

Migrant women's aspirations in the city

Anveshi City Project Team¹

There is a slow but visible increase in the number of women coming to the city for employment and education. Even though this number is significantly less than women who migrate with their household or after marriage, it still denotes a very important shift. There has always been a discomfort with single women occupying public spaces. Women coming to the city alone, for jobs and education, are altering this mainstream narrative and are making small shifts in the physical as well as imagined city.

Increased presence of women in the cities plays out differently from that of men. It brings in a certain anxiety related to their sexuality. These independent sexualities pose a threat to the functioning and structuring of the city. Scholars like Phil Hubbard and Tovi Fenster have argued that cities try to regulate irregular sexualities and hence it holds single women under an ambivalent gaze. More often than not city planning fails to take in account gender as a important category.

Exploring these debates through this paper, we aim to look at narratives of two women and their respective journeys to the city. We look at what brought them to the city in the first place as well as their desires and aspirations from the city. What does the city mean for them and how do they by their presence bring about small changes in the city? Here we look at the narrative of two women who have migrated to Hyderabad from other districts of Andhra Pradesh. We chose women who do not belong to the popularly imagined software sector of Hyderabad, but rather from work sector which provides lower salaries.

Methodology

These narratives are part of a larger study at Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies as part of a project titled 'City and Sexuality: A study of youth working and living in Hyderabad' which focuses on women who have come to the city alone for education or jobs. A total of 51 women were interviewed coming from different background and different professions like student, teachers, government workers, businesswomen, mall worker, nurses, administrative staff in hospital, women employed in low and middle income in different sectors like corporate, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), media, biotechnology, banking. We initially started with snowballing and then later in the study, to diversify our pool, we went to different women in different location and professions and did purposive sampling. We interviewed women who have a minimum qualification

¹ Members include: Mithun Som, Rani Rohini Raman, Madhurima Majumder, Madhavi Mirapa and Riyaz Unnisa

of higher secondary. These were in-depth interviews done in their place of comfort like home, hostel or neighbourhood. Interview was done in Hindi, English and Telugu. All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondents, then transcribed and translated.

Hyderabad: The Location

This study was done in Hyderabad. Historically, Hyderabad is a city which has a history of migrants, not just from the country but from other parts of the world. Presently, about 24 percent of the present population in Hyderabad comprise of migrant population (census, 2011). This has got a further boost with the kind of city centric development that is taking place in Andhra Pradesh especially after the 1990s. The economic reforms and the political change in terms of coalition government in the centre gave more power to the regional parties and to the states in terms of pursuing their economic policies. As the states got more autonomy, competition to get investors in their state grew. Service or Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) industry with big infrastructure led development was one area which was also expected to grow fast. Andhra Pradesh saw the highest growth in this sector during early 2000s (Kennedy 2007). To attract the investors, Hyderabad or rather a part of Hyderabad was projected as a global city with better roads, power, and other services. The city centric projects that relies on huge infrastructure was given precedence. Huge subsidies and concessions in land, labour laws, infrastructure, were provided. These policies brought in a lot of big companies which was being interpreted as the success of the state (Kennedy 2007, Kamat 2011) However, other parts of the state, did not see such development and in fact the state lowered its investment in the agrarian sector (Reddy and Mishra 2010). Power and other services were diverted to Hyderabad and it came at the cost of other districts of Andhra Pradesh.

For many people from smaller districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Hyderabad is the city of their dreams. Many of our respondents belonging to the different districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana came to Hyderabad as this was the city where they had opportunities. The number of educational institutes, coaching centres, software and allied industries made this a desirable destination for young and educated migrants not only from the state but from other states as well. We also found women who have come from politically disturbed states and they needed to get out of their home state for a better future. We found some women who came from families where there has been instances of abuse and they wanted to escape from their home. City provided that opportunity to them.

One such woman, is Lipika. She came from a coastal Andhra district for education. She now has a job in Hyderabad.

