CALL CENTRES IN INDIA:

A GLOBALIZATION BOON OR BANE?

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Abstract:

The article traces the coming and growth of Indian call centre industry in the contemporary era of globalization. The major argument posed is that whether the growth of this industry should be seen as a boon for the Indian service industry and its young urban workforce or it has become bane for its employees who are often called as 'Cyber Coolies' owing to its stressful working conditions with a limited career growth.

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Globalization & Coming of Call Centers:

Technological innovations in the last two decades have led to a restructuring and reorganization of work. The emergence of information and technology-driven economies has expanded the service sector and redefined notions of time, space, distance, production, consumption and boundaries on the global stage. It has changed the social, economic, cultural and political environment and the nature of global interaction. Services once considered 'non-tradable' across international borders as they involve person-to-person contact are now taken for granted. New communications technologies and investment in telecommunications infrastructure have made the long-distance transfer of information realizable and inexpensive. Along with ongoing Taylorization of work processes, these changes have made possible the rapid globalization of services such that many services previously produced only locally are outsourced 'offshored. "Off shoring or Outsourcing" refers to the movement of a business process done at a company in one country to the same or another company in another. It describes the relocation of business process from one country to another in form of production, manufacturing of the work to India, China, Malaysia and Phillipines. These services include call centers, software development, financial services and medical transcriptions (Abraham 2008)

The emergence of call centre culture started with the ideology of outsourcing and offshoring of business by America. The developed countries like USA in order to have an economic dominance over the developing nations especially of Asian countries like India, China started establishing their business centers especially in field of electronics and computers first in early seventies. In order to get high quality workers with wages lower than US workers, the major US electronic companies began to set up affiliates in Asia (Hong Kong, Singapore) for labour intensive works in 1970-1981. This set up the trend of off shoring and outsourcing of the services or services. The prime areas of off shoring related to IT research and development, Programming, software testing and maintenance, Manufacturing of semiconductors, computers and computer component, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), IT enabled services which include insurance claim processing, medical billing, accounting, bookkeeping, medical transcription, finance and reading X rays and Call Centers. In later 1990's the trend of off shoring of IT related services shifted from US, UK to developing countries of India, China, and Philippines.

Thus US MNCs established a new trend of global working environment which was made possible due to the new trend globalization encompassing the flow of products, services, labor, finance, information, and ideas moving across national borders. This wave was catching its hold upon developing nations of India especially during the early 90's. The Policy of economic liberalization in 1991 under Narsamiha Rao Government made urban India a major hub of various foreign multinational companies bringing various foreign and private investments in various areas of industry. To name a few, in the television industry, the early 1990's witnessed the phenomenal use of private foreign and regional television networks providing stiff competition to Doordarshan metro stations in urban areas[1]. In the mid 1990's mobile phones connections rapidly replaced landline connections allowing urban India to access the internet. Within a short span of time India became a major hub of information technology services (IT) and communication technologies under the mushrooming of globalization. There was upsurge in globalization of trade with coming of Multi National Companies especially in countries of India and China. The formation of WTO in 1995 enhanced the ideology of global free trade giving impetus to the rise of big business multinational companies. Some of these nineteenth century multinationals were motor technology and computer based industries which became important multinationals of the globe. General Electric (1895), Hewlett Packard (1939) in IBM (1911), Microsoft (1975) & Dell (1984) are the dominant giants in fields of computer industry. All of these companies had their origin in United States of America[2].

