Biehl Final Paper

For the Department of Economics

Consumer Culture, Changing Family Dynamics and an Affinity to the West: Call Center Employment in Bangalore, India.

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Introduction and Literature Review

Buttressed on its humble beginnings during India's economic liberalization of the early nineties, India's IT enabled services (ITES) has flourished. The initiation of extensive, inexpensive, and reliable wireless technology has helped make private enterprise in the US and Western Europe transfer a significant part of their telephone service operations to India and China (Davies, 2004; Kobayashi-Hillary, 2004). In fact, the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry was entirely a product of globalization since domestic call center industry did not exist at the time when international call centers were inchoate (Sitt, 1997). "The industry has witnessed a meteoric growth hovering around 37 percent in the past few years; it has evolved from offering basic voice-based services to high-end knowledge-based solutions and has had an unparalleled impact on India's economic and social growth" (Som Mittal, President of NASSCOM).

Indian BPO industry can grow five-fold over the next five years to clock revenues up to USD 28-30 billion by 2012. "[It] will be a USD 6 billion industry by 2012, up from USD 1.8 billion in 2008" (NASSCOM estimates). Today about 80 percent of the call center industry in India caters to Western markets (Holman et al., 2007). This growth has been made possible due to the availability of low cost and high quality English-speaking labor, which are the key ingredients for running call centers (Dossani & Kenney, 2003). The English-speaking call center laborers provide a myriad of voice-based process services including inbound customer services, support, and transactions- such as insurance claims, and outbound telemarketing- such as sales, collection, and credit approvals.

As a result of employment in call centers, a new class of employees is developing in India. They are from urban areas, usually in their twenties, evenly distributed between men and women, and have salaries ranging from $4000-$6000 (Pathak, 2004; Naughton, 2006). Ninety percent of them are college graduates or postgraduates (Naughton, 2006). Most of them do not remain in the business for a long time, as call centers experience an employee turnover at a rate of 75-100 percent every year (Mann et al., 2004; Scheiber, 2004). This new class is "rapturously embracing Western lifestyles and consumerist values" to such an extent that "their aspirations, though not clearly defined, cluster around an idea of the West as the locus of modernity" (Nadeem, 2009). This idea of the West stems from the training that each call center employee goes through for five weeks. The sixfold training includes: donning Western aliases, phonetic and accent neutralization, regurgitating 'scripted Taylorism' (Mirchandani, 2004: 359), adjusting to odd hours, understanding and emulating the culture, and learning to have a dogged approach despite customer abuse.

The employees are assigned aliases, specifically Western names, since authentic Indian names are hard for Western clients to pronounce and the aliases also conceal the true ethnic and regional identity of the employees. The intent of phonetic and accent neutralization is to rid the trainees' Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) and establish American or British accent through a six week long crash course. This process of acculturation culminates with the employees speaking with a neutralized accent by correctly enunciating the phonemes with only a few slippages. When talking to the clients, there is an expectation that the employees, with their accents neutralized and their Western aliases, be well-prepared to dictate words from a scripted dialogue.

This is what Mirchandani (2004:359) calls 'scripted Taylorism,' written to observe the "pedantic company decree and overweening management" (Nadeem, 2009).

Due to the five to ten hour difference in time zones between India, Western Europe, and the United States, the employees are usually expected to work from late evening to early morning (Joseph, 2002), shifts which are aptly called 'graveyard shifts' by the employees. The employees are also expected to be conversant with day-to-day American issues to the extent that they are able to carry on casual conversations with clients (Mirchandani, 2004; Shome, 2006). Despite adopting a new name, a different accent, hiding their nationality, and being up-to-date with the customer's popular culture, customers are still dissatisfied with the services of the Indian employees (McPhate, 2005). The employees complained about being subjected to tirades and abuses. Although they were trained or were in the process of being trained- which was the case for most of the employees- they had to have equanimity during such calls and not falter in maintaining their decorum.

