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FOR THINGS TO REMAIN (SORT OF) THE SAME, EVERYTHING MUST CHANGE[1] |
India's First Generation Professional Elites & The Surreptitious Reproduction of Hierarchy

Research on international inequality has begun to reveal an increasing heterogeneity in who constitutes as "elite" in an interconnected world (Behrends and Lentz 2012; Naudet 2015; Pereyra 2014). Even though the nature and extent of these changes have depended on local institutional contexts (Ghezzi and Mingione 2007; Van Veen and Kratzer 2011), market liberalization, especially in emerging economies, has brought forth new kinds of elite landscapes and a new demographic of people who can aspire to inhabit them (Domhoff & Zweigenhaft 1998; Letntz 2008; Liu et al. 2014). Consequently, although access into traditional elite networks and spaces remains relatively predetermined, new kinds of actors and institutions have begun to form a version of a cosmopolitan "global elite" (Freeland 2011; Friedman 2000).

This Chapter aims to locate one newly minted strain of neoliberal elite in India – elite professionals. The literature on elites in India has, for good reason, predominantly focused on political and/or economic elites with a standing assumption of ascription. But with an increasing ideological commitment to the idea of meritocracy (Mehta 2011; Subramanian 2015) and new kinds of global work that valorize it afresh, individual social mobility in India has become an important site of understanding the rejuvenating composition of elites. As other accounts of contemporary elites attest, no such analysis is possible without an introspection of both the individuals that inhabit these elite spaces as well as the circulation networks and structures that reproduce them (Khan 2012; Pareto 1968). Tasked to this end, this research asks: Who are the inhabitants of these new spaces? And, to the extent they are new kinds of inhabitants, what kinds of resources and structures buffer their entry and success? In this unfolding process, it attempts to unpack a more latent structural tension between status

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[1] Adapted from The Leopard (from Italian *Il Gattopardo*) by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1958). The original Italian quote is "Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi" which translates, more literally, as "if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." The interpretative translation of this line has forwarded some debate. See, for example, "Paradox at the heart of 'The Leopard'", Financial Times, October 23, 2010 available at https://www.ft.com/content/45bb2ef4-de3a-11df-9364-00144feabdc0 (last accessed April 2018).

mobility and stability, and, in turn, the complementary patterns of elite capital's retainment and attainment.

This research distinguishes a cohort of "first generation" elites – a burgeoning, albeit small, class of service professionals in India – from both traditional or ascribed elites as well as the wide range of other neoliberal white-collared workers whose post globalization mobility has been richly theorized (e.g. Fernandes and Heller 2006; Nadeem 2009; Radhakrishnan 2011; Upadhya 2009). The elite professionals in this Chapter are not just skilled professionals and managers that, in the Marxist literature would amount to the "new middle class" (Portes 2001: 265) but, rather, what other stratification scholars have described as "elite workers" (Portes 2001, Portes and Hoffman 2003). Within this analytical framework, unlike professional skills that afford status-retainment benefits in the form of a new (or upper) middle class, the skills that "elite workers" possess allow them to transcend more fundamental divides in capitalist society (Portes 2001: 265). Social conditions that have resulted in this sort of new access often are predicated on the socio-cultural conditions that they emerge from. In general, this mobility is often limited to the class of its retainer, but in exceptional contexts, possession can allow the owner to reach the ranks of true capitalists (2001: 265) – for example, the early rise of Silicon Valley entrepreneurial elite (Castells 1980); and the rise of intellectual bureaucrats in state-socialist societies (Szelenyi 1982). In similar ways, this Chapter tracks the emergence of a set of professionals with particular class-conferring skills who emerged in the wake of the 1991 liberalization reforms in India. I use "first generation" here to distinguish these professionals from those in the previous generation who were not equipped to cross class divides by mere posession of credential alone. And indeed, posession of such capital continues to not be enough to cross many barriers for the managerial class (Naudet et al. 2017). It is this distinguishing feature – the ownership of a special form of credential-based social capital that allows a select group of professionals to transcend their class origins – that typify the first generation professional elites that are the focus of this Chapter.

Yet, not all such professionals with elite credential have the same kind of career experiences and outcomes. In comparing elite professionals, this research suggests the significance of variations in access and, upon access, valorization, into these spaces and networks. Particularly, using the example of professionals in legal and management consulting firms, it reveals how

modern professional service organizations produce and retain old and new hierarchies along lines of gender and class. Particularly, while elite education is a standard requirement for entry, firms vary in the ways they valorize these other markers of status. As a result, while on the face of it, access across these elite professional sites seems equally meritocratic, structural differences advantage different kinds of individuals across these sites. Particularly, by using the comparative case of law firms that recruit from elite law schools and management consulting firms that recruit from elite engineering programs, this research sheds light on the variation that these seemingly similar meritocratic tracks can mean for the diversification in the demography of professionals they produce. As institutional crystallizations of India's new avatar of global capitalism, these high-status firms are a perfect locus from which to observe elite transformations and class formations: as receiving organizations for the country's brightest students, they offer a snapshot of observing how new kinds of aspirants are indoctrinated into elite logics; as well as the kinds of conditions where such mobility is thwarted. Further, by indulging in this comparative exercise, this research offers the importance of organizational variation as vantage point from which to observe the mechanisms through which individuals adjust to – and in turn, co-create – broader structural change.

