

Working Paper 541

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A CRITICAL STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF ICT ON INTERACTIVE SERVICE WORKERS IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

Jina Sarmah¹

Abstract

Interactive Service work is not new to the economy however, the growing demand for personalised services and the use of ICT has dramatically transformed the way work is performed in the new economy. The objective of the paper is to analyse the position of ICT in reshaping the organisation of work for value generation, focusing on Interactive service work in the hotel industry. The researcher uses case-study methodology and with the help of in-depth interview method re-evaluates the purpose of ICT in the workplace and whether technology has been able to promote enriching and dignified work among Interactive labour in the hotel industry. The researcher identifies and categorises the analysis under three domains, first, how ICT acts as an instrument in generating aspirations, secondly, how the transgression of ICT has shaped workers' performance through the creation of the desired labour market, and finally, how workers experience the realities of work in a technology-enabled work environment.

Introduction

Technological advancement and globalisation are considered as two critical factors majorly shaping the global economy today. The prime use of technology, be it the simple tools used in the agricultural society to the complex machinery in the industrial societies to ICT, is to simplify work, increase productivity, perform repetitive work, and reduce workload so that humans have time for leisure, creativity and participation in the public sphere. With this promise, technology was introduced in workplaces which eventually expanded to every other aspect of human life social, political and cultural. In the 1990s, the process of 'liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation' marked the beginning of the IT revolution in India. The opening up of the economy to international and private players through policy reforms in the Telecommunications sector led to the IT revolution². Further, with the introduction of smart phones in the year 2009, competition amongst the telecom service industries increased which made internet and other telecom services available to everyone at an affordable cost. India had 749 million internet users in 2020³ and is the world's second-largest online market. The study focuses on Interactive work as a reflection of the changing nature of work in today's economy. The study aims to explore how technology in the new economy impacts work organisation and the quality of life of the workers in Interactive service work.

With the boom of the IT industry and ITeS, there have been rapid urbanisation and the emergence of global cities even within the developing economies (Sanyal and Bhattacharjee, 2011). There has been a massive expansion of consumer services across the globe, for instance as McDowell

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² IT refers to the Information Technology industry as a whole, which includes IT infrastructures, computers, networking, software applications, information management, etc., while ICT refers to Information Communications Technology wherein computers and other digital technologies are used in the management of information.

³ Number of internet users in India from 2010 to 2020, with estimate until 2040 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/255146/number-of-internet-users-in-india/> accessed on April, 2022 .

(2011:8) states "from eating out, through travel, to all sorts of care for the body and the soul, from massaging to counselling", the economy has shifted to a weightless economy through the production of 'weightless goods and services'. The paper focuses on interactive service work, a form of work which demands face-to-face interaction with the consumers, and the worker's embodied dispositions add value to the service exchange and impact their employability. This form of work is often portrayed as an emerging form of work in the 'global cities' in the economy, as a result of increasing focus on service quality and a consumer-centric market approach. Negri and Hardt (2004) explain that this form of immaterial labour has come to play a hegemonic position in transforming the production process, not in terms of their numbers, as they represent a minority of the global workforce, but in terms of the strategic role they perform and the organisations they represent. Bhattacharjee and Sanyal (2011) argue that there has been a rise in employment in the services sector, in information-rich work, where workers add high value to the services through direct interaction with the consumers and this has been the result of the gradual shift in the production system - from mass production to production of goods and services with more consumer-sensitive preferences, which involve instant interactions between producers and consumers.

Several studies emerged, right from Hochschild's (1983) "The managed heart", to Goffman's (1956) "The presentation of self in everyday life", to several other empirical studies post 1970s, based on emotional labour, aesthetic labour, front line workers and interactive labour (Warhurst, C *et al*, 2000; Witz, A *et al* 2003; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009, Cullen, 2011). Initial studies on Interactive service work in the west focused on emotion management, in exploring the worker's relationship with the management, interaction with the consumer, with self and while performing emotional labour. The scope of the studies further expanded and focused on the dynamics of interactive work through a broader lens of class, identity, gender and race.

A few studies in the Indian context have explored interactive work as a new and crucial dimension of services and raised the issue of transforming workplace culture and employee identity. Studies in the context of India moved away from the Western-centric approach and highlighted the issue of class and caste inequality and its impact on the workforce (Gooptu, 2009, 2013; Upadhya & Vasavi 2006; Upadhya, 2008, Saith *et al*, 2008; RoyChowdhury and Upadhya, 2020). These empirical studies on different occupational positions such as IT professionals, call centre employees, private security guards, retail store sales persons, hotel staff representing interactive service positions have explored aspects of work culture, workplace identity, ethnicity, professionalism, and even a broad context of political economy examining the role of state and private capital in preparing interactive service workers. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of studies which explores how organisations (big and small) use digital technologies in the production process, in their day-to-day functioning and how does it impact labour in this process.