The reason for such training is to facilitate communication between two dissimilar parties, namely Western clientele and Indian employees, who are distinct culturally, regionally, and socioeconomically. Though such training increases efficiency of the company, it has caused among the employees a loss of identity and detachment from society, cultural corruption, consumerist behavior, substance abuse, and fierce competition. These conditions have consequential effects on the quality of life of call center employees. "In the heterogeneity of Indian society, developing a definition of quality of life is complicated" (Mitra, 2008). Some researchers have taken "emotional exhaustion" as a key factor in defining the quality of life of call center employees (Deery, et al., 2002). In Indian society, media reports address the

emotional aspect, which involves detachment from "family, loss of indigenous culture, respect, and the influence of the West on Indian culture" (Mitra, 2008). In this project, I have based the definition of quality of life on these constructs. In order to systematically measure and understand the impacts of call centers, I have taken change in family dynamics, change in consumption patterns, and affinity towards the West as the conceptual framework for understanding the consequences of call center employment.

To better understand the components of the conceptual framework, it is important to delve into the fact that India is a country filled with contrasts. Such contrasts include love versus arranged marriage, family ties versus independence or autonomy, and instant versus delayed gratification. They also include consumerist versus ascetic values, profligateness versus frugality, drive to climb the corporate ladder versus drive to stable career paths, and shortcuts versus classic work ethics. With the advent of call centers, employees are tending towards consumerism due to their affinity (inherent or ingrained by society) towards the West, and this is changing family dynamics, some for better and others for worse. Some believe that the impact of call center employment is both empowering and disempowering, homogenizing and particularizing tendencies all built into it and individuals who 'glocalize' will prosper (Friedman, 2006, 478-488). Others believe that call center employment neither heralds an era of unprecedented personal freedom and a belated modernity nor does it signify a breakdown of the 'traditional' Indian family, but causes "Indian morality play where the pleasure principle clashes with the demands of custom and obligation" (Nadeem, 2009). In this article I will discuss the aforementioned tendencies, affinity, and changes in greater depth. Applying theoretical and fieldwork approaches this article will investigate the effects of call center employment on the

cultural and socioeconomic status of the employees. This article also includes a cross cultural study to analyze change in the employees' consumption patterns of goods and the unprecedented growth of call center industry in Bangalore, India.

Research Methods

This article draws its data from a series of semi-structured, casual interviews with fifty employees in an inbound (catering to customer service) call center and from infrastructure and pricing observations in Bangalore during the summer of 2009. In order to capture a wide range of diversity, I tried selecting employees who were disparate in their ethnic and religious background. This diversity provides a broader and more balanced view of a call center employment's effect on the social structure than would a partisan study restricted to a singular ethnicity or religion. I tried selecting interviewees who have had some degree of experience in communicating with English speaking customers.

The sample size was of fifty. The majority of the subjects were in their twenties and single with the gender ratio of 80:20 favoring men. Out of the ten women I interviewed, three were married and in their late twenties and while the rest were single and in their early to mid twenties. Men were overrepresented in the company I surveyed. Employees worked two four to five hour shifts with one fifteen minute break in between. Twenty five of them were on day shifts, ending at twelve a.m., while the rest had the 'graveyard shifts' starting at twelve a.m. I used snowball sampling to arrange additional interviews. The questionnaire given to the interviewees included questions which required:

- Explanation of the acculturation training process used by the call center to prepare trainees for work;

- Elaboration of the effects of working in the call center in terms of change in consumption patterns, change in family dynamics, and an affinity towards the West;

- Extrapolation specific ways to improve the acculturation process and working conditions.

I collected data from interviewees' parents in order to have a chronological account of the effect of the employment on family life and behavior. I also interviewed five professors from local colleges in order to outline Bangalore's intellectual community's opinion on effects of call center employment. I surveyed the surrounding infrastructure and price listings of various services such as food, drinks, and movies in order to estimate how thrifty the interviewees were.

The Acculturation Process

The assignment of aliases blankets the true ethnic and regional identity of the employees and decreases lag time in communicating Indian names, which are relatively alien to the Western world. Accent neutralization is also an integral part of the process. The employees were taught to lose the local inflection, Mother Tongue Influence in their accents, and thus have a 'global' neutral or 'nation-less' accent, which is as much oriented towards conflict aversion as it is towards increasing efficiency of the company. Several employees informed me that companies discouraged them from disclosing their geographical location over the phone to muffle the political backlash in the West about cheap labor outsourcing in India. However, the true intent of the assignment of aliases and accent neutralization as documented by the company was to merely facilitate clarity of expression and effortless communication.

