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Call Centre as an Emerging Work Space – A Study of its Workers in Indian Context

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Abstract

An attempt is made in this paper to understand the different dimensions of the call centre as an emerging workspace. The paper provides a critical narrative of the profile of respondents (N=22), nature of work, work stress and impact on health, earnings, education, work-family interface and the socio-cultural alienation among the workers. It makes use of the respondents' experiences and their reflections on their experiences to understand the various dimensions and impact of work in call centres. The paper concludes that the patterns of work in this sector come close to the work conditions in settings aimed at mass production to meet the demands of forces at a global level with the underlying logic of treating the workers as commodities and to extract the maximum work from them. And these jobs are different from those from conventional work settings in terms of career and skill outcomes.

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Introduction

The growth in the Information and Technology (IT) sector has created numerous opportunities for employment for men as well as women in the so-called 'new age work spaces'. One of such emerging work spaces are call centres. Having grown manifold in size and matured in terms of service delivery capability and footprint over the past decade, the Indian BPO[1] industry is now favourably positioned to effect a five-fold growth by 2012 (NASSCOM-Everest Group, 2008:4). The NASSCOM-Everest (2008) India BPO study points out that growing at more than 35 percent over the past three years, the Indian BPO sector has grown to reach nearly US$ 11 billion in export revenues, employs more than 700,000 people, and accounts for more than 35 percent of the worldwide BPO market. The same report also projects that an expected five-fold growth in the sector can provide employment to about two million people by 2012 (p.1)[2]. In 2008, though the performance of the industry was affected by recessionary trends as clients cut their IT budgets, cancelled deals and delayed payments, the sector could maintain its double digit growth rate and remain net hirer. It could approximately contribute 6.1 per cent to the national GDP and accounted for almost 26 per cent share of total Indian exports (NASSCOM, 2009&2010). It was claimed that the call centre was an equal opportunity workspace without gender bias and that women account for 40 percent of 3,50,000 call centre employees in India (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007, p.158). But, according to Mirchandani (2004a) gender in call centre industry was overshadowed by the profoundly racialized nature of jobs between Indian workers and western customers which fundamentally structures transnational service work.

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[1] Stands for Business Process Outsourcing and Call centre is a part of BPO sector.
[2] Since NASSCOM is the trade group which predominantly represents the India's IT-BPO industry, its data is mentioned.

In this era of increased globalization, as only a few products and services are produced solely at one location, work is globally distributed where organizations from around the world contribute expertise and services to the production of goods and services (Kumar, Van Fenema, and Von Glinow, 2009). The emerging bridging technologies such as IT, transportation etc., have enabled such forms of interdependency and coordination which have given rise to the new workplaces such as call centres. It is in this context, an attempt is made in the present article to understand the various dimensions of the call centre as an emerging workspace. I shall describe in Section I of this article, the major dimensions of work at the call centre followed by Section II which discusses the method and limitations of the study especially pertaining to the sample size. Section III presents the results comprising of the rich qualitative data collected to compensate the difficulties in accessing adequate sample for study in conjunction with findings from other studies. The reflections are summarized in Section IV.

I

A call centre is a focal point for web-based customer transaction, e-mail management and conventional phone calls. It is a mode of delivery of service supplied at arm's length with the buyer and seller staying in their respective locations. Call centres were among the earliest BPO services to be outsourced to India due to the prolonged economic slowdown in the US during the early part of the millennium (Dossani and Panagariya, 2005). Though outsourcing of these jobs is a sensitive issue in America[3] (Cohen and El-Sawad, 2007), it must be remembered that the jobs outsourced to India were 'the most routinised, well documented, repetitive, high stress ones' which are least preferred by western workers (Chithelen, 2004; Mokhasi, 2009).

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[3] Another example is the recent controversial decision by the US government putting a cap on the number of H1 and L1 visas for Indian IT Professionals and increasing the visa fees in the name of protecting the jobs of US to be outsourced to Indian IT industry (Rai, 2010).

In contrast to work in other workspaces, work at call centres tend to carry certain extreme features relating to the workforce and its characteristics, nature of job, work stress and impact on health, work-family interface, changes in identity and values and so on.

Nature of Job

Generally, these jobs though substandard to that of global standards carry an attractive pay package and look lucrative compared to local pay scales (Chithelen, 2004). College graduates are highly sought after for Customer Service Representative (CSR) positions for their eagerness to learn and their aggressiveness to sell (Dossani and Panagariya, 2005; McMillin, 2006: 238). The employees work under a great deal of stress as work in these centres involves shift system under highly structured work conditions with incentives attached to evaluation of performance (Ramesh, 2004; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006). Indian call centres providing service to overseas customers have to generally operate during the day time hours of those countries. This has resulted in the so called 'colonization with time' (Adam, 2002: 21). As such, these workers are required to work during night – the natural time for rest and sleep. This throws their physical balance out of gear as they work against the biological clock while on night duty.