The rise of the Indian software services and IT enabled services industries can be seen as a direct outcome of these developments in the global economy, as companies located in the advanced industrial economies are outsourcing and off shoring an increasingly large proportion and range of their activities to places where skilled human resources are more easily available and at lower cost. The process of internationalization of the production, distribution and management of goods and services accelerated rapidly in the 1990s (Castells 1996:116), coinciding with the period when India's IT industry took off. The outsourcing of software

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[1] McMillin, D C (2001): 'Localising the Global: Television and Hybrid Programming in India', *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 4*(1), 45-68. – (2003): 'Television, Gender, and Labour in the Global City', *Journal of Communication, 53*(3), 496-5

[2] Marcia Robinson. , & Ravi Kalakota . (2004). *Offshore Otsourcing : The Next Wave , Outsourcing Business Models , ROI & Best practices* (pp.3-150. _____ Mivarpress

development projects by American companies to Indian services providers, the setting up of offshore software development centers by multinationals in India, and the burgeoning of international call centers and other such back office operations, are examples of this wider phenomenon. The off shoring of software services began in India with the dispatch of computer professionals by an Indian company to work in a country like US at the client's premises for a fixed period of time. Later the trend of doing part of the work at the client's site and the rest of it in India followed. The logic was that an American company rather calling an Indian IT professional to US started relocating its work in India. The IT professional was suppose to work upon the assignments and projects of company in India and then sending them back via Internet. Thus a company was able to do its cost cutting in terms of high American salary and bearing a cost of Indian in America.

This was followed by call centers, and then IT enabled services like accounting and the like. From medical transcription, Indian companies with setting up of new trend of business organizations such as BPO. The success of BPO industries, have produced a new global image of India as a rising economic power. It has also created the figures of the Indian 'techie' and call centre agent as low cost (but 'high quality') technical workers who represent the main threat to American and European IT-related jobs in the current decade. Moreover, for many political and business leaders in India, IT (Information technology) has come to be regarded as a model for India's future economic growth and development, based on the policies of liberalisation and globalization. However, while much has been written about the history, growth and structure of India's IT industry, there have been few critical analyses of its significance or implications for India's overall social and economic development. Moreover, there have been few sociological studies of work in these outsourcing industries.

Defining Call Centre:

A Call Centre is an example of how modern information technology rendered a possibility for creating new and improved forms of communication between customers and companies broadly defined, a call centre is any communications platform from which firms deliver services to customers via, remote, real time contact. Today this typically means live agents operating telephones and delivering a defined set of services(The Yankee Group, 1997, cited in Eriksson,

1999:1) A BPO or a call centre is a specialized office where employees (also known as agents or customer service representatives) remotely provide information, deliver services, or conduct sales, using some combination of integrated telephone and information technologies, typically with an aim to enhancing customer service while reducing organizational costs. Examples of services provided by call centers are: customer care, web sales/marketing, billing services, database marketing, accounting, transaction document management, transcription, telesales/telemarketing, benefits administration, tax processing, and HR hiring /administration and biotech research[3].   A call centre operates on the basis of CTI technology (Computer telephony integration) with based on a software technology for facilitating functions as customer, product, and sales information retrieval. CTI may be defined as "'a loose but complicated attachments of interlocking technologies', a way of combining the two streams of information – voice and data – through open, standards-based systems" The CTI technology in a call centre, consists of devices such as PCs(Personal computer), scanners and printers connected by a local area network (LAN). This client-server architecture allows sharing of files and databases and for mixing and matching machines from different vendors depending on the preferred graphical user interface (GUI). Customers may reach call centers through a variety of media: email, web pages, phone, fax or VoIP [4](voice over internet protocol)

Working Environment in a Call Centre:

A call centre is open round the clock as calls keep coming from different parts of the world. There are two types of calls – 'inbound calling' and 'outbound calling'. Inbound calling is for customer support, where the customer calls in for queries. Outbound calling is related to telesales, where the operators themselves contact the clients. There are two kinds of call centers operating in India, namely, 'process based' and 'client based'. Process-based call centers are those that service the clients of their own parent company. They are at lesser risk of closing down as clients are assured on a regular basis. Client-based call centre, on the other hand, has to look for their own clients. Companies in this category, in this category are at higher risk, as they are dependent on business conditions. There are two types of job requirements in a call centre:

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[3] National Association of Software and Service Companies (2003): *The IT Industry in India* (Strategic Review 2003), NASSCOM, New Delhi

[4] Sharp, D (2003): *Call Centre Operation: Design, Operation and Maintenance*,Digital Press, New York

operational and technical. The employees in the operational area cater to the needs of the clients and those in the technical area assist and support the people working in the operational area.