One interviewee, Ajay, desperately complained, "The six week training was not good enough for me to be able to produce good results, so I am earning much less than my friends who speak better than me". This variation in employee treatment by the company not only created

fierce competition but also great tension among the employees in their twenties, some of whom vented their stress through substance abuse and excessive expenditure which bears witness to the trend of young employees moving from frugal to consumerist behavior. "We smoke cigarettes in order to release tension," replied Ajay when I asked him why everyone working in a call center smokes cigarettes. Thus I observed a growing trend of young employees giving way to instant gratification instead of maintaining the traditional culture of delayed gratification.

On the other hand, some employees like Rohit, who went through the training process, believed that such a competition would hone his skills for the better. He did not smoke or spend money excessively. Instead, he was saving his money for a software company he wanted to open in the future. He planned to create an animated series based on his call center employment experiences and also to develop a software which codes local traditional paintings so that these paintings are given more exposure to the rest of the world. This act of incorporating the positive aspects of globalization with local ideas is called 'glocalization,' which is one creative way that local Indian communities should deal with the community decaying aspects of globalization (Friedman, 2006, 478-488). At the present time when wealth and consumption are seen as a measure of success, Rohit had retained the discipline and frugality that existed in the civil service-oriented Nehruvian state-led modernization. Rohit's classic work ethic contrasted well with the shortcut-seeking behavior of many other workers.

In addition to the accent neutralization, employees were also expected to be well-informed about 'what is hot' in the West, and frequent showings of popular movies and sitcoms are not unusual. "We watched *FRIENDS*, and *American Pie* when we were in training," admitted Rahul, "and that was the best part of the job so far." In addition to being aware of the popular

culture of the West, the employees were also expected to say certain things which had been prewritten in order to maintain decorum and service. "I wouldn't mind being nice when I am talking to the clients. I mean I have to be nice if I want to keep the job, but using power words such as 'Fantastic!' 'Great to be of service to you Sir!' and so on at five in the morning after working seven hours straight can be a little irritating sometimes," mentioned Ajay.

Such scripted dialogues did not provide incentive for the employees to work harder but rather contributed to the 'emotional exhaustion' (Deery, et al., 2002) that the employees felt due to the 'bonded labour' (Nadeem, 2009). Employees were monitored with a high level of surveillance. The timing of the calls was documented and lag times between calls were highly discouraged. One of the incentives for employees to graduate into a higher income strata was to decrease the length of the calls and take as many calls as possible while retaining the accent, alias, and quality. This treatment by the company created intense competition, which as confessed my thirty interviewees led to more substance abuse. "It's a vicious cycle and the only way to break it is by improving your self," said Ajay.

Despite the depressing nature of the dialogue, points on quality of service were given or deducted in accordance with the delivery of the speeches. The managers believed that the tone of voice of employees was governed by mood, so if employees were angry, the tone carried some of that emotion through the telephone. Hence, employees were trained to believe that the customers could hear their smiles and sense their moods. Therefore, it was mandatory to enthusiastically communicate with the customer no matter how irate the employee (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006).

Despite their best efforts, employees reported that customers were abusive as soon as they realized that the service provider was an Indian (Mitra, 2008). Some employees told me, "I

have had to listen to racial slurs and tirades explaining how to do my job, while all I am trying to do is help them." Some even had to face the discouraging situation of callers hanging up. Even though some of the employees were patriotically stirred or disappointed, they were expected to set aside their feelings and tend to the next call with equal and undivided attention. The close surveillance of their work provided enough incentive for them to acquiesce to such managerial expectations. To some, this added to the agony of the job which was manifested in their smoking of cigarettes during the fifteen minute break while others took it frivolously.