Specifically, in revealing these patterns of elite composition and circulation, this Chapter seeks to extend the following interrelated lines of enquiry regarding (i) gender and work, (ii) the tension between new class formation and reproduction, and (iii) the role of organizations in producing these outcomes. First, it argues that these "first generation elites" afford us a new understanding to a literature that has predominantly focused on economic and political lineage as a source of its definitional authority. Second, and specifically in using the example of how women in these elite firms experience their work environments, it suggests that one way in which the coordinates of elite mobility are moderated is through organizational exchange partners (e.g. clients, peers) who act as powerful external audiences. Finally, it offers that while this new generation of elites are seemingly devoid of the hereditary lineage of their predecessors, their embodiment of meritocratic selection and advancement is still steeply rooted in background frameworks of class and patriarchal privilege that surreptitiously reinforce new avatars of deeply embedded stratification.

1. PROFESSIONALS AS ELITES |

Two broad, and somewhat contrary, patterns influence the trajectory of global wealth segregation. On the one hand, inherited and ascribed advantages have been central to the reproduction of hierarchy, i.e., most elites are predetermined. At the same time, post-Enlightenment logics have opened up new access to elite spaces and pathways resulting in an increasing diversification of class constituents. As a result, although wealth remains concentrated, the demography of individuals who control it has changed both geographically and racially (e.g. Zweigenhaft & Domhoff 1998). The latent tension between these contrary patterns is that while we know that obvious legacy patterns are no longer the only routes to aristocracy, and that self-made attainment is on the increase (Edlund and Kopczuk 2009; Khan 2012; Piketty and Saez 2003), distinctions between "meritorious" and "inherited" remain murky even when they are claimed (Khan and Jerolmack 2013; Naudet et. al. 2018). Not unlike in other countries, socio-economic status has long been a function of ascribed factors in the Indian context. For example, in 2015, India was third next to only the United States and China in accounting for the number of billionaires in the world[2]. Of these, only a meager 5% – in contrast to, for example, China's 61% – reported as being "self made" and even they admitted to having had a "helping hand" from their parents[3]. And this is not just about billionaires – Naudet and Dubost (2016) for instance show that among the directorate networks in the country's largest listed companies, regional, caste and family ties are at the root of important dense networks. Similarly, research suggests that although new kinds of entrants populate new organizations, elite corporate networks remain caste valorizing "old boys clubs" with little diversity of board members (Ajit, Donker, and Saxena 2012). Thus, unlike the more coherent distinctions between "self-made" and "inherited" that characterized traditional elites in the U.S. and Europe respectively (Khan 2012), elites in India have a more checkered process to

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[2] See the Hurun Global Rich List 2015 released by the Hurun Report available here: http://www.hurun.net/en/ArticleShow.aspx?nid=9607 (last accessed July 8, 2016)

[3] The Hurun Global Rich List tracks billionaires globally. As per the 2015 report, only 5% of India's super-wealthy were described as "self-made, but with a helping hand from parents", while 9% "inherited a small business and grew it big time." In China however, the report said 61% of billionaires were "self-made" without any financial support from their families. See Atish Patel "India Has World's Third-Largest Number of Billionaires" The Wall Street Journal, Feb 4, 2015 available at http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2015/02/04/india-has-worlds-third-largest-number-of-billionaires/ (last accessed on July 8, 2016)

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this status attainment and retention. "Self made" remains ingrained in patterns of wealth inheritance, status advantage (chiefly among this, caste), and tightly maintained cultural capital via consolidated networks of power, exposure to urban environments and expert micro socialization.

Elite professionals offer an interesting site to witness a different kind of this textured class formation and transformation. Other scholars have highlighted the ripeness of professional spaces for investigating the "sociological heartlands of culture, monopoly, closure and stratification" (Macdonald 1995). And in the Indian case, they offer a new way of thinking about access to elite networks that have historically been predetermined by logics of caste and kinship (Jodhka and Newman 2007). But while they have been the subjects of sociological interrogation in other countries (e.g. Dinovitzer 2011; Kay and Hagan 1995; Riviera 2016; Somerlad 2007), professional elites in India have not encountered the same theoretical investigation as other kinds of aspired and attained middle-class mobility (e.g. Desphande 2004; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Friedman 2000).

One reason for this is that professionals have not always been considered "elites" except for those existing elites who also happen to acquire professional training. Although second generation elites are increasingly diversifying their professional portfolios[4], research shows that family succession is favorable not just for the family, but also for the market (Marisetty, Ramachandran, and Jha 2008). To some small extent, those that retain control over their family businesses no longer just inherit businesses but, instead, armed with international graduate degrees, retain their status through symbolic achievement. For this sub-cohort, then, professional credentials offer a new hand-wave towards meritocracy, thereby adding another tool to legitimize their inheritance[5]. But recent research on educational backgrounds of

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[4] Only 3.5% of all next generation members globally want to take over their parents' firms directly after college graduation; 4.9% plan to do so five years later, according to a study "Coming home or breaking free" published by EY in 2014. See Mandavia, Megha "Heirs of India's Biggest Tycoons Are Charting Their Own Entrepreneurial Path" Feb 04, 2016 available at http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/50842432.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (last accessed July 31, 2016)