A call centre may be engaged in many different processes in various shifts. The shift system coincides with the timings of the country for whose processes they are working. The employees have to answer a phone call within a set number of rings. Failure to do so it will result in an error. The team leaders and managers monitor the calls of the employees and if there are errors, marks are deducted from the employee's performance. If the calls are taken perfectly according to schedule, they get incentives. Generally, the clients would be from the US, Europe and Australia. To make them feel comfortable the employees are given training on pronunciation and accent. Thus Ramesh becomes Robert, Jaspreet becomes Janet and Babita becomes Betty. Employees in 'call centres' work on a five-day schedule. This is done to ensure rest and relaxation to help the normal functioning of the human body after continuously working in night shifts. Every employee gets in addition to the weekly off 2-3 days of casual leave per month. This casual leave can be carried forward up to six months. This means that an employee cannot stretch her leave to more than 18 days at a time. If the casual leave is not availed in a month, extra points are added to the employee's performance and incentives are given. In addition, if an employee works on a public holiday positive points are added to her performance and incentives are given. If the performance of an employee is rated as A++ in a month he/she can earn up to Rs 3,000 extra. The call centres follow a carrot-and-stick approach to motivate their employees. They penalise employees for taking leave without prior permission. The permission has to be taken in advance before the duty shift begins, via email. The working conditions which pervade call centres have largely emerged from the combination of existing elements of technology in a unique form to fashion a highly monitored environment in which workers are organised into 'teams', as structural elements of an organisation, yet toil away largely alone, often despite the close physical proximity of their similarly isolated colleagues.

Indian Call Centers (BPOSs) Pro Development Approach:

BPO'S have immensely contributed to India's growing Economy& Service Sector Industry

Like tsunami, every revolution starts slowly and then accelerates. BPO firms in India that started off in the early 1990s are today on the threshold of creating a revolution that touches not only

600,000 people directly employed by them, but millions of others who are associated with them. NASSCOMS latest study on a decade of working of BPO's in India "Impact of IT-BPO Industry: A Decade in Review" (NASSCOM 2010) states the success of BPO industry in India over the last 20 years. The IT-BPO industry has evolved from being a niche sector with a limited number of companies to one of the largest contributors to the Indian economy in general and the services sector in particular. The industry has been on a constant high growth path and the revenues have grown over 15 times from 1998 to 2009. The Call Centre industry in India has notched up revenues in excess of US $ 7 billion in 2007 (BPO) and is expected to grow 15-16 percent in (2010-11).The immense contribution of the industry can be judged from the impact it has had on the country's GDP, foreign exchange earnings, contribution to the exchequer and employment generation. This industry has also been instrumental in fuelling the growth of other sectors by employee spending and by attracting investments. The high growth rate of IT-BPO industry has helped the industry in steadily increasing its contribution to India's GDP by five times over 1998-2009 to reach 6.0 per cent.

The industry has also played an important role in the growth of the Indian services sector. Between 2002 and 2009, the contribution of the IT-BPO industry to the Services segment of GDP witnessed maximum incremental growth of 10 per cent, where contribution by other segments either declined or remained almost fl at. As a result, while share of other components of GDP (Agriculture and Industry) declined over 2002-2009, share of Services increased from 56.3 per cent to 62.6 per cent.

Attractive Work Environment & Benefits motivates youngsters to seek employment in BPO's:

Latest reports by NASSCOM shows the rapid growth in IT-BPO industry creating a large number of jobs for the expanding employable population. The employment provided by the industry increased more than 8 times over FY2000-2009 and reached 2.2 million in FY2009. Apart from influencing the life of people directly employed within the industry, the IT-BPO industry impacts the lives of around 8 million indirect employees. as one of the largest employers in the organised private sector, it provides direct livelihood to 2.2 million people.(NASSCOM 2010).