Lipika's Journey : The Phases

Why Hyderabad for Lipika

Lipika came to the city initially for education. She wanted to move out of the stagnation of her village life and look for better opportunity in Hyderabad. Lipika believed that her home town won't provide her the exposure that she always dreamt of. Eventually she felt that she won't be able to learn and progress much in life, if she continues to stay in her home town. She said, *"if only you are studying in the district, or only in AP region, we do not have any future. If once go out from our native place, definitely we will get something. We will improve our communication skills, we will improve our education also"*.

Lipika reflected on the mundane routine of her day to day life in her home town, which was limited to going to and coming back from college. Her home town was failing her as there was no other source of "exposure". She said, *"We go for study to college and come back and again go to college and go back. Then there is no outside world (duniya kuch bhi nahin rehta)"*. So, city like Hyderabad was not just a place to get a degree but she expected to gain more from the city and its environment. She was also excited to interact with all kinds of people and learn from them since people from different parts of the country come to Hyderabad. She wanted to be able to communicate with people and live on her own.

She also says that in her native place, there is an fascination around going out. She says, *"while studying also, we heard that boy has done this, that person has done that. Arey, why talk about this or that person, we can also do. Everyone has got brains but the home situation should also be cooperative"*. As in case of several other villages and small towns, in Lipika's village too, going out to the city became an important marker of success. This seems to have influenced her coming out to the city.

Lipika's background and choice of career

Lipika is from a village in coastal Andhra district. She is the third of the four sisters. She is from a lower middle class upper caste family and her father works in a low paid job. She had to undergo a lot of struggle for her studies. However, her father believed that education is the only way their daughters can do better in their life. Her father holds a degree and mother studied till 10th class. They have always stressed on education from the beginning, *"from early on they have said that education is wealth (amanat). Without education, there is nothing. Through education, you get everything, you get wealth, knowledge everything. Study and later your life will be good"*. It was for

her studies that she first came to Hyderabad. Her elder sister had moved out of the house when she got a government job. After that Lipika came out to Hyderabad for education.

Lipika has been a good student, she got 96 percent in her inter and cleared the EAMCET, the entrance exam for engineering in Andhra Pradesh. She got a seat along with scholarship. After her B.Tech, she did her internship from Sriharikota where she witnessed two rocket launches. Lipika had chosen electrical engineering for her B.Tech. When she decided to take on this discipline, there were people who felt that it was more appropriate for men and she should avoid it. *“When I went to chose my field, people said arey, why did you chose electrical, electrical is not that good, one has to go out and have to mingle with boys. So others said no but today girls do everything, so what is the problem”*. In her engineering college, girls were about one fifth of the class. On what kind of change she felt in those four years, she narrates, *“I felt that if I stay rigid then I won’t achieve anything. We have to move, we have to take the initiation from our life, we have to do something. We should be like change. At that time I felt that ok, we have to study, we have to interact with the people, we have to exhibit our talent which we are having inherent”*. With time, she could get out of her insecurities for being a small town girl in the midst of other people from the big city. After her good results in her first year of engineering, she felt, *“Till that time I was feeling that I have come from the village, all others are from the city, everyone studies well. But I understood 'everything that glitters is not gold'”*. Her results gave her the confidence.

In her present workplace, she is the only woman in her team of fifteen people. Lipika does not like the work environment. She says that people in her office do not interact with her as she is a female. When she had joined, she was asked to dress conservatively and was told *“this is not a glamorous field”*. She does not like the grim face of her colleagues and says she is there only because she is getting to learn more in her field which will then help her in future. She believes that her colleagues have not been able to get out of their conservative “village mindset” where talking to women is not seen in a good light. She believes that at work one has to interact with others and gender should not be a factor. One should always look for avenues of learning and better oneself. She says that even in the case of field work women find it difficult to go on a site as there is not much of security. However, during her internship she was free to move around and go to sites as it was in a closed space.

Living in the city

Moving out from the comfort of her home to living alone in the city at the age of 16, Lipika found it very difficult initially. After the first six months she went home and didn’t want to return. Her father

then convinced her to continue her studies to come back by showing her the big picture. Her father would not have been able to afford the expenses had it not been for the scholarship that she got.

