

Everyday Life of Girl Students Living as Paying Guests in Kolkata

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ABSTRACT

A sociological approach to everyday life begins with the assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society. The findings of this research have tried to unmask the connectivity between the two. The basic objective of this research is to find out whether everyday life of girl students living as Paying Guest (PG) inmates in Kolkata enhances their freedom as compared to the life at home. Findings of this study are based on personal narratives and interviews results of 100 PG inmates living in four houses close to Kolkata Medical College. The experience of everyday life of girls in a new environment at a PG reveals that human life is criss-crossed by both social expectations and individual choices. The new social space contributes on the one hand to the creation of self-identities. But an individual as an 'agency' also negotiates with the 'structure' and builds up his/her personality. Notwithstanding such constraints, individual actors can invent and improvise their actions within the structure of their routines. Hence, the habitus both produces and is produced by the social world.

Introduction: Significance of the Study

A sociological approach to everyday life begins with the assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society. It is argued that everyday life can only be understood against the background of the specific institutions that penetrate it and of the overall institution (Berger and Berger 1976: 21). It is equally argued that 'even the most banal externalities of life' are expressions of the wider social and cultural order (Simmel, cited by Wolff, 1950: 413). This research paper basically tries to explore this reciprocity between social and individual aspects of our living based on some field experience of girl college students living as paying guests (henceforth PG) in Kolkata. It is interesting from many points of view to analyse the particular way daily life of girls staying at PG house is informed and shaped by events happening around them. It is normally understood that a PG inmate is an 'individual' away from 'home' who enjoys enough 'freedom' to shape his/her life. But it is equally important for us to note that there is close

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interrelationship between the micro and macro events of day-to-day life of all of us including the Paying Guests. It is because of constant negotiation between the individual and social aspects of living that our life becomes challenging and interesting. The findings of this research would try to unmask the connectivity between the two.

Review of Literature

There is hardly any sociological research conducted on the everyday life of paying guests of both the sexes in India. One of the reasons for absence of any serious research on the theme is that the field is quite new and such experiences are limited to only some urban centres of India. It is also quite difficult to conduct research on qualitative aspects of PG living unless one is an insider like me. There are however stories of people living as paying guests written by novelists. Sarah Waters' fictional novel *The Paying Guests* (2009), for instance, has tried to depict a wife trapped in a miserable marriage and slowly coming to terms with her true sexuality through a male paying guest. Except the similarity of the title of this novel, it has no link with my research objectives. Prachi Gupta (2012) had written a short article on the expected experiences of girls at PG. But it was not based on any field research and reflects the typical image of PG as 'completely alien and liberated place'. Another related novel written by Vinita Gupta and Deepanshu Saini's novel *Girls Hostel- Unspoken Memories* (2014) dealt with the private life of some college girls living in hostels.

Despite absence of research on the field, sociological literature on the nuances of everyday life is plenty. Eminent sociologists like Weber, Simmel, Cooley, Goffman, Burger, Blumer, Mead and the like have written profusely on the different aspects of everyday living and we can certainly make use of their valued opinions and analysis in explaining the daily experiences of girls living in PG.

Research Methodology

This study is basically 'exploratory' in nature as there is hardly any literature available on the issue. Given such a state of condition, I tried to gain familiarity with the issue of my research. The idea was to gain some insights into the everyday life of PG girls. Obviously, my study did not aim to test hypothesis. Rather, I tried to formulate some precise research questions for development of hypothesis by subsequent research. It is argued that exploratory research helps researcher to understand the points of view of actors in the setting, identify worthy research questions, articulate and operationalise variables of interests and allow theory to emerge (Palys 1997: 79). Obviously, the strategy of my research also demanded flexibility, breadth of coverage and

multiple techniques. Conducting an exploratory research, like the one I have picked up, therefore involves certain challenges. Yet, I have opted for such a research as I also enjoyed the advantage of being an insider as PG inmate.