Work and Well Being

Moreover, work in the call centres has several implications for the health of the workers and a profound influence on different dimensions of their family life. It is reported that call centre workers working under these conditions suffer from digestion related problems and other physical ailments such as eye and head strain, back ache, and spondylitis (Singh and Pandey 2005; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006; McMillin, 2006). The interpersonal relationship disturbances and stress in the work place causes a sense of loneliness, depression,

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and problems related to anxiety. The stress at the work place is caused by organization of work and control, modes of surveillance, job insecurity and so on. The work-related demands such as automatic call distribution, use of script based agent's response, performance monitoring with specially designed software are some of the stressors. How the above processes engender work-related stress has been meticulously described in several studies (Ramesh, 2004; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009: 72-110). Besides, the jobs in the call centres include risk of traveling at night, discrimination at work place, and stigma due to the adoption of life style contrary to the existing social norms and values.

Work, Identity and Values

Empirical evidence about the experiences of call centre employees indicate that the employees are not just units of economic productivity but are people who alter their routines and rhythms in order to embed themselves in this global work space (McMillin, 2006; Bhatt et.al., 2005). According to McMillin (2006), the liberalized Indian call centre industry makes specific demands on its work force, regardless of skill level: an ability to withstand long hours of monotonous work, respond quickly to orders and to undergo certain transformations to adapt to the work place environment, which could mean a change in accent, diction, sleep cycle, and work place identity (p.235).

There is also evidence (Cohen and El-Sawad, 2007; Upadhya, 2008) to show how the relationships between the Indian and Western employees in this work context is posited in terms of 'us' and 'them' with western colleagues talking about Indian employees as incompetent, childlike subordinates in need of close monitoring – reflecting Said's (1978) concept of orientalism depecting the notion of East and West as cultural artifacts and of the East as a construction of the West. Therefore, it is no misnomer if these workers are called "cyber coolies" and "global proletariat" in "international sweat shops"

in the new economic order (Bidwai quoted in Mirchandani, 2004b, McMillin, 2006, and Ramesh, 2004) where the employees in a developing country work for the developed world at ten times lower wage rates compared to their counterparts in the developed countries (Batt, Doellgast, Kwon and Agarwal, 2005; Budhwar et al, 2006; Dossani and Kenney, 2003). Also, "on a global scale, developing countries offer low real estate, labour and infrastructure costs, making them prime targets of call centre location" (McMillin, 2006: 237).

Another important debate that gripped the BPO industry is regarding the issues of the unionization of call centre workers (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006 and 2009). Though some efforts have been made in this direction, the sector largely remains inaccessible for union formation mostly due to reasons such as prevailing labour market conditions, lack of maturity because of being a young work force, poor awareness regarding the concept of unionization, organizational strategies in the construction of employees identity, professionalism, and superior image of work in call centres (Sandhu, 2006).

The next important dimension is the clash between local culture and the new western identities acquired by the call centre employees. The entry of call centres into Indian work space, introducing western norms and values causing transformation of the Indian identities of workers in a subtle way has been well-documented (McMillin, 2006; Ramesh, 2004). Upadhya (2008: 102) explains that 'as capital seeks new sites of investment and new markets, it invokes, plays upon, appropriates, and transforms pre-existing cultural tropes and images, creating and recreating new forms of cultural difference and social identities'. The superior image of work and workplace ambience were aggressively promoted to draw educated and fun-loving youngsters from the urban middle class, who are fascinated by western ways of living and modern work environments' (Ramesh, 2008; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009: 150-154). According to Sandhu (2006), 'A BPO job for the new middle class is a way of leaving India, without ever leaving

India physically'. In India after IT boom, the most sought after and valued employment is that of a 'software engineer.' For the persons who were not "lucky enough" to find entry into this occupation, 'but desperately aspired for the pleasures of western life as shown on MTV or Channel V, the best place to be was in an Indian …call centre' (Mokhasi, 2009: xvii). Given the fact that nearly 70 percent of the work force belongs to the 20-25 years age group from middle class, this makes a big difference. Sadly, the trajectories of growth projected for BPO industry display little concern for its impact on these social and cultural dimensions of the lives of its work force.

Of late, there is a change in the projected image of work in a call centre. While a decade back the IT, HR professionals sold a stereotype of call centre jobs as 'fun loving – high living young workers' camouflaging work as fun at the Call Centre workplace (Call Centres, 2005), now, there is a change in this projected image because of subsequent cultural backlash especially when middle class parents were ambivalent about their wards going to these work places as depicted in different media (Bhagat, 2005; Mokhasi, 2009). As of late, they are showcasing how these jobs are helping middle income youth lift their families across the social class, and how their earnings are used for supporting families and their needs – thus trying to change the lenses through which public viewed these workers so far (Rai, 2009b).

In retrospect, the review suggests that the features such as the workforce characteristics (semiskilled, poor unionization), nature of job (stress, job insecurity, monitoring, repetitiveness), impact on health, work environment and changes in identity and values are found to be almost close to the descriptions of work conditions in settings aimed at mass production to meet the demands and directives of forces at a global level (Patel, 2011; Ngai, 2010). The last two features may appear to be unique to the call centre. Even though, the work place ambience created by the 'state of the art

technology' is quite impressive, the presence of other exploitative work-related features mentioned above evidently makes the workplace more an 'international sweatshop' or a glorified 'panopticon' than a dignified worker–centric workplace of a conventional work setting. Thus, even though the physical work conditions are different, the underlying logic of treating the workers as commodities is the same. This brings several other questions to the fore – What is the nature of work environment in a call centre, what impact does it have on the family life and well being of its workers? What career progression do they have as compared to other conventional careers such as law, teaching, management or medicine? What cultural and identity challenges these people are facing? and so on. The present study addresses some of these questions.

