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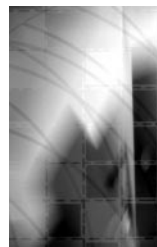
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## ‘India calling to the far away towns’: the call centre labour process and globalization

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### **ABSTRACT**

In recent years prominent companies have migrated call centre services to India provoking much-publicized fears for the future of UK employment. This article challenges the widely-held assumption that offshoring voice services is a seamless undertaking, principally through an investigation of the Indian call centre labour process. This enquiry is informed initially by an analysis of the political-economic factors driving offshoring and shaping the forms of work organization to have emerged in India. A critical review of literature on call centre work organization provides a conceptual framework, through which Indian developments are analysed. Data comes from fieldwork conducted in India and a complete audit of the Scottish industry, through which UK trends can be evaluated. We conclude that the Indian industry reproduces in exaggerated and culturally-distinctive forms, a labour process that has proved problematical for employers and employees alike in the UK and elsewhere.

### **KEY WORDS**

call centres / globalization / India / labour process / offshoring

## **Introduction**

In recent years the overseas migration of call centre services has generated widespread media coverage, as a string of prominent UK-based companies (e.g. Prudential, Norwich Union, British Telecom, Lloyds-TSB and Abbey

National) have relocated operations to India. To many, this process of offshoring, to use the term that increasingly entered business parlance in the United States in the 1990s (Huws and Flecker, 2004: 4), will ravage call centre employment in the developed countries. For example, one UK MP predicted that 'there would not be a call centre in Scotland in five years' (Brian Donoghue, *Herald* 14 March 2003). This common-sense perception that massive cost savings will be delivered in India, that call centres can be readily relocated and that offshoring will devastate the service sector, just as manufacturing disappeared *en masse* to the Far East, resonates with the arguments of the 'hyperglobalists' (Held et al., 1999). The essence of this perspective, that the contemporary 'global economy is genuinely borderless' and 'that information, capital and innovation flow all over the world at top speed' in search of lower costs (Ohmae, 1995), seems to apply to call centre offshoring. After all, the information and communication technologies, integral to the call centre's functioning, can connect customers in real time to remote servicing centres. Surely call centres exemplify Castells' informationalism (2000), which, in the context of a networked, globalized economy, replaces the 'space of places' with the 'space of flows', and represents the 'death of distance' (Cairncross, 1997).

A vital component of this paradigm of inexorable offshoring is the substitutability of labour in the so-called developing world for that in the advanced industrial countries. For UK offshorers the ease with which work organization can be transplanted to India, and the particular qualities of that country's labour force, are seen as central to the success of remote servicing. A succinct illustration of the widely-held conviction that call centre migration is a seamless process is to be found in the words of the CEO of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (HSBC), who lauded the virtues of Indian workers, at the moment when his company embarked upon its first major wave of offshoring.

They're quicker at answering the phones, highly numerate and keen to come to work every day... Staff are hugely enthusiastic. A lot have degrees. I wouldn't say in all cases the performance of the UK is inferior. However, the quality of work overseas is exceptionally high. (Whitson, *Financial Times*, 10 August 2002)

This article challenges the assumption that the offshoring of voice services from the UK is unproblematic and questions its theoretical underpinning, principally through an investigation of the Indian call centre labour process. This enquiry is informed by an analysis of the political-economic factors which have driven the relocation of call centre workflows and shaped the forms of work organization that have emerged in India. Following this essential contextualization we consider transnational similarities and differences in the labour process, taking full account of Indian-specific characteristics and influences. A necessary point of departure is a critical review of the recent literature on call centre work organization and the labour process, from which key themes and issues provide a conceptual framework for our study of Indian developments.

## Call centre work organization and the labour process: a critical review

It is now widely acknowledged that, despite similarities and continuities, the call centre can be distinguished from other forms of service and clerical work, and that the labour process is *the* feature which marks the call centre out as different. This sense of distinctiveness remains a powerful theme in the literature, notwithstanding (unsuccessful) attempts to portray call centres, at least in terms of workers experiences, as unexceptional (Holman, 2004: 238). It is also well established that the call centre genus is composed of various sub-species. For some, differentiation in type, work organization and HR policy is greatly dependent on firms' market segmentation strategies. Batt and Moynihan (2002) identify three models; the Taylorized mass-production, professional services, and hybrid mass-customization models. Similarly, Kinnie et al. (2000) have contrasted repetitive, tightly-controlled, 'transactional' work with 'relational' customer interaction where employee discretion and variation predominate. Others see the integration of computer and telephonic technologies, principally the Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) system, as a common defining characteristic, although call centres, or their workflows, can be distinguished by differences in volume and value, which reflect managerial prioritization of quantity or quality (Bain et al., 2002; Taylor and Bain, 2001). Houlihan (2002) has argued convincingly that such differentiation that does exist consists of variations of a low-discretion, high-commitment regime.

Though precise formulations vary these authors are expressing the widely recognized contradiction imbricating call centre work: that it is infused with two logics, simultaneously the need to be cost-efficient and the requirement to be customer-oriented (Korczyński, 2002). However, this common understanding that differentiation exists masks critical differences of interpretation, centred largely on the degree of emphasis placed on one or other of these logics. On the one hand, the legacy endures of an optimistic perspective on interactive service work (Frenkel et al., 1999) which emphasizes the customer-oriented logic. These authors see analytical skills and knowledge processing as central activities of ever-growing complexity in front-line work and call centre agents increasingly resemble creative, empowered, knowledge workers, given 'expanded levels of discretion' (Frenkel et al., 1999: 69). In this version, customer participation is decisive, generating variable responses and placing strict limits on the degree of standardization. Frequently, the concept of the 'triangular relationship' between customer, employee and management is employed, and is seen to render restrictive control strategies redundant. Thus, the intangible quality of customer interaction inhibits 'management's ability to measure outputs' (Frenkel et al., 1999: 139).

