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Working at the margins? Muslim middle class professionals in India and the limits of ‘labour agency’

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Abstract

This paper explores the work-lives of middle class Muslim professionals in India’s new service economy. While these workers have successfully negotiated labour market entry into the ‘core’ growth sectors of India’s globalising economy, they are simultaneously subject to different forms of social, cultural and political marginalization. Strikingly, they also remain at the margins of both economic geography and development geography scholarship. The paper extends a growing development geography/economic geography ‘intellectual trading zone’ (Barnes and Sheppard 2010) and enhances understandings of the complex relationships between labour agency, marginality and social inclusion. The paper draws on new survey data to document patterns of labour agency amongst Muslim professionals in New Delhi. This is augmented by interviews with Muslim professionals to show how different forms of marginality are experienced in their everyday work-lives and the strategies and agencies articulated towards (re)working those marginalities. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of these findings in relation to socially inclusive growth, the middle-class transformation of India’s Muslims and wider understandings of marginality and worker agency.

Key words: marginality, India, new service economy, inclusive growth, middle classes, labour agency, Muslim

Introduction

In analytical terms, an unpacking of the notion of agency needs to be combined with reconnecting agency to the wider societal structures in which it is embedded.

Coe (2013, 272)

I'll tell you something, when the company chairman came to Delhi last year to meet us he said something, now I'm not sure whether to take it as a compliment or not, but he said 'you don't look like a Muslim'. So this is what happens, you have to change people's perceptions.

(Aakil, IT Sales Professional, New Delhi)¹

Aakil was in his early forties when we met him in 2011. He had just been promoted to 'President of Sales' for a medium-sized finance and IT software solutions company which was based in India but with offices across the world. Aakil had business experience in Mumbai and the Middle East and had mapped a prosperous career within the financial services sector. A successful, middle class Muslim businessman, he exuded ambition and confidence yet at the same time spoke quietly and with measured responses, especially when we discussed how his religious identity was received and perceived in his work environment. This interview extract captures some of the uncertainty or ambiguity that Aakil experienced around the notion of appearing

¹ All person and company names used are pseudonyms.

Muslim in the professional white collar workspaces of India's new service economy. The company chairman's proclamation that 'you don't look like a Muslim' is underpinned by the societal assumption that Muslims only wear lungis (traditional cloth garment worn around the waist), topis (scull cap) and beards (see also Suroor 2014). Moreover, it suggests that being Muslim is somehow at odds with achieving success as a white collar professional in India's globalising service economy. Aakil's successful career trajectory within a multinational firm is evidence that despite societal discrimination and marginalisation, some Muslims have penetrated the labour market in India's new service economy. Aakil's reflection on this encounter reveals his self-awareness concerning how his religious identity is perceived and received in the workplace, and his need to challenge marginalizing stereotypes in order to succeed. Through examining the labour market possibilities for Muslim white collar professionals to establish themselves as an accepted segment of India's burgeoning middle classes our study raises important questions about the complex (and often contradictory) relationships between *labour market* inclusion versus *social* inclusion.

The work-life experiences and agency of professionals from minority backgrounds in the global South are notably absent as empirical objects of study in both economic geography and development geography. This paper addresses that gap by examining how different – and contradictory – forms of marginality and agency are simultaneously experienced by Muslim professionals. In so doing, we also recognise the value of bringing our respective disciplinary backgrounds and training into productive conversation in order to enhance our understanding of constrained labour agency in the global South. Importantly, this hybrid 'intellectual trading zone' (Murphy, 2008; Barnes and Sheppard, 2010) has gained some traction (Pollard et al.,

2011; James and Vira, 2012). However, it continues to present conceptual and methodological challenges (Vira and James, 2011; Horner, 2014).

The intellectual starting point for this paper is a development geography approach that recognises ‘the margins’ and ‘the marginalised’ as important sites for political contestation (e.g. Corbridge et al. 2005; Tsing 1993). The intention is to bring these ideas about marginality into conversation with notions of constrained labour agency from economic geography (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011), and thereby to broaden the focus of development geography research on marginal work-lives beyond the politics of the poor. Focusing on the work-lives of white collar professionals from minority backgrounds as they experience and negotiate marginality in order to ‘get in’ and ‘get on’ in India’s new service economy also prompts questions about what forms of agency are articulated, and with what implications for transformations in India’s post-liberalisation economy and society. We argue for the need to further embrace and embed ‘labour agency’ not just within the economy but also societal and state structures in order to capture social/political/cultural agencies that may not be in response or resistance to capital *per se*, but which nonetheless inform an individual’s economic opportunities and labour market experiences.

The paper begins with a critical summary of key development literatures on India’s middle classes, the transformation of India’s post-liberalisation economy and the labour market participation of Muslims as India’s largest minority group. After setting out the research design, the paper then presents findings from our labour market survey of Muslim workers in the National Capital Region and interviews. We show that despite celebratory policy promises of ‘the end of identity’ in India’s new

professional workplaces, identity *does* matter and continues to reproduce contradictory patterns of exclusion and *marginality at work* for Muslim graduates. The next section documents strategies for *(re)working marginality* and shows how Muslim professionals have interpreted and negotiated different forms of discrimination and strived to become less marginalised, or more ‘normal’. We point to the negotiated politics of embodiment, on paper and in person, in order to ‘get in’ and ‘get on’ in India’s professional workplaces, and argue that decisions to express agency as pragmatism and acceptance concerning exclusionary practices risk reproducing longer-term patterns of socio-political as well as economic marginality for India’s Muslims. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of these findings in relation to socially inclusive growth, the middle-class transformation of India’s Muslims and inter-disciplinary understandings of marginality and worker agency.