Interactive positions in the hotel industry is not a new form of work. It has always existed in the past however, with the growing influence of global capital on establishments and organisations there has been a demand to maintain a competitive edge in the market. While researchers have highlighted the need for more empirical research in the context of India to develop a comprehensive understanding of the transformations that have been taking place in the workplace in the new economy

and one such transformation has been the result of the expansion of digital technologies. It is only through a large body of empirical studies taking into account multiple scenarios, occupational positions, diverse sectors, old and new forms of work in the new economy, when integrated gives a pattern and picture in confirming a phenomena while drawing attention to the issue specifically in the context of a developing economy.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

A meta-narrative, that has been created and accepted by most people over the years, is that technology is equivalent to advancement and development. This “thought processes which planted faith and agency in technology as either liberator or an annihilator can be traced back to the European Enlightenment and was the result of centuries of European colonialism that followed... (Smith, 1994b as cited by Kamath, 2020, p: 4).” In the mid-1800s, the then Governor-General of India believed that with the expansion of the railways and telegraph system across the country would be able to do away with various social evils prevalent in the society, and technology would break down the caste system and pull the society towards a civilised and a modern social system and towards the path of industrial development (Saith *et al*, 2008; Kamath, 2020). These ideas and notions of technology associated with progress translated even in nation-building process, in the late 1990s with liberalisation and globalisation, the boom of the IT industry marked the beginning of a new era. An era of optimism and change led by the IT sector was observed, jobs in the IT sector were considered to be high-paying in a westernised work culture with modern grand infrastructure. A job in the IT sector was seen as the ultimate success for an individual and a chance for upward mobility (*ibid*). Hence, the notion that ICT played a significant role in improving the socio-economic conditions of the people in the developing economies continued to exist (Mann, 2004; Sahay, 2001; Walsham *et al*, 2007 as cited in Avgerou, 2010; Thompson, 2003). While ICT became the backbone in the operations of many sectors, it was used to promote new ways of working, restructure organisational models, change demand for skills, etc. However, gradually as studies were undertaken to assess the nature of work and work culture in the IT and ITeS sector, it was established that this form of work was also marked by stress and a professional rat race with long meaningless work (Kamath, 2020; Upadhya & Vasavi, 2006, Upadhya, 2008).

Nevertheless, this notion of technological determinism, that technology and technical innovations (including digital technologies) are a major factor which transform society, culture and economy and bring advancement, was challenged by the many critical studies questioning the purpose of technology (Kamath, 2020, Saith *et al*, 2008; Jungwoo Lee, 2016; Andrew Feenberg, 2002, Upadhya, 2008). For many, the understanding of the idea of technology has been reduced to mere artefacts representing technology (Kamath, 2020), and there is a need to understand technology in its entirety. Technological experiences have to be immersed and integrated into the social context to create solutions to social problems. Studies gradually identified and argued that technological determinism and solutionism could be a potential threat to the development of society as one is led by the belief that technology is to solution to all social problems (Kamath, 2020, Saith *et al*, 2008; Jungwoo Lee, 2016; Andrew Feenberg, 2002). ICT does not function in isolation, unless the social, cultural and political context is not taken into account in the process of technology development and in the implementation

of ICT at the workplace, the impacts of ICT can never be integrated with the larger social welfare (Feenberg, 2002).

If the largely accepted debate of technological determinism is true the question that arises is how do technological transformations translate into the lives of the people? Who decides on what functions ICT should be put in use in organisations and what is the position of ICT in the organisation of work? MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999, as cited by Kamath, 2020; p: 18) mention that “technologies are political not only in their design but actually in their entirety; this, therefore implies that technologies are more compatible with social relations than others”. Critical theorist Feenberg (2002) argues that the interest of the ruling class and the values of the social system which they aspire to maintain, for the continuity of their dominant position, is by default installed into the design of the technology even before it is assigned different tasks (p. 14-15). Hence, it comes down to the question of who controls technology; the purpose behind the designing of ICT; whose purpose does technology serve; and whether it benefits the worker or the capitalist; are queries of immense significance. When one looks at the hotel industry in India, it has been recorded that post-liberalisation and from the early 2000s, a large number of international hotel chains began to enter the Indian market, which implies there has been an investment of global private capital in the Indian market, thereby increasing competition among the establishments. Workplaces have experienced increasing digitisation and ICT now plays a crucial part in the day-to-day functioning of an organisation.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Bengaluru, Karnataka. Bengaluru is a major IT hub in India with an expanding consumer services market, such as restaurants, hotels, hospitals, personal care, malls, retail, fitness and wellness centres, luxury showrooms, etc., creating demand for interactive service workers. While interactive workers are present in several services sectors such as retail, hospitality, educational institutions, hospitals, personal care, counselling, etc. the researcher chose the accommodation (hotels) sector for the study, because unlike the newly-emerging avenues of work which have been the direct result of IT sector, hospitality sector have existed for a very long time. The intervention of ICT gives us the scope to analyse the transformation the sector and its workforce undergoes.