Emphasizing the cost-reduction logic, the case against this virtuous account of relational, customized work is convincing. While acknowledging heterogeneity, there is broad agreement that Taylorized, 'production-line call centres proliferate' (Bain et al., 2002: 184; Batt and Moynihan, 2002: 14; Houlihan,

2002: 98; Taylor and Bain, 2001: 48; Thompson et al., 2004: 148). Evidence of extensive control mechanisms is compelling, whether through Callaghan and Thompson's (2001) insightful application of Edwards' (1979) perspective, or analyses of far-reaching monitoring, scripting, output measurement and qualitative assessments of operators' performance (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Given these significant differences of emphasis, it will be instructive to see how the tensions between the customer-oriented and cost-efficient logics manifest themselves in the Indian context.

Arguably the weakness of optimistic versions is rooted in a failure to locate call centres within the wider political economy, a criticism consistent with Thompson's (2003) observation that a focus on the workplace alone cannot reveal the most important drivers of organizational change. At the highest level of abstraction there is a disregard for the circuits of capital (Kelly, 1985) and the ways in which call centres – or more accurately their workers – provide important functions in terms of creating, or realizing, value in relation to the products and services, tangible or intangible, being delivered (Huws, 1999). The origins and early growth of the call centre were neither the product of corporate desire to improve customer service per se, nor a response to customers' wishes. Rhetoric apart, improved customer satisfaction was always a post hoc justification, following the key impetus of massive cost reduction consequent upon the centralization of previously dispersed customer service and sales operations. Ultimately, the interests of customers were, and remain, subordinated to the imperatives of capital accumulation and profit maximization. This does not deny the importance companies may place on service quality, satisfaction and retention, particularly for high-value customers, but to recognize that the customer–management–agent 'triangle' is not equilateral. Customer service is not driven by some autonomous organizational logic, but by the overriding requirement that it delivers profitable outcomes, a factor leading employers to privilege quantitative imperatives and economies of scale (Bain et al., 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 1999).

As early studies of the call centre phenomenon by economic geographers (e.g. Richardson and Marshall, 1996) demonstrated, there was always a spatial dimension to achieving these related objectives of cost minimization and profit maximization. Call centres, crucially, involved the *physical* relocation of customer contact channels. Studies demonstrated that proximity to (cheaper) skilled labour supplies, advanced telecommunications connectivity, low cost property availability, and regional development policy and incentives, were key factors producing regional clusters (e.g. Richardson and Belt, 2001). Contrary to deterministic predictions that call centres would become 'footloose', because they embodied 'distance shrinking' technologies, the extent of geographical dispersal remained limited. Overwhelmingly, call centres were located in 'home base' countries, with transnational operations situated within the major regions of the developed economies, particularly North America and Western Europe. Only relatively recently did the prospect of the call centre becoming a genuinely globalized phenomenon, located in the developing world

but serving customers in the developed world, become a reality. To what extent, then, do corporate decisions to 'offshore' represent an extension of the process of spatial relocation, which produced in lower-cost regions of the UK, identifiable clusters of call centres, in which routinized workflows have tended to dominate?

In what ways do Indian employers attempt to resolve the perpetual tension between quantitative and qualitative imperatives, which generates labour management difficulties and affects service quality? One central challenge involves sustaining the commitment of employees, ensuring that they are always 'smiling down the phone', performing emotional labour of consistently high quality within this technologically-driven, high-volume, low-cost labour process. Recruitment, selection and training are key practices, where greater importance is often attached to positive attitudinal and communication skills, and controlling feelings towards the customer, than to technical competencies or product knowledge (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). Clearly, linguistic and cultural difference in India will create additional dimensions to this managerial problematic.

Many labour management problems are rooted in the distinctive character of the call centre labour process. The long-recognized problem of high attrition is in large part a consequence of work that is repetitive and dominated by short cycle times where call throughput is prioritized. Lack of control, extensive monitoring, the prevalence of targets and the brevity and infrequency of breaks further contribute to work being experienced by many as pressurized and frequently stressful, often leading to emotional exhaustion and withdrawal (Deery et al., 2002) and to sickness absence and ill-health, particularly where built environment problems exacerbate the effects of poor job design (Taylor et al., 2003). Temporal flexibility and extended working hours to meet peaks in customer demand may add to work pressures. Hyman et al. (2003) have revealed the tangible and intangible forms taken by work-related incursions into domestic life. Consequently, it might be asked how the quotidian experiences of Indian agents differ from those of their UK counterparts.

Finally, it is recognized that the distinctive labour process can contribute to the generation of resistances. For example, prescribed modes of verbal communication and the emotional content of customer interaction provide rich possibilities for subversion (Thompson et al., 2004: 145) and humour (Taylor and Bain, 2003a). Research into trade unionism demonstrates the extent of recognition (Bain and Taylor, 2002) and organizing possibilities (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Heery et al., 2000; Taylor and Bain, 2001, 2003c). Individually and collectively, and in formal and informal ways, call centres are very much contested terrain. Can it be assumed that Indians, in their supposed eagerness to embrace remunerative employment, will eagerly accept the realities of call centre work, eschewing the oppositional attitudes and practices prevalent in the UK and elsewhere?