1. The ‘new’ middle classes and India’s post-liberal economy

India’s ‘New’ middle classes and their professions

This paper responds to calls to understand how India’s middle classes have been transformed under liberalization in recent decades. The emergence of India’s ‘new’ middle classes in the late 1990s echoes comparable shifts elsewhere in the global South (McEwan et al., 2015; Goodman and Chen, 2013). Within India, academic

interest has focused on society's changing cultural dynamics and how the new middle class behaves (e.g. Deshpande, 2003; Dickey, 2012). Whilst less research has interrogated the experiences of the middle classes within the spaces of production that *enable* new consumption and lifestyle practices, an important body of scholarship has examined the 'new' middle class in its relation to the means of production, and the restructuring of the labour market in the private sector (Fernandes, 2000; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2008). This scholarship has challenged the hegemonic narratives of the 'newness' of the middle class to show both contrasts and continuities, especially where old power structures have been reconfigured (Fernandes, 2006).² Scholars have already elucidated these fractured middle class realities in terms of caste, occupation and community as well as interests and access to resources and housing (Jeffrey et al., 2008, Nisbett, 2009; Baviskar and Ray, 2011; Deuchar, 2014).³ In this paper, we depart from the majority of this existing scholarship on how professionals spend and consume as members of the middle class, to explore how the politics of identity and inclusion are negotiated by religious minorities in their professional work-lives.

'Professional' work and employment refers both to the long-established, formally-regulated sectors of law, accountancy, architecture and real estate, and to emergent 'new economy' growth sectors of advertising, business and management consultancy, market research, public relations, financial services, data processing and computing

²The 'new' middle class is contrasted with the 'old' middle class of newly Independent India which had a managerial relationship with the state as service and professional classes, and which was the legacy of their role as mediators between the British and India under colonial rule.

³ Fernandes and Heller (2006) identify three tiers within the Indian middle classes: senior professionals, higher bureaucrats and others with advanced professional credentials; petit bourgeoisie and merchants that seek to emulate the upper tier and; those educated but occupying lower ranking bureaucratic roles. Our empirical analysis engages with worker who fit most closely with the first tier of this typology.

services (James 2008). A central feature of professional work is that ‘product’ delivery happens through interpersonal relationships with clients in which workers exercise a high degree of personal judgment. An important starting point for this paper, then, is that inclusion within the professional classes depends on an individual’s capacity to perform an appropriate aesthetic on behalf of their respective company, and to demonstrate the right kind of embodied knowledge and skills – in short, where ‘looking good, sounding right’ – is a part of the product consumed (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009, see also Pathak, 2014).⁴ As such, workers’ looks, personalities and emotions, as well as their intellectual capacities, are involved in service delivery; sometimes forcing them to manipulate their identities more self-consciously than in other kinds of employment (Leidner, 1991).

Muslims in India experience marginalisation on the basis of their visible religious identity which may be determined by their Muslim sounding name, appearance (e.g. males wearing a skull cap or beard), and residential neighbourhoods, where religious segregation is very common within India’s cities (Prime Minister’s High Level Committee, 2006; Williams 2015). Our research explores how this marked and marginal identity interacts with the articulation of a professional ‘labour aesthetic’ within India’s liberalizing and globalizing economy with its growing Hindu nationalist underpinnings, especially in recent years (Nanda 2011; Radhakrishnan 2011). Given India’s changing political environment and an increasingly public marginalisation of Muslims (see Ghoshal 2016) this paper offers important findings concerning possibilities for socially-inclusive economic growth.

⁴ As we discuss in Section 6 of this paper, such practices have distinct resonances with the concept of ‘emotional labour’, defined by Hochschild as ‘the management of feeling to create a publically observable facial and bodily display’ (1983: 7).

Working in India's new service economy

To raise critical questions about marginality within the core sectors of India's post-liberalisation economy goes against the current of popular and academic debate which has been animated by narratives celebrating its inclusive and meritocratic culture.

The growth of India's new service economy was initially associated with Information Technology, IT-enabled services and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sectors (re-labelled by NASSCOM as Business Process Management, BPM), but is now widely interpreted in more expansive terms to comprise *multiple* growth sectors also including: tourism, travel, hospitality, organised retail, marketing, real estate, healthcare, electronic media, banking, insurance and finance (Banga and Goldar, 2007; Eichengreen and Gupta, 2011).

The 'newness' of these service sectors references not only the rise of new kinds of industries within a global knowledge-based society serving Indian and Western markets, but also a transformation in the style and form of these Indian workplaces, informed by growing international influences, private investment and individual aspiration (see Thompson and Warhurst, 1998). These 'new' workplaces have also been celebrated for their inclusive merit-based ideology which promotes the idea of business success primarily rewarding an individual's talent, expertise and capacity to work hard, and not being based on one's ascriptive identity or family privilege.

Despite the promise of the new service economy for new forms of socially inclusive growth, social inequality has been increasing rather than decreasing in India in recent years, and large sections of Indian society continue to be marginalised from the

benefits of India's economic prosperity (Corbridge and Shah, 2013). In questioning the extent to which the celebratory narratives of inclusion resonate within India's organized sector scholars have revealed ongoing patterns of discrimination against India's historically marginalised communities within the private sector workspaces of the new economy (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Jodkha and Newman 2007; Upadhyya, 2007). For example formal private sector enterprises have been shown to select against lower caste and Muslim job applicants on the basis of their name (Thorat and Attewell, 2007), and at interview, the hiring practices of firms shown to reproduce – inadvertently or otherwise – applicants' caste privilege through their concern with 'family background' (Jodkha and Newman, 2007) or 'communication skills' (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2006). But whilst this literature has documented patterns of exclusion for some marginalised sections of society, it does little to illuminate the agency of professionals from minority religious backgrounds who *have* successfully negotiated access to employment in the organised private sector. These labour market experiences raise interesting questions about how different forms of marginality inform workplace opportunities and obstacles, from the perspective of marginal actors who are present in India's core growth sectors.