The study is exploratory in nature and case study methodology was used for the process of data collection. The researcher chose purposive and snowball sampling methods and acknowledging the weakness of the purposive and snowball sampling method, known for drawing a homogenous sample a ‘maximum variation sampling’ method was employed for ensuring a heterogeneous sample selection. Therefore, three different hotel groups were categorised:

1. Luxury hotels (5 Star & 4 Star)
2. Midscale hotels (3 Star)
3. Budget hotels (2 Star)

The sample consists of 10 individuals, 8 male and 2 female and with the help of an unstructured interview guide, the lived experiences of employees in the technology-mediated workplaces were explored. The identity of the respondents and the establishments are kept confidential,

as requested by the participants. Using Atlas.ti software, the data was extracted and organised from the interviews and after two round of coding a thematic analysis was carried out.

Table 1: Respondents' profile

Respondents' Name (pseudo name) position	Educational qualification	Age	Sex	Type of hotel	Respondents' Place of origin
Vinod Manager (Front office)	BA Hotel Management	37	M	Luxury hotel	Mumbai (Urban)
Shubroto Manager (Front office)	BA Hotel Management	35	M	Luxury hotel	Kolkata (Urban)
Anil Front Office staff	BA Hotel Management	31	M	Luxury hotel	Nagaland (Urban)
Ankita Hostess in Hotel Restaurant	Hotel Management (Diploma)	26	F	Mid-range	Kolkata (Urban)
Rahul Front Office executive	Hotel Management (Distance Diploma education)	25	M	Mid-range	Himachal Pradesh (Rural)
David Service boy (Hotel restaurant)	Hotel Management (Diploma)	24	M	Budget star	Darjeeling (West Bengal)
Surya Service boy (Hotel restaurant)	Hotel Management (Diploma)	21	M	Budget hotel	Tamil Nadu (Rural)
Tahseen Hotel Management College Lecturer	BA Hotel Management	31	F	Previously worked in Luxury hotel	Karnataka (Urban)
Srinivas Ex-Trade Union Leader	BA	78	M	Luxury hotel	Karnataka (Urban)
Kumar General Manager	BA	62	M	Mid-range	Karnataka

The above table displays the profile of the workers interviewed for the study. These 10 respondents working in different positions - 2 as managers in Front Office, 2 as Front Office staff and 3 restaurant service workers, 1 Hotel Management college lecturer, a Trade Union leader and a General Manager – were interviewed as part of getting a larger picture of the transformations that have taken place in the hospitality sector.

Limitations during fieldwork

The permission for conducting interviews became a major issue, as permission from a higher level of management was required and the employees were required to abide by multiple organisational protocols. The question of permission regarding access to hotels for data collection varied across the hotel categories. While 'budget hotels' were welcoming and willing to share information, the 'mid-scale' hotels were comparatively curious in terms of verifying the researcher's work status and checking the interview schedule. The situation was opposite when it came to luxury hotels, as they made the researcher run from one department to another albeit without any response. It was disappointing and yet interesting to observe the power relation at play. As mentioned by Kvale (2003, as cited in Funder, 2005), there exists a power relation between the researcher and the units of study (individuals, organisations, agents, etc.) through which the researcher was able or unable to access information in the field. Data collection remained a challenge due to time constraints on the part of participants as the hospitality sector is 24 hours 7 days a week service sector and is known for odd work hours. Moreover, the gender of the researcher became an issue as most of the employees were male and lived in staff

quarters or dorms, catching up with them after or before work was problematic. All the interviews took place in the respective workplaces along with non-participant observation at the site of data collection.

The findings of the study have been put under three categories which are first, the perception and aspirations created through ICT about work has been explored, secondly, the use of ICT in the workplace and finally, the how the installation of ICT impacts workers at work and in personal life was examined. Under these broad categories, the themes are as follows:

ICT as an instrument of subjectivity creation

When one is asked about frontline workers in the metro cities, what comes to one's mind is polished, English-speaking workers working in high-end establishments, well-groomed, modern glamorous infrastructure, sophisticated digital technologies at workplace and high salaried jobs, these are symbols of upward economic mobility in our society. ICT plays a crucial role in shaping one's aspirations and expectation and their decision to work in a particular sector and occupational position. The exposure to the internet and online applications has created a space for individuals to aspire for a different kind of life or "the capacity to aspire" which Appadurai argues is the key element in empowering the disadvantaged groups of the society (as cited in Miller *et al*, 2016). The emergence of ICT has restructured global capital, with huge amounts of capital being invested in the process of subjectivity creation. Television and social media play a crucial role in producing dominant cultural products and tend to shape the values and perceptions of social reality. Digital technologies and platforms such as social media and advertisements act as a medium to communicate information, often portraying technology-mediated workplaces and work as an advanced form of work marked by increasing level of efficiency. It is the larger political narratives which play a hegemonic role in shaping the perception people hold about ICT-enabled workplaces as sophisticated work environments, with complex instruments which have been able to generate employment for the educated English-speaking workers. This was seen as a sign of development, modernity and economic advancement by the populace.

The respondents stated that the desire to work in luxury hotels, to a certain degree was a result of reality shows like Master Chef, which portrayed how common people attained fame, recognition and money overnight. A former hotel employee and now a teacher in a hotel management school mention that many people join the hotel management course after watching TV shows like Master Chef, travel shows, etc., the glamour around it aspires them to join the sector, however, once the student is in the 3rd year of the programme and goes for Industrial exposure, their perception turns upside down.

