bears us from a life bound by necessity into a world of durable objects, but ironically it facilitates, far more than just laboring, a transcendent and sustaining consumption.

Consumption, however, is a forgetful activity. Marx's brief comments on fetishism remind us of the daily, customary exchanges by which we equate, compare, and evaluate products in relation to other products, incognizant of the social realities of labor that produced these (1915). Others note that the pleasures of consumption can materialize only by excising labor relations from our conceptions of production (Billig, 1999; Bradshaw et al., 2013). Such forgetfulness, I argue however, is itself productive: through its very excisions, consumption establishes a framework by which to hope, dream, and imagine the good life. In other words, consumption sets the parameters for the formation of work itself. The allure of work, or the 'good job' with the 'big company', is not just that it delivers us from labor into a transcendent life of consumptive possibility, but that it nurtures, however unevenly or symbolically, what Appadurai has called the 'capacity to aspire' (2004). The remainder of this note examines the unstable place of labor in developing such aspirational capacities in post-liberalization India.

The valuation of material progress

The valuation of material progress in India has a history which helps explain why a deliverance from labor at all becomes possible, or necessary. Principally, there has been a deliberate turn away from the Gandhian commitment of earlier decades to 'simple living-high thinking' and toward neoliberal consumerist sensibilities. Writing of the developmentalist state in the decades just after Indian independence, Rajagopal notes that citizenship and national belonging were at the time understood as economically necessary for the collective project of national development (2011: 1005). The key arena for organizing, the expression of collective dissent, and for seeking improvement (other than electoral process) was industrial labor conflict, monitored and regulated by the state itself. The work of governance was organizing labor: marshalling development, mediating conflict between labor and management, even running unions as extensions of political party work.

Several key developments radically shifted this older emphasis from labor as a basic public good, necessary for national prosperity, to work as the only reliable means to private advancement. The economic stagnation that set in in the 1960s caused the ranks of 'educated unemployed' to swell dramatically, leading to a wave of professional emigration that would become India's 'brain drain' (Khadria, 2007). The state's constitutional commitments to social uplift allowed subordinate social groups to lay increasingly assertive claim to state-managed resources, fostering widespread middle-class discontent. Culture, community, and religion, gained profound electoral salience from the late 1970s onwards,

owing largely to the Congress Party's strategic nurturance of identitarian politics. Rajagopal (2011) notes that the decline in trade union conflicts in this period was accompanied by a concomitant rise of religious conflict: political and cultural battlegrounds were shifting from developmentalist spaces regulated by the state into the unregulated spaces of identity. Not only was political society (Chatterjee, 2004) asserting itself thus, relationships between labor and business were changing, too, with workers' rights and political power being passed over in favor of monetary compensation and cash benefits (*ibid.*: 1041). Underpinning each of these shifts was the despairing conviction that the Indian state was both unequal and unwilling to attend to the needs of its populace, functioning much like a private party in what was clearly devolving into a patronage democracy.

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s only consolidated these emergent values and discontents. Relaxed import restrictions in the decade prior held out the 'promise of membership for Indians in a global 'ecumene' of world-class consumption' (Mazzarella, 2003: 33); advertising and media then further established 'consumer-led liberalization' as a tremendously attractive 'alternative social ontology to centralized state planning' (Mazzarella, 2002: 12). The middle class' erstwhile faith in the security of public sector 'government jobs' gave way readily to an aspiration for private sector employment, which paid better, offered more perks and more possibilities of advancement, and thus carried far greater promise of affluence. The result was the production of a 'normative civic culture' based on the rights of consumer citizens rather than workers (Fernandes, 2006: 189). 'Indian consumers' were not just being produced, but were suddenly globally accessible and sought-after; private consumption displaced public production as the 'principal labor' of late capitalism (Appadurai, 1996: 66-85).

Visibilizing consumption, invisibilizing labor

Far less glamorous and visible than the production of Indian consumers, however, was the concomitant production of a new Indian labor force. The vast expansion of the consumer economy created equally vast numbers of service-sector jobs in industries from sales and marketing to banking, hospitality, event planning, and organized retail. The IT (Information Technology), ITes (IT Enabled Services), and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) boom of the late 1990s and 2000s was only the most celebrated aspect of these wider transformations of Indian economic landscapes for its establishment of India as a global back-office processes service provider.

There is much more to be said about the ITes and BPO industries' growth and impact on Indian physical, cultural, and work landscapes, than I can cover in this note (see Upadhya and Vasavi, 2007). Briefly, these were industries that developed in the wake of the unprecedented success of the offshoring of software development services (commonly grouped as 'IT'), capitalizing on lower costs and India's large, English-speaking, educated youth demographic. The emergent 'knowledge industry' had a two-tiered hierarchy: highly prized, globally mobile, white collar software engineering and other technically skilled jobs in IT on the one hand, and less esteemed, less mobile positions in data entry, telemarketing, technical support, medical transcription, and other back-office work in the BPO and ITes sectors, on the other (Patel, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2011). The 'call center' became an iconic representative of the industry – as did 'phone clone' and 'dead ringer' workers trained to speak and interact as Americans, functioning in one mindspace while existing in another as 'virtual migrants' (Aneesh, 2006; Mirchandani, 2012; Nadeem, 2011; Poster, 2007).