The basic objective of my research was to find out whether everyday life of girl students living in two PG houses in Kolkata enhances their freedom as compared to the life at home. It is true that whenever any 18-20 years of female college student starts living away from her natal home for a larger part of life for the purpose of getting higher education, she starts doing several things on her own, develops friendship with new mates and enters into a new world of reality at the new 'liberated' space. Being a PG inmate myself, I could feel that despite some limited 'control', like restricted entry time and room sharing, the girls are not 'governed' here like those by the parents at home. In one sense, PG life does promote 'free culture' as there is 'no curfew zone' here. Hence, I wanted to know whether such living makes PG inmates autonomous, independent and free. At the same time, my sociological knowledge about human social life influenced me to investigate into the social and structural constraints that inform life of PG inmates.

Keeping these objectives in mind, I formulated the following research questions for my study:

- i) What changes do PG girls experience after shifting from home?
- ii) How do they take decision involving personal and immediate issues in daily life?
- iii) Do they change their preferences, choices and value system by staying at PG for long?
- iv) Do they feel restrictions even in PG life?
- v) Do they try to balance between autonomy and restrictions?
- vi) What lesson about everyday life can be deduced from the experiences of PG girls?

Data for this study are collected through personal interviews of 100 PG inmates living in four houses close to Kolkata Medical College as well as collective of their personal narratives. My sample size remained limited as I wanted to concentrate on the quality of social life of my respondents. Being a PG inmate myself, it was possible for me to gossip and pass extra time with my friends to unmask their narratives and also observe their behaviour. Such triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data allowed me to delve deep into the intricacies of everyday life of these girl students.

Based on my personal experience of PG life, I have devised an interview schedule to collect the views of my respondents on items like their socio-

economic background, their choices and life style at PG as compared to their home. The schedule contained 20 questions most of which were structured. I however had to carry out a Pilot Study to structure the various options of the questions set for the interview schedule. I kept the number of questions limited because PG girls do not have time for any lengthy discussion.

In the study, I have included seven indicators of daily life of PG inmates in order to ascertain their relative level of autonomy and freedom. These are: a) newness of daily activities at PG, b) nature of restrictions or privileges enjoyed on certain essential aspect of daily life, c) consumption of addictive substance (Alcohol/Cigarette), d) decision making, e) personal relations and consultation, f) sources of instructions or advice received, and g) movement. Through these indicators, I believe, I would be able to compare their current everyday life at PG with that of their past experience at home.

The sampling frame I used to choose my respondents was Purposive. I did not randomly draw my respondents because of following reasons: First, I tried to collect the views of most of the PG inmates living in two houses. Second, my topic of research involved several personal and critical questions. Hence, I was not sure whether any and every PG mate would agree to spare time to me. My hunches also came true as some of the PG inmates did not agree to spare time on filthy ground. Finally, I had to rely on my personal network for collection of data as establishment of rapport with unknown or less known PG inmates appeared to be a very difficult job. This is more so as these girls mostly remain busy with studies or personal life and do not have time for attending any researcher like me. Moreover, collection of information related to their personal life and choices was possible only through in-depth interviews and collection of narratives. Hence, I relied on my familiarity and a chain of network of my friends to fulfil my research objectives.

There are however several limitations of my work. Thus, to begin with, the sampling technique I followed is particularly weak from the statistical point of view since 'there is no way to calculate the limits of permissible error... the practical consequence is that the sample varies in unknown ways from the universe' (Goode and Hatt 1981: 230-31). Moreover, a sample size of 100 respondents is not a reliable number for statistical generalisation. I should have studied PG inmates of several PG houses of Kolkata. Often, a few of my respondents tried to conceal their feeling and did not properly answer all my questions. Despite such limitations, I tried to make my research findings reliable and valid in the following way:

First, I tried to conduct the interviews in lonely place in the absence of outsiders. Second, whenever I could feel that my respondent is not telling me the truth, I tried to cross check that information by observing their actions

seriously. Being an 'insider', I had the advantage to reveal a truth from alternative sources. Third, apart from formal interviews, I also carried out informal group discussions with my PG mates on serious issue like whether PG life allows us 'complete' freedom. While doing so, I could collect case history of my respondents to supplement a point with real life story. Fourth, I also tried to observe the behaviour of my respondents as Participant Observer. Such triangulation of methods allowed me the scope to try a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973: 6) of my respondents. Finally, I have used my personal experience as borders of two PG houses during the last two years to illuminate the matter. Such self-reflection, as shown by eminent Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1996), enhances the quality of any findings and analysis.