II
Research Method

Though Visakhapatnam is one of the fastest growing cities in Asia and the second largest in Andhra Pradesh, unlike other cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad or Kolkata, the software professional activity started here much later. This study was taken up in the year 2007-08, around 3 years after the establishment of a call centre as first of its kind in the city. Thus, the call centre where the present study was taken up can be said to have ushered in the city the seeds of a culture specific to BPO industry. This Centre was started in Visakhapatnam by one of the World's largest banking and financial services institutions which has an international network of about 9,500 offices located in 76 countries and territories spread across the Asia-Pacific, Europe, the America, Middle East, and Africa. As part of its services, the company's global resourcing in India employs over 10,000 professionals across 5 centres at Hyderabad, Visakhapatnam, Bengaluru and Kolkata. They provide services to customers in UK, US, European Union, Middle East, and Asia-Pacific countries. The

Centre at Visakhapatnam comprises of 1,84,000 sq. ft. of office space and can accommodate 1649 desks at a time and provides its services to thousands of customers through its 2034 employees. By the time the study was taken up, i.e in 2007-08, it could be assumed that the industry and its workers might have come to terms with the social and physical infrastructural realities of the city. Keeping this in view the present study was taken up to explore some of the aspects of life of the call centre employees as affected by the interface between work and family life, nature of job, health hazards faced by them, and changes in their life style in terms of existing value system. The name of the call centre, from which employees were interviewed for this study, has been kept confidential.

The specific objectives of the study were to:
- Ascertain the perceptions of the call centre workers about the nature of the job and their work environment
- Elicit information about their family relations and work-family interface
- Explore the impact of work environment on their health and well being, and
- Identify changes, if any, in the identity and values of the workers as compared to the local culture

Sample Respondents

Generation of adequate sample size is one of the major difficulties encountered by the researchers studying call centres and other IT enabled services. For example, Fuller and Narasimhan's (2008) study was conducted on a 'small and haphazard sample' of 19 female and 22 male staff of 6 big software companies and several small firms. They regretted their inability to carry participant observation at workplace because of security instructions (p.193). Similarly, Vasavi's (2008) study depended on data collected from 40 informants and

their family members, and discussions with the counselors. She further expressed difficulty in having detailed and follow up data from key sources (workers) as 'many of them were hesitant to provide information (p.229). Similarly, Noronha and D'Cruz's study depended on 59 agents from call centres in Mumbai and Bengaluru (2009:66). Mirchandani (2004b) studied 7 men and 6 women call centre workers, in addition to managers at three call centres and representatives of three agencies that provide training for workers. Altogether her study covered 19 respondents (p.358).

Considering the difficulties involved in accessing respondents from the call centre under study, a snowball sampling method was used to generate the sample, from at least 4-5 different individuals to begin with, to get a heterogeneous group. A woman research scholar from the Department of Psychology, Andhra University, who had earlier worked for some time as a voice trainer in the call centre, was hired to take up the interviews for the study. Her background was of some help in obtaining names to initiate the snowball sampling. During data collection phase, there were difficulties in fixing appointments with them, as many of them were found to be spending their day time either with family members or sleeping and therefore reluctant to spare their time for the interview. The other difficulty was the resistance of the respondents to be interviewed. One respondent who was approached by the interviewer told her that the workers at the call centre were specifically asked by the communications manager not to talk about their work either with media or with any one in the 'outside world'. As the study progressed, at one point of time, new respondents stopped answering the calls of the research investigator, possibly for this reason. As a result, out of the 40 people contacted, only 22 (men = 9 and women = 13) could be interviewed. An interview schedule (with both close ended and open ended questions) was used to conduct the interviews face to face with the respondents, with the exception of 10 respondents with whom the interviews were conducted on telephone in view of the distances to

be covered and their work timings. A number of open-ended questions were included which enabled the researcher to have access to rich information from the respondents.

Respondents with at least one year experience in the call centre from where the study sample was drawn were included in the sample. However, the criterion of minimum experience was relaxed to 8 months if the respondent had related work experience in another call centre preceding this job.

III
Results and Discussion

In this section, the findings are discussed under five broad heads – profile of the respondents, nature of job, work-family interface, health and mental well being, and changes in identity and values. An important limitation of the sample (N=22) is that it may not reflect the diversity of characteristics of the nearly 2000 employees working in the call centre at the time of the study. However, in spite of its smallness, the sample did not deviate much from the actual workforce composition of the Centre at the time of the study.

Profile of the respondents

Of the 22 respondents studied, majority (n=13) were women. Ten respondents were in the age group of 20-25 years, one respondent was of 45 years age. The mean age was 27.5 years and the median was 26 years. Majority of the respondents (n=14) were Hindus and the remaining were from Christian, Muslim and Sikh communities. Ten respondents were from backward castes and the rest belonged to other castes. There was no one from SC/ ST category. Nine respondents were from Visakhapatnam and the rest were from places such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai, Kolkata and Mumbai. The educational profile indicates graduation (n=12), and post-graduation

(n=10). In terms of their positions, only two people who were interviewed figured at 2nd and 5th level in the hierarchy of the Call centre while the rest of them were in positions varying between 6th to 8th level in the hierarchy. Of the 14 unmarried respondents (7 are men), 12 reported as staying with parents. Out of the 8 married respondents, 6 were women of whom 5 had children. The unmarried respondents staying with parents reported that most of the household responsibilities were taken care of by their parents.