Subhroto, a luxury hotel employee states: *"Around 2008, at that point in time the hotel management and hospitality sector was booming and there was a growing demand for people to work at the hotels. I was fascinated by people, some of my distant friends who worked in the hotels. The work culture is quite modern, beautiful glamorous infrastructure-polished, well-groomed personality, wearing a suit and always smelling good."*

What poses a challenge is that without looking at how digital technologies interact with workers in a particular context, the realities of the true nature of workfare often swept under the rug. It has been argued that the workers often see work in a technology-enabled services sector as an

opportunity for a better life, hence, in the process internalise work relations and disciplinary cultures, and eventually become subjects in the capitalist labour process.

Skill set in an ICT-enabled work environment

The increase in the flow of global private capital in the Indian hotel industry post-2000s through the international hotel chains had a considerable impact on the way work has been organised in the sector, and different categories of hotels felt the ramification of it. Magnified competition and easy accessibility of luxury services for all at competitive prices meant increasing demand for skills of the workers based on global services standards at a lower wage rate. The growing use of technology has many effects on the economy and organisations and one such impact is the increase in the demand for acquiring a new set of skills such as handling computer software, basic decision making, customer handling, organising meetings, constant coordination and communication with clients and colleagues. In addition, as Interactive service work requires, embodied dispositions to acquire a competitive edge in the market (Cullen, 2010), maintaining aesthetics or being presentable and well-groomed, becomes a crucial aspect of performing frontline work. As one enters a hotel, the tasks assigned to the interactive workers includes 'checking-in/out' to 'checking the previous record of the guests', 'updating software', 'taking orders on tablets' in the restaurants, etc. till the point the guest leaves the hotel with 'rating and feedbacks of the services provided in the hotel' the worker functions in a technology-enabled environment.

These skills and the use of ICT are often determined and practised in the western context and the organisational models are replicated in the context of developing economies as well. Labour, irrespective of the social conditions that he/she comes from, is trained to cultivate new cultures alien to themselves. For someone working in a restaurant of a high-end hotel interacting with the guests needs to know and provide in-depth details about the food served (composition, tastes, contents in case of allergies and dietary requirements), acquire knowledge about a wide range of alcohol (wine especially) recommend drinks (details about the drink) which completely alien to them, at the same time making it sound interesting and irresistible (Dowling, 2007) requires skill. What globalisation and technology have done in this process is that it has brought in standardisation in the nature of work (Jones, Taylor and Nickson, 1997) and created demand for new sets of skills in the workforce. For instance, when one visits a five-star hotel chain in the UK and one visits the same hotel chain in India, the consumer expects a certain degree of standardisation in services but at the same time maintains unique personalised services and experiences.

Further, it was observed during fieldwork, how the mid-range hotels used online platforms to bring about standardisation of services, wherein they use ICT in the form of online training platform to improve the quality of service and bring in standardisation of service across small hotels all over India through their online training programmes. What the platform does is that it expands its brand name through a franchise model, where it takes on the responsibility of training the workforce using a centralised online training platform. In addition, it becomes mandatory for the workers to register himself/herself online as it helps the management to track the presence and activities of the workers. ICT plays a key role in the process of shaping the quality of labour. The centralisation of control over

the service training, however, is problematic as the local context and socio-cultural factors are not taken into consideration in the process of the training of the workers (the socio-economic background of the workers would vary from city to city and town to town and across organisations). The socio-economic background and the identity of the worker are crucial factors in Interactive work which are often neglected. To remain unique and gain a competitive advantage, demand for certain skills, which are immeasurable and invisible aspects of service work, such as creativity, interpersonal skills, and emotional skills, have gained significance. Ankita states,

"from possessing a fair hold on multiple languages to guest handling, to standing and moving around for long hours, to being able to look good and sound right, while maintaining a pleasant face as these employees are the first point of contact, interactive work includes both physical and emotional labour".

Similarly, to attract more consumers and be relevant in the competitive market economy the increasing trend of social media presence was observed during fieldwork. Employees were encouraged to share similar innovative ways of drawing consumers, and constantly promote and introduce new and innovative ways of increasing visibility in the market.

"Rahul: My task is also to plan and execute innovative ideas and design offers to attract more guests, I can give you an example of this, recently we advertised asking our guests to click a selfie of themselves with their friends and hashtag⁴ the name of our hotel, this way many people associated with our guests notice the hotel and the chance of them visiting us increases. As a reward, we select one guest through a lucky draw who wins and gets to enjoy a free dinner at our restaurant. Many of our guests do participate in these online promotional games."

While the control and power and decision-making rights remain in the hands of employers and management, workers are made to believe that they are equally responsible for the success and failure of the establishments.