[5] International degrees are especially crucial currency for family businesses that are on the verge of globalizing operations. See for example, the kinds of management and other degrees from prestigious U.S. universities that second generation family business owners have prior to running international wings of their conglomerate businesses. For example – Aalok Shanghvi, son of USD 9.2 billion Sun Pharmacutical's Dilip Shanghvi, studied molecular biology at the University of Michigan before he was in charge of international marketing.

business elites confirms that this is more the aberration than the norm (Naudet, Allorant and Ferry 2018). Instead, Naudet et al. question this rhetoric of merit as an essential source of legitimacy creation among India's elites by suggesting empirically that returns to credentialism remain weak in the country. Traditional business elites continue to show a high share of low-educated heirs: while top managers (often from the aspiring upper-middle classes) continue to need high status education as entry points for managerial positions, for chairmen and owners, educational attainment does not preclude their eligibility or even legitimacy. In contrast, the professionals in my research *directly* benefited from their credentials – to a point where it was a source of identity, and their educational socialization had important effects on how they navigated their organizational environments (Ballakrishnen 2018).

Another reason professional elites have not really been dissected under the scrutiny of "elites" is because most professionals are *not* elite in the Indian context; and women in particular, have had to work harder to balance any changes to their status. Radhakrishnan's work (2009) on IT professionals, for example, is a serious introduction to a new class of Indian workers in new transnational spaces and the professional women she describes are no doubt breaking new ground in their families' histories and trajectories by working away from home. But despite leveraging symbolic capital, Radhakrishnan's rich ethnography shows that these professional women were still accessing – or in many cases, holding on to – quintessentially middle class positions by straddling classic conflicts around sexuality, family responsibility and consumption through their practice of "respectable femininity" (2009: 201). Similarly, Nadeem (2009) who uses the case of the outsourcing industry to understand the global professional's aspirations of modernity, continues to situate the *kama-dharma* (pleasure-duty) thesis as a crucial balancing act for the "new middle class" (2009: 104). And "young, chaste women" who are sucked into this "den of immorality" are especially vulnerable to middle-class moralists for whom discretionary income, casual sex and alcohol all offer "precarious standing on the middle-class social scale" (2009: 118). Unlike Radhakrishnan's women professionals, then, Nadeem's account of the outsourcing industry is revealing of a particularly misogynist undertone – women in this account are, at best the incentive for male workers to continue

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See Karmall, Naazneen "Richest Indians: How Indian Entrepreneurs Fared in 2012", Forbes India available at http://forbesindia.com/printcontent/34149 (last accessed July 31, 2016)

working so they can buy them "dresses, necklaces or flowers" (2009: 111) or, more likely, one of the many "non monetary perks" to retain male workers (2009: 111).

In contrast, a striking characteristic of my female respondents[6] is their relative nonchalance when it came to scripts of middle-class morality and the relative distance they had in their everyday lives from these concerns of domesticity, nation and feminine morality. Many of them were single and living alone or in partnerships without being married. Those that were married mainly lived in nuclear families and almost all of them had selected their life partners without being "arranged" by their families. Not only were these women in an economic salary bracket that superseded the average IT or outsourcing professional[7], they inhabited spaces and praxes at direct odds with the kind of middle-class ethos that Radhakrishnan and Nadeem suggest among their respondents. Take for example, Nita, a partner at an elite law firm in Mumbai who, sipping herbal iced tea in one of Mumbai's "Midtown" *bistros*, told me about her marital status with relative blasé "*if i find a guy and it works out, great - but I am not looking. I don't know if I want to be married or have kids - and without it, I know I am not unhappy. Doing something for the sake of doing it makes no sense.*" Nita was one of several women in their mid-thirties for whom marriage and children were not resigned futures. She had just bought her first apartment in Mumbai – minutes from where her parents lived so she lived "near but not *with*" her family. Her office commute downtown in her chauffer driven car (that she had bought with her own money a few years ago and was looking to upgrade) was, following new construction in Mumbai, only one new super fast expressway drive away but comfortable enough so she could

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[6] This research draws from a larger project of 139 semi-structured interviews and observations between 2011-2015 with professionals across different sites in Mumbai, India. For a more detailed explanation on data and methods, see Ballakrishnen 2018.

[7] There are several distinctions between the IT industry and the professionals in my sample who work in elite professional service firms (Ballakrishnen 2016). One of the fastest growing industries in the country, IT contributes to 8.1% of India's GDP, a significant growth from 1.2% in 1998, when it was first introduced as part of the country's national priority mandate by the Vajpayee government (NASSCOM 2014). In contrast, despite having been introduced to the Indian market at around the same time, consulting is, at best, a USD 1.5 billion market (Source Global Research 2013) as compared to the estimated USD 150 billion market that is the IT industry (NASSCOM 2015). Similarly, while IT employs 3 million workers, even the most prominent legal and consulting firms have only between 50-400 professionals – thereby working at an entirely different framework of operation and infiltration. Further, employees in elite outsourcing firms in the IT industry are typically college graduates who earn on average, between 4,167–7,700 USD a year. In contrast, first-year lawyers and consultants in my sample earned on average, between 15,500–24,000 USD a year and entry into these firms required a professional degree in either law or business or engineering, from one of the country's selective graduate schools.