She learnt a lot by staying in hostel during her student days. It was not just academic learning but also how to go about in the world. She remembers, *“But how to stay and how not to stay. But before coming here I didn’t even know how to tie my hair..I had a friend who used to tie my hair daily. I could not do my head wash also, every time my mother used to do it. Every time I was picking up picking up, how to keep the things properly, how much we have to maintain properly, everything I learnt from my friends from my college hostel”*.

Having survived all by herself in Hyderabad, she became confident after her B.tech. She says, *“And now I have the confidence and if you leave me anywhere in the world, I can come back. I have got the courage (himmat) now after coming to Hyderabad. So I really feel a craze about Hyderabad”*.

During her student days, Lipika would go out with her friends for movies or just hang out in places like tank bund. Now that she is working, she does not have much time to go out and neither does she have a group of friends with whom she can. Working in a low paid job with only one day off, which is mostly spent in washing clothes and taking rest, she does not have much time left for socialising. Many of her hostel mates also face similar predicament. She says, *“It is not like college days when we have a lot of time. Now people get tired after coming back from work”*.

The city apart from giving the economic independence, is also providing freedom to Lipika. Over here, there is no family or community to do surveillance. In terms of dressing, here she dresses the way she wants to when she goes out for shopping or other things. At her home town, due to her upper caste status, there are certain restrictions regarding dressing. She says, *“We are the scholars and so in our native place, everyone knows our names. So if we are not dressing properly then definitely they will give negative feedback. So I never wore that. But I want to wear like fashion but I won’t”*. Here she feels free to go out in a jeans and kurti when she goes for shopping or outing.

Lipika is also clear that the freedom one gets should not be misused. While being in village she used to think that boys and girls should not talk much or go out together. Now she feels that this was 'narrow thinking'. Now she thinks it is appropriate for men and women to hang out together. However, decisions about love, relationships, marriage should be taken with extreme caution. If they commit once, they should keep to it.

She likes to call her parents everyday and tell them about her day. *“I talk to my parents daily and tell them if I am in the office that I am in the office, if I am in the movie theatre, then I tell them that I am in movie theatre. I don’t want to hide anything from them. Without telling them, I can’t go anywhere. I will do everything in front of them. They trust me that their daughter won’t do anything. I don’t want to hide anything”*. She also realises that in many houses, there are restrictions. She

believes that parents should give freedom to their children and also provide guidance or else when they all of a sudden get freedom, they tend to go astray.

For her marriage, she wants her parents to select someone after which she will talk to that person and make her final decision. She does not want to choose for herself. She says, *“I go to three four shopping malls for only one dress. I can’t chose my own dress, I need some one else to chose. Then how will I chose a guy”*. She is also cautious about choosing her husband as she has seen her elder sister not too happy after her marriage as her husband did not allow her to work outside.

Time when she was away from Hyderabad

However, even getting “exposure” to the city, she has not been able to make it big, is what Lipika feels. In her words, *“abhi manzil haasil nahin hui hai”*. She took intermitten breaks in between her stints in the city. She did a course on software after her B.tech. She then worked as an intern in Sriharikota for few months. Later, she came back to Hyderabad and enrolled in coaching for GATE. She could not get a satisfactory job and so went back home again. At home, she stayed for a year and prepared for GATE. However, people around her started gossiping about her sitting at home and doing nothing. This got Lipika depressed. She again came back to look for a job. This time she did get a job. At present, she is not happy with the money and the work. However, she looks at this job as a learning phase and expects this job to help in future. She got exposure to the city but feels that she did not achieve as much success as she could have as there was no one to guide her when she came here. She feels that somehow she has lost her way. She says

“when I completed my B.tech in electrical and electronic engineering, then nobody is giving any guidance to me. Whatever I have done is my own decision. So at that time what happened was I lost my age, I lost my wealth and health everything, everything because I didn’t do anything properly. Properly means arey what you can do you do but I think if you are going on a path and if someone comes and tells you the route, you can go easily. But if you don’t know the route then you go but you have to keep asking and there are lot thorns and stones in that path, you have to face a lot of difficulty in going and once you reach and you don’t get the destination then how do you feel? My life has been like that, there has been no one to guide me. Whatever I have done, I have”.

She is still looking for her “big break”.