Digital technologies have transformed the process of recruitment to a large extent in the hotel industry. The use of online applications, such as 'LinkedIn', 'Indeed', which are online job-searching and professional networking platforms is growing rapidly. ICT is commonly used as a two-way channel for disseminating information on vacancies and employment opportunities and as a process of recruitment. It has been observed specifically in the context of luxury hotels, that online platforms such as 'LinkedIn'⁵ 'Indeed' and 'Facebook groups' are widely used as a convenient, less time and resource-consuming way of finding the 'right professional'. Online platforms like 'LinkedIn' and social networks, serve skilled professionals in the sector in terms of displaying their educational degrees from reputed institutions and work experience or internships with big brands. As one of the respondents stated: 'The HR knows everything, he/she is well connected to people in this sector and knows exactly who to look

⁴ Hashtag (#): # symbol is used on social media apps such as Instagram and Twitter to identify messages on a particular topic and becomes visible to a large community

⁵ LinkedIn: LinkedIn is a social networking platform that focuses on professional networking via websites and mobile applications

for through social networks'. On the other end of the spectrum, semi-skilled or workers without formal training in hospitality management look for employment opportunities through informal networks and information received through 'WhatsApp' and 'Facebook groups' from their friends or kin already working in a particular place. This was commonly observed during the fieldwork among migrant workers working in budget hotels.

Work conditions

ICT as a means of control

Braverman (1974), drawing on Marx's writings throws light on those times when the tools used by workmen to perform or implement different tasks were installed on the machine itself and it was this defining moment which transformed the way work was being performed. He further states that evolution did not occur when the size of machinery changed nor when the complexity and speed of operations changed, but alterations in the labour processes occurred when the operations of control shifted from humans to technology (ibid). As mentioned above, the centralised control mechanisms in the organisations give immense power in the hands of management to regulate work culture and the way work is organised. While every employee has access to digital technologies the flow of control and communication and ways of performing work, ways of regulating workers' conduct, workplace relationship, and interaction with various actors (colleagues, consumers, supervisors) only happens through the digital technologies controlled from above, without taking into account the dialogue from the working groups. Saith, *et al* (2008) state "under different social conditions, similar technologies can empower workers at lower levels in the hierarchy or for that matter, even reduce the need for such hierarchised production structures. In the Indian ITeS sector, however, ICTs have been used largely to reduce the autonomy of workers and enhance the ability of management to monitor the workforce (p:331-332)."

With the increasing expansion of global hotel chains, a centralised operating system has been established as a common organisational practice. Interactive work requires workers to deal with unpredictable situations of customer handling, unscripted face-to-face conversations as a result of different situations and anticipation of consumer needs, this demands creativity and interpersonal skills. The increasing centralisation of power and control in the hands of the management restricts creative processes and autonomy in the day-to-day functioning, especially in the case of frontline work. However, interestingly workers, in the interview responded that while the control by the management makes work less interesting, as they become exhausted performing the exact scripted performance each time, it helps them improve services so they do not complain. The respondents largely mentioned that the control over the performance of the workers and the demand for common skills regulated through ICT by the supervisors and management must be for their good as it helps them improve service quality and efficiency at work. This, in a way, reflects the ingrained notion workers hold about ICT at the workplace, which is constantly associated with efficiency and high service quality. Apart from the centralised control mechanism, other forms of control were also observed during fieldwork.

Surveillance

Surveillance has become a common phenomenon in the new economy. Constant supervision through CCTV cameras, managers monitoring the work, day-to-day briefing and updates on WhatsApp group enquiring about situations characterise work in the hotel sector. Consumers are asked to provide critical feedback and are often incentivised to provide critical comments on the service quality. While this is presented in a sugar-coated form when management uses the argument of improving performance through feedback, however, this is a direct form of surveillance of the workers. Studies (Chalykoff and Kochan, 1989; Holman *et al* 2002 as cited in Kensbock and Stöckmann, 2021), have highlighted that increasing surveillance has over time resulted in high levels of stress, high attrition rate and low levels of job satisfaction among employees.

Everyday briefings by the employer⁶ to his/her team was an important routine, as workers were motivated to work in a certain way and everyday problems and issues are discussed, as workers take charge of the day. Gooptu (2009) points out that workers in the neoliberal market economies are socialised in a certain way which gives rise to new forms of work culture which, in turn, further guide workers' actions, turning them into self-governed neoliberal subjects. This implies that even in the absence of surveillance and constant supervision, workers internalise the work culture in the process of becoming active participants (Lazarrato, 1996).

App-based control: Online ratings/ Reviews/ Feedback

Online reviews have in recent years have come to play the most significant role in shaping consumer choices and expectations about a place.

"Rahul: "Before booking a hotel guests visit the online website or applications like 'Trip Adviser' and 'Booking.com' as their first step to selecting a particular hotel represented through 'Stars' and already create an opinion about the place after going through the comments and reviews made by the previous guests"

As the entire model is consumer-centric, workers have very little control over the process of production. In case there are lower online ratings, the workers are brought to question and an explanation seeking the reasons for low ratings is required by the management. Increasing control over the workforce through the use of ICT has also resulted in increasing commercialisation of human relations.