2. Hybrid geographies: questioning marginality and the limits of 'labour agency'

Despite the seeming ubiquity of the idea of 'marginality', the term is rarely defined, conceptualised or interrogated in geography. Recent arguments have called for a more

fine-grained engagement with the concept amidst calls for its analytic development (Déry et al., 2012, Cons and Sanyal, 2013, Andrucki and Dickinson, 2015). This paper contributes to this discussion by interrogating differing conceptions of ‘the margins’ within economic and development geography, and exploring how marginality is lived and negotiated by professional middle-class workers from minority backgrounds.

Within economic geography ‘the margins’ are often understood in spatial economic terms, as those (predominantly Southern) territories which are not centrally integrated into the global economy, and which are generally considered best left to development scholars. In short, the substantive focus for economic geography has long been on the Western economic ‘core’ (see Vira and James 2011; Pollard et al. 2011). Similarly, marginal workers are perceived to be those who are not fully included within the capitalist economy; the un-employed and underemployed (e.g. Sullivan 2014) and/or those located within peripheral regions. Whilst some scholars have explored axes of difference within ‘core’ economic spaces (McDowell 1997) and critiqued the core-periphery binary model for its implicit ‘territorial dualism’ (Pain, 2008) there is nonetheless an assumption that access, success and the circuits of capital converge at the core. Conversely, within development geography, ‘the margins’ represent the predominant focus for inquiry. What constitutes the margins in this field is more expansively understood with respect to structures of power, referencing not just the economy, but also the state and societal institutions more broadly (Corbridge et al., 2005; Li, 2007; Williams et al., 2011). Attention is paid to marginalized and marginal actors who live in ‘out of the way places’ (Tsing, 1993) or exist on the territorial and moral edges of society (Jones, 2009) as well as those who are socially and

economically disadvantaged (Chari, 2004; Rogaly, 2009). Consequently, understanding how individuals might be included in the economy, yet simultaneously marginal in other social, cultural or political contexts, is less widely recognized in development geography literature.

In seeking to develop more nuanced understandings of marginality we interpret it as a process that may be configured and reconfigured through time and space. As a process, marginality is not uniformly experienced, but represents an uneven terrain of multiple and overlapping spatial and social influences, that present constraints as well as possibilities for those, externally and self-referentially, perceived as marginal (Williams et al., 2011). By drawing attention to patterns of marginality amongst professionals working in core economic sectors of the global South, this paper seeks to challenge binary social and spatial constructions of marginality. Like Andrucki and Dickinson (2015) we find it productive to think about how people come to know, experience and negotiate marginality. This approach is in part inspired by the seminal work in sociology of Park (1928) and Stonequist (1935) which is instructive for thinking about how the ‘marginal man’ can be a site in which cultures come into contact but are ‘never completely interpenetrated and fused’ (ibid; 892). But, we also understand how the concept of ‘marginality’ may underpin negative representations of people and places, and has been used to ‘blame the victim’ in academic and public-policy discourse (Portes 1972; Perlman 1976). In developing a more nuanced account of marginality we recognise that individuals are not passive in the process of marginality and the construction of its meaning (see Mehretu et al., 2000; hooks and Ferguson 1990), and we seek to challenge accounts of the ‘marginal man’ which typically perceive reactions to marginality in negative, singular terms.

Examining experiences of marginality from the perspective of white collar workers from Muslim minority backgrounds prompts a concern for understanding how different forms of agency might be simultaneously articulated or differently constrained in their work-lives. Agency is broadly understood as the ‘universal’ capacity to act, according to the situated demands of the social and cultural context (e.g. Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1990). Economic and development geographers appear to make different assumptions about the motivations, intentions, constraints and effects of agency. Worker agency or praxis has been subject to increasing scrutiny by labour geographers, to advance an economic geography which is both *of* and *for* the interests of workers (Hastings 2016, see also Herod 1997, 2001). In response to calls for more rigorous theorisations of agency (Castree 2007), concerns have shifted from thinking primarily about worker agency as collective action to how individual workers are differently able to negotiate improvements in their terms of work and employment (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011 Coe, 2013); and from focusing on key transformative moments, pay disputes or labour unrest (Herod, 1997; 2001) also to encompass worker agency as everyday coping strategies that span the work-home boundary and incorporate workers’ family and personal lives (Datta et al., 2007).

Some of this work has responded to the ‘need to apply a labour geography perspective to cases in the Global South, where the exercise of ‘agency’ takes on significantly different form and meaning’ (Tufts and Savage 2009, p. 946). Here scholars have variously documented: how offshored workers in global service chains are able to circumvent constrained internal job ladders by building cross-firm career staircases: (Vira and James 2012); how labour agency is not merely fashioned by vertically

linked production networks but also by livelihood strategies and social relations embedded in regional cultural economies (Carswell and de Neve 2014); and how ‘unfree’ low-wage migrant labourers actively resist precarity and workplace isolation through transnational community organisations (Seo and Skelton 2016).

The recognition that ‘labour agency’ has a distinct geographical dimension has foregrounded the dialectical nature of place and agency and encouraged scholars to (re)connect agency, not only to capital, but also to state formations and societal structures (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011), and more recently to the work-place itself (Hastings and MacKinnon 2016). The latter approach importantly situates work-place based accounts of labour agency in the context of local social relations and labour market conditions (see Lund-Thomsen 2013) and engages with the moral and ethical concerns informing labour agency (Hastings 2016).