take calls on her commute. She describes her family as "middle-class and traditional in many ways" but also one that "understands that she is happy" and does not push her to do the "traditional marriage thing". When I finally managed to get on her calendar for lunch after weeks of trying to schedule it, she apologized and then told me she was leaving that night for a vacation with her girlfriends (all of whom were her age and two of whom were also unmarried) to Barcelona for the long, "bank holiday" weekend when work was, as she described it "light". When I asked her if there was a special reason for the trip, her explanation revealed that the trip itself was the event since, in her words, "*what is the point of all this if you don't travel*" referring to her long hours at work and the stress involved in her job that made her feel deserving of this time away for leisure.

I do not argue from a place of originality in suggesting we focus on leisure and consumption as a way of understanding the ways class and caste is "done" (Deshpande 2004; Veblen 1899). Yet, Nita's choices demand particular attention beyond the classic social consumption patterns that determine category constituency. As other scholars of emerging class constituencies suggest (Currid-Halkett 2017), Nita's class access is not just ownership and location – professionals and elites alike had iPhones and went to malls – or even just about using these things to intermingle with an imagined world community. What distinguishes Nita's class access is that this global intermingling does not have to take into account – or worry about – her actual, immediate communities. Vacationing in Barcelona with other professional women her age is exactly the sort of expenditure – and life choice – that stands sharply against the chaste relationship to consumption that the Indian middle class draws its legitimacy from (e.g. Donner 2016; Kesavan 2016). Nita identifies her family as "middle class" but her life is marked by the kinds of praxis that do not seem to be available to the average middle-class woman in India. And, specifically, this is a far cry from Radhakrishnan's respondents – also female professionals – who, even as sole bread earners, remained deeply committed to the ethics of austerity, especially when it came to "consumer spending that was disconnected from family life" (2009: 205). Instead, in a single generation, Nita had gone, riding on her own mobility, from a family with "traditional values" to a position from which she was able to disassociate herself from the pressures of her assumptive class morality. It is this transition that this research calls attention to.

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Finally, and as I have argued elsewhere (Ballakrishnen 2016), a significant part of the explanation is a function of scale. Mobility into elite spaces and praxis is still relatively niche with few actors capable of seamlessly transgressing these boundaries. Nita is still one of only a couple of hundred professionals in Mumbai who graduate each year from elite professional schools and remain employed within the kind of elite professional organizations that are capable of offering this version of social mobility. Yet for the small sliver of those who do, this opportunity has meant a single generational mobility from a comfortable – but by no means elite – urban, middle-class background to a new kind of class space that they feel entitled to and included within. One could argue that other kinds of professionals have had this first generational elite mobility – for example, IAS officers who were selected *via* a standard government examination and entered high status political positions in stark contrast to the largely middle-class backgrounds they come from. But these government elites certainly did not begin reaping the benefits of their mobility as quickly, as in their first decade of employment. Further, even when they were self-made and single generational, it did not seamlessly extend to them also sharing the same leisure spaces and capital as the inherited elite they worked amongst. Being professional elites has meant not just the process of mobility into Shanghai's "dazzling office buildings" (Liu et al. 2014) and Mumbai's blue glass covered "Midtwon" Lower Parel offices for women like Nita, but also the ability to order *crêpes suzette* and hot chocolate in a small South Bombay *café* and reminisce casually about how it compares with a similar weekend brunch in the south of France the past summer. It is *this* changing demography of these first generation elites and their praxis that this research concerns itself with.

2.   FIRST GENERATION ELITES | *People, Praxis and Pathways*

Nita's "bank holiday" trip to Barcelona with her friends suggests another currency at the disposal of this new elite professional class – ownership over time. Unlike the explanations many of their peers felt they owed to their families and communities, the female professionals at the focus of this research did not feel like their schedules needed to be vetted by others. Instead, they seemed to have an agency and ownership over their time, especially when it came to accounting for their personal leisure. Aditi, a young law firm partner in her early thirties who lived by herself in her Bandra apartment explained the hard but, in her mind, fair balance

she had made with her time by balancing home and work in the following way:

> I still manage on most days to [get to] sleep at 10 pm, get up at 6 am, play squash every day, have my breakfast and read my paper with my morning tea. I work solid hours, yes—but I have not had to compromise on anything.

Similarly, another senior partner – married and in her forties – who took her personal time seriously commented on how she worked around the long hours in the firm by waking up early and making the mornings her personal time. "*No one gets here (to the firm) till about 10:30-11:00,*" she said, "*and I am an early riser—so I just make the mornings mine: I play golf, I catch up with my friends, I get some nariyal pani (tender coconut water)—and then I am ready to start the day and put in all the long hours.*" That these women work the kinds of hours that require them to carve out personal time for themselves is important. Equally relevant is that in carving out this personal time, they only had themselves to consider. This iteration of "personal time" is not standard for middle-class women, who often feel committed to account for their time to those they share their lives with. At the same time, accounts of women playing squash and golf as they balance long working hours do not fit traditional descriptions of upper class leisure activities either. Rather, this description of time seemed to reflect membership within a more cosmopolitan clique, one that transgresses national boundaries to fit an "aspirational class" beyond existing notions of leisure and consumption (Currid-Halkett 2017).