Respondents reported drawing salaries ranging from Rs.10, 000/- to Rs.25,000/- per month, with some (n=9) in the range of Rs.10,000/- to Rs.15,000/- per month. More than half (n=12) were from families having a monthly income of Rs. 20 thousand to Rs. 50 thousand with parents, mainly fathers working as either government servants or executives in companies. Of the remaining sample, 6 reported that their parents' income ranged between Rs. 50 thousand to one lakh a month. While 5 have working mothers, 16 had their mothers as home makers. Almost all of them reported coming from a nuclear family background with a minimum of one earning member in the family apart from the respondent. While there seems to be a consensus in family decision making, male members either father or husband seem to have a decisive say in financial matters indicating the patriarchal nature of the family setting of the respondents. Thus, on the whole the respondents were young graduates, mostly unmarried, with more than half of them from outside of Visakhapatnam. They were from well-to do backgrounds and none were the sole earners in the family. Similar characteristics of the workforce were reported in other studies on call centres (Upadhya and Vasavi, 2006, Ramesh, 2004).

Nature of Job

The work at call centre comprises of various aspects such as night shifts, performance monitoring, abusive and racial comments, routine and drudgery which add to the negative dimension. However, on the

brighter side, such a job in this industry provides a life style which many middle class youth could not otherwise dream of. Compared to other sectors, "they are well paid, well dressed, had credit cards, enjoyed their weekends, and visited discos and pubs..." (Noronha and D'cruz, 2006). Though a typical worker in an Indian call centre has 14 years of education (on an average two years of college) compared to 13.3 years of a worker in U.S. in-house establishment, in respect of compensation, in-house centres' workers receive 90 per cent more pay than workers in an Indian call centre (Batt, et.al., 2005).

In the present study, nearly half of the respondents reported having been employed in the call centre for at least one year. The same number mentioned having work experience in other organizations but not necessarily in a call centre. For instance 3 women respondents were teaching before opting for a call centre job. Half of the respondents were handling credit card related calls and the remaining were handling services such as Banking, Insurance, Home loans, back office process, and retail and non-voice card services. In spite of drawing an attractive salary by the Indian standards, majority (n=17) did not report having a promotion in their jobs during the last year and felt stagnated. This appeared to be true of call centre jobs even elsewhere (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009: 51; McPhail, 2002). They also reported working for long hours. Officially they were expected to work for 9 hours a day in the call centre. But, they put in more number of hours, as one respondent put it:

"Officially 9 hours but unofficially it is 13 hours".

An overwhelming majority of the respondents (n=20) quoted night shifts and long working hours as the aspects they disliked about the job.[4]

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[4] It must be remembered that because "India is between 9-12 hours ahead of United States and United Kingdom and around 4-9 hours ahead of South-east Asia and

There is also another aspect which the workers dislike in the job. Seven (7) respondents expressed their unhappiness about the cut-throat competition and jealousy among their colleagues. In the words of one respondent:

> "They (the colleagues) ditch you for their career advancement."

Favouritism by the supervisors and the need to keep the supervisors in good humour was indicated[5]. Also, it is made clear to the workers that their vertical mobility on the job ladder is linked to their healthy relations with the management more than to their performance ranking (Ramesh, 2008). Reflecting this reality, one respondent of the present study said:

> "Butter him (the supervisor) up and take him out for dinner and so on, then only you get your promotion."

But slowly they seem to get used to this situation.

> "Initially I did not like it. Later on I got used to it"

This is also an important aspect to be taken care of, as the work of the employees is monitored with a view to managing commitment and performance (Rubery, Carroll, Loke, Grogulis, and Earnshaw, 2004). As pointed out by Sisson and Storey (2000) individual performance appraisal development policies are advocated with a dual purpose of motivating and monitoring employee performance. However, as one respondent puts it "there are good parameters, but lack

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Australia" (McMillin, 2006: 239), the night shifts in call centres are developed to match relevant time zones and the respondents had to work in night shifts to serve these overseas clients.

[5] This may be because the career opportunities though available are limited in number and scope because of the specificity of organizational structure of call centres (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009 and Budhwar, Varma, Singh and Dhar, 2006). This would lead to competition between the agents. Studies (for ex. Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009) have indicated that cultivating a network of superiors was a critical factor and to be in the 'good looks' of the supervisor.

implementation" and the whole process of performance appraisal misfires! As the criteria for monitoring performance are highly subjective, they create much stress.[6]

Abusive and racial comments. The respondents were asked whether they came across racial comments while handling calls of customers. Fourteen (14) of the 22 respondents reported in affirmative. According to them it happened at least 1 to 10 times as recently as one month back. The content of the comment was mostly insulting remarks about and use of profane language toward Indians. Also, it consisted of refusal to speak to an Indian or saying firmly to connect him/her to a western agent. Some of the comments of the customers with racist nuances reported were:

> "Indians won't serve properly.'
>
> "Indians might not be able to serve me", and
>
> "I don't want to speak to an Indian."