The Indian hospitality sector is well known for its excellent service not just in terms of paid services, but because the principles of providing services to guest is drawn from their very own cultural practices. For instance, the practice of "Atithi Devo Bhava" which is a Sanskrit verse meaning "Guest is equivalent to God"; reflects the dynamics underlying the host and guest relationship being practised in almost every Indian household. In this connection, an employee describes how the host-guest relationship has evolved with the introduction of technology. With the advent of ICT, a respondent stated that the act of serving people in hotels has changed. The guests are provided with feedback

⁶ Employer: by employer I mean the Dept Head of each team, as Hotels are run by a management group and are mostly not owned by a single employer.

forms either in the form of emails mailed to them or in the hotel rooms, in the form of a questionnaire taking an account of the services provided by the worker. This has resulted in the commodification of the services, as now, unlike the earlier times, the actions of the hotel staff are not as organic as they used to be. The front line workers, to a certain extent, perform their tasks keeping in mind the implications of how they perform in terms of feedback and reviews. "The concept of embodied performance and commodification of the workers' body has been used to refer to the fact that individual worker's appearance, deportment and behaviour have become the objects of control by employers" (McDowell, 1997 as cited in Gooptu, 2009, p: 46).

A general manager who had been working in the same hotel for the past 30 years explains that the relationship between the guests and the hotel employees had evolved over the years and this transformation of relationship has happened from interpersonal interaction to a profit-driven scripted interaction. Kumar, the 62-years-old manager says:

"Years ago, when I was working at the reception counter of the hotel, we used to manage bookings in a register, write down every detail of booking entries manually... remembered every detail about which room was occupied by who, what their preferences in terms of food, places and beverages. We knew our guests very well and even they knew and remembered our names and always came back to our hotel whenever they were in Bengaluru; there was a sense of loyalty...This sort of relationship with our guests gave me job satisfaction and I would happily dedicate most of my time here. However, it is not the same today, with computers and apps, the relationship between the guest's and the employee is formal and restricted; the guests expectations rise more from the fact that they feel entitled to being served having paid money for the service..."

Work-life balance

It was observed during the fieldwork that the workers were constantly engaged on their phones while performing their assigned tasks of interacting with guests and providing other related services. To this, a respondent said "look (showing his phone) this thing never sits quite whether I am at work or home. Earlier, once I was done with an 11-12 hours duty at work I was done for a few hours and did not get to know what was happening at work until the next day. This, however, is buzzing all the time now, even when I reach home my colleague who takes over my duty during the other shifts has to constantly update me about what is going on, even when at home I am thinking of work because there are constant notifications on my phone and I cannot ignore it".

A respondent shared his concern with the researcher stating that his constant presence on social media has been stressful over a while. He explains that he has started feeling its impact on his life when he had a meeting with his daughter's class teacher. The teacher after observing his daughter's behaviour, told him that he needs to pay attention and spend time with her, the teacher complained that the child has not received enough attention from her parents resulting in violent behaviour at school.

The workers mentioned that they spend on an average 11 hours at work, 7 days a week. The number of hours was higher in luxury hotels, a little less (10 hours on average) in the midrange hotels and around 9-10 hours in the budget hotels. Ankita, a 26-year-old front desk executive, mentions that she used to work in a luxury hotel but decided to join a mid-range hotel (in a higher position) considering the number of working hours. "I can compromise on the salary but I need sometime for myself, even if it means working in a smaller hotel. Here I have better working hours and after work I reach home on time, and this was not possible in the luxury hotels".

What is interesting is that despite the increasing use of technology the workers continue to work for long hours without any sort of compensation for the extra hours of work, having blurred the lines between personal life and professional life. Employees even after their office hours are constantly engaged receiving updates and queries from the workplace at all times of the day. It has been reported that each department has a 'WhatsApp group' where each employee of the department along with the department Head is constantly communicating and updating with each other 24 hours a day, blurring the line between work hours and off-duty timings. Through the use of ICT in the form of 'WhatsApp', 'email', 'instant messaging' etc organisations have restructured the way work is performed.

"Vinod: We are accessible to our Dept. Heads anytime and we cannot escape this reality"

Demerouti, *et al* (2014) highlight that the emphasis is growing more towards the accomplishment of tasks (final outputs), rather than being physically present in the office for a certain number of hours unlike earlier times, which demands flexible or increasing working hours, this is known as the New Ways of Working (NWW). New ways of working is an approach to work which is known to increase efficiency while reducing costs at the workplace. But a question arises, who does such an approach benefit? Does it benefit the worker or the organisation? Or does it benefit the organisation at the cost of the worker?

New ways of work have three main defining dimensions, which are flexible work hours, flexible places to perform work or more options for the place of work and most importantly the use of ICT as the facilitator of work (Demerouti, *et al*, 2014). This system of work has different meanings in a different contexts. In a certain context, it is highly beneficial for the workers as it allows them flexibility and they determine how do they want to work. On the other hand, these new ways of work can be used as an exploitive mechanism to extract labour in the absence of labour regulations. Hence, this form of approach to work is loaded with meanings and embedded in the local political and social context which cannot be replicated in all contexts and standardised.

Globalisation has resulted in the compression of time and space and through the use of technology it gives rise to multiple cultures (again through social media content from all around the world, giving exposure to new cultures, food habits, lifestyles, etc) in a different space and location.