The impact of the BPO boom really cannot be understated. Critics highlight the complications of working 24-hour cycles to keep with global time-clocks, risks for young women workers, internal harassment, and low job security among other causes of high worker attrition. These, however, were set against the industry's celebrated potential to '"leapfrog" India into a post-industrial service economy and resolve the problem of widespread unemployment, especially of the educated youth' (Vasavi, 2007: 215). What the BPO phase of India's economic history did was to open out routes to an imaginable and highly desirable future: professionalized, financially comfortable and globally positioned in a way that really only private companies would be. Large private companies established the standard for lucrative employment, taking over where the public sector had stagnated. IT and other multi-national groups (MNCs) became 'good companies' who set standards for what India could achieve, given the right impetus. Desperate for a steady stream of workers, companies actively engaged in selling jobs to applicants via campus recruitments, luring them with images of plush workplaces, career prospects, and invitations to 'reach out to the world' (*ibid.*: 217). Finding a job was already becoming an act of consumption.

Behind the euphoria of the 'Incredible India' and 'India shining' slogans (of India's tourist marketing and the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP's 2004 political campaign respectively) and the elevation of country into a corporate 'motherbrand' (Mazzarella, 2003: 39), however, was a fundamentally altered relationship to work. Workers no longer existed as collectives (the BPO industry is famously not unionized) but as 'neoliberal subject[s] – individualised and responsible for his/her own self-presentation, self-government, self-management and self-advancement' (Gooptu, 2009: 46). Further, work produced pay – more

pay than ever before – so much so that 'disposable income' and 'purchasing power' counted among the more empowering phrases of these decades. Attractive salaries made individual consumption possible as never before, and vastly enabled service sector expansion.

With such focus on individual agency and consumption as the new tools of self-making came the invisibilization of labor. The roles of worker and consumer were largely collapsed, the latter taking precedence as the object of desire and measure of progress; the service sector worker was also consumer of other services, as never before. Labor activists are quick to point out that the status of 'worker' is effaced at many levels, most especially for workers themselves, by industry euphoria and the very international configuration of the hidden, outsourced 'back-end'. The promise of 'heavenly' working conditions in air-conditioned offices and modern glass-and-steel buildings, with rows upon rows of computers – those technological symbols of progress, affluence, and deliverance from physical hardships – only adds to the effacement. Workplaces are presented as 'fun' college-like 'campuses', and, at a titular level, everyone is an 'executive' or a 'team lead', symbolically an extension of management, no matter how menial their actual work (Dey, 2012; Ramesh, 2004; Vasavi, 2007).

Ramesh notes that several of these strategies emerge from new paradigms of Human Resource management, which replace the older 'personnel management' of conventional manufacturing and service sectors (2004: 494-496). Tasked with 'detach[ing] the workplace feeling from the workers' (*ibid.*: 495), HR departments provide training, organize team social events, invoke trendy youth cultures in posters and 'fast food' meals, and generally try to strike an optimal work-fun balance. Their purpose is ostensibly to build loyalty and maximize productivity by bolstering the social importance and prestige of work. And yet, these very strategies also aim to minimize the routine, repetitive and laborious character of work, deflect attention from sources of frustration, and mask endemic issues:

> lower security of employment, adverse impacts of flexible employment practices, inappropriate social security measures, rigid work organisation with stringent control mechanisms, dismal scope for career/skill improvement, near absence of worker collectivity, weaker social dialogue mechanisms and so on. (Remesh, 2014: 42)

What gets projected instead is an impressive façade built of enviable incomes, westernized work environments, peppy youth culture, higher-than-normal labor standards, and the impression of work as a lifestyle (Vasavi, 2007).

Here, indeed, is work without labor – work stripped of its laboring character and detached from relationships of control and domination, mystified, fetishized, and presented as one among a suite of commodities to which the upwardly mobile worker-consumer now had free, easy access. Indeed, the only people talking consistently about collective experience or labor were those attempting to organize workers, and in that climate, union leaders were increasingly regarded as old-world troublemakers blocking the future forward advances of private development.

Consuming Nokia

Consumption, however, is a fragile mythology sustained by the capriciousness of capital and undergirded by unstable political arrangements. The case of the Nokia phone manufacturing plant based in the Sriperumbudur SEZ (Special Economic Zone) and 'hi-tec' hub near Chennai reveals the practices that shroud labor relations in the allure of consumption when capital is assured, only to reassert its existence in the face of instability and uncertainty.