Some reports have characterized call center jobs as "dead-end, with low complexity, repetition, and tediousness" (Knights and McCabe 1998; Taylor and Bain 1999). One interview attested to this fact. "You feel a little taken aback when you hear such things, but you have to keep that aside and put full focus on the job ahead" said Rita, a cheerful and intelligent twenty-four-year old college-grad Bengali. She confessed that she never took the call center job seriously. She even narrated a few humorous anecdotes, one of which included an older man who exclaimed, "I did not want to talk to some Indian, but hey for an Indian you have a funny accent." She said that such incidents were actually the perks of the job, which she deems trivial. She even went to the extent of saying, "one day it'll be outsourced to a country full of programmed monkeys." Upon my asking why she was working at the call center, she replied, "The money is better than anywhere else I could have gotten." She also said that she will take the GMAT and apply for an MBA program after she saves up enough money.

The last step of the acculturation process involves working at night to accommodate the five-to ten hour time difference between India, Western Europe, and the United States. Many employees declared that the toughest part of this process was adjusting the body to the drastic

time change for sleeping and eating patterns. The employees in the company that I worked with were assigned certain shifts according to their job descriptions. Ajay, who was an inbound service employee, had recently secured the night shift starting at 10p.m. and ending at 6a.m. He said that the first week was torturous. He said he had lost appetite and changes in his sleeping patterns precluded opportunities to spend quality time with family and friends. Even after several weeks it was hard for him to recalibrate his internal biological clock to that of the call center. He said he never got seven to eight hours of undisturbed sleep after working the night shifts, which were taking a toll on his health.

There were other employees who were working overtime during the weekend to make up for the firing of other employees when the call center management was restructuring. They also informed me that one of the employees left the company because the tension was too much for him to handle. The majority of the employees complained about unpaid overtime and favoritism. In order to show loyalty towards and interest in their jobs, the employees were expected to work overtime but were not paid for it. This technique, shared one employee, helps the management see the commitment and enthusiasm shown by the employees. Job commitment is a wage determining factor. Employees who worked the unpaid overtime hours were treated favorably with higher wages. However, some reports show the existence of managerial favoritism based on bogus reasoning (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006). In spite of these issues, collective resistance has been lacking and union formation has been non existent (Nadeem, 2009). Employees have realized that accountability and quality of work will create progress in the industry.

A Possible Breakdown of the Fabric of the Indian Family?

In a land where opposing tendencies of tradition and modernity are in balanced suspension, the advent of call centers in Bangalore has stirred that balance. Important issues of marriage and independence directly involve family and community in addition to the quality of living of the workers. Call center work was deemed dubious because of the combination of "graveyard shifts, excessive consumption and partying despite their comparatively high salaries" (Nadeem, 2009). The media also played a big hand in the spread of such news to the point that women who worked in a call center found it hard to find spouses. Ramaa, who is in her early thirties, had been working in the call center for two years but was unable to find a spouse until she met Raghav, another employee in the call center. Their amorous relationship was secretive, but when the parents found out they insisted that the couple must marry. Thus call center employment has given greater mobility to women. However, Ramaa exclaims that she was considered unmarriageable by the community in which she lived merely because of the fact that she worked in a call center. Now that she has found her love, she is willing to relax her connections with her community. "Arranged marriage has a lot of baggage: money, property, social status, etc but love marriage does not, it's much simpler that way."

With the advent of outsourcing, importance has shifted from family, prestige, caste, and class towards personal achievements, skills, and drive. Individualism is on the forefront and to some, is synonymous with financial independence and the resulting familial independence. "In a community where social bonding arises most elementally from a sense of mutual dependence" (Sennett, 1998:139), such independence is claimed to be a catalyst of decadence by the traditionalists. This claim is supported by reports in which workers have admitted having casual

affairs (Nelson, 2006) and extra-marital flings, which were attested to by my findings from the interviews. I was repeatedly told that the work is great for earning "disposable money" and "having some fun on the side." One particular incident as narrated to me included a young female employee having six overpriced drinks at one of the many bars, coming home completely inebriated, and then facing half-asleep conservative parents. This incident could be taken as a playful and immature act of recreation that came from experiencing a premature independence from family and community. Indian society, though not yet ready to cope with such changes, is sluggishly accepting this new independence.