Considering the problems of conducting research among the busy girl students living at PG, the strategy of field work adopted by me turned out to be quite effective in gaining generalised and critical insights into the everyday life PG girls. On the whole, this research has tried to present a synoptic and holistic view about the processes and issues involved by combining various techniques and methods of research.

Brief Profile of Respondents

Due to relative advantage of Kolkata as a central place in Eastern India for the pursuit of higher education, a huge number of students belonging to both sexes hailing from the different districts of West Bengal as well as from other states come here. Obviously, they either stay at hostels provided by the educational institutions themselves or stay at private PG house or Mess. Interestingly, my experience proves that as compared to the boys, girls prefer to stay at PG because of two reasons: i) PG houses are very close to the educational institutions, and ii) they are comparatively safe and free from 'politics' as compared to the hostels. As a result, in the width and breadth of Kolkata and more particularly close to educational institutions and offices, uncountable numbers of PG houses have come up to cater to the needs of students. Employed persons and professionals also use such facilities. These houses provide both food and lodging to their members on monthly payment basis.

In both the PG houses that I have studied, a total of 60 girl students stay. Initially, they mostly stay at crowded room (4 to 6 girls in one room) if the room is good and secured. But, gradually, the seniors move to single or double seated rooms. Such seniors (3 or more years) constituted 25% of my samples. It should be noted that PG inmates do change their rooms and even houses due to any clash of interest with the PG owner or roommates. We may argue here that PG inmates start giving preferences to their choices as they gain experience and seniority.

So far as the family background of my respondents is concerned (see Figure 1), most of them (84%) come from nuclear family. 64% of my respondents were single girl child of family while 32% had single brother or sister. This shows that my respondents mostly come from small family.

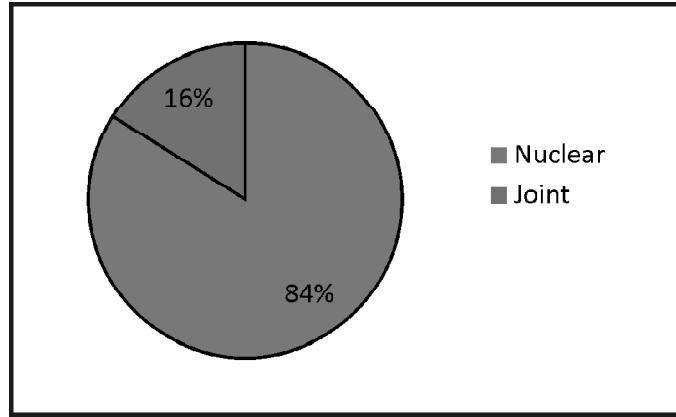


Figure 1: Family Background of PG Girls

Economically, 60% of my respondents come from middle-middle class families having monthly income between Rs. 60 to 80 thousands. Among others, 24% belong to the income category of Rs. 40-60 thousands, while another 16% come comparatively from sound background (Rs. 80,000 +). The middle class background of my respondents is also reflected in the fact that parents of 60% of my respondents are engaged in service or profession while the rest belong to business families.