Nokia's presence in the Sriperumbudur SEZ from 2005 onward owed to the then ruling DMK's (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) courtship of the Finnish phone giant, and its success in outbidding other Indian states vying for Nokia business with unparalleled monetary and infrastructural incentives (Dutta, 2009). Adding to that heady victory, Nokia's component manufacturers soon joined the SEZ. As a result, Nokia was held up as the embodiment of industrialization in Tamil Nadu, along with Hyundai and Saint-Gobain Glass, one of 'the three pillars of Sriperumbudur' (Mishra and Leena, 2014). The DMK's own Vallthu kattuvom thittam or the 'We live' recruitment scheme then aided Nokia's own initiatives to identify new employees (Finnwatch et al., 2011). Soon after beginning operations in 2005, Nokia employed 8,000 and supported an additional 20,000 in component manufacturing. Many of its employees were first generation industrial workers from agricultural backgrounds, just out of school or having quit their educations to jump on the Nokia bandwagon, enthusiastic about the reputations of foreign companies as 'good employers' who would pay high salaries with solid benefits (*ibid.*).

Changing consumer tastes for everything from electronics to fruits (more expensive than vegetables; heralding dietary changes and spending habits) and 'pencil pants' (George, 2009) would soon reveal that Nokia represented, far more than simply lucrative employment, an aspirational framework. Employees noted their ability to purchase services like healthcare, defray their marriage costs, and saw their jobs as a path to the lesser hardships of a middle-class life (NITS,

2014). Indeed, these were the very signs of India's promised prosperous future, now finally filtering down to lower castes and lower-income communities, just like they had for others with the IT/ITes/BPO boom. Consumption was not an activity just enabled by work, but '[d]eeply place-, position- and history-rooted', the means 'for people to claim the value of their work' (Marques, 2010: 544).

What Indian workers consumed though, as we saw even in the BPO industry, was not merely products which money could now buy, but the idea of work-without-labor – supported by company practices and simply by the Nokia brand. Finally, for young men and women less educated than those absorbed by the BPO industry but no less entitled to the same futures, here was a brand with the right disposition: Nokia was after all the name that dominated the mobile market until even the late 2000s, releasing a series of low-cost dual-SIM phones for the India/Asia market starting in 2011 – named 'Asha', Sanskrit for hope. The company's culture was 'open, transparent, performance- and development-focused' – one official cited traits that are not easily found in other manufacturing companies (in Mishra and Leena, 2014). It conducted large recruitment drives in neighboring villages, actively promoting the Nokia brand, pushing prospective employees to understand quality in terms of brand recognition and trust. The company hired women and trained operators to work assembly lines; it bussed its employees from nearby villages to production facilities, distributed glass engraved awards to high-performers, provided lunches and free camera phones, celebrated 'Tejas day' to mark the company's founding anniversary in a huge celebration each year, and conferred the pride of high volume production to its growing workforce in purple embossed handsets with the words '500 million [handsets manufactured], 5 years' (Matthews, 2012: 12).

All told, the company provided services as families couldn't and government wouldn't. Indeed, companies in the SEZ had been improbably classified as 'public utilities', ostensibly in order to ensure promised infrastructural incentives like water and continuous electricity supply – services glaringly unavailable and not-promised to local communities, but also specifically to 'curb labor indiscipline' (Dutta, 2009: 24). And yet, these were the wider trade-offs to be made for good work: 'I think it balances out because we get employment opportunities', one Foxconn employee remarked plainly (in Matthews, 2012: 14). Nokia, along with the other component manufacturing companies clustered in the SEZ, represented a work-around, if not to civic rights, then at least to the products and services that a salary could buy, and the prestige of working for a recognized global brand. It was thus not long before Nokia employment became a status symbol with intimately local significance, enough to distinguish families from each-other based on who had a Nokia employee, and who didn't (Mishra and Leena, 2014).

In all these quotidian ways, Nokia lived up to worker expectations of how a foreign MNC like Nokia, would operate in liberalized India, and actively nurtured employee identification as simultaneously producers and consumers of its product. In so doing, it refigured what workers were able to consume: that is, not just what their wages enabled, but the idea of the 'good brand' that Nokia represented, in whose image workers constituted themselves, by which they marked their own material progress, claimed the value of their work, and charted their futures.