This recent work challenges assumptions about labour agency as those acts intended and/or practiced by workers in their own interests and/or the interests of others (Rogaly 2009), which are purposive and positively transformative. It opens up conceptual space for theorizing the complexity and competition implicit in worker rationales, and how worker agency may cause negative impacts, for example in the context of intra-worker struggles where actions of one group of workers negatively impact others (Hastings 2016). Our primary focus here concerns how agency is negotiated not only between workers, but also clients, customers and management in the context of difference and marginality in the workplace.

In development geography (and related disciplines) scholars have argued that it is important to recognise how agency – especially within the margins – can be productive and creative in a plurality of ways. Here, agency is about more than resistance to capitalism, but also about coping, surviving and making do within society more generally (Datta et al. 2007; Mahmood, 2005). Attentive to the ways in which agency is always embedded in social relations and cultural contexts a range of work demonstrates the multiple forms of agency as resistance (hooks and Ferguson 1990), resilience and reworking (Katz 2004) and decisions to express agency as patience (Jeffrey 2010), pragmatism and acceptance (Williams 2015) in everyday responses to marginality. Drawing on McNay’s understanding of agency as ‘a key mediating concept through which the inter-connections between cultural and economic forces, identity formations and social structures can be examined’ (2004, 177) this paper emphasises experience in the workplace because of its centrality to questions of (embodied) agency, and the possibility of exposing difference as relationally and dialogically constituted within a complex network of interactions. The paper therefore illuminates a current blind spot within labour geography concerning the role of religious identity in shaping lived experiences of work and employment as well as the moral dimensions of worker agency and its transformative capacity.

3. Methods and evidence base

Muslims are India’s largest religious minority, comprising 13.4% of the population

(compared to 80.5% Hindus) in 2001 (Government of India, 2001).⁵ When it comes to employment, India's Muslims are over-represented in the informal sector and under-represented in public and private limited companies where only 7.4% of urban Muslims work compared with 15.3% of all urban Hindus (Prime Minister's High Level Committee 2006, p.320). Despite their historically marginal socio-economic position (in which their religious identity intersects other forms of gendered, caste and ethnic identities), Muslims have not been the beneficiaries of reservations within education and public employment in the same way that India's Hindu lower castes have been.⁶ The resulting situation is that 'Muslims are generally not part of the ongoing economic boom or even its derived effects, such as the service- and security-related industries, which recruit very few Muslims' (Hansen, 2007, p. 50).

In acknowledging the challenges that come with thinking across concepts and approaches in both development and economic geography a two-pronged methodology was developed. The following analysis draws on data both from a regional labour market survey of Muslim professionals and from follow-up, in-depth interviews. Fieldwork for the survey was conducted in India's National Capital Region (Delhi, Noida and Gurgaon) from June to August 2013. The survey was aimed at understanding labour agency amongst Muslim graduates (n=448) and a smaller Hindu General Category control group (n=115) in India's new service economy. The survey explored: (i) workers' educational and social backgrounds; (ii) post-graduation employment histories within and across the lead sectors of India's new service

⁵ This is now anticipated to exceed 14%, however, as of late 2016, the religion-wise population data has yet to be released by the Government of India following the 2011 Census.

⁶ The Indian Constitution mandates that quota based reservations are allocated for Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Castes and Scheduled Tribes in education, scholarship and public sector employment. The affirmative action policy was originally conceived of as a short term strategy for the uplift of India's most marginalised communities, but as inequality persists, it has become an enduring feature of India's economy.

economy; (iii) workers' use of different labour market intermediaries (recruiters, culture trainers, accent trainers, etc); (iv) training and skills; and (v) experiences of labour market discrimination and prejudice. To acquire this information we collaborated with an experienced local team of 31 fieldworkers from the Indian Market Research Bureau (23 male, 9 female; 8 Muslim; 24 Hindu) whose demographic characteristics allowed them to access Muslim majority residential areas in New Delhi (e.g. Batla House and Jamia), draw on their existing knowledge and networks, as well as specific referrals from research participants.⁷ The Muslim survey participant sample comprised of 76% men and 24% women, reflecting the difficulties of recruiting Muslim female research participants across all eight growth service sectors targeted: Banking, Insurance, Finance Tourism, Hospitality and Travel, Organised Retail, ITES-BPO, Media Entertainment, Real Estate, Healthcare and IT.⁸

Whilst the survey data offered important insights into the labour market trajectories of Muslim graduates, it was limited in revealing their everyday work-life experiences. We therefore also draw on data from interviews that were undertaken prior to and subsequent to the survey with 20 male Muslim professionals working in the new service economy in Delhi (aged between 22 and 45 years), as well as representatives from higher education and recruitment agencies. Interviewees were identified through

⁷ The research collaboration with IMRB drew on previous experience by two of the authors, James and Vira.

⁸ The male dominance of our research participant sample reflects well documented patterns of early marriage amongst Muslim women in India, and subsequent labour market withdrawal following childbirth. We are keen to explore the ways in which the growth of India's new service economy is potentially challenging these gendered patterns of labour market participation in the next phase of our research in India's National Capital Region.

alumni of Jamia Millia Islamia University and subsequently snowballed as well as through the authors' personal networks.⁹ Whilst one female graduate was contacted, it did not prove possible to arrange an interview. Interviews, which lasted up to two hours and were sometimes followed up with repeat meetings, were conducted in coffee shops, restaurants and work places in New Delhi, but always in the absence of work colleagues or employers. On the whole, the interviewees came from middle class family backgrounds, which was evidenced by their parents' high educational attainment and professional occupations. In many ways the situation of Muslim graduates was one of inherited economic and educational privilege, yet they simultaneously experienced spatial and social marginalization within the city. The following sections document patterns of successful labour market entry and participation for some Muslim graduates which are juxtaposed with their work-life experiences and the ways in which their marked religious identity informed workplace encounters and career strategies.