Not only they provided gainful employment to millions, they have also made millionaires of many young entrepreneurs who have set up business closely associated with BPO industry like recruitment consultancies, travel agencies, cafeteria services and training centers. Thus Indian government's successive policy of economic reform in 1990s characterized by the mantra of LPG—(Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization), compliance with the World Trade Organization (WTO) have been regarded as a prominent factors attributed to coming of BPOs in India.

The establishment of an IT-BPO unit provides employment to numerous people involved in ancillary (subordinate) activities such as catering, security, transportation and house keeping. A large segment of the indirect employees belong to the rural areas/small towns of India.(NASSCOM 2010)

The attractive work environment and benefits offered by the BPO sector have motivated many young adults to seek employment in this sector (Sharma, 2004). For example, the majority of BPOs provide provident fund, gratuity, group medi claim insurance schemes (for employees as well as their spouse, non-earning parents and children), personal accident insurance scheme, subsidized food and transportation. Also provided by many BPOs are performance based incentives, flexi-time, flexible salary benefits, paid days off, maternity leave, and an employee stock option plan. Recreational facilities are also available in BPOs; these include pool tables, chess tables and coffee bars, and some even have well equipped gyms, personal trainers and many organise regular get together and other cultural programs for staff. Some even provide company leased (shared) accommodation for out-station employees, corporate credit card facilities, cellular phones/laptops, medical check-ups, loans and educational benefits. (Sharma, 2004).

Women in Indian Call Centres:

The BPO industry has played a pivotal role in bridging the gender divide in the Indian workforce by ensuring no bias while offering positions to women candidates. With one of the highest gender ratios for the workforce, the industry has witnessed an increase in the number of women professionals over the years, which is estimated to reach 31 per cent by FY 2009. In addition, about one-fifth of the female employees in the IT-BPO industry are at managerial level or above

indicating the numerous opportunities provided to them by this industry.. Companies have encouraged women participation through various initiatives which take care of the special needs of the female employees. These initiatives include special 'pick-and-drop' cab facilities, formation of anti-sexual harassment committees, and provision of maternity leaves during pregnancy, and creation of exclusive web portals for females.(NASSCOM 2010)

(Shelly Tara , P. Vigneswara Illavarasan 2009) in their study upon women call center employees of Jaipur explains the trend of increasing number of women working in call centers due to the availability of parental support. A similar perspective on aspects of employment of women in call centers in India is held by (Singh Preeti, Pandey Anu 2005) based on a survey of 100 women employees of Delhi. The study examines the recent phenomenon of women working in night shifts as well as the impact of call center employment on women's health, family life and decision making powers. The study finds a direct and adverse effect of night shift employment on the health of women but on other hand it states about the greater acceptance of such 'non- traditional' jobs by families across a larger segment of society. Therefore Call Centers have become the career option of choice for many young educated Indians, for whom it offers salaries unknown in other sectors as well as an opportunity to live and work outside of India.

Banes of BPO culture:

Thus on one side BPO's have brought new forms of employment and rising income level, but on the darker side it has raised questions about its impact on structures of social inequality. The choice, freedom and money that BPO offer to their employees has a darker side having serious implications, both for the workforce and their employers.

High stress:

The biggest demerit of call centre organization is that it accounts for high stressful working conditions which have an adverse effect on employee's health. Management scholars like Paul Bain (2000), Fernie & Metcalf (1998), Peaucelle (2000) have identified call centers as stressful places of work which strictly operate on Taylors Principle of Scientific Management. It