## Methods and sources

Indian evidence comes from several sources. In January–February and June 2003 the authors undertook fieldwork in Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. Access to seven call centres was facilitated by the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM). All call centres were third-party operations, but varied in company size (from 50–2000+ employees), establishment size (50–400 employees) and in the sectors and markets served. Potential case study organizations derived from our request to Nasscom that they should be representative of Indian call centre operations. Prior to final selection we evaluated company and establishment profiles as presented in Nasscom's (2002b) Directory.

Extended semi-structured interviews with senior management were based upon schedules of questions covering necessary contextual factors including company history and structure, infrastructure and connectivity, the relationship between call centre and back-office work, and the factors driving, facilitating and inhibiting company and industry growth. However, our central concerns were with the nature of work organization, the labour process and workforce management. Key questions focused on recruitment, selection and retention, training practices, linguistic and cultural capability, workflow complexity, working time and its effects, and the consequences of growth. While we were given tours of all the facilities and permitted to observe training sessions in one case, direct access to interview workers on-site was denied for reasons of corporate confidentiality. This deficiency was partly overcome by group discussions, serendipitously organized and conducted outside the workplace, with Mumbai call centre workers employed in two case study companies.

Several additional sources illuminated work experiences and complemented workers' direct testimony. First, formal interviews were conducted with senior (Nasscom) personnel, industry leaders and trade union officials. Second, at three industry conferences attended by the authors, delegates, in debating with remarkable candour human resource issues facing the industry, delivered unique insights into current employment relations and working conditions. The proceedings of these conferences (ITES Conference, Mumbai, 27–30 January, Nasscom Conference, Mumbai, 11–14 February, Nasscom ITES-BPO Strategy Summit, Bangalore, 12–13 June) were recorded and transcribed. These events provided the authors with numerous opportunistic informal interviews with personnel from across the industry. All references below to these dates relate to speeches by, or interviews with, conference participants. Only minor linguistic difficulties were encountered during the research process due to interviewees' and conference participants' command of English. Finally, for several years the authors have gathered extensive documentation on Indian developments.

Evidence from Scotland complements the Indian data, providing insights into the broader political economy by investigating companies' offshoring practices and intentions. As a major region of call centre activity, Scotland provides

a useful prism for evaluating UK trends. Primary data is drawn principally from a comprehensive sectoral audit conducted between February and July 2003. A detailed questionnaire was distributed to all call centres (290) and was completed by senior site management, although requests for strategic information frequently required responses from corporate personnel. Ultimately, 250 full questionnaires were completed, split equally between written returns and telephone interviews, while basic data was supplied in 22 cases and estimated for the remaining 18 operations. Comprehensive research findings were published in a full report (Taylor and Bain, 2003b).

## Indian call centre industry profile

The Indian industry originated in the mid-1990s when American Express, British Airways and GE Capital established customer support operations and transaction processing services (Nasscom, 2002a: 15), although none initially were interactive call centres (Nasscom, 2002b: 58). In the late-1990s GE established India's first voice operation, and was followed by a speculative boom and overcapacity in third-party outsourcing, leading to the collapse of several companies and some consolidation. Subsequently, despite the post-11 September 2001 hiatus, the sector has expanded rapidly, with Nasscom anticipating 55 percent growth for 2003–4 (Mittal speech, 12 June 2003). Calculating numbers employed is difficult as Nasscom (2003: 57) subsumes call centres within a broader ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services-Business Process Outsourcing) category, encompassing non-customer facing, back-office clerical and administrative operations. Synthesizing evidence from Nasscom sources (2002a: 18; 2003: 59) and surveys and reports (e.g. callcentres.net, 2003: 7), while simultaneously extrapolating the ratio of voice to back-office employees from case study and interview data, we calculate, with confidence, that between 75,000 and 115,000 people were employed in Indian call centres in June 2003.<sup>2</sup> Insurance and retail banking work is prominent because of 'the high proportion of processes and services that can be outsourced overseas' (Nasscom, 2003: 65), although telecoms, retailing, utilities, IT, airlines and software have also seen much migration (Nasscom, 2002a: 21).

Operations catering for the internal requirements of Transnational Corporations (known as 'captives'), and indigenous third-party providers, similar to UK outsourcers, are the most important organizational types. While Indian software/IT firms and traditional business houses are active, significantly the growing presence of global Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies (e.g. Accenture, EDS) is sharpening competition with third-party providers. Because offshoring contracts are growing in value, increasingly only larger companies with sufficient financial, infrastructural and human resources are able to meet the demands of international clients. Consequently, the number of medium-to-large third-party establishments is growing. Evident, too, is the growing number of joint ventures between UK/US and Indian companies, an



observable trend in transnational production and service networks (Dicken, 2003: 259). Migrating companies engage, not just in third-party outsourcing (e.g. Aviva and EXL), but also in partnerships, co-sourcing (Prudential and ICICI) or remote sourcing (BT and HCL/Progeon) relationships with Indian suppliers.

Call centres are most concentrated in the National Capital Region (Delhi), in the suburbs of Mumbai, and in Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad. To reduce risk, avoid overheating in larger cities' labour markets and draw on untapped, cheaper labour pools, companies have invested recently in 'second tier' cities such as Pune, Kochi and Ahmedabad (Nasscom, 2003: 60), and in smaller locations like Mangalore, Mysore and Cochin.