4. Muslim labour agency in India's new service economy

In contrast to previous work which has identified limits to the ability of Muslim graduates to successfully negotiate access to professional employment in India's new

⁹ The in-depth interviews were conducted by Philippa Williams with assistance from Khalid Jameel, a graduate student of Jamia Millia Islamia.

service economy (e.g. Thorat and Attewell 2007), our survey data evidence the presence of Muslim graduates across *multiple* growth sectors of India’s new service economy, including banking and finance, IT, real estate, hospitality and retail (see Table 1). These survey data are analysed in depth in a parallel paper. In summary, Muslim professionals were identified across 371 different employers, including western-owned multinationals, Indian-owned multinationals, and Indian-owned domestic employers. Within this diverse range of service providers, our results evidence the presence of Muslim graduates across 225 different professional service roles, with common examples including: Accountant, Assistant Manager, Business Development Manager, Customer Care Executive, Executive Marketing, Sales Executive, HR Executive, Insurance Adviser, Marketing Assistant, Process Developer, Relationship Manager and Retail Officer.

Table 1: *Muslim graduates Labour market entry: 1st job (July 2013 survey)*

Sector	n = 448	%
Banking, Insurance, Finance	84	19
Tourism, Hospitality and Travel	68	15
Organised Retail	59	13
ITES-BPO	59	13
Media Entertainment	50	11
Real Estate	42	9
Healthcare	36	8
IT	23	5

Whilst the findings show that some Muslims have secured labour market entry to the new service economy, their labour agency also appears to be constrained relative to the Hindu General Category, as evidenced through an average overall lower salary (albeit with some variation by sector) (see Table 2). In addition, their subsequent patterns of labour agency appear to be circumscribed relative to the Hindu General Category, with Muslims evidencing lower levels of cross-firm job-to-job mobility after having successfully negotiated labour market entry (Table 3).

Table 2: Labour market entry: 1st job salaries (July 2013 survey)

	Jul-13	
Sector	Minority Mobilities (N=563)	
	Hindu General Category (n=115)	Muslim (n=448)
Average age at labour market entry	23.0 yrs	23.0 yrs
Aggregate Rs per month	15 491	13 801
Aggregate ₹PPP p.a.	46 843	38 752
IT / ITES-BPO	15 045	15 021
Tourism, Hospitality and Travel	9 684	11 967
Real Estate	17 429	14 045
Media, Entertainment	15 110	14 714
Healthcare	(5 500)	11 338
Banking, Insurance, Finance	17 375	16 206
Organised Retail	10 283	12 988

Table 3: Measuring minority graduate cross-firm job-to-job mobility (July 2013 survey)

	Hindu General Category			Muslim		
	n	% movers	Ave frequency cross-firm job hops (excludes non movers) yrs	n	% movers	Ave frequency cross-firm job hops (excludes non movers) Yrs
Freshers	41	20%	0.54	124	7%	0.52
Mid-career	35	54%	1.19	118	38%	1.13
Established	39	77%	2.52	222	69%	2.79

In addition, Muslim research participants reported being one of very few Muslims in their respective places of work (Table 4). Despite having secured professional job roles, when asked to self-identify problems facing them at work, ‘discrimination in the labour market’ and ‘low levels of employment security’ were the highest ranking factors.

Table 4: *Percentage of my current work team also from my segment (July 2013 survey)*

	Jul-13	
Sector	Minority Mobilities Survey (N=563)	
	Hindu General Category	Muslim
	n = 115	n = 448
All sectors combined (ave)	81%	29%
IT / ITES-BPO	83	20
Tourism, Hospitality and Travel	86	44
Real Estate	91	32
Media, Entertainment, Broadcasting, Content, Creation, Animation	76	32
Healthcare	74	34
Banking, Insurance, Finance	71	19
Organised Retail	84	27

These aggregate data are important because they highlight the presence of Muslim professionals within a range of sectors in the new service economy, even whilst the numbers of Muslims in the formal private sector overall are still relatively very low. However, the follow-up interviews indicated that these patterns of labour market inclusion are not always consistent with experiences of *social* inclusion and acceptance within the workplace for these Muslim professionals. In the next section we shift from the macro picture to more fine grained, micro-scale analysis from our interviews to offer insights into everyday Muslim experiences of white collar

workplaces in India's National Capital Region and how they are embedded within extra-firm societal formations and state structures.

5. Marginality at work

Professional meritocracy and the 'end of identity'?

It has been widely documented that whereas the 'old' Indian middle classes aspired to government and public sector employment, the 'new' middle classes attach success to careers in the private sector which are based on merit rather than hereditary privilege, cronyism and corruption (Deshpande, 2003). This sentiment was especially palpable in our discussions with Muslim professionals for whom the private sector represented sites for middle-class optimism and economic opportunity:

Eshan didn't hire me because I was a Muslim, he introduced me to 'Financial Solutions' on the basis of my merits. If I have caliber and the potential for the job then I will get it. Good that we're all seen as professionals – and not on the basis of our religion.

(Naasik, Regional Head of Sales in Financial commodities)

Its about confidence – not everyone can join the private sector – you need to have the right kind of experiences.... Private sector is reachable to most sections of society. India has changed.