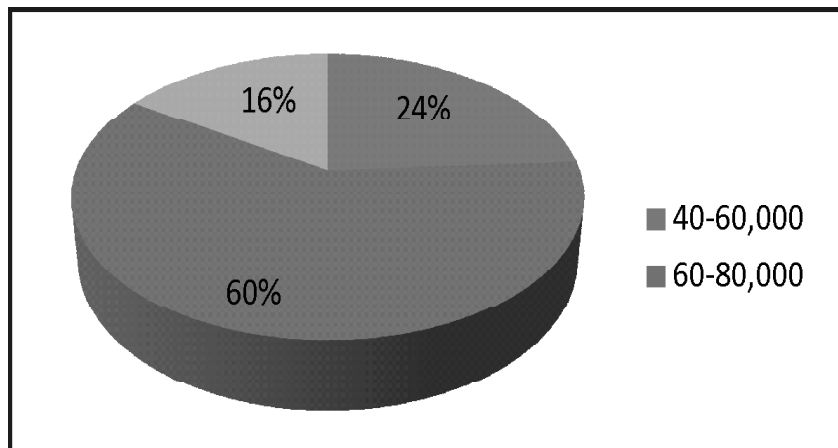


Figure 2: Monthly Family Income of PG Girls

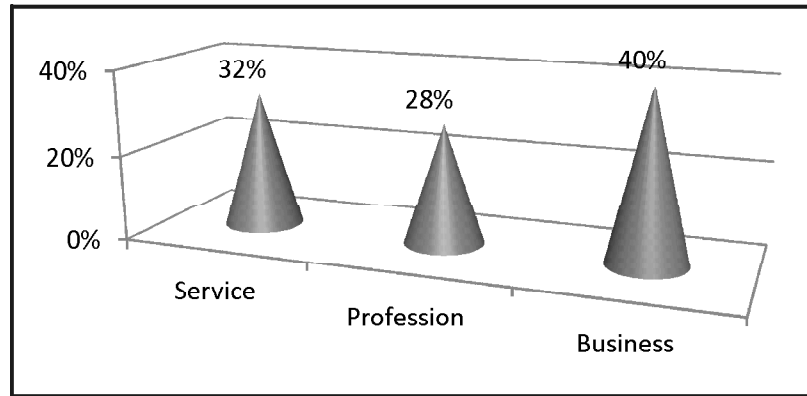


Figure 3: Occupational Background of Parents

Major Findings

a) Nature of Daily Activities at PG

Normally speaking, PG is a makeshift arrangement where the inmates from different background accommodate themselves in a new environment and condition temporarily. Hence, it may be argued that everyday life of a PG remains free from any external or societal control and it is full of routine and mundane activities like brushing teeth, taking a cup of tea/coffee, reading newspaper, bathing, dressing, taking food, sleeping and the like. But, it may be argued that such daily activities are common to most of humans irrespective of residential differentials. In what respect then PG life is different?

It is interesting to note that even though 60% of my respondents take food from PG aunty, the rest have started relying on external sources (home-delivery and roadside eateries) for their lunch and dinner. Those who rely on external sources have complained about poor quality of food as well as lack of food options at PG. Interestingly, such 'rule breakers' (in the eyes of PG aunty) are seniors and have been staying at Kolkata for two or more years. Again, PG rules proscribe use of heaters for cooking or ironing. But, most of PG inmates violate these rules. They however abide by the rule to enter into the PG latest by 9 PM. In fact, majority of my respondents prefer to come back by 7 PM. Hence, none of my respondents attend late night parties. This proves that PG life not only allows freedom, it also restricts choices. I may explain this point with some more data.

Thus, none of my respondents consume alcohol. Four respondents however did acknowledge that they smoke cigarette though their parents are not aware of such consumption. All of them are seniors by age and

experience of PG living. As compared to such data, majority of my male college friends are seen smoking cigarettes. Again, none of my respondents attend any late night party. The reasons stated for not doing so are shown in the figure 4. These findings clearly reflect the way PG life is also controlled by ideological and patriarchal notions like 'good girl', safety of a girl, and 'character' of a girl. This is the reason for which girls dislike late night party and are afraid of telling their parents that they smoke cigarettes. These respondents are free to come back to PG by 9 PM, yet, they prefer not to delay such entry unless otherwise required. Even those who break certain rules at PG, obliges them at other context. Hence, drinking alcohol and smoking cigarette is a taboo for them.

