Review Paper

IT workers in India. An Indian Urban Proletariat for the Western Capitalists??

Rajdeep Sunar
Assistant Professor of Sociology, WBES, Haldia Government College, India.

Abstract
This paper tries to look into how the IT industry in India is actually creating an Indian Urban proletariat for the western capitalists. The role of the Human Resource management in the call centres is also explored. It also tries to look into the strains in the relationship that the westerners have with the Indian call centre agents. The exploitation of the Indian workforce by the western capitalists are also highlighted.

Key Words: Information Technology, Call Centre, BPO, Proletariat, Capitalists, Human Resource Management

Call centres have emerged out of the major changes that have taken place in the sphere of work and employment in the last two decades or so. This new method of outsourcing resulted in the increase in the number of jobs in the service sector. One such sector which has grown rapidly due to these changes is the information technology enabled services – business process outsourcing (ITES-BPO) sector. The services offered include customer interaction, back office operations, transcription, content development and education/training/research. It has emerged as one of the key industries for investment in the country (Noronha and D'Cruz 2006). The phenomenal success of the BPOs particularly call centres continues even today in India which offers particularly English speaking high school and college graduates with quick employment with moderately high wages which promise them a high standard of living which would not have been possible for these groups of people otherwise.

Call centres have often been called as the electronic housekeepers to the world taking care of a host of routine activities for the multinational firms. The firms here handle a host of back office work which includes responding to credit card enquiries, preparation of invoices, pay rolls, cheques, reconciliation of daily accounts, writing medical transcriptions, processing applications, billing and collections (Ramesh 2004).The access to these call centres are very easy. So, considerably this becomes a potential avenue to absorb the growing mass of the educated unemployed. The Call centre agents in India are paid comparatively lower salaries than their counterparts in the west doing the same job. This difference in the salary is explained by the authorities in terms of the difference in the standard of living in these two regions. So, basically call centres in India enables nothing but the making or the developing of the Indian urban proletariat.

Now, let us look into certain critical aspects of the call centre which leads to the cultural transformation of the call centre employees. Today there is this notion of individual agency that in a globalizing world new economic opportunities and media choices are available to those who take advantage of them. For e.g. in India, while the national government decries at various historic moments, the pollution of Indian culture through foreign products in the Indian marketplace or through aggressively commercial oriented television programming, audience consumption of products and programmes remains high and the labour supply for various multinational enterprises be they call centres, clothing and electronic sweat shops, ancillary factories or even pyramid marketing schemes stays plentiful. For low skilled assembly line, sweat shop worker, semi skilled call centre employees or even highly skilled doctors and information technology professionals, multinational corporations provide a wide variety of job opportunities that were simply unavailable before the nation's economic liberalization policy in 1991(McMillin 2006). So, within the past decade call centres have become a primary way through which companies conduct their business particularly because of the significant role played by the communication technology. Companies conduct their business this way, also because by outsourcing they get access to advance technologies, they get vertical expertise and the speed of the service also gets enhanced. So, even when the National government is against the invasion of the foreign ways of life and culture, the nation is busy moulding itself as someone who it is not by embracing the alien ways of life and culture of it's so called developed counterparts through various ways and means. In India the call centre makes specific demands on its employees, apart from the skill level; an ability to withstand long hours of monotonous work, respond quickly to orders and undergo certain transformations to adapt to the workplace environment which could mean a change in accent , diction , sleep cycle and workplace identity. The modern look and the feel of the call centre with facilities of international standards stands contrast to surrounding semi- urban villages and slums. The experience of the call centre employees identifies them not just as units of economic productivity but as people who alter their

routines and rhythms to partake of the benefits of the global market. The ability to speak the English language in an accent that may not quiet is American or British but certainly not strongly ethnic Indian becomes a crucial qualification in the service of a transnational clientele. Most of the employees in the call centre seem to like the job because of the interaction they have with people, challenges in sorting out the clients problems , young colleagues, comparatively good salaries, free transportation, opportunity to improve communication skills and English language and diction, the modern look and the playful work atmosphere of the workplace. They particularly enjoyed talking to Americans and other foreigners across the world learning the American accent and culture and breaking cultural barriers through their interactions. The call centres stand as strong symbols of a neo-colonialist environment, where labourers need to enter into the cultural contexts of their employers and clientele based in the US, UK, Germany or the Netherlands as the case may be and using their knowledge of the range of customer services available to the client converse fluently, stripping away as much as possible indicators of their local Indian contexts (McMillin 2006).

For all the call centre employees, to live and breathe the cultural contexts of their clientele, names are changed from Indian to Western ones (particularly for US based clients) and fictional personal profiles are developed with residential roots in some prominent city in the US. The call centre employees have to be highly trained not just in the technology but also in voice, conversation and troubleshooting to garner new customers and retain old ones. Training typically includes workshop, seminars, call observation, product knowledge tests, monitoring and coaching, online tutorials and tool kits. The recruiters specifically seek those who have been exposed to US culture either through television or through their urban residence. Strong native accents are eliminated. Call centre employees were encouraged to watch American programmes such as MTV countdown, Friends, Oprah, CSI, Cartoon Network, Discovery etc. (McMillin 2006).