ICT as a mode of escape or as an instrument for unionising

Work in the contemporary economy is characterised by multiple issues such as intensification of work, long hours of work, absence of autonomy at work, strong surveillance system, the pressure of having to look, act and sound a certain way, precarious employment contract, stagnant wages, sense of alienation and an increasingly blurring of work-life boundaries. This leads to a common question about when and how workers raise the issues that concern their work-life and what the workers do outside of work.

Most of the Interactive service workers work on a shift basis (even though work hours most often exceed up to 11-13 hours per day/ 7 days a week) when asked "what do you do when you are not on duty or during 'leisure' time"? The workers responded "The mobile phone has been of great value to me... I talk to my friends and make new friends on Facebook, watch 'Tik Tok' videos and sometimes even enjoy making 'Tik Tok' videos".

As the researcher exchanged phone numbers with some of the respondents, she automatically had an access to the respondents 'WhatsApp'. On keeping a track of their day-to-day posts, it was observed that very frequently there are posts on funny videos, music videos, 'WhatsApp status' expressing love, anger, stress and other emotions related to loved ones and the workplace. ICT became a window for the researcher to understand the life experiences of these workers.

In this context, while discussing ICT and its impact on the ISW hotel workers with a trade union leader, who was himself a hotel employee in the 1990s, he mentioned that apart from being a mode of providing information and enhancing the process of communication, ICT had emerged as a source of entertainment and also a major source of distraction for the workforce.

"Unlike earlier times, when employees would meet up maybe over some 'Chai' discussions and debates about one's life and work conditions would take place, in the present times, workers are distracted from the issues which shape their social conditions. Now ICT has become a source of distraction with individuals being engrossed in social media, Facebook, Instagram, online news, etc. and forget about their day-to-day struggles."

The reasons behind the absence of unions are multiple. The way work is organised today under capitalism is such that consent is harvested from the workers in their day-to-day interaction with the management. In the case of luxury hotels, the supervisors and the department managers are often compared to a friend by the workers. This is done to lower the chances of protest and demands by the workers to make them believe that their problem is heard and understood but we (the manager and the workers) are all facing the same problems and this is how to work in the new economy has become and there is nothing one can do about it. Dimple mentions

"in case we are facing any kind of problems the only place we can go to share our problems is to our seniors and department managers, they are our counsellors. Once every month the manager will have a meeting with all the employees individually. He/she talks to them and tries to find out if they are facing any problems. It might be a small conversation, but we employees feel good."

In addition to this, constant engagement with guests, both emotionally and physically, leaves them with little or no time for other activities such as organising and mobilising, or even having a discussion and debate. Moreover, accommodation of the workers is arranged in such a way that, along with time constraint, the space to interact, discuss and mingle with employees from other hotels is restricted. An important question which arises here is that, despite accessibility to information, online forums and platforms to amplify and form strong social networks and associations, has everyone accepted the new forms of exploitative employment as their fate or do they have their individualised coping strategies aiming for a better future and career mobility.

Discussion

The purpose behind the creation of technology and ICT is to ease the workload, increase efficiency and enhance the 'realm of freedom' (Marx 1992:959 as cited in Atzeni, 2014). As we observe the increasing use of digital technologies in the functioning of an economy in its day-to-day activities, one cannot help but think of technology as a reason for bringing social changes and advancement in modern society from the outside. However, what one needs to ask and critically look at is, has technology helped in improving work experiences and work conditions of the workforce? The answer is no. ICT has not been able to bring meaningful transformations in work in the case of interactive service labour. The findings of the study have been categorised into three categories. Firstly, the respondents explained the crucial role of ICT in the pre-entry phase before joining interactive service work. For instance, TV shows, social media and advertisements celebrate certain kinds of work as trendy, desirable, international, and glamorous. It promises them upward mobility not just in terms of economic mobility but also in social mobility. Secondly, the investment of global private capital changed the way work is performed as a result of increasing competition. The demand for new skills arrived where private spaces, interpersonal relationships and human emotions were transformed into marketable goods and a site for capital production (Jarret, 2019). Working as a frontline employee requires multiple skills depending on the category of hotel one is employed. While the luxury hotels demanded higher personalisation of work through emotional and aesthetic labour, budget hotels, despite lack of capital are constantly looking for ways through which an educated English-speaking workforce is employed to fulfil the basic requirements of the hotel. Similarly, ICT has, to an extent, evolved the process of recruitment in the hotel industry. While on the one side it has helped workers by giving them access to information on employment opportunities on the other, based on the use of these digital platforms, it reproduces social inequality among the different groups of workers. Thirdly, the final category is to analyse how has Interactive workers experienced ICT at work and how it has benefited them. The major issues that emerged under this category are: increasing control over the workforce and in the organising of work, absence of work-life balance as the line between one's professional and personal life has been blurred, commercialisation of day-to-day interaction and relationship with the consumer base, lower level of wages and lastly, an absence of unionisation efforts and consciousness among the workers regarding working conditions and consent to exploitation.