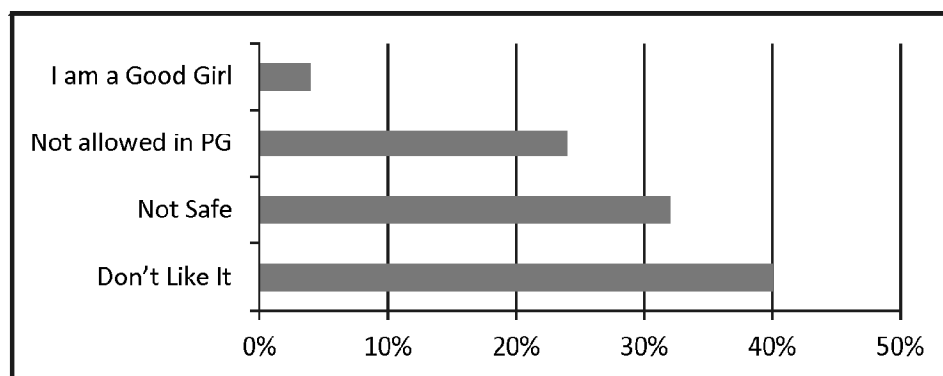


Figure 4: Reasons for Not Attending Late Night Party

b) Scope for Freedom and Autonomy

Just after joining a PG, its inmates start experiencing a new saga of learning, experiencing, and entertaining. In other words, a phase of 're-socialisation' begins for them as they start negotiating and adjusting with other inmates in a friendly manner. As a corollary, PG inmates start taking many instant decisions in daily life on their own. This definitely allows them the choice and space to exercise autonomy and freedom and grow their individuality.

Thus, there is very little surveillance done by the inmates or the landlady over PG mates. Hence, no one ask them to get up early in the morning and study as some inmates are late risers. The inmates also differed widely about when to go to bed. Eating timings also varied depending on class timing and choice. More importantly, students are not compelled to study during a particular hour known to be 'study hour'. They could study a story book, chat with my roommate or other friends or remain busy on mobile phones/ Internet during a 'study hour'. I saw many of my PG mates to go out to

pass evening hours with friends. Even though it is very difficult to go to bed early in a PG or hostel, it is not absolutely impossible. On the whole, it is an 'adult environment' where no one disturbed the personal likes and dislikes of others.

Thus, data stated in Table 1 reveal that there is lesser volume of restrictions imposed on PG life as compared to home. At home, due to pressure build up by parents, relatives and neighbours, restrictions were imposed on serious matters like type of clothing, mixing with boy friend, personal movement, type of food eaten, use of electronic gadgets and Internet. A girl is allowed to express her personal choice in these matters only if that does not challenge the social and cultural expectations of a patriarchal society. But the situation is just opposite at PG. Only in matter related to food, there is some restriction here as boarders are offered the same food by Aunty and personal choices are not entertained.

Table 1
Variation in Restrictions between Home and PG

<i>Type of Restrictions</i>	<i>Restriction in Home</i>			<i>Restriction in PG</i>		
	<i>No</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Heavy</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Heavy</i>
1 Restrictions on clothing	38	57	5	88	12	0
2 Mixing with boy friend	2	28	70	88	12	0
3 Restrictions in movement	24	52	24	100	0	0
4 Sleeping at fixed time	32	52	16	100	0	0
5 Food Restrictions	36	64	0	64	36	0
6 Use of electronic gadgets	68	32	0	92	8	0
7 Unlimited use of Internet	52	24	24	100	0	0

Absence of restrictions at PG should not however be taken as an index of autonomy and freedom. Thus, figure stated in Table 2 reveal that shifting to a new set up not only enhances the scope for personal initiative, it also increases the responsibility of PG girls. Thus, they have to wash and iron cloths, arrange cloths, books, dry food, cosmetics and bedding materials properly, clean utensils, make tea and snacks, go to market to purchase essential goods. At home, they were either not assigned these duties or were given such tasks partially. Home environment therefore offered these girls many privileges. More particularly, they enjoyed the liberty to avoid household chores, did not think about what to cook, when to go to market and from where money would come for such expenses. Again, they not only enjoyed healthy and tasty food at home, guidance and support of family members was always available as and when needed. But this is hardly a case here at PG.

Table 2
Different Daily Activities at PG

<i>Sl. No</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Washing/Cleaning	92
2	Cooking (Tea/Snacks)	100
3	Marketing	100
4	Travelling alone	100
5	Outing with Female Friends	80
6	Outing with Male Friends	24
7	Sleep as and when desired	8

In continuation of data cited in Table 2, Table 3 demonstrates that PG girls face impediment on several aspects of their daily life: taking food, travelling, sleeping and studying. Thus, they restrict themselves in taking any type of food as and when desired. Notion of slimness, beauty and health criteria determine their choice of food to a large extent. For instance, quality and volume of oil used for cooking at PG is a recurrent theme of discussion. Again, they hardly go anywhere as and when desired. This is because travelling and movement in the streets of Kolkata carries risk. Hence, they prefer to move in association with their girl and boy friends particularly at odd hours. Surprisingly, PG life does not allow the inmates complete freedom to sleep as and when desired. This is because, they have to seriously think about their studies and career at this stage of life. Parents do repeatedly remind them about these issues. Only occasionally, therefore, they exercise their option to sleep or study as per personal wish. As against our common expectation, therefore, everyday life at PG is full of challenges and constraints.