Instead of the typical pressures of having to balance old notions of domesticity with an expanding new environment, other cultural praxis seemed to set this class apart – one with equal dissonance to old notions of leisure as well as to the constructed demands of middle-class domesticity. On a sultry Saturday in the summer of 2013, I met Kumar, a rising lawyer in his mid-thirties, in one of Mumbai's newer country clubs where he and his wife – a similarly elite professional – had just snagged a membership. In the welcome air-conditioning of the club's *members only* coffee shop, they told me over cool *fresh lime sodas* and *masala peanuts* how they were the first in their respective families to have this sort of club membership because unlike the "old Bombay clubs" people could get in without existing family referrals. The conversation was rhythmically interrupted by their respective cellphones – a melody I'd come to expect in these interviews – but when they apologized for it, they explained that it was not work, but the weekend they were planning for. Each of them had been traveling so much the past weeks that they had not had a chance to have proper downtime with their friends in the

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city, so all the coordination was for a party in their house later that day – a "night of debauchery" as Kumar described it. In this conversation about leisure and socializing, where it was obvious Kumar and his wife were both equal partners and purveyors, Kumar recalled how he was called out early in his career about the gendered assumptions that unfairly excluded his female colleagues.

> And I remember once all the guys got together and have a night out and we were drinking away. So a friend of mine, a female counsel, she calls me the next day and she says, "What is wrong with you guys? Why can't you call us and now make us a part of your network. So we drink with you, we party with you. And you start referring work to us." And I was stunned, hearing that. And I said okay, I should make it a point. It's not fair at all. We should make it more inclusive. Get over this stupid childish concept of "boys night".

These were not men and women, then, who typically had moral scruples about "smoking and drinking" – two classic forbearers of universal modernity (and the doom of globalization) to the Indian middle class (e.g. Nadeem 2009). And, particularly, these were not women who were averse to gender-blind socializing after work hours with their colleagues. In fact, there was a certain sense that exclusion from these spaces was more offensive than an invitation. Within these class coordinates, then, was the emergence of a new kind of professional elite who transgressed the typical balance between nation, morality and modernity. Key to fuelling this infraction was the idea of membership within a more cosmopolitan, nation-agnostic cohort of global professionals, a "fit" among like-minded community members that was conceived and valorized as early as when they applied for these positions. Neela, a mid-tier consultant in her late twenties who worked for a global consulting firm described that it was exactly this "cultural fit" that had her excited to be part of this "cool" crew. She recalls the "*Day* 0" placement event at her business school – one of the country's best, which she attended after graduating from one of the top engineering schools – and how she responded to the recruiting team from her consulting firm that stood out against the slew of employers who did not seem as attractive to her personally:

> If I think about all the events I attended, the reason consultants stand out, is that, by nature of what they do, they are a lot more - don't know what the word is - *presentable.* They are incredibly smart people, they know how to talk about anything, they have a wide range of experience, and the best part of meeting them in a PPT event is that it's not like an interview…they are there and they are like "hey we just want to speak to you as a person, we want to see if you fit culturally"… I had a great conversation with partner about travel experiences.. we both spoke about disastrous flight

experiences.. and it was great. They don't seem as single dimensional as others in industry.

Neela recounted that she had since realized that all this casual posturing by partners (e.g. "pulling up their sleeves" or saying "what's up?" or "let's just talk") were standard strategies to seem "cool" to recruitment candidates. At the same time, she admitted that the personal connection forged by this familiarity was paramount in maneuvering her choice to join the firm; and that it was the spirit of it that continued to make her believe that this was the right "fit" for her.

3.   DIFFERENCES ACROSS SITES | *Peer Socialization and Client Interactions*

Recent empirical evidence on students in elite law schools confirms long standing suspicions that caste[8] and socio-economic status are significant factors in determining success in these schools (Jain et. al. 2016: 150-3). A typical lawyer in an elite law firm is not just successful; she is also the inheritor of certain types of social and cultural capital – particularly, kinds of capital that is valued anew in an increasingly global world. Like Neela and Nita, she usually goes to a certain kind of English-speaking high school, graduates from one of the country's *National Law Schools*, and comes from an urban family, likely one where both parents are likely to have gone to college. Steeped in this backdrop is the paradox between ascription and achievement. Unlike many of their predecessors, women like Nita did not need to be born into a lawyer family or connected to a tightly set up clique of elite judges to join or be successful in the law firms they worked in. And they did not even have to be rich – in fact, many of the professionals in these law firms were children of stoutly middle-class families. But they were, in being from the kinds of families they were in, best situated to reap the bounties of these new environments because they had the preexisting tools to access it. Success in these firms was then, not a direct extension of previous kinds of capital, but, instead, a process of transformation from existing latent capital (being a particular strain of urban middle class) at an opportune moment (liberalization).

