CASE STUDY
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New Services Behind Upward Mobility In India

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There is much talk about the growth of the service economy and the shift to a post-industrial world. However, we know relatively little about new service jobs or how people entering these jobs approach them.

Our research looks at two new service professions in India: gym trainers and coffee baristas.

Gym training and coffee shops are relatively new to the Indian context. Fifteen years ago, when I lived in Mumbai, there were very few coffee shops or gyms. Even though the city has the tradition of Irani cafes, these have little to do with the kind of cosmopolitan “third place” between home and work that we have come to associate with chains such as Starbucks. Similarly, the new gyms like Gold’s Gym or Talwalkars have little to do with the culture of the akhara, the traditional Indian wrestling gym.

As part of this research, we followed gym trainers and baristas in Mumbai, New Delhi and Jamshedpur. Mostly, we wanted to see how Indian service workers approached this kind of work. We conducted long interviews, spent time with our research participants in gyms and in their homes, and we even filmed a couple of gym trainers as they went about their day. Below is a film we made about Kamran, a young gym trainer living and working in Byculla, a working class area of Mumbai:

https://vimeo.com/user34869005/vimeokamran
What is striking about gym trainers like Kamran, and something I try to analyze in my work, is the way new services like gym training can become a way to gain the recognition gym trainers lack in other spheres of their public life. What gym trainers find especially gratifying is that clients call them “sir” and value the specialist knowledge they have accumulated. While this respect is somewhat circumscribed to the particular space of the gym and the interaction of trainer and client, the value trainers get from this interaction, is a good reminder that recognition is one of the most powerful dynamics animating social life. The philosopher Alex Honneth writes that

“The reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one’s partners in interaction, as their social addressee”


And while coffee shop baristas may get less respect from their clients, they are drawn to the perceived professional mobility associated with these jobs, the cosmopolitan image of coffee shops, and the largely respectful interactions with customers. New services, in the Indian context, can offer a new interaction frame that departs from the frame of service as servitude.

Not all services offer this kind of recognition though. One of the fastest growing professions in India and the world, security guard, seems to generate a fair amount of humiliation and alienation (insert footnote for Gooptu, Nandini. "Servile Sentinels of the City: Private Security Guards, Organized Informality, and Labour in Interactive Services in Globalized India."International Review of Social History 58.01 (2013): 9-38.)

Regardless, the concept of recognition may help us better understand the dynamics of the service economy, the frustrations and aspirations of service workers, how these new understandings and practices coming with these new jobs shape social interactions, and how they eventually diffuse into the social fabric.

About the Author

Julien Cayla is an ACI Fellow who received his PhD from the University of Colorado (Boulder, United States) where he majored in marketing and minored in cultural anthropology. In his research, Julien Cayla tries to integrate anthropological theories and methodologies to the study of marketing in the global marketplace. His dissertation on the Indian advertising world received several national awards, including the MSI Alden Clayton Award and the Sheth Award. His work has been published in outlets such as the Journal of Consumer Research, the Journal of Marketing, the Journal of International Marketing and the International Marketing Review.