is the computer based technology which accounts for stressful working conditions amongst call centre employees. 'Computers, which are meant to help employees to do the work more efficiently are regarded as extremely merciless monitoring tools' (Peaucelle 2000, p. 461) 'Conditions prevailing in this situation resemble those of Taylorian workshops, where work rates are close to the maximum that workers can manage. There are very few breaks in between different tasks and the deadlines create a high level of tension. Operators consequently respond to these hard working conditions. (Peaucelle 2000: 461). Spending all day on the phone dealing with people one after another, day after day, is difficult. Doing it under constant pressure to keep call volumes up, with no time between calls to "recover from an awkward call or from 'customer rejection'" is even more difficult. The high stressful working conditions in call centers have been the chief reason for high attrition rates. Various surveys upon Indian call centre industry indicate the fact that , push attrition is found as a significant feature. The separation from the firms is mostly due to the expiry of contractual term, increased stress and lack of career prospects within the firm. Growing push attrition rates clearly indicate the employment insecurities associated with short-term employment contracts, demanding/stressful nature of the work and lack of bright career paths in the sector. On the one hand, workers are being thrown out regularly; due to the firms' strive for retaining only the most productive hands and to get rid of long-term commitments towards employees. Alongside, the nature of work is so stressful and demanding that the agents themselves opt to quit. Further to this, several others quit the job after an initial trial, as the chances of vertical mobility are bleak, given the pyramid structure of manpower organisation.(Ramesh 2004)

The long working hours at night disturb the natural body rhythm. Unearthly hours and over-exertion take a heavy toll in terms of health (both mental and physical) and job performance. The results are then two-fold – increased healthcare costs on the one hand and frustrations at the workplace, on the other hand. Odd working times usually leads to disturbances in personal and social life. There are problems related to maintaining friendships, keeping in touch with relatives, accomplishing household duties and finding time for sound family relations. Employees are not even entitled for national/ religious holidays, as the firms work with clients' calendar.30 The call centre employees have reported several symptoms of mental and physical ill health such as nervousness, chronic fatigue, body ache, insomnia, nausea, anxiety, restlessness, irritability and even depression. Some of them pointed out that working in shift even causes psychoneurotic

disturbances such as depressions coupled with t he frequent occurrence of gastrointestinal problems, with digestive problems such as constipation, peptic ulcer, indigestion, diarrhea, excessive gas formation, abdominal pain and heart burn. It was also noticed that workers do develop poor eating habits, overeating, smoking, excessive drinking of coffee and so on to cope up with the psychological and physical stress.(Ramesh 2004)
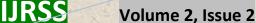
Identity Crisis:

The second major crisis of the call centre work is related to identity crisis of its workers. The experience of working in a global call centre, talking to foreign customers eight hours a day, together with the way in which call centre work is constructed in the media and popular imagination, has a profound effect on the subjectivity of workers – even those who do not remain for long in the job (Upadhyay Carol, 2009). In a call centre the Customer Care/ Sales Executive (CSE) are given a pseudo / fictitious names so as to keep their identity hidden from the customer to whom they are calling in a foreign land (U.S. / U.K). The employee is suppose to speak in the British or American accent so as to make the customers in U.S or U.K. feel that they are whites and are calling from their country. Workers also undergo training in western accents and popular culture and are discouraged from disclosing their geographical location on the phone. The rationale for these practices, according to managers, is that they allow agents to serve the customer better. Initially, workers were trained in specifically American and British accents, but the preference is increasingly toward a 'global' accent as it allows workers to be shifted around to serve various markets without additional training (Mirchandani, 2004). Those who work on voice such processes, are forced to live as Indian by day and westerner after sundown" Thus the workers appear to lead a double life – an "authentic", Indian, daytime life, and a phoney, western, night-time one. In case the identity of call centre employee is come to be recognized by the customers in U.K. or U.S. the CSE is subjected to racial abuse and vulgar remarks. Apart from the false accent and identity, what probably has a more profound impact on workers is the emotional labour that they are required to perform, which can be extremely stressful. As noted above, while emotional labour and associated stress are a normal part of such service jobs, in Indian call centres the emotional stress of the work is augmented by the fact that they face racial and other types of abuse from customers due to anti-outsourcing sentiment, especially in the U.S.