Visibilizing labor relationships

But the romance would only last so long. The SEZ's protection from 'labor indiscipline' began giving way in 2009, to emerging details of Nokia's heavy reliance on contract labor in all possible non-manufacturing jobs (contract labor is banned in the manufacturing sector), the resulting job insecurity, and several issues over low wages. Tensions between management and labor resulted in a massive strike that year – a first within a SEZ – leading to the unionization of Nokia's workforce in South Asia. Two more strikes followed in 2010, also over wages and the suspension of 63 workers for 'indiscipline' (Cividep, 2010). An extended battle with the Indian and Tamil Nadu governments over taxation revenues then precipitated a finishing withdrawal. In April 2014, an acquisition by Microsoft reduced the Sriperumbudur plant to contract-status. Ironically, just before May Day, 6,000 employees were offered a voluntary retirement scheme and all others a mandatory retirement option.

Such ruptures point obviously to the volatility of industrial relations in the Sriperumbudur SEZ, and to the facts of labor and shifting political arrangements with the state that were otherwise glossed in stories of Nokia's roaring successes. Union organizers of course drew attention to labor relations by citing legalities and worker rights, but workers themselves evoked social relationships in far more personal ways. When the factory closed, many had found themselves with no employment future to speak of, having dedicated themselves to the one company and one skill set for years in an environment which privileges 'freshers' (Radio Potti, 2014[1]) – and they were quick to note that it was their very loyalty that was now leaving them stranded.

In exchange for new-world visions of affluence, Nokia had bought over the old-world loyalties of its employees who then counted themselves in so many kin-

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1   Radio Potti is a small collective gathered to broadcast content about local issues every weekend, and had several episodes addressing the Nokia factory case.

metaphors as members of the extended 'Nokia family' – for whom they sacrificed to the point of trading in their employment futures, and who in turn supported their very real extended families. Desperately seeking job security and assurance in the wake of the Microsoft merger and the uncertain future of the plant, these workers invoke relationships of moral obligation, responsibility, and patronage that a patriarch in traditional Indian society or the welfare state could be held to provide. Except that there is no patriarch or (functioning) welfare state here. There is just the good brand: Nokia one day, and Microsoft the next.

The tragedy of the Nokia factory case is that it is not just labor that was made invisible to the precariat of India's new economy, but also capital. While union organizers seek protections against the vagaries of global capital, it is clear that workers neither really understand nor really care about tax imbroglios or the impetus driving global acquisitions and mergers or capital fluidity. One worker, Ramya, insists that Nokia should settle its tax issues, but 'in a just and correct manner, without affecting the workers, assuring us job security', appearing entirely unaware of how linked the two issues are (Radio Potti, 2014). 'Whether they're paying tax or not, is their own personal problem; they should speak it out', continues another, Sarala. 'Now because of these two [referring to the Tamil Nadu government and Nokia], we are ones getting affected' (*ibid.*). These comments and others call to mind conflict as it might occur between family-members or groups in a face-to-face community. What is at stake is simply moral obligation: the responsibility of Nokia as a partner with the government to pay its taxes so that it can stay true to its fundamental mission to provide local employment. What capital might mean beyond these commitments is unclear.

A forgone consumption

For the nine years of its operation, Nokia employment provided the means of navigating towards a tremendously attractive 'horizon of hope' (Appadurai, 2013: 295) by fusing work with consumption. The young men and women who everyday donned white anti-electrostatic aprons and shoe covers at the Nokia factory came from impoverished and rural socio-economic backgrounds with only uneven access to state resources and benefits, and work futures framed only by the possibilities of development. For them, work at the Nokia plant was a brokered arrangement which made way for the MNC to deliver the material and symbolic things the developmentalist state had failed to provide: prestige, recognition, consumer goods, better medical care, better capacities to help family, even water and food. The state represented a failed aspirational framework, as much as it made the political arrangements for the promissory futures of consumption. When those failed in the end, the open link between

what futures could be imagined and what presents could be materially procured was broken, too. Labor was visible once more, but this time as a sort of denied livelihood, a return to the prior state of animal laborans, and a forgone consumption.

Aspirations, Appadurai tells us, are never simply individual 'as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think', but are 'formed in interaction and in the thick of social life' (2004: 67). My argument in this note has been that consumption represents one critical site of this interaction which frames the imagination of the good life, and constitutes work. It is not by any means the only aspirational framework in Indian society, maybe not even the most creative or ethical one, but certainly a dominant space of desire that cuts across social differences in a way that development has not, and politics does not. Work as consumption, or the work of consumption delivers us into this admittedly fragile, imaginative, aspirational space, away from hardships and material deprivations, 'map[ping] the journey from here to there and from now to then, as a part of the ethics of everyday life' (Appadurai, 2013: 292).

Until the point of collapse, that is, which reveals once more all that consumption conceals. A union-backed film (NITS, 2014), hunger strikes, and despairing worker narratives crawling the web never allowed us to forget the stark realities of losing work, or being stripped of the frameworks that allowed labor to acquire, express, and perform its value. Workers marked the stages as they fearfully noted precipitous drops in production, no more high-end phones, machines moved to Hanoi, shifts being restructured for fewer workers, and other details that give form to the sheer speed of capital flight.

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