(Jamil, Area Sales Director)

As Christophe Jaffrelot (2013) has argued, Muslims have welcomed India's liberalisation because it has entailed more distance from the state (which they have

typically viewed with distrust) and facilitated an expansion of opportunities which are not usually available to them in the Hindu-dominated government sector. For aspiring Muslim professionals the growth of jobs in the service economy therefore represents new sites of economic opportunity and aspiration. Yet, narratives celebrating the new service economy's emphasis on merit and inclusion and the 'end of identity' co-existed with their lived experiences of workplace discrimination. Our findings show that the widespread sense of optimism concerning expanding labour market opportunities proved to be a thin veneer, one tempered by anxiety concerning experiences or perceptions of marginalisation. The case of Mujbeer proved illustrative and serves to disrupt the notion that religious identity is no longer relevant in India's new workplaces. Mujbeer was in his mid-thirties and worked for a property consultancy in south-east Delhi. At time of our interview, he was the only Muslim employee in his office, and was responsible for a team of twenty, comprising men and women, architects and engineers. He was emphatic that everyday practices of discrimination against Muslims were commonplace experiences within the organized private sector, and something that he had personally encountered.

In 1997 when I was graduating one big company came to the campus [at Jamia Millia Islamia] to recruit students. They had selected three people, myself, Aftab Alam and another guy Amit Kumar. I'll remember that day all my life. I was the first to enter the cabin where the company representatives were meeting us. I sat down... He asked for my name, so I told him I'm Mujbeer Asim, and on learning it he threw my resume in my face – and said that they didn't have any vacancies anymore. This was very surprising to me since they had only just come to the campus and selected us because

there were jobs. Even today I still think about the moment. I'm unable to find any logic to explain it.

As Mujbeer finished this story he shook his head, evidently still puzzled and hurt by the nature of his rejection and, as it later transpired, the subsequent decision to hire the Hindu candidate for the post. When asked whether this kind of situation had happened since then, he responded by saying, 'not like that ... but yes we always feel like we're on the back foot.' Despite India's constitutional commitment to religious equality and attempts following the Sachar Committee report to introduce an Equal Opportunities Commission there are no formal channels through which to pursue grievances concerning racial, religious or ethnic discrimination in the workplace. In any case, as Mujbeer exclaimed, 'how would you prove discrimination? It is very difficult to prove. I can't fight these things. If you fight then you don't get another job.' And so, Mujbeer had concluded that the most appropriate response was to put the incident behind him and move on.

Given his personal experiences and more general opinions about the habitual nature of Muslim discrimination, it is intriguing that Mujbeer simultaneously celebrated the 'end of identities' in the 'new Indian workplace'. Writing in the context of Western approaches to work, Collinson (2003) points to the instability of the relationship between identities and inequalities and the ethic of merit and success. He argues that meritocratic ideologies are more often embraced in societies that are also characterized by deep-seated class and status inequalities. In meritocracies dignity and respect are theoretically de-linked from birthright, and instead become conditional

realisations which have to be earned and achieved. Moreover, he suggests that the ongoing labour required to sustain respect and dignity contributes to a sense of persistent insecurity in the workplace, the impact of which is often overlooked. Our findings from New Delhi point to how Muslim professionals consciously negotiated identity insecurities around being Muslim. They were acutely aware of how their potential to ‘get in’ and ‘get on’ in the workplace was constrained by their position within India’s religiously stratified society. The apparent erasure of ascriptive identities within the new workplace was, for many professional Muslims, an active process rather than one that was intrinsically produced by virtue of being in India’s post-liberal professional workspaces. Muslim professionals’ overt subscription to narratives celebrating the end of identity within India’s organized private sector may be seen as a narrative strategy towards inclusion, but apparent silences around identity can also be revealing of deeper held insecurities. In the next section we show the contradictions that arise where success for Muslim middle class professionals is contingent on actively marginalising other Muslims in order to be accepted as ‘normal’.

Homophily and the (re)production of marginality at work

Mujbeer’s account of the recruitment of the Hindu candidate over two Muslim applicants resonated with the experiences of other research participants. What proved interesting was how Muslim professionals sought to rationalise this practice, interpreting it as a routine and inevitable condition of society where people always want to hire others like themselves. As Mujbeer remarked it was common practice that ‘Guptas hire Guptas and Jains hire Jains’ but it aggrieved him that ‘for us, if we

hire Muslims then our name will be black-marked.’ Others, like Naasik were more pragmatic and accepting of the situation:

Well, it's obvious to us [Muslims], people like to employ people they know are like themselves. That's how it is. There is no need to get discouraged if you are not picked. But for us there is no other option. You have to be the first in team and then you need to make sure that the person who is second is nowhere near. There are instances [of discrimination] but it happens everywhere.

In the industrial relations and organisational literature this tendency for individuals to associate and bond with similar others and form exclusive social networks is known as homophily. A number of studies have examined how social networks and practices of homophily structure patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace, not least how axes of difference, such as race, can disadvantage minority groups in the process of job finding (Elliott and Sims, 2001, Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo, 2006, Mouw, 2003). However, this literature largely focuses on worker experiences in the global North, and in particular, on the experiences of African-American workers in the USA. Little attention has been directed towards matters of workplace (religious) diversity in the economies of the global South .

Our findings indicate that amongst Muslim professionals there was a culture of acceptance concerning everyday practices of homophily within religious (and caste) groups. This functioned to reproduce intersecting patterns of Muslim marginality in two ways. First, Muslim professionals were marginalised from mainstream Hindu networks which reduced their potential source of contacts and consequently their perceptions of opportunities for career progression. Second, some Muslims were

reticent about hiring other Muslims for fear of criticism and hostility from Hindu colleagues and claims that they had acted preferentially towards ‘their’ community.¹⁰ For example, Mujbeer explained how he was asked by a Muslim client to provide two or three contractors to work on property development but the client was emphatic that the contractors should not be Muslims because he did not want the company to think he gave preferential treatment to Muslims. Meanwhile, another research participant was told more explicitly by their boss not to hire Muslims, given the perception that particular IT and engineering markets in north India are ‘more receptive to non-Muslims’.