The experience of respondents of the present study showed that they received racial comments from customers belonging to Europe, Asia Pacific region, and to the Middle East as well. According to Mirchandani (2004c, p.193), the consequences of customer resistance to the depersonalized customer service they receive are borne primarily by frontline service workers. These workers are situated in the context of subcontracting relations with in which 'work providing nations' hold far greater power than 'labour providing' ones. Consequently, racist attitudes towards immigrants and foreigners merge with notions of the incompetence of service provision to give rise to customer resistance which often take the form of racialized anger. Appadurai (1996) feels that in the contemporary global capitalism, customer is the most important social actor in business

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[6] This is because the basis for the agents' promotions remains unclear. Visible criteria like objectivity and merit linked performance are dominated by subjective assessment of superiors. Thus, call centre workers going by organizations' specified criteria were baffled by promotion decisions which were not in keeping with stated norms (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009:155).

arrangements and the anonymity of phone service allows the exercise of considerable power by customers. Though Appadurai (1996) speaks only about American customers, in the context of call centres in India, this differential power between offshore customers and Indian service providers is often expressed in the form of racial expletives. However, it may be said that this anonymity even applies to services rendered through internet chat. As shown in the example[7] (Box 1), the relationship itself is susceptible for the customer to exercise such power irrespective of race or location of the service provider. In this instance, only half of the clients were defined as courteous. Knowledge of race and location may make it more specific and worse.

Box-1

Excerpt from a chat session

Daphne (Site operator): Hello, how may I help you?

Devi (Author): I was chatting…to solve my problem and it was rectified. I want to say thank you. Please place this on record.

Daphne: I will, Devi and is there anything else I may help you with today?

Author: Thank you. May I ask you a few more questions?

Daphne: Yes Devi, what is it?

Author: This is out of academic interest I am asking as I am a researcher doing research on call centre and ICT. From which location are you responding now?

Daphne: We are in West Palm Beach, Florida Devi…

Author: That is great. Could you tell me during your shift of one day how many chats do you handle and of which how many (in percentage) would you approximately define as polite and courteous with you.

Daphne: Okay, it might be more or less 40 to 50 chats.

Author: and how many of them could you define as courteous?

Daphne: Half of them.

Author: Thank you for your kind response. The information will be useful to me.

Daphne: Thank you for stopping by to chat…

June 21, 2009 – 9.28 a.m. (IST)

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[7] The author of this article, once after receiving guidance to solve a software problem pertaining to his computer through internet chat, asked a few more questions to the site operator.

How do the workers react to such comments? Elaborate training is imparted and guidelines are offered to the workers specifying the appropriate emotional reaction expected of them to such comments. For instance, during the period of their training, workers are told to ignore such behaviour of the customers and show a pleasant, enthusiastic, helpful mode while dealing with them (Rose and Wright, 2005). According to Mirchandani (2004a) 'call centre workers are taught to emulate two roles during training programs to successfully provide customer service – mothering and servitude'. Also management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Leidner, 1999: 82) is part of the duty of the worker. They are held accountable for their emotions (Hochschild, 1983) and are often forced to express emotions they do not feel (such as being friendly or happy) or suppress emotions that they genuinely feel (such as anger or frustration). This can lead to feelings of emotional dissonance and thereby result in anxiety and burn-out (Poondla, 2006). Thus, workers are often required to perform *emotional labour* as part of their jobs (Mirchandani, 2004c) and racial overtones of callers are expected to be handled with a professional finesse (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006 & 2009).

In spite of the training and advice to 'ignore' the racist and abusive behaviour of the customers and being taught to speak sweetly over telephone, the abuse from clients or customers do depress them (Beena quoted in Krishna Mohan, 2007). Many a times, these remarks, as expressed by one respondent of the present study: '*touch their heart and hurt them*'. But they they have to handle the call or reroute the call to their counter parts in UK. However, at times, when they can not remain cool and indifferent, they tend to vent up their anger, though in a restrained manner. As one respondent puts it:

"I switch off the mike and curse the customer."

Work-Family Interface

The work family interface of a call centre worker is another important aspect to be understood. This is because in transnational call centres, workers increasingly become detached from the spaces of social life such as their households or communities (Mirchandani, 2004b)[8]. There can be periods of total isolation since family lives get disrupted and contacts between family members break-up (Ponduri, 2007).

In the present study, many respondents felt that they could not spend time with their families. For them, there was a sense of lack of connectedness with the current time. As pointed out by Mirchandani (2004b), workers are detached from the spaces of social life such as markets, households and transportation links, which occur only during the day. An expression of one respondent of the study sums up this exclusion exceptionally well:

> "We work when the whole world sleeps and we sleep when the whole world is busy with activity! I feel excluded and isolated".

More than half of the respondents of the present study (n=13) reported that working during night, while their family routines continued during the day, was the most significant drawback of the job which is also supported by other studies (McMillin, 2006; Adams, 2002:17). In one of the Studies (Noronha and D'cruz, 2006), the call centre employees stated that "they had not been or had a meal with other family members for weeks on end. When they were awake the family slept and when the family worked, they slept." In the words of a respondent of the present study:

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[8] As call centre workers work during night shifts and sleep during the day time, this leaves them with little opportunity to be connected with social networks outside their workplace and as a result life balance was seriously affected (Noronha and D'cruz, 2009).