Table 3
Types of activities at PG

<i>Types of Activity</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>Some Time</i>	<i>Rarely</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Total</i>
Take any food as and when desired	12	44	36	8	100
Go anywhere as and when desired	16	60	16	8	100
Sleep as per my wish	8	60	32	0	100
Study as per my wish	16	56	16	12	100

c) Growth of Intimacy and Close Relationship

As a corollary, PG inmates have to devise alternative strategy to make their life smooth. Thus, many of them maintain daily contact with family members to seek guidance and advice when needed. Mobile phones and internet have made it possible for them to do so frequently. Apart from parents and family members, they also consult friends particularly in matters involving immediate solution. Girls coming from faraway places like Assam, Jharkhand

and Bihar rely more their personal network to resolve any impending or personal issue.

Take, for instance, the case of Payel (name changed for anonymity), a student of Kolkata Medical College. She comes from Assam and her father is an engineer. She is staying at this PG for the last two years. She has a boy friend who is studying Engineering. Payel remains engrossed in her academic and personal life and by now she has become independent to take personal decisions. She however consults her boy friend and roommates in case of any immediate need and does not consult parents for day-to-day issues.

Only in matters involving big decisions, my respondents consult parents. This is because they do not want to bother their parents or make them tense with a problem that cannot be solved by them. It may be argued here that PG life does allow its inmates the space for growth of friendship beyond the limited primary circle. A girl of 18 or 20 years then starts thinking about her personal choices and preferences. This is the time when she is encircled by critical questions about relationship, body and sex. From such a point of view, PG life does become helpful for development of individuality and personality.

Some of my respondents also feel that they do not normally share their personal problems with parents as it may rather complicate the matter. They also feel that parents would not be able to understand the issue and one cannot just explain everything to them over phone. This initiates a gap with their parents. As a result, PG girls start developing intimacy with room partners and other PG mates for discharging their daily tasks. Informal chats and gossips among the inmates during the leisure time bring them close to each other. Shopping and eating out with them also provide extra energy. Gradually, a sense of belongingness, a sense of 'we' feeling, and a sort of quasi-family develop across the PG mates.

One may, however, argue that the PG mates are in fact 'friends of utility' and there is hardly any lasting impact of such a temporary relationship on the emotion and value pattern of a person. Yet, it is observed that if roommates of a PG house share their life for a considerable period of time, they become emotionally attached to each other. In this sense, the quality of our association with others depends on the duration of such a relation. As Bourdieu (1986) has shown, a *habitus* or a set of internalised dispositions is acquired as the result of long-term occupation of a position in the social world and this govern our behaviour.

c) Social and Structural Constraints

Despite the prevalence of a 'free culture' at PG, there were many social and structural constraints. Thus, PG roomies see to it that their actions do not disturb each other's interests. Over and above, a parental concern about

security of their daughters including their future prospect looms large on the daily activities of PG inmates. Thus, data cited in Table 4 show that parents keep on advising them over phone on matters like security and movement. Parents also keep on telling their daughters to get up early from bed in the morning, study properly, and take food on time. They also express their concern on issues like washing, cleaning, dressing and behaviour. Apart from parents, PG Aunty remains mainly concerned about food timing as she has to complete her task on time. She also advises the girl to behave properly in case of any brawl. Often, roomies and friends also intervene to tell what to do and how to do on certain aspect of life.

Table 4
Does anyone tell you to do things at PG properly?