### Political and economic contexts

Just as cost reduction drove the adoption of the call centre organizational form within the UK, so too must this be seen as the fundamental motive behind offshoring. Reviewing all available evidence suggests that 40–60 percent savings can occur when processes are migrated to India (Nasscom, 2002a: 12). India's key advantage lies in the labour cost differential, estimated at '70–80% for offshorable processes' (Nasscom, 2003: 65), although more recent McKinsey research concludes that 'labour arbitrage from moving to India' had declined to 60–65 percent (Kaka speech, 12 June 2003). Survey data confirms the importance of reducing costs, or increasing profits; 16 of 22 Scottish-based companies who have offshored, and 6 of 11 who intend to, cite these as principal drivers. However, cost advantage alone is meaningless without the workforce's other key attribute: the ability to speak English. The significance of this linguistic capability is evidenced by the fact that 'over 90% of its [ITES-BPO's] revenues come from English-speaking geographies' (Nasscom, 2003: 56). Indian managers reported growing interest from UK-based firms, with one acknowledging, 'The recession made a difference and the threshold for convincing people about cost savings has come down' (Mum1). Indian industry leaders view UK companies as increasingly moving from tactical outsourcing to strategic offshoring as cutting costs becomes 'a corporate obsession', driven by intense shareholder pressure. Thus, from 2000, offshoring accelerated following the dot.com collapse, the crisis in the 'new economy' (Brenner, 2002), widespread recessionary pressures and sharpened competition in financial services and telecoms. Concerns over profitability initially prompted some employers to respond by intensifying work and escalating targets (Taylor et al., 2005), but these measures failed to reduce unit labour costs sufficiently. In these circumstances, offshoring could appear an attractive proposition.<sup>3</sup>

Policies stemming from successive Indian governments' commitment to economic reform and the tenets of the Washington consensus – liberalization, privatization and globalization – have facilitated migration. Key initiatives include the provision of tax incentives and telecoms deregulation. In the neo-

liberalist climate in which labour market deregulation is regarded as a prerequisite for growth in the 'new economy', states have legislated to benefit the industry. For example, lobbied by Nasscom, the Labour Department of Maharashtra relaxed regulations forbidding women working at night (ITES Conference, 27 January 2003).

This brief profile of the industry, and the political and economic factors impacting upon it, are indispensable for contextualizing Indian call centres. The sector's particular history, its size and structure, its rapid growth and locational characteristics, its relationship with capital, state and labour, inter alia, suggest contrasts between India and the UK in terms of work organization and employment conditions.

### Indian workflows

Primary and secondary data confirms that work organization in India approximates to, and may even constitute an extreme form of, the mass production model (Batt and Moynihan, 2002). The types of calls handled tend to be highly standardized, simple in content, tightly scripted and of short duration. At Del1 work largely consisted of rigidly structured credit card collections calls lasting three to four minutes. Four of the five Mumbai centres visited undertook basic transactional services for US financial sector clients. At Mum4, typical calls lasted 30–180 seconds. Agents, engaged in debt recovery, collections, outbound telesales, telemarketing and credit card campaigns, confirmed managers' accounts (Group discussion, 2 February 2003).

Nasscom recommends (2002b: 64) that third-party suppliers should bid for low-value, low-skill work. If they are successful in securing contracts, and then delivering on cost and to prescribed quality standards, operators hope to persuade clients to offshore more valuable, complex work. 'Moving up the value chain' is the widely-used phrase which captures the essence of this strategy, whereby suppliers aim to capture 'domain expertise', either deep knowledge of a specific industry, or greater expertise of a generic process. However, 'moving up the value chain' remains largely an aspiration. At conferences, participants frankly debated the industry's weaknesses (Taylor and Bain, 2003b: 133–7). At a session entitled 'Moving-Up the Value Chain: Non-core to Core', the keynote speaker was overtly self-critical.

When clients are coming in, [they see that] the experience that exists right now is pretty confined. It is something that takes low recruitment and training ... a couple of weeks to train people for doing credit card applications, for collections work, or basic customer service. This type of work will grow, but is not really about the transition process [of core and complex work]. I would say the number one challenge facing the industry is overcoming the lack of domain and business process knowledge. We are very immature. (Vashista, 12 June 2003)

Analysts identified the problem as rooted in the way 'the model for a third-party player' became the 'offshore-based replication of on-site, or onshore,

activities' (Venkatraman speech, 12 June 2003). Mirchandani confirms how companies 'seamlessly outsource the exact scripts and procedures currently in place in their call centres' (2005, forthcoming: 4). Fundamentally, the Indian outsourced sector emerged as a *dependent* niche market for developed nations' requirements. This reliance on labour arbitrage in the provision of low-value, standardized services was producing commoditization of the Indian industry (Kaka speech, 12 February 2003), threatening profit margins and undermining efforts to diversify from mass production work.

The practices of Scottish/UK companies confirm these assessments. Despite some variety, it is possible to identify the call types offshored; overflow, out-of-hours calls, basic customer services (e.g. change of address), routine insurance claims, directory enquiries, ticket fulfilment, debt recovery/reminders/collections, telemarketing/telesales, technical support/IT helpdesk. With the exception of the latter more complex tasks, the majority consist of standardized, low-value processes. An interesting statistical finding is that offshoring companies operate call centres whose mean workforce size (437) is more than double the industry average. It is not size per se that is significant, but the fact that larger call centres process higher volumes of standardized calls that lend themselves to both outsourcing and offshoring. Thus, most susceptible to migration are high-volume, low-value, routinized, short cycle-time workflows, mainly in financial services, in large workplaces, by companies which may have recently merged or undertaken significant rationalization (Taylor and Bain, 2003b: 60–66). Usually offshoring involves not the wholesale substitution of services in India for those in the UK, but companies restructuring processes, and then segmenting, or 'slicing off', the most standardized workflows for migration. In the process, the same cost-reduction dynamic – or to use Korczynski's (2002) more static term, cost-efficient logic – that created, developed and continues to drive the UK industry, is now fuelling offshoring to India, and producing forms of work organization which lie at the extreme quantitative end of the call centre spectrum.