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[8] The IDIA Diversity Survey 2013-14 indicates that the majority of students i.e 69.11% belong to the general category, 11.65% belonged to SC category and 5.06% to the ST category. Similarly, NLSIU data reveals that Muslims are underrepresented in these schools. Instead, about 59% of NLS are composed of upper caste students, 2.3% OBCs, 14.9% SC and 7.1% STs. 10.7% reported themselves as not having a caste, while 6% reported themselves as not being aware of their caste. (Jain et al. 2016, pp. 30-32)

In contrast, the typical consultant is less likely to be this homogenously identifiable. On the one hand, the consultant profile is set too – an elite engineering degree, a few years of corporate experience, an elite school MBA. But the schools themselves offer different socializing opportunities for their inhabitants. First, as newer neoliberal schools, the elite *National Law Schools* – primary feeder schools into elite law firms – have been at par with a larger global trend to graduate what other scholars of the legal profession have described as a cosmopolitan transnational professional elite (e.g. Dezalay and Garth 2002; Liu, Trubeck, and Wilkins 2016). Second, being relatively newer schools has meant that their composition consists of a much more consolidated urban, middle-class population. The underlying ascribed advantages that engender attendance and endurance within these highly competitive graduate schools has been well documented (Deshpande 2004; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Subramanian 2015). Particularly salient in these observations, have been the ways in which competitive entry procedures have solidified a merit-legitimized stratification system that continues to be relentlessly caste-bound. The entry pool into the *National Law Schools* adds further complexity to this. Unlike the considerable variation in the applicant pool that applies to top engineering schools (e.g. IITs), law school applicants are likely to be equipped with more cosmopolitan cultural markers – i.e., private school educated, urban, and fluent in English. Students are also likely to reflect privilege markers in other ways – most students in these schools are Hindu and forward caste, representation from rural and remote parts of the country is insignificant (Basheer et al. 2017: 578), and English remains the language students are most predominantly comfortable with (Jain et al. 2016: 37). And, finally, the big difference between these feeder institutions is their respective gender composition. While engineering schools and business schools are predominantly male skewed, elite law schools enroll and graduate at least equal (and sometimes higher than equal) numbers of men and women from their degree programs. This sets up another kind of important advantage for women in law firms – male peers socialized to be in mixed-gender settings without thinking of it as an aberration to the norm (Ballakrishnen 2018).

As a result, although law and consulting firms were comparably elite, these differences in the supply side dynamics introduce an important variation in how these spaces are experienced by these inhabitants. Women in elite law firms, for instance, spoke about the relative gender-

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neutrality in their perceived identities. Given that many of these women came from similar backgrounds, the environments they were introduced into played a big role in creating and fostering these assumptions about gender. And these endorsements were mirrored in their interactions within the firm too. Nitin, a new partner at one of Mumbai's most prestigious law firms and an alumnus of the National Law School seemed surprised that I thought gender would be a relevant metric to sort his peers:

> I went to law school with these [women] – many of them beat the S*** out of me in class - why would they be different in a meeting or interaction here? Just because they are a woman? I'm going to say there is no difference – and it is not just because I can't think of anything. Be it competence, client facing ability, you name it – there is no difference.

The way Nitin speaks about his female colleagues is telling of the kinds of capital that is at matter in law firms – gender, in the face of being from a similarly socialized institution, was not a factor of predominant importance.

This sort of socio-cultural fit mattered to some extent in consulting firms too; where someone like Neela who could discuss flight discrepancies with her hiring partner at a placement event was likely to benefit from sharing the same life (class) experiences. As Tarunya, a mid-tier consultant explained, "*Within [*] people you work with - up and down, both – well, communication-wise, it's not a problem. There are no cases of discrimination per se because all these, people are from same SES, so they've gone to similar schools, they all speak the same sort of English, like similar things like that.*" But this did not mean that all hires into consulting firms had the same blasé view of middle-class morality and practice, especially when it came to views about gender in the workplace. Vihaan, a self-described "classic consultant caricature" (he had degrees from top engineering and business schools) from a North Indian city (as per him, a small traditional town" in contrast to "modern" cities like Mumbai and Delhi) offered a telling description of his firm's gender equality:

> There is no difference between men and women - if fact, the only time it makes a difference, is in promotion. But that is because the amount of time you need to invest is more and so, then, it matters. But it doesn't matter to the firm - if you do as much work as a man, you'll get your promotion - but it probably matters to family and neighbors who will not want a woman to spend so much time at work outside the house.

I highlight Vihaan's version of his female colleagues because it offers an especial contrast to how Nitin spoke about his peers – a testament to the ways in which socialization *before* entry into these firms was crucial to molding identities once within them. Vihaan's description of what he thinks of as a fair, equal work environment is striking for a number of reasons. That he thinks that there is "no difference between men and women" (despite acknowledging the gendered promotion variation) or that he can get behind that the firm's expectation of a gendered ideal worker (Acker 1990) is only one part of it. More striking is the audiences he thinks moderate the inability of his female peers to get ahead as they deserve: *family and neighbors*. That a woman's time was likely to be circumscribed by commitments to her community and family is not unusual in the Indian context, but that it was primed in this way to explain a gender promotion gap was striking given the tenor of explanations that his other "more modern" peers offered for their career trajectories. Vihaan's views about why his female colleagues were rightfully stalled in their careers were different from Nitin's because, among other factors, each of them had gone to schools with very different kinds of student attendance.