So, when we carefully see all these we can say that the call centre industry is basically trying to influence the employees and encouraging them to embrace the ways of life and culture of the so called developed countries to which they cater. They want their employees to know in and out about the ways of life and mannerisms of the clientele base they serve in order for the business process to go on without hindrance and in the process these employees end up embracing these cultures and mannerisms of these non-Indian clients and thereby forgetting the culture and mannerisms of their indigenous place. We come across many instances whereby the call centre agent continues to speak in the same foreign accent even when he is not working and also his mannerisms and his attires gets influenced. The cultural transformation of call centre employees occurs not just in individual appropriations of western accents, clothes and interpersonal behaviour but also in family structures and norms. For instance in most part of India the public sphere is considered to be a hostile and a male dominated space but now with the inception of call centres the females also have started working out at night in the call centres (as because business in call centres are carried out basically during night time) and the time of work are also no longer derogated but glorified. And also, since the daytime is spent in sleeping, the employees are hardly able to give time to their families. Problems become more distinct when they get married. Additional responsibilities of running a family demands more time and hence eventually people quit the industry. Most of the employees work on Indian holidays too, which causes frustration. Some employees even feel the need for inclusion in the family and the society. Hence it is important for family members to render support for their young sons and daughters and to help them with the stress that they are undergoing. Hence, the ideal Indian family life is being transformed here. Also working in a call centre where working time is artificially created clashes with the human body and takes a toll on health both mental and physical. Ill health, nervousness, fatigue, body ache, irritation, depression, gastrointestinal problems are common.

Let us now look at the profile of the workers and the structure of the workforce in the Indian call centre. Generally the social composition of the IT workforce as a whole (including software engineers) is more homogeneous than is often supposed, in that the workforce is largely urban middle class and high middle caste. The process of exclusion that operate in the educational system and in recruitment and also the ideology of merit in the context of elite opposition to reservation, create this relative social homogeneity in the IT workforce. Employment does not depend on social connections (influence) or "ascriptive" status (reservations) unlike in the public sector and the old economy companies but is based entirely on merit. Good communication and social skills, confidence and the right kind of personality which is very important trait of an IT aspirant are elements of cultural capital the students from urban middle class (usually high caste) families are likely to possess and not students from rural lower class (Upadhya 2007).

Portrayal of work as fun and the workplace as yet another campus is the central logic through which the potential workers are attached to and engaged in the BPO sector. The superior image of work in the sector and the vibrant ambience of workplace with modern art and technology, company of young smart and fun loving colleagues from urban middle class who are fascinated with western ways of living and modern work environments are the things that attract urban English educated youngsters to the industry. Being computer literate, good communication skills, good typing skills and a command over English is all that is required. Most of these workers identify themselves as part of an elite class of professionals and consider themselves superior to their counterparts in traditional industrial sector who are mostly low-skilled, less educated and employed with lower wages and inferior conditions at work. The favourable supply condition in the labour markets allows the firms to test the candidates in several rounds of (language, communication and hospitality skills) and to handpick the best lot through various modes. Also, in order to minimise the training cost, candidates with experiences are preferred (Ramesh 2004). The structure of the workforce in BPOs is dualistic i.e. there is the existence of the core or the permanent workforce which includes the team leaders and the managers and the periphery or the non permanent workers which includes the call centre agents. Agents are not allowed to avail leave without the consent of the team leader/manager. In case an unauthorised leave is taken by any agent then he/she is liable to be terminated without prior notice. The employees are not eligible for national holidays. Work is monitored on the spot and after

the working hours with the help of specially designed software, computer networks and closed circuit cameras. The degree of surveillance required at work is even comparable with the situation of the 19th century prisons or Roman Slave ships. Workplace interactions are recorded and taped and are checked by team leaders/managers. Agents are given daily targets which are often placed at higher levels which are to be met daily. Reaching the pickup point late for more than five minutes is noted as a transport defect and also taking more than stipulated time lunch break is also considered as a defect. Camouflaging work as fun is done by Human Resource managers who arrange for get together, parties and other recreational activities. Human Resource management also does space management by allowing the employees to keep the wallpapers of their choice in their computers, pictures of their relatives on the flipchart. They have strict dress codes on paper but they permit the workers to wear outfits of their choice which will make the employees happy without any additional costs. This balance between work and fun thereby creates a docile workforce (Ramesh 2004).

Having gone through this we can say that that the workforce in the BPO industry specially consists of the urban middle class English educated youngsters who are fascinated with western culture. We also come across the nature of the rigorous monitoring that the employees are subjected to, so that the business process doesn't get hampered. The rules are strict and defection of the rule is liable to be punished by terminating the employee. We also came across the witty ways in which the human resource management camouflaged work as fun and also how they get the support of the employees by making them happy without having to do much. Having considered all this the BPO employees seem to be along side or even more exploited by the authorities than their counterparts of the traditional industry.