## Work organization and worker experiences

The technological aspects of work organization in India are essentially the same as those in the advanced countries. Thus, ACD systems distribute calls, electronic wallboards display queue numbers and waiting times, and agents in Mumbai receive calls through headphones plugged in to the same turrets as found on workstations in Melbourne or Manchester. Agents navigate familiar screens and menus, entering data on globally-branded computers. Formally, the technical architecture of the labour process is similar, if not identical. Further, the forms and techniques of control manifest in call centres in developed countries, the subject of much research activity and debate, are also found in Indian establishments, although it is necessary to distinguish both subtle and substantial differences in their application and effects. Generally, these are the result

either of culturally-specific distinctions and/or the functional relationship between the offshored process and its company and country of origin.

Agents' performance is extensively monitored in these highly routinized workflows. As with UK outsourcers, Service Level Agreements (SLAs), based on contracts between third-party providers and clients, prescribe quantitative measures (including call volumes, abandonment rates, call-handling times) and specify qualitative criteria. Both forms are strictly imposed in India; for example, contractual requirements dictate that agents adhere rigidly to scripts. In all case studies SLAs were translated downwards into agents' targets. One manager explained how his centre was more stringent than others.

... because we not only have targets, we grade agents into three categories: A – Excellent, B – Satisfactory and C – Not meeting standards. With Personal Improvement Plans, the Cs are taken out, and if they do not become As or Bs after a short time, then unfortunately they have to go. (Mum4)

Diverse evidence suggests that Indian agents experience this work as demanding, pressurized and frequently stressful. Nasscom, though committed to boosting the industry, has even referred to 'high-volume induced burnout and the tedium of some of the tasks' (2002a: 52). High turnover is perhaps the single most serious human resource problem and, while patently the product of rapid sectoral expansion, is also the consequence of working conditions that many find intolerable. For 'despite rather lucrative pay packets' (Nasscom, 2002a: 26) and limited alternative employment opportunities, 50 percent of those who exit a call centre leave the industry altogether (callcentres.net, 2003: 34). Emerging academic research confirms this picture. Datta (2004) found workers remained with their employer, on average, for eight months, and that discontents relating to work pressures were manifold amongst the 78 'associates' interviewed.

Given our previous discussion of call centre work outcomes, where call throughput is prioritized and strict monitoring prevails, it is unsurprising that, in India, where standardization occurs *in extremis*, employee exit and burnout appear to be commonplace. However, distinctive characteristics of the Indian industry exacerbate these generic problems. First, call-handling for overseas customers takes place at night, or during evenings, on shifts that can last more than eight hours. In Datta's cases 9-hour shifts were the norm, but often were extended 'by another 3 to 4 hours for a "reward" of \$6' (2004: 7–8), while Indians employed on British Telecom's contracts work two overlapping nine-hour shifts between 2.30 pm and 2.30 am (Deb, 2004: 17). 'Graveyard' shifts commencing at one, two or three o'clock in the morning are common (Mum1; Mum5). One experienced manager understood that 'taking 150 different calls a night is very difficult and there is high burnout', responsible even in 'good' centres for 30–35 percent attrition (Mum2). Several managers identified the *combination* of night-time working and repetitive call-handling as stressful, taking its toll on agents' health and social and family life (Mum1; Mum2; Mum5). Long commuting distances and travelling times compound these negative effects. Deb (2004: 20) reports his, and fellow-workers', experiences of

inhabiting 'a self-contained world of 13-hour days, taking into account the travelling time of up to two each hours each way, with space for little else to penetrate one's existence'. Some managers well understood the deleterious consequences: 'A worker leaves home at 2pm, starts work at 5.30pm and after work reaches home at 5am. This is not a good thing, but a sure recipe for health problems' (Mum3).

Agents confirm the prevalence of ill-health, with one typically commenting, that 'many cases have arisen where people have lost weight ... usually because the cycle of eating and sleeping is disrupted. Symptoms include dark circles under the eyes ... in most of the people' (Discussion, 2 February 2003). International research has long established the relationship between night-shift working and ill-health, but when combined with repetitive call-handling and negligible control, it makes Indian agents' experiences even more pressurized than their UK counterparts. Thirty-three percent of Datta's (2004: 13–14) respondents reported difficulties in getting 'normal sleep', a problem intimately related to working long atypical shifts involving little task variation and autonomy. At a session at Nasscom's ITES-BPO Conference devoted to HR issues, participants expressed concerns at the effects of extended unsocial working on health and work–life balance. The General Manager of Hughes BPO was emphatic in his identification of the problem.

Working the night shift ... is not something that you can willingly adjust to easily. It does lead to a high level of stress.... It isolates you from your family, friends, social life. When there are birthday celebrations in the evening, you find you can't go because you have to work. This is a very big area of concern, and why you see a lot of people getting out of the industry. Stress is accentuated by bad eating habits – eating food at all hours. At least one in two people is a smoker, which is not healthy. I think, as this industry grows, we need to ask questions, what are the effects of this working routine at a physiological level, psychological level, social level, family level?' (Goyal speech, 13 June 2003)

Women, who constitute half the workforce, are particularly affected by conflicts between working hours and the demands of task performance, and domestic, family and social responsibilities and expectations.

Second, although the built environment bears favourable comparison with UK facilities, the fact that buildings are sealed and that temperature, air conditioning and humidity are controlled by Building Management Systems (BMS), means occupants are likely to experience problems. Lacking fresh air and opening windows, these artificially created micro-climates have been linked by the World Health Organization to 'sick building syndrome' (Health and Safety Executive, 1995). Symptoms could be exacerbated by temperature and humidity extremes during the monsoon period, which BMS may be unable to counteract, particularly in circumstances of 24-hour building occupancy (Nasscom, 2003: 63). Research (Baldry et al., 1997) has shown that widespread ill-health results from routinized labour processes taking place within unsupportive ambient and ergonomic environments.