> "Family life, especially when wife works in the morning, is seriously affected. Hardly any communication happens (between us). Basically no time for each other during the week".

Another respondent said:

> "It looks odd - me walking in and out of home at odd times."

It was pointed out (Ramesh, 2008) that odd work timings usually lead to disturbances in personal and social life. There are problems related to maintaining friendships, keeping in touch with relatives, attending to household duties and finding time for family.

The impact of night shifts seems to be more on women, particularly married women. There is much literature on the stress women experience in dual earner families where both the spouses are employed and as such these women have to perform respective roles both at the work place and home (For e.g. Ramu, 1989, Chakrabortty, 1978, Vijayalakshmi and Devi Prasad, 1999). The stress seems compounded in the case of married women call centre workers. As expressed by two of the married women respondents, one having children and the other yet to conceive.

> "When he (husband) comes home I go to work. Care of the children is the casuality. I am not able to provide needed care to my children."

> "I am not planning to conceive. Doctor says it is not advisable to work at night during pregnancy."

Another dimension of the work is the difficulty to manage the disjunction between customers' timings and the workers' local time. While these workers are in conflict with local time, they are required

to organize their lives in accordance with the holidays and celebrations of the customers, mostly US and UK.

Therefore, the conflict between local and global time always has a significant impact on the families (Mirchandani, 2004b: 364). Sometimes, they have to work even on the days of important Indian festivals.

Majority of the respondents (n=19) reported that their festival days clash with work days as the American and British holidays do not coincide with the Indian festivals. They try to deal with this situation by working during American/ British holidays and take leave on the days of Indian festivals. However, this arrangement may not work for all the workers all the time. According to one respondent of the study, out of the total workers, only a few may be able to avail such type of compensatory leaves. One married respondent says: 'my wife has Indian holidays. When I have holidays, I shall be the only guy sitting at home.' Thus, many of the respondents find no time for family, for outings or to take care of kids. They reported missing meeting friends and relatives because of night shifts. Though two weekly holidays are given '*most of that time is spent to catch up with the lost sleep.*' Sometimes even they may not be able to sleep uninterrupted as disturbances from friends and family during the day may disturb their sleep.

Lastly, in a country like India where traditional images regarding role of women still prevail call centre jobs, especially for women, seem to carry stigma. One of the local male respondents of the study mentioned that:

> 'Girls working in a BPO have low marriage prospects'.
>
> 'People comment badly about girls working in call centres mostly due to night shifts'.

Health and Well Being

Work in Call centres can lead to stress which is of two types: timings-related stress and work-related stress. Firstly, having to work during the night has serious implications for the health and well being of the workers, though unlike in other big cities, there is no risk of traveling in the night because Visakhapatnam is still a small city and distance between the call centre and workers' residences are short. But, one of the implications of working during the night is its negative impact on health. The timings of the night shifts reported in the present study are: 1-30 AM to 10-30 AM, 2 AM to 11 AM, 11-30 PM to 8-30 AM, 9-30 PM to 6-30 AM and 6-30 PM to 3-30 AM, and 10.30 PM to 7-30 AM. Of the 22 respondents interviewed, 20 reported having night shifts. Majority of them said that night shifts did disturb their normal routine by affecting their sleep pattern. Working in the night for a prolonged period disturbs the biological clock and employees suffer from 'shift mal-adaptation syndrome.[9] Most of the respondents of the present study reported back-ache, eye strain, headache and indigestion, overweight, and underweight as some of the consequences of disturbance in the biological clock. Similar observations were made in other studies (McMillin, 2006 and Singh and Pandey, 2005). The impact of night shifts on the psychological well being is also reported elsewhere (Rahman, 2007; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006).

Secondly, regarding work-related stress, respondents in the present study experienced stress in the work place because of 'targets to be met', 'hectic work', 'many calls to be handled at the same time', and 'being seated before the system for so long (which) is quiet taxing and boring.' The stress is manifested in both physical and psychological symptoms. Another dimension that adds stress to the

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[9] With sleep and activity levels reversed, the biological clock is confused as a result (of) which a person faces various health problems" (Ponduri, 2007: 23).

work at call centre is interaction with customers. According to Gutek (1997) the interaction is of two types – 'encounters', and 'relationships'. While relationships depend on long term interactions and lead to trust, mutual understanding, and build emotional connections, encounters are anonymous, one time interactions. The call centre workers while having 'encounters' with the customers are expected to behave as if they have 'relationships'. This is one stress factor.

Further, linking performance with incentives / punitive actions also forces the workers to experience stress continuously. For example, the continuous appraisal and monitoring by supervisors is a stressor. Some of the respondents were not happy with the way the appraisals were done. "Partiality of the supervisors," "promoting people with no talent", "politics at higher management level for promotion" are some of the reasons given by the respondents for this unhappiness. According to the respondents, though ratings (performance ratings) were shown to them, contentions over the ratings were not dealt with properly. The general belief among them was that their promotions depend on their relationship with their superior rather than their performance rating. The respondents of the present study felt that the parameters for rating were good but lack in implementation. According to one respondent:

> "Different packages for different people. Salary packages are not balanced. Lots of bargaining".

These situations lead to frustration and anger. One worker expressed his reaction:

> "I will see how long it goes. After that I will quit. That is what I tell myself".