In a society and set of industrial sectors where social networks and contacts matter for career advancement, the dual exclusionary practices of homophily had significant consequences for Muslim professionals and their potential to ‘get in’ and ‘get on’ within the new service economy. Nonetheless, as this research documents (see Tables 1 and 2), Muslims *are* succeeding in gaining employment and remaining employed in India’s post-liberal professional workplaces in spite of practices of discrimination and the marginalising effects of homophily. So, how are Muslims able to negotiate and re-work perceptions and experiences of marginality in order to succeed in these sectors? The next section begins to answer these questions by exploring some of the strategies deployed by professionals to resist practices of discrimination, to appear ‘less different’ and to re-work marginality in the workplace.

¹⁰ The survey data show that Muslim professionals were most commonly working alongside other Muslim colleagues in Tourism, Hospital and Travel, where on average 44% of their current work team colleagues were also Muslim; followed by healthcare (34%), Real Estate (32%) and Media Entertainment (32%). These figures are significant given that Muslims represent just 13.4% of India’s total population (Bhaumik and Chakrabarty 2009). In addition, Muslim professionals were most commonly managed by other Muslims in the Banking, Insurance and Finance (40%) and ITES-BPO (37%) sectors.

6. (Re)working marginality

Individualised responses and labouring to 'fit in'

Our research participants were cognizant about how being Muslim in India was synonymous with perceptions of being 'backward', 'uneducated' and 'anti-national' as well as 'inward looking' and 'self-segregating'. In this context, Muslim professionals articulated the importance of actively challenging or re-working marginalizing stereotypes if they were to be successful in India's new professional workplaces. Indeed, a shared aspiration amongst Muslim professionals was to be the Muslim who was least discriminated against. In order to achieve this, interviewees emphasized the need to be pragmatic about experiences of workplace discrimination and to take personal responsibility for their own career trajectories, not least by being flexible within different settings in order to nurture favourable impressions amongst employers and colleagues. Accordingly, as with the marginalising practices of homophily, Muslim professionals seemed to accept discrimination as habitual, and discursively down-played its negative impact on their work-lives by referring to incidences as 'knock backs' and challenges to be overcome:

In business there are more opportunities for mixing [with people from different socio-religious backgrounds] which creates challenges because people come with their perceptions, but you have to create a good impression for yourself...Recruitment is very open, it's all about perception and image. But you have to have the flexibility. For some Muslims when they are told something they don't like they take it personally. But people have to stop thinking like this, even if the comment was intended to be discriminatory

(Aakil)

When playing the game – whenever Mario gets some star etc. it gives him energy. But then the baddie drains his energy. Life is like this. If you fight [the system/people] it drains you whether you're a Hindu or a Muslim. It's a matter of being a human being. Everyone has their limitations, whatever they might be.

(Naasik)

A prevalent view amongst our research participants was that it was counter-productive to blame 'knock backs' or failure on 'being Muslim' and that everyone had their 'limiting factors'. For example, Aakil was mindful of the importance of differentiating between things that he could and could not change at work, and recognised that the key to success was knowing how to make the best of a difficult situation. The frequency of narratives emphasising the importance of pragmatism and acceptance, rather than despair and grievance in the face of discrimination, prompts the tentative conclusion that resilience and self-reliance were characteristic traits of Muslim middle class professionals, or at least of those who had successfully navigated their career trajectories to 'get in' to jobs in these sectors.

As this paper's opening quotation suggests, Muslim professionals understood their labour market agency to hinge upon their capacity to manage other people's impressions about them, and more specifically, to alter people's negative perceptions of Muslims. Within this context, research participants described how they negotiated their 'politics of embodiment', both in person and on paper. One of our interviewees described how he had become sensitive to the way in which he presented himself in his Curriculum Vitae. When we met, Abdul Kareem was in his early twenties and

working in client services for a government organisation. Talking about his fortunes in the labour market, he reflected on some invaluable advice that he had received from a Hindu contact who worked as a Human Relations Manager for a multinational company. This contact had offered to look over Abdul Kareem's CV and when he reached the list of referees told Abdul Kareem to 'get rid of Mohammed this and Khan that' and instead write 'Patel or Gupta, or something along those lines... otherwise the moment you send this CV it will be thrown away.' In a culture where HR managers were typically from the majority Hindu community Abdul Kareem noted how important it was to create a perception of oneself as a Muslim that 'fits in' with mainstream society.

The need to appear as a Muslim who was integrated into the Hindu dominated mainstream was as important in person as on paper. Though many research participants insisted that it was *their* choice not to grow beards, others were more candid about their office culture and the preferences held by their managers which shaped their decisions. Ehsan, a Service Sales Engineer, described how conspicuous Muslim dress such as a *topi* [skull cap] was certainly not allowed in his office and how:

One can grow a beard, but it is not appreciated and managers can object, but there is no such company policy [against it]. Earlier when I joined I wore a beard but had to shave it off because my manager asked me to. But I grew it back later...

As Eshan's comments reveal, he accepted rather than openly contested such requests, but he also knew how to negotiate workplace expectations around his appearance.