Third, there is evidence that customary Indian hierarchical workplace cultures have been transposed to call centres (Outsourcing Insight, 2001: 114). One associate in Datta's study revealed how when call volumes are high, 'one has to raise a blue flag to attract the attention of the team leader for breaks and sometimes one cannot go to the loo' (2004: 7). Certainly, top-down methods dominate companies' staff communication systems (Nasscom, 2003: 149). Despite strong union traditions in telecoms, banking and insurance, there is neither recognition, nor even embryonic union organization in Indian call centres. This absence of employee voice constitutes a democratic deficit, which contrasts with widespread, if uneven, union recognition in the UK, and denies Indian workers opportunities to channel grievances and improve working conditions.

Fourth, the deleterious effects of task performance are aggravated by frustration, role confusion, a crisis of expectations and psychological tension experienced by Indian agents as they negotiate the contradictions between their culture, identity and aspirations, and the requirements of service provision for western customers. The widespread adoption of anglicized pseudonyms, of having to conceal their Indian locations, and the obligation to speak in 'neutral' accents, or even emulate their customers' dialects, contribute greatly to a pressurized working experience. One manager (Mum2) was openly critical of these normative practices, which, originating in GE's call centres, were spread throughout the expanding industry through a managerial diaspora.

If agents are taking 150 calls a night from the east coast, from the west coast [of the US], it puts even more pressure on them if they have to change from call to call to speak in the accent the customer uses. Customers can see through false accents.

Undoubtedly, the compulsion to conceal location – locational masking to use Mirchandani's term (2003: 16) – can increase tensions during encounters with customers. What motivates this deception is the assumption, shared by Indian providers and offshoring companies alike, that providing services from India produces 'huge consumer opposition' (Mitral, 2002: 43–4). Agents report how perceptions that Indian call centres give inferior service can lead to customer frustration, and even aggression, directed towards them as front-line staff (Datta, 2004; Group discussion, 2 February 2003). When customers believe they are being lied to over location, anger can become overtly racist. In more subtle ways the performance of emotional labour is given an added, culturally mediated, twist, but this again intensifies work pressure, as in this instance where an agent recalled being congratulated by a satisfied customer,

Well done! You really helped me, and he asks you your name. So I tell 'Nick' (pause). I'm not Nick. I don't know who Nick is ... what's the use of giving my alias, when I'm the one working. I'm solving the problem. I'm from India ... no we cannot give my name. (Mirchandani, 2005, forthcoming: 9)

Also, the gulf between the stimulating work and prestigious career promised by employers, and the mundane nature of incessant call-handling can cause disenchantment and disengagement from job and organization. Articulating this

conflict between career and status expectation on the one hand, and the reality of task performance on the other, these ex-graduates see work 'as demeaning and inappropriate given their qualifications' (Mirchandani, 2005, forthcoming: 8). Directly contradicting the presumed loyalty of Indian workers, a male agent stated how, 'We are all here, working, waiting for our opportunities to come', outside of current employment (Mirchandani, 2005, forthcoming: 10). This desire for more attractive, although less-remunerative employment, was also discovered by Deb (2004: 18).

Work and employment conditions generate both familiar and distinctive forms of resistance. Some workers clearly do know when supervisors monitor calls and adjust their behaviour accordingly, allowing them 'to maximize their [performance] scores' (Deb, 2004: 9). Intriguingly, some are able to manipulate procedures for resolving customer service problems. Given that speed of resolution is essential, 'where issues are complicated and customers are irate, workers sometimes decide to give customers a "talla"', a hoax solution. The extent to which Indian workers employ creative methods to circumvent controls and maximize bonus payments is a fascinating question which future research hopefully will pursue. However, even these few examples show how far some Indian agents deviate from Whitson's (*Financial Times*, 10 August 2002) virtuous stereotype.

## Recruitment, training and attrition

Although Indian workflows are highly standardized, it does not follow that tensions between the cost-reduction and customer-oriented logics, the contradiction between quantity and quality, has been resolved satisfactorily in favour of the former. The *quality* of agent–customer interaction, albeit within the tightly-prescribed parameters of transactional, scripted calls, is of great importance. No matter how standardized the call content, the inescapable requirement that agents communicate effectively, sensitively and even profitably with customers cannot be automatically guaranteed. For, while the social skills and competencies, identified by Thompson et al. (2004) as the objectives of recruitment, selection and training procedures, are required, the linguistic and cultural challenges involved in providing voice services from India adds further layers of complexity. Contradicting the received wisdom, it cannot be assumed that 15 years of English language education at school and university necessarily equips Indian graduates with the ability to communicate to customers, whose mother tongue is English, to standards deemed acceptable to Indian providers and their overseas clients. Despite rigorous selection (Nasscom, 2002b: 51) and extensive training, involving practices which should be regarded as forms of linguistic and cultural imperialism (Mirchandani, 2003: 13), problems remain in the quality of interaction between Indian agents and western customers.