There have been positive aspects of female empowerment as a direct result of call center employment. Three of the women I interviewed were housewives who said that the call center job was very well suited for them. In a patriarchal society like India, housewives are compelled to take care of their households. However, with their employment in the call center, the three women had found something meaningful to do with their spare time. Even though they were sometimes assigned the 'graveyard shifts,' their husbands were considerate and accommodated their time schedule accordingly. The husbands also picked up and dropped off the women at work despite access to the free and convenient transportation service provided by the call center. I believe it was genuine love rather than paranoia that made the husbands drive their spouses to work. Interestingly, the three women did not smoke, drink, or party and were focused at work. They wore modern jeans with a conservative *kameez*. This epitomizes female empowerment which comes from call center employment. Women retain the traditional aspects of Indian life yet also incorporate positive aspects of the West such as more freedom in choice of wardrobe and maintaining a strong work ethic.

On the other hand, the other single women and men I interviewed had very relaxed opinions about smoking, drinking and partying. They told me that such activities provided them with instant gratification and pleasure even though they conflicted with the established customs of society. Most of them mistook their freedom to indulge in such activities with personal independence. Yet they remained financially dependent on their families, which were their immediate connection to society. They were happy emulating celebrity lifestyles and pursuing activities providing instant gratification, yet they were shortsighted about planning for the future.

Such behavior has made Indian society envision call center employment as a 'pseudo-vocation' where there is a constant struggle between temptation and self- restraint, purity and contamination, marital freedom and societal constraints. Nadeem has eloquently mentioned that this struggle is between the "pleasure principle (kama) and the demands of custom and obligation through duty (dharma)" (Nadeem, 2009). This struggle is slowly and eventually dissipating as exemplified by the conservative parents' letting young females work in spite of their late night partying behavior, the acceptance of Ramaa's affair with lower caste Raghav, and the freedom of married female employees to wear jeans instead of *salwar*.

The Mystical West and the Consumer Culture

Bangalore has seen a facelift in its infrastructure over the past two decades. There are high-rise buildings within cobbled-stoned avenues and a metro system is currently under construction. Around the call center, hoarding boards rampantly showcase designer clothes and watches. There are eateries at every step. Multiple shopping malls, recreational lounges, coffee shops, and restaurants are clustered together to improve the experience of shoppers. Through my

infrastructure survey and interview I found out that the number of socializing spots has increased with the advent of call centers. Beer gardens, which provide customers with comfortable bean bags, soft rock music, affordable beer such as *Kingfisher,* and finger food, were especially popular among workers. Call center workers came to these restaurants to take a break from their work, which most of them described as hectic. The manager of one of the many competing beer gardens nearby the call center informed me:

> *Pecos* certainly gets a lot of customers from call centers and the IT sector nearby. A lot of them have become regular customers and some of them even have tabs here. They spend a lot of time here especially during weekends. Some days they order pitcher after pitcher of beer and are all loudly cracking jokes… A pitcher of *Kingfisher* for example used to be 250 rupees a couple of years ago, now I serve two for that price. We have lowered prices for all the goods that our guests demand in high quantity and that we are competing to sell with other restaurants. We try to keep prices for food and soft drinks reasonable but what matters the most is the quality of service, because we are building customer trust. Finding what the customer needs and serving it at an affordable price with a smile on our faces is what I think is best.

As I interviewed more workers, I found a trend of what they perceived as enjoyable – spending an excessive amount of money on drinks and fast food, throwing extravagant parties, getting expensive haircuts, and wearing designer clothes and imported watches. Most of the workers saved a minimal amount of their salaries; some spent it all. As watching hockey is replaced by bowling, *tandoori dhabas* and other local restaurants get replaced by fast food joints and beer gardens, local tea shops by *Café Coffee Day, Caffé Pascucci,* and other such fancy coffee houses, the idea of consumption has changed drastically. This change stems from a redefinition of progress whose indicators now include wealth and consumption. Conspicuous

consumption of Western goods has now become a means of exhibiting a high standard of living and creating a social status among the bulging middle class of India.