Meanwhile, another research participant disclosed how, in order to gain the respect of his Jain manager, he changed his eating habits by giving up ‘non-veg’ food. The majority of those interviewed were clean-shaven and dressed in ‘western’ business clothes – shirt and trousers – while a couple, including Aakil, wore suits. In the globalising corporate work spaces of India this sartorial business code created a degree of uniformity which erased more ‘traditional’ public characteristics of identity, such as the *topi* and beard for Muslim men. This negotiated politics of identity echoes the findings of McDowell (1997) in London’s investment banks where women and men deployed different strategies in order to ‘fit in’ and advance their careers in a hyper-masculine work culture. For example, women countered the image of the sexualized female body in the workplace by wearing neutralising business suits, which simulated the dominant suited male environment. In a similar way, by enacting workplace practices and performances that downplayed their Muslim-ness, we argue that Muslim professionals did not aim to pass themselves off as *non-Muslims*. Instead, their workplace presentation of self was intended to counter the image of the traditional, backward or dangerous Muslim and signal that they were a ‘modern’ Muslim who was accepting of, and integrated into ‘mainstream’ society.

Scholarship on the management of emotional labour has foregrounded the ongoing negotiation of identities and emotion in service sector workplaces as an important dimension of individuals’ capacity to work, and the ways in which people anticipated how their visible identities may be received, perceived, and responded to accordingly (Hochschild 1983; Dyer et al. 2008). The focus of such scholarship has been extended beyond worker-customer relations to also recognize the interactive labour that exists between professionals and their clients, as well as colleagues (Pierce 1995;

Orzechowicz 2008). However, as Mirchandani (2003) notes, though the literature on emotional labour is sensitive to gender relations, and to an extent class, there is little analysis of how workers perform emotional labour in relation to racial, ethnic or religious hierarchies. Moreover, research has typically been centred on the global North and white/homogeneous workers. Our findings point to the importance of emotional labour undertaken by Muslim professionals in order to present favourably and (re)position their outwardly religious selves within India's heterogeneous social environment. More generally, this research prompts us to recognize how persistent insecurity in the workplace around religious identity demands that workers from minority backgrounds perform 'the suppression of emotion' (Ward and McMurray 2011) - *additional* forms of emotional labour that are enacted in order to navigate social marginality at work, whether with clients, customers or colleagues.

Conclusions: Working at the margins?

With its focus on Muslim middle class graduates working in white collar service roles in the global South, this paper lies at the margins of both economic geography and development geography research. Focusing on experiences of marginality has prompted questions about what different forms of agency look like for workers from minority backgrounds, and their implications for transformations in India's post-liberalisation economy and society, as well as how we theorise agency within and across geographical sub-disciplines.

Through analysis of survey data and in-depth interviews this paper has documented how Muslim professionals are simultaneously central to India's liberalizing growth

dynamic, and marginal, both within narratives of economic success as well as lived realities of these new Indian workplaces. The very presence of Muslim middle class professionals in India's new service economy appears to reveal a progressive story about the potential for economic development to open up opportunities for socially inclusive growth that transcend 'traditional' minority religious identities. But aggregate statistics evidencing increasing diversity within the workforce only tell us so much; examining the perceptions and lived experiences of minority professionals show *how* Muslim professionals have achieved 'inclusion' within the economic core by negotiating their marginal identities in the course of getting 'in' and getting 'on' in the labour market. However, minority strategies have produced inadvertent contradictions. On the one hand, the repetition by Muslim professionals about the 'end of identity' served to signal their economic inclusion, but it simultaneously depended upon the depoliticisation of inequality faced by Muslims within Indian society. On the other hand, acceptance of workplace practices of homophily meant that in order to succeed in their own careers, Muslim professionals found themselves complicit in discrimination against other Muslims. The wider implications are that middle class strategies for inclusion and acceptance as 'normal' within professional spaces potentially reproduce longer term patterns of economic and social marginalization for Muslims working within these growth sectors of India's post-liberal economy. These findings emphasise the importance of interrogating not just what is said, but also the silences and degrees of acceptance around worker identity in the workplace.

A 'neoliberal governmentalities' reading of the workplace strategies and labour agency documented in this paper might warrant the conclusion that Muslim

professionals have been fashioned into ‘enterprising selves’ and compliant workers who are able to privately navigate the risks and vulnerabilities of a competitive market economy (see Burchell, 1993, Tickell and Peck, 1995). However, only situating these agencies within the context of the neoliberal market obscures the longer social, economic and political trajectories of Muslim marginality in South Asia. This context crucially shapes both minority professional agencies at work and their wider implications. The *individual strategies* enacted and *personal responsibility* adopted for minimizing and mitigating against discrimination should be interpreted within a context of state failure to protect Muslim’s socio-economic rights *and* the biopolitical reach of the neoliberal market.

A shared aspiration amongst Muslim professionals was to be the kind of Muslim who was least discriminated against, and corroborating recent research, the over-riding message was that India’s Muslims ‘want to be ‘normal’’ (Suroor 2014, loc. 306; Jamil 2014). Yet, less has been said about how that aspiration to be normal is materialized in the Indian context. Our findings show that Muslim professionals stress the need to be self-reliant and resilient, and articulate agencies of acceptance, pragmatism and the re-working of marginalising stereotypes. Moreover, research participants both actively and tacitly pre-empted and managed other people’s perceptions and impressions of ‘the Muslim’. Thus subtle forms of emotional labour, underpinned by persistent insecurity, constitutes an important dimension in how these minority professionals approach their working relationships. More generally, this adds empirical weight to arguments that marginality is a complex process that includes within it contradictory articulations of agency.

By expanding the scope of analysis for economic and development geography this paper raises further questions for future research. We need to know more about how career mobility interacts with social and spatial mobilities for minorities in India's cities. What about the experiences of aspiring Muslim professionals who could *not* access employment in the new service economy and what factors lie behind their failure? More too needs to be known about the contrasting contexts of the new service economy and how firm type and composition shapes the everyday working lives and opportunities of minority professionals.

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