Even so, intra-firm relationships were not the predominant site where gender was especially primed. As Tarunya recalls, the assumed homogeneity of the peer group meant that even if latent, these views did not affect the everyday interactional experience of the women he worked with. Instead, it was in interactions with an external audience – clients – that these latent identities were fleshed out to the relative advantage and disadvantage of these women in management firms. Tarunya, who had graduated at the top of her class in business school and felt like she had no trouble connecting with her peers, explained that this all changed when clients were involved:

> It comes down to the way clients perceive you. This is the other thing - it is generally hard for 50-60 year old men, who have been around in the industry longer than you've been born to take advice from you. And clients are generally who make or break you – so it is harder for them to take it from a girl. I've had difficulty with clients who basically refused to talk to me because they were like "what would i know as a young girl". Especially in places like a hard-core engineering company, I had a rough time because I was a girl and not a engineer, [which were] two things they don't respect very much.

This caricature of the average client as an older Indian man who was not used to dealing with

young women in a position of authority highlights an important dynamic that influenced individual experiences within these organizations. Consulting firms, as local offices of multinational service organizations were set up with a range of modern cultural scripts, but they still predominantly dealt with domestic clients who came to them with relatively fixed ideas and biases around their preferred ideal worker. In contrast, women in elite domestic law firms who dealt predominantly with international clients, felt like their gender was never in dispute because these clients – who they referred to as "sophisticated" – did not prime their gender in interactions. As the face of a large, globally important (although not globally managed) organization, they saw themselves – and, in turn, were seen as – the given firm's lawyer and not as a woman or a "woman lawyer". This finding that women are able to renegotiate their status within globally facing local organizations is in line with other comparative research. Al-Dabbagh and colleagues (2016), for example, show that male – rather than female – workers in emerging economies pay a penalty for being "local" when faced with an external, global market. And this favorable exceptionalism worked particularly in the case of women in *desi* firms. Early in my research on these elite professionals, a senior lawyer who worked at a large Mumbai law firm seemed very aware of the exceptionalism of her own position, both vis-à-vis tales of women who were assumed to be secretaries instead of professionals as well as actual women she knew in other kinds of professional settings:

> I think we are probably—most of the people who come here would never be mistaken for anything but a lawyer because we come from a certain strata of society. But I don't know about other professions—my brother is a doctor with the armed forces and there you can see the distinction between the ranks—and that is something he has told me about. Women, for example, don't get promotions and if you have kids, then the penalty is obvious. (It is a) very hierarchical organization and my sister in law— who is also a doctor—tells me stories about how she is not at all taken seriously . . . and this is different from anything I have experienced.

Of course, not all firms were equal in being able to provide this sort of environment where gender was not primed and women in smaller domestic firms that had a lot of what they referred to as "traditional clients" were subject to some of this gendered backlash. For example, women in these firms spoke about the one-off chance when a traditional client would be "uncomfortable about talking to a woman" or ask in particular for another lawyer. But usually because this was an aberration and not a recurring reality, women were able to shrug it off and react to it with amusement and distance. To the extent this happened, women spoke

about how it made them want to work harder at proving these clients wrong (usually to a point where the client would never ask for another lawyer) and others spoke about how it was just a matter of "putting them in place" the few times that gender was made salient in a transaction.

> Sure, theoretically, perhaps there are traditional clients who might have some preferences between men and women lawyers - but they are likely to be PSU clients, you know, the usual Gujarati man who is traditional and if it comes to that, we will strategically think about including a guy so they feel "more comfortable" but this is only the much more traditional clients and we don't have much interaction with them here.

Thus, gender typing existed across sites, its prevalence was deemed sustainable by varying degrees. Many of the women dealt with it either by ignoring it or making light of it when it was an aberration and, in other cases, working hard to prove that it was a misconception. But much of this leverage to deal with it was connected to the kinds of institutional support they received at the sites of their work. Significantly, while women with similar class positions inhabited the spaces across these different sites, the type of organization they worked in buffered different parts of their identities differently.

4.   SURRUPTITIOUS RENEWALS | *The High Cost of New Equalities*

Professional spaces since 1991 have undergone a sea change but this transformation has been mostly a mobility project into a more stable middle class (e.g. Fernandez and Heller 2006; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Nadeem 2009; Patel 2010; Radhakrishnan 2009). In contrast, the kinds of pathways and praxis employed by people like Nita, Neela or Kumar are not about entering or maintaining their middle-class positions, but instead about inhabiting spaces that are at once new and familiar to them in their composition. And although it certainly paid a part – literally – in affording them access to vacations in Europe and country club memberships, this virgin composition was not a function of their financial independence alone. As other research shows (e.g. Subramanian 2015), the predisposition to these fits were buffered through various strains of caste and class privilege even as they were camouflaged within more legitimate considerations like merit. Yet, while origins mattered in dictating what "cultural fits" people were attracted to, their understanding of what made someone similar to them did not have to do with who their parents were. Instead, they were creating an interactional cohort of elites that had similar experiences and the language to speak about them

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in "cool" ways. Neela was not the daughter of a wealthy businessman whose class position was maintained by not working in industry. She was, instead, the daughter of a bank officer and schoolteacher whose middle-class upbringing could have never imagined making and living the life she did as an adult. Making more in her first year as a professional than her parents likely made at retirement, Neela was part of a first generation of elites who lived and spoke in the rhetoric of the elite without having emerged from it. Her middle-class roots no doubt socialized Neela into thinking of education as the ultimate *teleporter* of mobility; and her private school, English-speaking upbringing – classic signposts of the urban, upper caste family – were crucial in schooling her about what was "cool" and a "cultural fit". Seen through this lens, Neela's connection with the partner that recruited her about "disastrous flight experiences" recounts a particularly nuanced – and novel – neoliberal understanding of class.