However, as pointed out by Noronha and D'cruz (2009), when these agents realized that their vertical movement was constrained by subjective evaluation process, they sought to further their career growth by moving to other organizations within the ITES[10]-BPO sector. But the situation was no different in these organizations compared to the place they had left. Sadly, this realization dawns on them only after working for some time in the new organization.

Changes in Identity and Values

As earlier studies (for e.g. Mirchandani, 2004c; Ramesh, 2004) have indicated that call centre employees were required to adopt western pseudonyms, mask their location when speaking to the customers and to change their accent, the respondents in the present study were asked about these aspects. Interestingly, all the respondents of the study replied that they were not required to change their names or mark location but are only required to have fluency in English and a neutral voice – stripping away as much as possible indicators of their local Indian contexts. This seems the current trend in the call centres (McMillin, 2006: 237). As pointed out by Rai (2009a).

> Even as recently as 2005 … American and British clients primarily demanded agents with good accents. They did not want callers to… discover that customer service had been offshored to India…Representing a big shift, customers of offshore back office companies these days are accepting of agents who speak in neutral accents and can be understood by their callers.
>
> Callers too are used to the idea that the person at the other end of the phone may be in India and are accommodating of Indian English… Accent training which was once... a big chunk of a call centre workers' education has become just another module in the making of an Indian call center agent.

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[10] Information Technology Enabled Services

Similarly, one witnesses a significant change in the values and habits of the workers in call centre over a period of time. A glance at the responses of the respondents shows the changing trend. Most of the respondents (n=16) reported changes in their dressing style, food habits and spending patterns. Eight respondents reported increased use of alcohol and other beverages. Going to pubs after joining the call centre was also reported and all men and seven unmarried women respondents reported attending parties on week ends. Of late, quite a few pubs and expensive restaurants have sprung up in Visakhapatnam city to meet the requirements of such employees. Because of their relatively high salaries and young age, many of them evidently turn to expensive spending patterns.

Another example of their liberal values is their attitude toward the 'live-in relationships' among their colleagues at the call centre. Thirteen respondents (9 women and 4 men) mentioned that they were aware of live-in relationships among some of their colleagues and a majority (n=7) said that it was 'OK'. According to them:

> 'it is up to them, if they want to follow western culture, it is not a crime'(a woman respondent)

> 'The present world has changed. We are in the 21st century. In the beginning there were some problems but now people are getting used to it' (a woman respondent).

> 'Individual freedom, everybody has a right to live their life in their own way. It depends on the two, their family atmosphere and outcome' (a male respondent).

Also a note of ambivalence is seen - a woman respondent said:

> 'It is their wish but I feel a little awkward. Anyway, it's their personal life. But personally I am against it'.

Some respondents from cities like Delhi and Kolkata, remarked that the 'locals among their colleagues were conservative.' Evidently, there is a difference in the perception between how the 'local' and 'outsiders' view these value stances. For example, one local male respondent said:

> 'I appreciate the girls of Vizag (Visakhaptanam). (They are) not so outgoing. Culture here is vitiated by those from Kolkata and Delhi'.

Actually the proportion of girls and boys who enter into such relationships may not be very high. However, 'it is the visibility of the few who do and the strong disapproval that it invokes is the basis for the widespread view that women working in call centres are changed by the culture and money paid to them in these settings' (Vasavi, 2008). This shows that there exists a gap between the local culture and the western culture prevailing in the call centre and the local culture is yet to catch up with it! Here is a different opinion:

> "For middle and lower middle class conservative families to give up their young daughters… (and) wives… to a night trade can only mean that such a trade is extremely lucrative… The cultural transformation of call centre employees then occurs not just in individual appropriations of western accents, clothes, and interpersonal behaviour, but also in *family structures and norms. Young females claiming the night as a time of work are no longer derogated but glorified."[11]* McMillin (2006: 239)

This transformation seems to have gone even beyond family to the larger society. When Haryana State Government has decided that

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[11] Italics added.

women working in BPOs at night were not safe, there was a hue and cry in the media labeling it as "moral policing" (Buster, 2005).

What one needs to recognize is that there is a cultural ambivalence about the work in call centre and the responses from the present study show that there are two cultures prevailing and that there is a clash.

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IV

Reflections and conclusion

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Though changes in the economic systems bring new work spaces into existence, call centre as a new phenomenon, especially in the developing countries, has brought in a new work culture, work place identity, and by altering the nature of social and economic resources has been affecting the economies and social relations in societies in significant ways (Basant and Rani, 2004; Larner, 2002). At the same time the new work space has also brought out a number of issues relating to the nature of work, its impact on health, earnings, education, identity, and a socio-cultural alienation among the group of workers, which are equally difficult to ignore. The present study is an effort to throw some light on the inner life and perceptions of employees of the industry in the context of the issues mentioned above. The major discussion of the paper is divided into four broad themes which have emerged from the findings of the study as well as from the review of literature.

