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Book Review: India's Working Women and Career Discourses: Society, Socialization and Agency

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India's Working Women and Career Discourses: Society, Socialization and Agency.
Suchitra Shenoy-Packer (2014). London: Lexington Books. 233 pages. Three appendices and index.

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Recent headlines including the *New York Times*' "Why Aren't India's Women Working?" (April 23, 2015) and "India's Domestic Workers Need a Break" in *The Guardian* (June 10, 2015) parallel scholarly debates focusing on the paradox between Indian women's declining presence in the Economically Active Population and high visibility in a growing informal sector. The International Labor Organization and popular press attribute a decline (from 37 in 1994 to 29 percent in 2010) in Indian women's participation in the paid labor force in the early 21st century to a number of factors, including their increased enrollment in secondary schools, an increase in household income levels, and "failure to allow women full access to the labour market." The popular media and many scholars alike frame this discussion against the backdrop of Mumbai's growth as an offshore call center and the "new" jobs that have been created in the telecommunications industry.

In speaking to all of these issues, Suchitra Shenoy-Packer's analysis of Indian women's career choices and experiences in the city of Pune in Maharashtra province makes an important contribution to our understanding of factors that shape these women's multidimensional lives. Simultaneously, it adds an important case study to the growing body of literature regarding women's labour in an urban economy where opportunities for mobility through education and employment are often determined by socioeconomic origins. In this case, readers gain insight into women's personal aspirations against the backdrop of the complexities of a caste system that overlays class structures and family dynamics.

This discussion is framed by Shenoy Packer's overarching argument that women's work can only be understood within societal constructions of their essentialized roles as daughters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-laws. As she stresses early on and revisits throughout the text, the patriarchal overtones that disadvantage women in both public and private realms. Women are discriminated against in terms of hiring, salaries, and opportunities for advancement relative to men. Compounding this, they have internalized the priority society places on their private roles as "guardians of morality in Indian society" (p. 30) whose domestic responsibilities are paramount.

To explore how these issues affect individual women's career choices and social relations, Shenoy-Packer – a professor of communications who began this work as a doctoral study – conducted interviews (in English, Hindi or Marathi) with 78 women from upper (n=18), middle (n=27) and lower (n=33) socioeconomic origins whose ages spanned three generations. She explains in the first of six chapters that she is a native of Pune whose origins as a "middle-upper class, upper-caste Hindu" gave her entry into her informants' worlds and cultural insights into their experiences (p. 4). This point is elaborated in Appendices A (Research Methodology) and B (Positionality and Field Research Experiences). Her approach is founded in feminist interviewing,

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which entails the researcher putting the informants at ease through self-disclosure and subjects expressing themselves in a setting of intimacy (p. 180). The importance of understanding women's lives within their cultural milieu extends to the research methods, where Shenoy-Packer contends that "share[d] cultural norms" between "researcher and subject" maximize understanding (p. 179).

Positing that career opportunities and choices must be studied within the socioeconomic and political context, Shenoy-Packer begins by providing perspectives on expanding employment and education opportunities from the mid-20th century into the present that contextualize historically changes and consistencies in attitudes toward women's work and gender role ideals. The inescapable expectation is that women will marry and retain responsibility for ensuring that their households run efficiently while they are generating income. While affluent women have the option of hiring lower income women to perform these duties, women of lower status – both economic and caste – typically must find a balance between their paid and unpaid labour.

After this valuable introduction, she examines the importance of the socialization process and family members play in women's notions of work and their career trajectories. Foremost, she holds that fathers' influence and expectations play a critical if not the determining role in daughters' attitudes toward work and careers. Even when daughters' pursued a path that differed from their father's preference, she found that they were for the most part supportive provided the career did not bring disrepute to the family. Women in upper- and middle-income households benefitted from their fathers' knowledge of career paths and economic support.

By providing emotional support and encouragement, mothers enabled their daughters to pursue their studies and work (pp. 83-91). Additionally, extended family members – including grandparents, husbands, and in-laws – often encouraged women to study so that they would be prepared to work outside the home. Often "memorable messages" – "fragments of everyday discourses" conveyed by elders that are "recollected ... at crucial" moments resonate years later by women negotiating their adult life paths (p. 71). Having familial support and backing meant that women do not let negative sentiments toward women who work outside deter their own commitment to working (p. 64).

In terms of class, it is little surprise that while women from lower income households aspire to skilled and professional jobs, women from upper and middle classes do not pursue a job that results in downward mobility. For women in economically sound households for whom it is a given that they will train in professions, and their knowledge of English is a great asset in this. The question then becomes not how or why they will do so, but rather if they will follow their fathers' preferred career choice for them or pursue a field that appealed to them more. Moreover, due to legislation regarding hiring of protected classes, some women felt that they faced discrimination as members of higher castes that overlaid the discrimination (p. 48) they also felt as women who were paid significantly lower than their male counterparts.

Many of Shenoy-Packer's findings coincide with larger trends reported in studies conducted in India and elsewhere regarding women's motives for working – including that lower status mothers' lack of studies and precarious financial situations are often an impetus for their daughters' to study and work, while educated women in middle income households may tell their daughters that remaining at home is fulfilling in terms of family, yet boring. Thus, even as family ties and obligations are paramount, the women interviewed have a strong sense of work-related fulfillment and identity, especially when their jobs provide opportunities for learning (pp. 153-156). Even when there was little opportunity for this intellectual growth, interviewees across the social spectrum spoke of the importance of feeling that their labour makes a contribution to society. Even so, even women who are extremely fulfilled in their jobs consider their family responsibilities

to be the most important area of their lives. This entails a delicate dance between agency (e.g., pursuing goals) and communion (e.g., working in harmony with their environment) (p.111).

It is imperative to read the four appendices, which detail the methods used, authors' position and provide more information about members of the research population. Feminists will appreciate Shenoy-Packer's honest analysis of her interviewing techniques and the nuances of her status as a native researcher trained and based in the United States. A point of particular methodological interest challenges the central issue of confidentiality that researchers hold so dear: Shenoy-Packer reports that while some but not all women in the upper strata understood the importance of protecting other study participants' privacy, "women from the low-income category ... did not care either way because they believed theirs was a universal story" (p. 192).

This point brings us to back to the greatest strength of this text: Against the all too familiar backdrop of an all too familiar pattern where women's opportunities are shaped by the limitations of patriarchy, readers will take to heart the rich narratives of women interviewed, who explain in their own powerful voices how they establish an identity for themselves and negotiate their complex status as working women whose family obligations come first in a rapidly changing social milieu.