<i>Person(s) Advising You</i>	<i>Instructions Related to</i>							
	<i>Study Properly</i>	<i>Washing/ cleaning</i>	<i>Food on time</i>	<i>Getting up from Bed</i>	<i>Dress properly</i>	<i>Behave properly</i>	<i>Move carefully</i>	<i>Remain Alert</i>
Parents	80	48	84	84	40	40	88	88
PG Aunty/Uncle	0	8	60	0	0	20	0	0
Room Mate	8	16	16	8	16	16	24	18
Girl Friend	8	0	0	0	8	12	14	12
Boy Friend	0	0	0	0	12	14	15	15
No One	8	8	4	8	8	8	8	8

The gender question also influences PG life including its selection. In fact, the notion of a 'girl's PG' is based on the prevailing notion of residential divisions by sex. One distinct rule of these PG houses is: male persons including family members are not allowed to enter into the rooms of girls. While this has something to do with privacy of girls, the gender question is given importance. The intention to avoid any untoward incidence must also have forced the owner to formulate such a rule. In essence, therefore, a PG also entails control over our body, mind and self.

In addition to the external controls cited above, there are self-imposed controls in negotiating with others. Thus, as a PG inmate, I had to manage or restrict my emotion. I could not tell anything to any PG mate even though we were close. Similarly I expected my friends to follow a standard. In PG culture, there is much formality even within a so-called informal setting. I have carefully noticed that PG members use meaningful symbols to express positive and negative assessment of other's actions/behaviour. More often, these meanings are expressed mainly through facial expressions and gestures. In other words, there is limit to deviate from the standard practice even within a PG environment. And surprisingly, these limits are most often self-imposed.

This proves that even so-called mundane and routine life at PG is actually constrained by structural conditions. The social and cultural forces prevalent in the society at large remain present in even a micro interactive situation though its form and content changes with time and space.

One particular area where the control over body and mind is prominent among the PG girls is their daily movement. Thus, apparently, PG girls are free to go to any place. But, in reality they do not do so because of their concern for security, career and money. As an individual, each of them neither can make their parents annoyed about their actions nor can infringe on the expectations of their kins, friends and others. In this sense, they are influenced by the 'generalised other' (Mead 1934) that tries to socialise about what is good or bad for them in a particular context. We may read the data cited in Table 5 and 6 in this context.

Table 5
How frequently do you go alone to Market/Shopping Mall/Cinema Hall

<i>Timing</i>	<i>Market</i>	<i>Shopping Mall</i>	<i>Cinema Hall</i>
Always	8	8	0
Sometimes	32	8	0
Never	60	84	100

Table 6
If you never go alone to Market/Shopping Mall/Cinema Hall, who accompanies you?

<i>Accompanying Person</i>	<i>Market</i>	<i>Shopping Mall</i>	<i>Cinema Hall</i>
PG Mate	40	56	60
Boy Friend	12	12	12
Girl Friends	8	8	28
Parents	0	8	0

These tables confirm that most of the PG girls do not always go to market alone and only in urgency they take the 'risk'. So far as the question regarding going to cinema hall is concerned, they never go there alone and in most cases PG mates accompany them. Friends also accompany them to places like shopping mall and cinema hall. These responses clearly speak about the fact that girls prefer to move at least with one PG mate or friends to places outside PG. Such restrictions again bring into question the gender issues that I have discussed earlier.

Conclusion

The experience of everyday life of girls in a new environment as a Paying Guest reveals that human life is criss-crossed by both social expectations and individual choices. Following Giddens (2006), it may be argued that an

individual as an 'agency' negotiates with the 'structure' and builds up his/her personality. The PG as a social space, therefore, contributes to the creation of self-identities as well. Blumer (1969) had, therefore, argued that society is always in the process of being created through the interpretations and definitions of actors in situations. Following Mead (1934), it can be argued that the responses of the self as an object to itself come from the point of view of others to whom one interacts. The self is, thus, both individual and social in character. It is worth arguing, following Bourdieu (1986), that cultural assets stored in our body and mind guide our behaviour. In this sense, individual actors can invent and improvise their actions within the structure of their routines. Hence, the *habitus* both produces and is produced by the social world. It is, therefore, not possible to study our everyday life without referring to the instantaneous interplay between the individual and societal factors. This makes the study of everyday life, as depicted through the experience of girls staying at PG in Kolkata, significant, interesting and challenging too.

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