The idea that cultural fits and capital can skew what we think of otherwise merit is not new (Khan 2012; Rivera 2016; Subramanian 2015). Yet, even among graduates from similar class positions, different factors influenced how they experienced their environments across different elite organizations. While caste and class-sanctioned homophily was likely to make young consultants like Neela feel more at ease in their firms, it did not ensure that they were treated at par with their male peers when it came to external interactions. When it came to this important external audience, women like Neela and Tarunya went back to being caricatures of their obvious identities – young women who had gone to fancy schools but who were still, at the face of it, young women who reminded their clients of their granddaughters; women who were treated well but – as in the case of most benevolent sexism – were not trusted to handle a transaction on their own. Class advantages could help these women get through the door, but once in, recurring patriarchal scripts kept them bound. Hostile work environments where women are vocally discriminated against are no longer the descriptive posters of gender inequality in modern organizations (although in my years of fieldwork there were many examples of these blatant environments too). As other researchers of organizational stratification warn us, inequality in organizations no longer needs to *look* starkly unfair or unequal. Instead, these organizations host and perpetuate an equally dangerous strain of inequality that stems from invisible background frameworks (Ridegway 2009) and second generation biases (Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb 2013) that speak of the war as already having been won while continuing to cement structural differences. Similarly, Vihaan's claim that there was

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"no difference between men and women" in his consulting firm epitomizes this dangerous rhetoric. The idea that the organization is equal and fair and that inequality in leadership is a function of supply side choices and restrictions (in this case, women who do not make the promotions they might have otherwise made because they do not have the same ownership over their time as their male peers) is troubling because it gives organizations a clean chit. Even though Vihaan's firm had few senior women ("no difference between men and women *except* in promotion"), he still thought about his surroundings as egalitarian and meritocratic – where women were ill represented because they were not able to do what their male peers did (for whatever "understandable" reason). In contrast, women in elite law firms – domestic firms facing what they classified as "sophisticated clients" who would not prime gender – seemed to be best positioned to leverage these middle-class advantages both within and outside the firms.

But what makes Nita and Nitin think about gender and status a certain way that did not extend to Vihaan's version or Tarunya's experience? I've tried to suggest here that it is a function of the institutions they are embedded in and who they interact with in those institutions that allow for these variant strains of neoliberal realities. That is, over and above being part of an educated middle-class cohort of men and women accessing professional opportunities in the age of liberalization, two additional structural factors worked in their favor. First, unlike male peers like Vihaan, women like Neela in elite law firms had colleagues like Nitin who were socialized *prior to joining the firm* to deal with mixed-gender settings where women yielded power. Second, they interacted with actors outside these firms who were less likely to obliquely prime gender in their interactions, thereby setting up an environment where they could ride on the advantages of their class-based capital ("*most of the people who come here would never be mistaken for anything but a lawyer because we come from a certain strata of society*"). At the core of this comparative experience is that even when keeping class constant, environments can change experience. While most – if not all – of these elite professionals are second generation middle class, their relative compatibility and fit within these elite life chances came from a conjuncture of going to the graduate schools they did, at the particular time in history that they did and the ways in which these two things were valorized by the institutions they joined upon graduation. And that it is variation in these three factors that afforded very different kinds of experiences even within this seemingly tight class of the first generational elite professional.

Theorizing about mobility and newly achieved status in this manner also allows us another tool to disentangle the tension between achievement and ascription: the consideration that this "moving up" process might not be a mobility process at all. Instead, it could well be that in situations of transformative economic growth that impacts opportunity structure, upward mobility offers the only plausible mechanism for elites to *retain* – rather than achieve – status. Nothing in this Chapter is to suggest that these new entrants do not have pre-existing advantages that help grease their class attainment trajectory: being part of this professional elite class could be the new mechanism through which urban, forward caste elites unlock and/or convert their historic privilege. Even so, they remain distinct from those who achieve in order to retain their existing class status. It is this concurrent reorganization of certain kinds of capital alongside a specific temporal-based mobility that this Chapter seeks to shed light on. New kinds of gendered identities as a product of liberalization has been a site of recent research but this demographic of women who are leveraging upper class access as a function of their caste position and relative interaction with global opportunity is new. Together, this heralds the creation of a new elite class of global professionals – not an ascription-driven superclass of global elite that other scholars have referred to but middle-class bred, domestically educated first generation elites who are new consumers of elite spaces, networks and markers as a function of their relationship with globalization. In this way, these people, their pathways and praxis expand further the ways in which we think about elite pockets in transitional economies (Walder 2003).

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