Lipika intends to do a Ph.d in future. *“I want to become a good electrical engineer first of all afterwards I want to finish my M.Tech and then do my PhD after that I want to go for a college or university to give lectures....I feel that we should study, we should study, we should learn more and more things”*.

When she came for the second time in Hyderabad, she started staying with her sister. Her sister has a job and she lives alone. However Lipika and her sister could not get along and so after three months, Lipika decided to shift to her present hostel. The hostel that she lives in currently is a small private hostel with a capacity of about 50 girls. This hostel charges a monthly payment of Rs 3000 – 3500, depending on the number of occupants in a room. Lipika earns 12000 and hence finds this hostel quite affordable.

Before moving ahead to the next narrative, here we need to talk about the hostels in Hyderabad. As mentioned above, with more and more single women coming to the city, residential spaces like hostels are proliferating in numbers.

Hostels in Hyderabad

Hyderabad has seen a rapid increase in the number of private hostels for working women especially after the software boom and the increase in allied industries. These hostels allow women to find affordable residence in the city. Also, parents of these women allow them to live alone in a city, trusting the safety and security of these hostels. We had reviewed several newspaper advertisements and websites of private hostels. We found that most of these hostels claim to provide safety, security and control over these single women who are staying alone in the city. We also found that hostels are available for different economic categories. Most of the women who migrate to Hyderabad, either stay in these hostels or opt for rented flats. Many students try to stay in the accommodation provided by the institution. Interestingly when Lipika had first come to Hyderabad for her B.Tech, she stayed in the college hostel for the first year and then shifted to private hostel as it was much cheaper than college hostel. Now when she has come back again for work, she is staying in a hostel run by Vijetha.

As mentioned above, the price range of Vijetha's hostel was affordable for Lipika. She also shared that since this hostel was close to her office, it reduced her travel time and expenditure, which was very useful for her.

Vijetha's journey to the city

Why Hyderabad

Vijetha comes from another town in coastal Andhra region. She lost her parents when she was two and half years of age. She had a difficult childhood as she and her sister were brought up by her mother's relatives who did not take a good care of them. She mentions, *"They just allowed to stay in their house and sent us in government school, I was very interested in studies but never got chance as per my choice. I had to work at home and then go to school. Food was also not given to*

us in a proper way. If we used to work a lot then used to get food. Many times we used to get leftover food of night in morning. After my 5th class they stopped our schooling and told that we do not need to study any further, be at home and we will get you married after five years”.

She says that at one point in her life she had even contemplated suicide. However, the thought of leaving her disabled sister alone stopped her from taking her own life. She was eventually brought to Hyderabad to stay with one of her relatives for few years and do their chores. One of her teachers, later, helped her pass her 10th exam in private. She was good in studies. Later she completed her diploma. She had to sell off her mother’s small house to meet the expenses. She got a chance in engineering college but could not afford the Rs.25,000 fees for it. She came to Hyderabad for work as this was the place where she could get a job. She also brought her sister here as her relatives were not taking care of her sister. The city provided her the economic independence which freed her from her dependency on relatives and provided her an escape.

Running the hostel

And after coming to Hyderabad, she has not just made a living for herself, but also made it easier for other women like her to stay in the city. Running this hostel has not been easy for Vijetha. She lives in the hostel and is deeply involved in the day to day functioning of the hostel. She buys the vegetables on her way back from office, guides the cooks and even cooks herself if the cook is absent. She opens the gate for women coming late at night from work. She also has to manage any issues within the hostel and outside. Within the hostel, she has to supervise the girls, set up rules and ensure they are followed, intervene in medical emergency, mitigate fights between residents, have to deal with different kinds of residents like kleptomaniac, etc. Outside the hostel, she has to take care of the security of the residents. There is no security guard for the hostel. She instead has asked the night guard in the locality to take special care of the hostel. She had cases of outsiders trying to break in or harassed some residents. She had to take care of the situation by involving the police. She cannot take breaks and has to be present in the hostel every day. A year back, when she decided to give up, the residents staying there persuaded her to continue. There was an orphan Muslim girl who stayed in her hostel for four years, she had managed to study by securing scholarships. She got a good match and the grooms' parents came to see the girl in the hostel. Later Vijetha said, *“we all got her married”*. That girl is happy now. She sometimes comes to visit them and is thankful to Vijetha and the hostel.