In addition to conspicuous consumption, there is an intense drive among young middle class workers to distinguish themselves as successful in their careers. There are two integral incentives for this drive. First is the realization of potentially numerous opportunities associated with the influx of large foreign direct investment on outsourcing and, more relevantly, with the establishment of call centers. Second is the fierce competition that comes from a huge population of people interested in call center employment. Those who hone their skills in specific areas will achieve success while those who get sidetracked by the temptations of consumption will either stagnate in their jobs or will be fired. One survival tactic is what Friedman calls being "untouchable," digging into one's own creativity to polish job skills to the optimum and thereby attaining assurance of long-term employability (Friedman, 2006, 278-307). Thus, with the advent of globalization through call centers in India, "status distinctions based on caste, creed, and prestige are being replaced by those based on income, consumption, wealth, occupation, and skills" (Beteille, 1996).

The Acculturation Process and a Feeling of Displacement

With the acculturation process, the employees have unflinchingly embraced Western culture. The appropriation of Western culture has made employees construct a vicarious idea of the West. Outwardly, workers have Western names, accents, cultural orientation, and overall identities, yet their idea of the West is disjointed from the real West. While workers are taught to mimic American lifestyle, "there is a slippage between the information they are presented about

Americans and the ways in which they interpret this information" (Mirchandani, 2004: 361).

Such a disjointed and vicarious idea of the West provides multiple fallacies about the West and

precipitates conspicuous consumption, which may or may not lead to happiness.

Call center employees spend half of each work day outside in real India and half within

the framework of a drastically different identity. Living such a dual life has produced a sense of

identity loss and detachment. The construction of a Western identity has a lot of room for

creativity. During their time as their assigned fictional Western identities, the employees

converse with Western callers some of whom have whimsical financial behavior. Interactions

with financially irresponsible Western callers have some telling effect on the employees. Such

emulation of financial behavior during their time in the real world adds to the dual life of the

employees. Thus, some workers informed me that they keep their perspective of the world intact

by abandoning their real identities while they are working with the fictional identities and then

abandoning their fictional identity while they are in the real world. Some workers are able to

strike a balance between the two possibilities (Mitra, 2008).

Some of the Western callers use their credit cards irresponsibly and fail to make the

minimum monthly payments. Some have very low risk aversion and participate in dangerously

risky financial speculations. When the workers are exposed to such irresponsible financial

behavior, it reciprocates in their own lives. I was informed by a call center worker that he had

experienced considerably greater ease in dealing with his own financial transactions since he

started working for a credit card company in the United States. He became much more

comfortable with carrying large debts. He told me that he was much more comfortable spending

money excessively on credit in retail shops and beer gardens such as *Pecos* compared to before

he worked in the call center.

Many workers complained about losing time to socialize with their families and

communities while adjusting to the fictional identity at work. Differing expectations at work

from managers and at home from family and society members had taken a toll on their

behavioral patterns. Detachment from family and community mixed with the preconceived

negative aspects of call center employment resulted in disputes with families and community

members for some employees, which significantly disrupted the workers' reputations. For

example, this disruption caused some employees such as Ramaa to be perceived unmarriageable.

Another example of losing indigenous culture includes working according to the Western

calendar and no longer celebrating major fortnight-long religiously significant festivals such as

Dashera and *Divali*. Such working schedules created a sense of cultural displacement among

many employees.

The Positive Aspects and Workers' Suggestion for Improvement

Workers admitted that there were many positive aspects to call center work, one of which

included the acculturation process itself. The process exposed the workers to a new and universal

accent, culture, and ideas, which increased their awareness of international issues. The process

has also taught them to maintain equanimity and curb emotions for the benefit of customers, thus

fostering habits of unselfish service. Helping customers allowed employees to develop both their

conversational skills and analytical and cognitive skills. These universally acceptable

communicative and reasoning skills are vital for workers who aspire to get more prestigious jobs

outside of outsourcing. These facts gave the workers great satisfaction with their jobs.

On a day to day basis, managers expected workers to improve the quality as well as

quantity of their services. Managers also expected workers to be regular, punctual, and efficient.

This kind of rigorous work, the employees admitted, improved their sense of accountability,

respect for customers, and work ethics. Such improvements were reinforced by the call center's

promotion policy. The policy was partly based on merit and quality of work so that those who

exhibited the best and the most efficient performances earned promotions. The management's

emphasis on high quality performance encouraged workers to strive towards providing quality

over-the-phone services.