Now, let us shift our focus to call centres and the notion of trade union formation. Call centres have been used to escape from existing collective agreements or challenge them, and moving in the direction of the more liberal employment model. Union avoidance has been the core management strategy in call centres. The BPO industry is afraid not of losing the business but is afraid of union formation in call centres. People in the industry feared that unionisation would kill the BPO boom in the country. The media also argued that there was no room for complaints against the BPO outfits as they provided exceptionally good environment and good salaries. The Human Resource management have significant strategies to take care of the employees. The authorities control the hearts and minds of the employees and not just how they behave. They promote corporate ethos that demands loyalty from the employees and it excludes, silences or punishes those who question its creed. The relationship prevalent in BPO industry between the employer and the employee is very cordial. Hence, this new relationship between the employer and the employee marginalises the role of unions in the workplace. There are both exclusivist strategies and inclusivist human resource management techniques used in the industry. The exclusivist techniques make sure that the employees don't form unions and the inclusivist strategies makes sure that the needs of the employees are met so that they are happy and contented. The company shapes the employees notion to conceive of themselves as belonging not to an employee focused collectivity, a 'union' but rather to an employer focused collectively, the 'organisation'. There is intense competition among the employees that the demand for wages will not be based on movements in community standards but on improvements in personal productivity. The management worked hard to improve the employer employee relation in order to minimise the chances of union formation. Customer service representatives who had unitarist tendencies and were antithetic to workplace trade unionism were recruited while those with union backgrounds or those who previously worked in highly unionised firms were blacklisted. The recruits were pressurised to sign individual non-union contracts at the time of appointment or promotion. Close monitoring takes place in the workplace which also minimises the chances of union formation. Most people in the workforce are against the formation of unions. This is because a union would only intensify the situation of job insecurity as it would lead to work stoppages affecting the clients, the company and the agents themselves. This was something that none of the stakeholders could afford more so the agents, as it would render them unemployed. Also today because of the technology one can transfer the process from one city to another or even from one country to another. So, if a union is formed in one city that would result in the transfer of the industry to another city leaving the previous city and its people unemployed. And also the employees are aware of the competition from China and Philippines. Hence, they would not want to be unemployed, so, no unions are formed. The employees are also made to believe by the Human Resource management that their minor problems are heard by the authorities and are taken care of. In order to garner the support of the employees these companies arrange for team meeting to enable the employees to air out their grievances. Furthermore easy access to higher officials in the company gives the employees a sense of less bureaucratic structure unlike the government offices and also, gives them a sense of themselves being valued by the company. The employees are of the opinion that in a good company if one complains it will be solved. The union formation received a setback in the call centres because the workforce there is not stable. Quitting the job is common in a call centre. If one does not agree with his/her boss, they simply quit. The large number of call centres opened in every nook and corner of the city allows the person to find a job instantly, so, there is no hesitation in quitting. Also, the call centre had a relatively young workforce which lacked maturity. This is also a reason for union avoidance (Noronha and D'Cruz 2006).

So, here we saw how the authorities by various strategies avoid the formation of the unions and garner the support of the workforce. The authorities make the workforce believe that their problems are being heard and are being taken care of. Also the workforce is made to believe that they are an asset to the company and are being valued. Also, the Human Resource management comes up with various strategies which work in the line of strengthening the relationship between the employer and the employee. Now, when there is a healthy relationship between the master and the labour, no question of union formation arises which will only jeopardize the working process and the job security of the workforce. In a way the employees refrain from formation of unions because they fear that doing so will cost them their jobs and the present standard of living that they are enjoying, which they are not willing to lose.

Lastly, considering all these we can say that this industry is actually creating an Indian Urban proletariat for the western capitalists. The western capitalists are exploiting the Indian workforce by making them do the international standard work in a much lower salary than their western counterpart doing the same job and explaining the differences in terms of the standard of living. Also this job brings along with it hatred that the westerners shower upon the call centre agents in India accusing them of having snatched their jobs and leaving them (westerners) unemployed. Hence, it is now time that the state should renew its role and make sure that the national and the state IT policies that enforce work and break schedules, retirement and medical benefits and investment opportunities, gives call centre employees firm ground to stand on when they make an argument for better conditions for work. A proportion of the profit of the BPO industry should be used for urban and rural development and not just for the infrastructural development of the call centre. Also the state should work together along with the non-governmental organisations and actively play crucial roles regarding issues of equal pay and just treatment of the employees and gender discrimination. They should also conduct workshops and seminars for the call centre employees educating them regarding their rights.

References

McMillin, Divya C. January 21, 2006. *'Outsourcing Identities: Call Centres and Cultural Transformation in India'*. Economic and Political Weekly.

Noronha, Ernesto and D'Cruz, Premilla. May 27, 2006.'Organising Call Centre Agents: Emerging Issues'. Economic and Political Weekly.

Ramesh, Babu P. January 31, 2004.*'Cyber Coolies in BPO: Insecurities and Vulnerabilities of Non-Standard Work'*. Economic and Political Weekly.

Upadhya, Carol. May 19, 2007. *'Employment, Exclusion and Merit in the Indian IT industry'*. Economic and Political Weekly.