The first is related to the close similarities between the underlying patterns of work at Call Centres and the work organizations and conditions that prevailed during the post industrial economies (old economies) or for that matter description of work which are related to any mass production of goods such as assembly lines to meet global demand. The features such as the work force characteristics, job design and work stress, monitoring and control over the performance

of workers, long hours of work, impact on health and well being, etc. sound so similar - whether it is the era of old economy or new global information economy. The state of the art technology of the call centre did not change much the underlying logic of treating the workers as commodities and to extract the maximum work from them (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009:72-110). It has in fact enabled the management to extend control over their labour through more subtle forms of surveillance and culture management. For example, call centre organizations are found to be using a tightly controlled, cost-efficient and customer-oriented procedures resulting in standardized and monotonous work environment which has got this work setting the name 'new age sweatshop' and the workers to be called as 'cyber coolies'. The unit of work may be a call from a customer or a car or a raincoat – the logic is the same! Study after study on call cenres have indicated a similar work regime. Here, let us have a look at some description of the work conditions of workers which are illustrative of this strong line of similarity:

> 'During phases when call volumes are high or targets were not being met, agents were made to stretch such that they had to forfeit or shorten breaks and /or work beyond shift hours or on weekly/public holidays (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009:75)'.

> 'The workers are subjected to a work regime that is based on a high degree of computer-telephony integration. The use of such technology along with standard scripts allows firms to keep 'free time' to bare minimum (Ramesh, 2008:245)'.

> 'As punishment for minor mistakes, workers are also asked to work overtime without compensation. "I am supposed to produce one unit of work in 40 seconds. If this target is not met even by a low margin, I have to work two to

three hours extra", rued a worker' (Singh and Sawhney, 2011:13)'.

In a raincoat factory in Guangdong, China:

> 'Yu Caihua's job was to attach collars to the raincoats. She was paid 1.8 yuan per 100 coats, and she could do between a 1,000 and 1,500 a day, depending on how energetic she felt. One month she earned as much as 600 yuan…These piece rates were not stable: the boss would lower them if we did them more quickly. In May, for example, he lowered the rate for attaching hoods from 1.5 yuan per 100 to 1.2 (Ngai, 2010:170)'.

Thus, study after study on call centres have indicated the work regime similar to the examples mentioned above.

Then why work in the call centres is still attractive in spite of the many 'limitations' of the job, and in the case of women - the stigma attached to their work in call centres? Bringing Gramsci theory into focus, Strinati (1995:166) points out: 'subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group neither because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated but because they have reasons of their own'. In this case the reason seems to be the attraction, "for the immediate material rewards it brings… workers are aware of the draw backs of the system, but also recognize that equally lucrative alternatives are almost non-existent" (McMillin, 2006: 241)

The Second issue is about the impact on values and identities of workers. We cannot brush aside the repeated findings indicating abuse of workers' rights, stressful work, entry of liberal values, cultural transformation – as simply arguments put forward by anti-call centre stance. For a majority of public in India, call centres are still symbols of neo-liberal economies of developed countries. As such,

there exists a divide between the local economies and culture, and the industry, though the degree of difference may vary from city to city. Respondents of the present study attested to this fact. This pattern is explicit in call centre's work as compared to other conventional work settings such as medicine, nursing, or teaching and this pattern is actively promoted as one of the attributes of the work. Moreover, in these settings, unlike others, the notions of dignity of work, equality, justice, and freedom of expression do not often figure or valued.

The third theme is about the lack of career progression and the semiskilled and repetitive nature of the work at call centres which makes these jobs come close to the characteristics of workplaces where the work conditions are more akin to those in an assembly line. The debate around the nature and role of skills in call centre work finally vindicates the fact that the skills acquired in this sector are not often required outside this workplace. The other fact is that there is no career progression in the call centre jobs and therefore for most people it is a stopgap arrangement. Seen in this light, how should we interpret the projections of the NASSCOM – Everest Study (2008) about the possibility of creating 3 million work force in the BPO sector by the coming five years and about educating parents and approaching educational institutions to create specific education models that match the needs of the sector and to encourage young people to join BPO sector? Moreover, the HR professionals of this sector use different strategies to package these jobs for the educated youth, calling them as professional, though they do not possess the characteristics of a profession and placing emphasis on commitment at the cost of personal expense, all for the advantages of the organization (Ramesh, 2008).

Further, if we consider the number of women working in the BPO industry, it is on the increase. The researcher was also given to understand from the interviews with the workers that women were

more in number in the call centre where the present study was undertaken. These women employees were facing specific difficulties in relation to work and timings in this industry. It must be noted that these organizations operate round the clock, seven days of the week and 365 days of the year and employ women at all times. They are covered by the existing labour legislations with a few exemptions granted by some state governments in respect of Shops and Commercial Establishments Acts (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009: 45). Because of the closed nature of the organisation from public gaze, the nature of work practices and nightshifts open avenues for exploitation and abuse of women. As instances of such abuse and violence have been reported elsewhere (SDC, 2009; Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007, p.158-9), there is a definite need to take adequate precautions in this regard.

The Fourth issue is regarding the need for research and transparency. As these workplaces are widely seen as places for cultural transformation, exploitation, and objectification of human intellectual labour, they need careful probing and examination. However, there is still a veil of secrecy and impenetrability associated with the study of BPOs and in a majority of the instances research into these spaces is considered intrusive and researchers as 'outsiders' (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006). Almost all studies (For eg. Mirchandani, 2004b) except a few (Singh, 2005; N=100), have placed on record the difficulty of obtaining a reasonably adequate sample, besides mentioning other obstacles. This trend needs to be changed and the call centres should be made accessible for research.

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