The basic logic of capitalism is maximising profits through the extraction of surplus labour. Going by this logic, labour is the source of profit. One can invest in the physical infrastructure of a hotel

and so will the other competitors. Moreover, there is constant pressure on reducing the cost of services as a result of competition (hence, over the years luxury is not just accessible to a small group but has a growing consumer base). What brings competitive advantage to an organisation are workers, who through their interaction (one's personality and interpersonal skills add unique advantage to front line position) and services provide, quality services.. While the investment in infrastructure and facilities (raw materials, food, drinks, operations, electricity, maintenance, etc) remains fixed and cannot be negotiated to continue the smooth functioning of the establishments, the only source where costs can be cut down is labour. In an economy with an abundant supply of labour, increasing competition and the absence of labour laws give an upper hand to the capitalistic enterprises to push down wages and introduce new ways of work by which maximum labour can be extracted. Hence, the role of technology becomes crucial as it is used either to completely replace labour or used to reduce workload. It is used as an additional condition along with the labour to extract the maximum out of labour.

Critical theorist Andrew Feenberg (2002) argues that "the degradation of labour, education and the environment is rooted not in technology *per se* but in the anti-democratic values that govern technological development (pg:3)". The exercise of power and control over the use of digital technologies at work has resulted in an intensification of work through the introduction of new ways of work and flexible working conditions. Moreover, earlier problems at work were in the material conditions or objective conditions/outside of workers (poor working conditions, long work hours, inadequate wages, etc.). The problems faced by workers today, along with the material conditions, are much more subjective based on one's everyday experiences. Digital technologies used for rating services and providing feedbacks are subtle means of control constantly shaping workplace behaviour. Unlike the earlier forms of control which were more visible and coercive, the new economy is based on generating consent. Online reviews and rating platforms have become crucial in controlling workers' behaviour, where the worker loses control over one's physical and emotional self. Along with the constant monitoring of their activities under supervisors, managers and ICT, consumers are further requested to provide in-depth feedback on the services and performances. Sherman (2007) highlights: "Customer feedback and monitoring create a "second boss", that supervises the worker even in the absence of managers" (p: 9). Workers are required to incorporate customer-pleasing behaviour by acting as subordinates through emotion management, aesthetically-pleasing manners, client relationship, service with a smile and technologically-determined workplace behaviour where consumer sovereignty gains a central role. Although, authenticity and uniqueness are highly valued traits in the workforce, ICT demands a certain level of standardisation of services through the standardisation of the workforce, irrespective of the social realities and conditions one comes from. Digital technologies imported from the west are directly implanted into workplace systems of a complex social context.

The critical theory rightly explains the significance of social context in one of the paradoxes of technology, as he states that the current social systems fail to understand the history under which a particular technology was developed and the purpose it fulfils (Feenberg, 2002). While technology from the globalised world quickly reaches far corners of the world, the principles guiding its use, do not reach future users. One can draw a parallel to it even in terms of ISW work in India. Technologies are imported from western economies marked by an inadequate supply of workforce in a context which

promotes strong labour laws, strict working hours, fair payment of wage, social security benefits, data privacy laws, trade unions and hence, well-regulated working conditions (specifically in the European economies) to an economy like India with a complete absence of implementation of labour laws and employment regulations. It dramatically impacts and results in intensification of work and exploitation of the workforce. What is considered to increase productivity and reduce workload in labour-deficient economies with strong laws and regulations, turns out to be exploitative in the context of economies with weaker laws and regulations. What is even more interesting is that while the service delivery and other ways of performing work are standardised, the rewards system, that is the employment relations, the working conditions, the salary system and training for career mobility, is nowhere close to being standardised. The rewards mechanism remains highly flexible with precarious employment relations and it is when one talks about the reward system that the social context becomes applicable. This implies that globalisation is applicable as and when it serves the purpose of the ruling class.

An interesting question that leaves further scope for investigation is why the participation of Interactive service workers, in any form of association, remained absent? The researcher argues that the absence of common physical space and time, and an extreme form of precarious work conditions are the major reasons behind this. Where the workers lived, with whom they interacted and how much they interacted, and how much leisure time they had was all closely monitored by the managers leaving them with no space for any activities outside of work. When the workforce is divided in a way where the space to engage, organise and mobilise is absent altogether, how does one understand, identify and accept that there lies a problem in the production system and collective bargaining is crucial to bring about a balance in the system.

Nevertheless, one should be able to look at an alternative approach even under such circumstances, as critical theory encourages an emancipatory approach. ICT could be used as a key instrument in the process of forming strong labour associations. The critical theory argues, to challenge the hegemonic power of capital, an alternative can be created through the democratic participation in technical decisions of the organisations by the workers. ICT offers numerous opportunities to the working class to organise on an online platform, share awareness about the rights and working conditions, social security benefits, decent wages, etc. Specifically talking about the Interactive Service, workers working in metro cities, who have better access to cyberspace, knowledge about the use of online applications and the ability to speak and understand English, gives them an added advantage. There lies the immense potential for workers to circulate information, have a dialogue with larger worker communities at the global level through e-unions and organise themselves keeping aside differences. There is a need to accept the issues regarding working conditions and unite for a better working environment.

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