Vijetha's hostel has seen many highs and lows. When she does not have enough occupancy, she has to dip into her personal funds to keep the hostel running. She had kept the hostel small but is aware that if she expands it to about 200-300 residents, then she will make a very good profit. At present

she says, *“Turnover of this business is above one lakhs and every month I am only able to save 20000. I do not attempt to earn a lot, as I have my job also. If I only do that then I have to pay for the flat to stay, food and all so all these things I am getting from this hostel, so I look at it like that”*. She continues with her job, as she thinks of it as a permanent source of income, unlike her hostel. Currently she earns a monthly salary of Rs. 30,000 from her job. She is very clear about the demarcation between the hostel and her work. She does not talk about hostel or its problems in her office space. If required, at times, she spends about 12 hours in her office. In her work space, she feels, women do not get enough importance. She says, *“There is more competition there, they do not give more importance to women. Boys dominate over there and even if the girl has talent, they do not give importance. So I decided that after working for so many days, I will set up my own business sometime”*. Interestingly, she does not see her running of the hostel and scope to expand it as a business opportunity and thinks of business in terms of opening up a boutique or beauty parlour. However, her immediate goal now is to get married. She is worried that she is getting older and is still unmarried. She says, *“Girls have to compulsorily marry, otherwise it is not good”*. In her work, once she trusted someone but that guy finally married someone whose family gave him a hefty dowry. Since then, she has not trusted the men and wants her relatives to find her a good match. She is also tired of the problems in her life and does not have 'mental capacity' to handle anything more. She says,

“I don't have faith (bharosa) in love marriage. Because I have faced so much of problems, I don't have faith in people. Now people are money minded. If one will get married, what will the boy see, how much money, family background, you know na how is the society. I believe someone and then something happens...we do not have support na. Till now lots of problems, life is irritating, if there is another problem, I do not have the mental capacity to face it. So whatever my relatives say, I do. I give more importance to them, I don't take personal decisions. Because I do not want to face any problem”.

Ironically, in spite of successfully running a hostel and managing her career, Vijetha still thinks that her life is incomplete without marriage. When asked if she will continue running this hostel after marriage, she says that it depends on what her future husband wants.

Two journeys under the same hostel roof

These journeys of two independent women staying alone in Hyderabad reflects on the larger picture of migrant women. Their journeys are unique to them but at the same time reflects the dilemmas and struggles that other such women face. Through the narratives of these two women, we tried to bring forth their aspirations, desires, their life in the city and future plans. These are crucial in understanding their interaction with the city and by extension look at the ways in which their living here is impacting the city. The increased visibility and presence of women, for example Lipika's

presence in the male dominated office space is at some level is breaking the norm. Lipika's entry into her office space is creates a certain tension. She is asked to 'dress conservatively' and her male colleagues keep a distance from her. Her male colleagues who are hitherto not used to having female company in office is now slowly getting used to it. At the same time, Lipika's stay in the city enabled her to question the dressing norms of her village. She reflects on the continuous scrutiny that many women like her face in their home towns.

Vijetha through her hostel is actually enabling entry of women like her and Lipika to the city. Finding a safe, secure and affordable accommodation becomes essential for women migrants and more so for their parents. The presence of a hostel with so many single women living together also raises curiosity and a certain male gaze. Vijetha in her narrative of her journey so far, is stitching the narratives of several women who have stayed or are staying in her hostel. These narratives are about work, zeal to advance their careers, excitement of managing on their own, harassment at work or on the streets, successful and failed romance, desire or apprehension towards marriage. These narratives represent the dualities in which several migrant women live in the present time. On one hand city gives them opportunities to work and to excel but at the same time the questions of marriage and 'settling' down never leaves them.

These women deal with these dualities in their day to day life. They are knowingly or unknowingly making several small changes in the norms and fabric of the city, which is no more an alien space for these migrant women. Although this is a very slow process, the city is getting more acceptable to these women which we can see in the creation of new residential and commercial spaces for them.

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