Selection procedures evidently prove inadequate to guarantee supplies of labour with the requisite attributes. In addition to familiar attitudinal characteristics – 'positive outlook, people skills, ability to work under pressure' –



employers seek applicants able 'to grasp different accents and various cultural nuances, or those who demonstrate "cultural fit"' (Scope Marketing, 2001). Although Nasscom (2003: 148) claims an offers-to-applicants ratio of 1:4 for the ITES industry, managers reported much lower rates, ranging from 5 percent (Mum4) to 8 percent (Mum 5). Most applicants failed because of thick accents: 'For some people it would be impossible to speak with the neutral accent we require. More applicants fail this hurdle than any other, as it is a very important issue for us and our clients' (Del1). Experience informs employers that customer service would be damaged should candidates lacking necessary standards of fluency, command and accent progress to call-handling. Survey evidence confirms the scale of the problem, with 38 percent of third-party operators experiencing recruitment difficulties (callcentres.net, 2003: 35).

Language and cultural training are central priorities, with one manager stating that 'accent training is perhaps *the* most important criterion' (Mum4). The obligation to provide satisfactory standards of spoken English originates with the offshoring companies, who are sensitive to possible customer dissatisfaction, where migration causes perceptions of inferior service. The transnational dimension to service provision ensures two elements to language training. First, agents must be able to understand the national accents of English-speaking countries and customers' diverse regional accents. Second, customers must comprehend the speech of Indian agents. The universal practice is to 'neutralize' accents, to 'make sure that agents do not speak with Indian inflections' (Del1), a process of modification which varies according to the strength of regional accents.

During language training (Mum4) an ex-patriate Indian coaching agents how to relate to Canadian customers, commented on trainees' performances, following a role-play exercise aimed at improving pitch, empathy and pronunciation.

There was a lack of empathy in the voice. Your speech tells us that you want to get off the phone as soon as you can ... you have to spend time with the customer and concentrate on the softness of the sounds. There are problems if you don't get modulation in your sounds. Also the 'r' sounds are not coming out clearly and neither are the 'v' sounds.

Mastering tongue twisters<sup>4</sup> aimed to improve pronunciation in order to challenge western prejudices regarding Indians' 'imperfect' speech. Having neutralized accents, most employers encourage, or train, agents to adopt their customers' accents. One manager's 'ideal' was 'to get agents to speak with accents, although to expect this immediately would be fanciful' since only by 'prolonged exposure on the phone will agents get there' (Mum5). Modifying natural speech is combined with programmes designed to familiarize agents with the cultural background of customers' countries. One centre, providing two-day modules on US and UK culture, covered 'typical customers, geography, currency, holidays, time-zones, slang and colloquialisms, and major sporting events' (Mum5).



A critical evaluation of these practices concludes that, notwithstanding agents' formal command of English and the high priority accorded to accent training, linguistic capability *generally* is not sufficiently developed nor flexible to ensure that more than routine call-handling can be conducted satisfactorily. That many in India share this judgement is illustrated by the comments of this senior official at the Ministry for Communications and IT: 'On the quality side it is very important that we make moves from just felicity with the English language to higher communication skills and then on to superior domain knowledge' (Rajeeva Shah, 12 June 2003).

Further, truncated programmes cannot successfully bridge the cultural distance between India and the UK. In this respect, ill-informed commentary has appeared in the UK press, where linguistic and cultural assimilation is assumed to be non-problematic. For example, an article reporting a visit to an Indian centre was headlined 'Greetings Jimmy...great episode of Eastenders last night, by the way' (*Sunday Herald*, 9 March 2003). The implication here is that not only do Indian agents have a sophisticated understanding of English, but are conversant with Glasgow patois and are familiar with the most recent episode of a British soap opera. There is simply no evidence that this sort of interaction occurs, nor that training modules provide this depth of cultural understanding. Whether the objective is, as Mirchandani (2003) puts it, 'Making Americans', or making English, Scots, or whatever nationality Indians are expected, chameleon-like to become, there are limitations on the ability of these neo-colonialist practices to succeed. Indeed, difficulties are acknowledged by UK companies. While leveraging the educated, English-speaking resource was cited as the second most important reason for migrating work, companies reported 'accent and language problems/cultural differences/mistakes through misunderstanding' as the major disadvantage experienced (Taylor and Bain, 2003b: 56–8).

The received wisdom has it that Indian agents are supremely motivated, dedicated and loyal to their employers, partly because of limited alternative employment (Nasscom 2002b: 25; Outsourcing Insight, 2001: 28). However, the evidence is that turnover rates are far from negligible. In addition to 'exit' decisions caused by negative work experiences, high attrition is a consequence of rapid expansion. Substantively, attrition rates are comparable with those in the UK, where recent surveys estimate it as 25.1 percent (IDS, 2003: 23) and 32.8 percent (IRS, 2002: 34). Nasscom conservatively calculates 20–25 percent for India (2002a: 26) and callcentres.net (2003: 34) 22 percent, but rates of 50 percent and higher are common (2002b: 59). The consensus among employers is that attrition is increasing as the labour market overheats in particular locations. The tendency for call centres to cluster, the poaching of existing staff, the need to pay more to retain employees, and difficulties in finding experienced supervisors and managers, all serve to inflate labour costs. None of this denies the fact that, in this expanding industry, opportunities to build a career do exist, and many workers do stay with their employer.

In sum, migrating call centre services to India has not enabled companies to escape from intractable labour management difficulties faced in the advanced

countries. Indeed, it is remarkable how the Indian industry not only reproduces, albeit in exaggerated form, a labour process that has proved problematical for employers and employees alike in the west, but that it also displays, again through the lens of its distinctive national character, HR problems that are only too familiar.