Call center employment has also greatly improved the lives of the employees. Their

relatively high incomes have given them a myriad of opportunities for improvement. Through

parent interviews and surveys I found out that overall consumption of goods and services and

savings have increased, with which they have obtained services such as better quality education,

housing and sanitation, transportation, and quality food. With the advent of call centers, many of

the conveniences of the West are now readily available in Bangalore such as cheap, reliable

internet services and international telephone services. Call center employment has become a

launch pad for many positive economic opportunities.

Workers also admitted that call centers have brought with them a surge of improvement

in infrastructure, public services, and private enterprises, which have made their lives better.

With growing traffic in Bangalore, primarily due to the workers' commute to and from

employment areas, a metro system is under construction. The system will connect all the major

parts of the city, making travels within the city more convenient and faster. Such improvements

in physical infrastructure have positively influenced the employees. For the development of

Bangalore, one worker gave credit solely to globalization. However, workers were eager to give

suggestions which would improve their work conditions. These included more relaxed rules on

punctuality and regularity as well as better incentives such as bonuses during festive seasons,

paid overtimes, insurance benefits, and job security.

Conclusion

Built on Western ideas such as work efficiency, exposure to liberal thoughts and

promotion of consumer culture, call centers have pushed the conflict between the employees'

temptations and self-restraint to the limits. In some cases, temptation has won over with affinity

towards consumerism, and tendencies towards shortcuts instead of strong work ethics, and

instant instead of delayed gratification. The employment has also acculturated, homogenized,

and sensitized some employees to levels where they experience displacement from family and

community. Due to tendencies towards marriage based on love, and premature financial

independence, family ties are also pushed to the limit.

The study results also show that call center employment through its acculturation process

has helped usher in a redefinition of progress, the development of a warped view of Western

culture, a sense of displacement, and a loss of indigenous culture. Previous studies vary in their

conclusions regarding the nature of call centers, which include calling them an "electronic

sweatshop to twentieth century panopticons", to a job with "challenge, interest, skill variety, and

a clear recognition of the value of frontline personnel" (Das et. al., 2008). However, based on the

work presented in this paper, I conclude that the positive outcomes of the employment outweigh

the negative outcomes.

Positive outcomes include exposure to Western ideas, improvement of conversational,

reasoning and analytical skills, development of a sense of accountability, respect for customers, a

work ethic, massive improvement of physical infrastructure, and an overall increase in the

standard of living. Such exposure to Western culture has made family members more accepting

of changes, including inter-caste love affairs, such as the one between Ramaa and Raghav,

employment of housewives, and immature mistakes of the young women pursuing

independence. Employees such as Rohit with easy access to wireless technology are now able to

blend their local creative ideas and strong work ethic to "glocalize." For other employees, such

as Rita call center employment has simply helped them with their educational plans.

Employees who embrace potential opportunities and resist the temptations that come with

these opportunities reap the greatest benefits from call center employment. I agree with

Friedman's idea of "untouchability" and "glocalization," since self-improvement and creativity

need to be encouraged. Those who capitalize on their own strengths and creativity to become

"untouchable" will improve their job security and employability. The skills that the employees

develop during the acculturation process help them attain such improvements and employability.

I disagree with Nadeem's idea of globalization in India as merely a struggle between *kama* and

dharma. I think that the *kama*, the pleasure principle, can be defeated in the struggle as long as

consumerism is curbed on an individual basis and priority is put on the *dharma*, the duty of self-

improvement. Thus, I believe that the call center employees can enhance their lives by

channeling their focus from conspicuous consumerism towards self-improvement and creativity.

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Appendix:

Individual Survey

- Name:

- Age:

- Work specific and company/ vertical (inbound/ outbound). What exactly do you do on a day-to-day basis: Telemarketing? Tech Support? Customer Care?

- Monthly Personal Income in Rs (before and after employment at the call center):

- Monthly Personal Savings in Rs (before and after employment at the call center):

- On what do you spend most of your money? Give a detailed summary.