Studies explain the fact that the attraction of higher salary/perks in BPOs is longer acts as a major motivating factor for seeking employment when it acts as contrast with the education and opportunity costs of the employees. As majority of them are educated in expensive institutions, the average cost of their education far exceeds that of an ordinary Indian graduate. Thus, these agents represent a group of expensively educated cheap labour. The long-term opportunity costs of BPO work could be still higher. Most of these youngsters are in fact burning out their formative years as 'cyber coolies', the toll of which is very high. Entering into a well-paid employment soon after the completion of graduation act as a deterrent to continue studies. Further to this, BPO work does not provide any scope for skill upgradation. Most workers in the sector are doing low-end work, which were handled by erstwhile computer operators and receptionists. Rather than picking up accents and certain communication skills, the skill upgradation is minimal.

It enabled service sector and call centers are perceived have offered a great employment opportunities to women but major threat pertains to the security of women employees. The rise in number of cases of molestation and rape in big metros of Delhi & Gurgaon are making women reluctant to join this industry. The stressful working conditions and late night working hours are acting as a major deterrent for them for getting married and having a family life.

Bpo Industry and Reproduction of Social Inequalities:

Various studies on call centers reveal that the kinds of employment opportunities provided by the industry tend to build on existing class divisions rather than absorbing a broader cross section of the population into the technical-professional workforce. Because the industry requires workers who possess a certain kind of cultural capital as well as technical skills, it tends to draw primarily from the educated urban middle classes, and within these, especially from those who have attended elite educational institutions. Given the nature of caste/class structures and the urban/rural divide in India, this means that the vast majority of lower caste, working class, and rural people cannot be absorbed by the call centre industry This process of exclusion is not deliberately designed or pursued by the call centre industry, yet it needs to be recognised that the use of supposedly neutral, job-related criteria for selection (the 'merit only' position) operates as an exclusionary mechanism because the cultural and social capital required by BPO call center

companies is not evenly distributed throughout society. The BPO industry insists that it must be left free to recruit only the best workers if it is to maintain its competitive edge in the global market, and for this reason it has consistently opposed the idea of job reservations in the private sector. However, some companies and industry spokespersons have acknowledged that the private sector must bear some responsibility for social justice and for creating greater opportunities for a wider cross-section of the population, and the idea of evolving a voluntary affirmative action programme has found favour in some quarters. But barring only one or two, till date most companies have not taken substantial steps in this direction. This is a central issue for debate and policy formulation, either by the state or as a voluntary initiative by industry.

Conclusion:

Call centers in India have come to stay owing to India's policy of economic liberalization of 90's and its large availability of English speaking manpower. This new middle class of global proletariat takes pride in being part of India's IT sector which has contributed immensely towards country's mushrooming economy. On one hand where this blooming call centre industry has acted as a boon to India's economic growth and its youngsters with innumerable lucrative employment opportunities at an early age the darker side of this globalization process can't be ignored. Work conditions associated with more electronic monitoring and control of workers; intense pressure on workers to meet daily targets and efficiency goals; stress and burnout from working atypically long hours in night shifts; dealing with irate customers and experiencing cultural confusion from adopting western names in customer interaction are the major demerits of the call centre job . A large percent of the workers are prone to severe health problems and behavioral disorders. Lack of upward mobility within the job and the monotony of the work have been camouflaged by a management strategy of using feel-good, sound-good job titles.Thus a major paradox posed by this coming of call centers in India is that at on one side it is seen as a boon for the large youth manpower of India but it is seen as a cultural bane for this urban workforce. Moreover the benefits of this development are limited to the urban class of Indian population who has a good English speaking background. The latest reports by NASSCOM (2010) claims to have call centers in rural India in near future but that is still long way to go. A strong Union of workers is required in this industry who feels the need to form associations to

express their grievances and aspirations. Unions can play a role in building and aligning with non-union associations so as to enable workers to gradually accumulate the confidence for unionization. International laws need to be developed to regulate subcontracting and ensure accountability for labor standards across the globe.

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336

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337