## Conclusion

While call centre offshoring to India certainly provides evidence of growing interconnectedness in the global economy, it is necessary to re-emphasize that globalization does not consist of a single pre-determined trajectory with inevitable outcomes (Dicken, 2003; Held et al., 1999). The perspective that globalization represents sets of tendencies, is confirmed by this analysis of the migration of voice services. Undoubtedly, powerful forces are driving offshoring, particularly the central capitalist imperatives of cutting costs, and maximizing profits and shareholder value, just as these were central to the emergence and widespread diffusion of the call centre as an organizational form in the English-speaking developed countries. Therefore, in one sense, moving to India represents merely an extension of the process of spatial re-location which, in the UK, produced concentrations of call centres in regions notable for lower costs and available skilled labour. Call centres, embodying distance-shrinking technologies, promised then, as now, 'a spatial fix', to use Harvey's (2000) phrase, to cost problems in capitalism's customer servicing functions. The impact of economic stagnation, reduced margins and intensive sectoral competition stimulated the current phase of re-location, this time on a transnational basis. Thus, political-economic and geographical factors provide essential contextualization.

The nature of work organization in India is best understood by acknowledging how the ITES/call centre industries emerged as low-cost replications of the most routinized processes in the west. Organizational restructuring and strategic review in UK companies tends to precede the horizontal segmentation of services, leading to the most standardized and least risk-laden processes being sliced-off and offshored. Fundamentally, then, and expressing the importance of the cost-reduction logic, India largely hosts an extreme version of the mass production model.

While the technological architecture of Indian call centres is recognizable, and, formally, a familiar array of normative, technical and bureaucratic controls operates, national characteristics, particularly the neo-colonial context, modify their content. The synchronization of agents' shifts with western customer servicing hours – 'colonization with time' to use Adam's (2002) term – is both symbolic of the subordination of Indian workers to the interests of western capital and, because it induces nocturnal work patterns, significantly exacerbates the generic pressures associated with routinized call-handling. The binding together of Indian agent and western customer in this transnational

servicing (or selling) relationship generates contradiction and tension. Janus-like, Indian employers face two ways, appealing to overseas clients that its Indian workforce is inexpensive, well-educated and more than capable of handling the routinized services they might wish to migrate, while simultaneously promising to Indian workers high wages, interesting work on behalf of prestigious clients and career opportunities. Managerial rhetoric conflicts with agents' experiences, as the realities of work – relentless call-handling, extensive monitoring and strict conformance to clients' SLAs, long nocturnal working-hours and travelling times – can take their toll on health and domestic life, leading to disengagement and exit.

Whether the adoption of westernized pseudonyms or locational masking are mandatory, or the result of intense normative pressure, the effects on agents are similar. These neo-imperialist – and indeed racist – practices add significant, culturally-specific dimensions of psychological strain to pressures associated with the emotional labour that call centres engender (Taylor, 1998). Denial of identity, at the command of overseas clients, may deepen worker dissatisfaction, an outcome acknowledged by astute Indian managers, and may also contribute to emerging resistance. For, although research is in its infancy, evidence suggests that, just as in the west, the Indian call centre is contested terrain. Contestation can take familiar forms of opposition to intensive working conditions, but also becoming 'front line' representatives of overseas companies creates new opportunities for resistance. It cannot be assumed that globalization goes unchallenged and that Indians become eager agents – in both literal and metaphorical senses – willing to re-model themselves at the behest of American or British corporate clients.

Nor can it be concluded that migration is seamless. The cost-reduction logic drives companies to offshore voice services, but they are then confronted with a series of problems deriving from the customer-oriented logic. The requirement that Indian agents interact sensitively, effectively and profitably with distant customers, albeit within highly standardized call structures, creates recruitment and training challenges of a different order to those experienced in the countries of their customer bases. Evidently, the considerable efforts devoted to ensuring that agents communicate in Oxford English or Friends' American are not wholly successful, from the perspective both of Indian suppliers aspiring to 'rise up the value chain', and UK companies keen to exploit the huge cost advantages more fully by offshoring more than the most standardized services.

Elsewhere we have analysed fully the factors inhibiting call centre migration (Taylor and Bain, 2003b). Without question the difficulties encountered in transcending linguistic and cultural difference constrain the potential to offshore more complex voice services. Fluency and clarity of speech, and depth of cultural understanding, combined with necessary tacit knowledge, are prerequisites for successful servicing and selling relationships. However, it is difficult to make these qualities explicit and transmit them through formal mechanisms. Even allowing for the simplified, standardized nature of the bulk of Indian call-

handling, it appears that cultural and linguistic differences are not readily overcome. Consequently, the call centre with its distinctive labour process may in the long run be offshored less readily than other non-customer facing, back-office activities.

## Appendix: Indian Manager Interviews

Del1, Noida, 24. January 2003

Del2, Noida, 25 January 2003

Mum1, Navi Mumbai, 27 January 2003

Mum2 Manager, Santa Cruz, Mumbai, 30 January 2003

Mum3 Manager, Powai, 30 January 2003

Mum4 Manager, Powai, 30 January 2003

Mum5 Manager, Santa Cruz, 30 January 2003

Group discussions of call centre employees, Mumbai, 2 February 2003

## Notes

- 1 Indeed, we contend that the literature still underestimates the prevalence and significance of targets, both quantitative and qualitative, and their effects upon workers (Bain et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2003).
- 2 For a full account of the meticulous process by which call centre employment levels were calculated see Taylor and Bain (2003b: 83–5).
- 3 Under the impact of these economic pressures, significantly, of the four case studies on which Taylor et al.'s (2005, forthcoming) paper is drawn, one (holiday) company has already offshored to India, another (finance) is about to migrate jobs and a third (outsourcer) established a pilot to assess the viability of relocating work.
- 4 Bizarre examples included 'Rory the warrior and Roger the worrier were reared wrongly in a rural brewery'.

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