- Number of hours worked per week (before and after employment at the call center):

- Living with parents or husband or wife?
  ___Yes   ___No

- Total number of dependent family members:

- Stress level at the call center job (0-10). Explain.

  Are you:
- Getting enough sleep?

- Eating healthy food?

- Having health issues or any adjustment problems?

- Spending enough quality time with family members?

- Who does the house chores for you? Mom/wife/servant?

- How well do you like your job (0-10)? Elaborate.

- Previous job specific and company:

- How well did you like that job (0-10)? Elaborate.

- How are you treated at your job by your manager? (0-10)

- Is there any sexism, racism or any other form of discrimination due to caste, creed?

- Are you expected to be punctual and regular?

- How are you promoted- by your customer satisfaction survey? Is promotion merit-based?

- Are you offered any kind of monetary incentive? Like Dashera, Tyohar, Idd, Holi bonuses? What about overtime? Are you expected to do overtime? And are you paid for it?

- Do you resort to cigarettes, coffee, fast food? Why? (To release stress temporarily?)

- How well do you like your life now compared to your life with the previous job (0-10)? How has your employment at the call center affected your life?
  ___Positively   ___Negatively ___Neutral? Elaborate.

- Reason for joining the call center:

- Do you think the company you are working for is all powerful?

- Do you think your job is disposable? Is there a possibility that you can be fired any day?

- Do you fear being fired? Do you have other job prospects in other call centers?

- What is your plan in the future? Do you plan on working at the current call center and strive to be in the managerial level or join college or start your own company, etc?

- Is call center employment decaying the cultural identity of India? Elaborate with either choice.
  ___Yes   ___No

- Does accent neutralization, American aliases, working for a MNC, etc make you less of an Indian and more of an American?

- Is there a generation gap?

- How has the call center employment affected the people and the culture of Bangalore? Do you think it has improved the living standard of the people? If so, how?

- How about the living standard of your own family? Has it improved? If so, how?

- What does the future of India hold with the current trend of call center employment--culturally and socioeconomically?

Parents Survey

- Do you think your sons/daughters' employment at the call center or IT sector has improved the living standard of the family? If so, how?

- Do you think you the employment is decaying the generation by providing them with disposable income? And do you think consumer culture is a good thing for India? Culturally?

- Do you think your son/daughter's life is better off now than before his/her employment?

- Do you think your son/daughter should be studying to be a doctor, engineer, lawyer or any of the traditional work rather than doing his/her current job?

Home Survey

- Explain type of diet (number of times meat is included in the diet per week) before and after employment at the call center. Has the food become better in standard or more luxurious or healthier?

- Do you or any one of your family members now own a car, jeep or a motorbike because of a direct result of your employment:

- Housing condition (the area of the bedrooms in square feet) before and after employment at the call center. Have you moved into a bigger, better and more expensive apartment, townhouse or a house built because of a direct result of your employment? Is it more centrally located in Bangalore? Or have you moved to the outskirts, which still is very expensive?

- Sanitary conditions before and after employment at the call center. Has it improved? Do you feel like you are more cleanliness/health conscious after your employment? Has your health improved?

- Quality of education before and after employment at the call center. Do you and your younger siblings or any other dependent family member now go to better colleges/ schools? Do you think your job is giving you educational opportunities that you wouldn't have had otherwise?

- Availability of health services received (number of times the family gets routine health check ups per year, number of vaccine shots taken that year) before and after

employment at the call center. Do you and your family members have regular health check ups? Have your and your family's health improved since your employment at the call center because of more frequent visits to the hospital/ clinics?

- The amount of electricity and water consumed per month (before and after employment at the call center) Does your family consume more electricity and water now that you are employed in a call center compared to when you were not? Include the monthly expenditure on electricity and water (in USD) before and after your employment:

- Amount of leisure before and after employment at the call center:

  o Number of times per week you eat out in restaurants & total money spent in USD:

  o Go to the nearby shopping malls & money spent in USD:

  o Watch Bollywood films in theaters & money spent in USD:

- Do you think call center employment is decadent culturally and economically? What do you think are its cultural and socioeconomic implications/effects? Elaborate.