Tradition and Modernity in Indian Call Centres: A Narrative Research Approach

par

(Brandon) Rama Vaidyanathan

Sciences de la gestion
Option : Management

Mémoire présenté en vue de l’obtention du grade de maîtrise ès sciences (M.Sc.)

mai, 2008
© (Brandon) Rama Vaidyanathan, 2008
AVIS DE CONFORMITÉ À LA POLITIQUE EN MATIÈRE D’ÉTHIQUE
DE LA RECHERCHE AVEC DES ÉTRES HUMAINS DE HEC MONTRÉAL

La présente atteste que le projet de recherche décrit ci-dessous a fait l'objet d'une évaluation en matière d'éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains et qu'il satisfait les exigences de notre politique en cette matière.

Titre du projet de recherche:
Lifestyle transitions of call centre employees in India: Towards a moral sociology of globalization

Chercheur principal:
Chercheur : Rama Vaidyanathan
Titre : Étudiant(e) Maîtrise
Service/Option : Management

Directeur : Linda Rouleau
Titre : Professeur(e) agrégé(e)
Service/Option : Management

Date de déclaration du projet au Comité d'éthique de la recherche: 
13 décembre 2006

Date d'approbation du projet: 
21 décembre 2006

Date de publication de l'avis:
21 décembre 2006

Céline Bareil, Présidente
Comité d'éthique de la recherche

École affiliée à
l'Université de Montréal
In Memoriam

William Stephen Brown
1978-2007
Abstract

Much attention has been paid in recent years to the offshore call centre industry that has been mushrooming all over India. Studies focused on the labour process emphasize how call centre employees work night-shifts and undergo accent-training for the sake of customers in the West, and researchers denounce such ‘locational masking’ and ‘linguistic imperialism.’ However, such views can tempt us to see call centre employees as passive victims colonized by a homogenizing capitalism which erodes local cultures. This effectively neglects the agency of these actors and their ‘critical capacity’ to make their own judgments on the impact of globalization on their lives.

Drawing on the frameworks of Boltanski, Thévenot and Chiapello, the present study examines in-depth narratives and evaluations of 20 call centre workers in Bangalore, in order to show how, for these workers: 1. call centre work, despite its negative consequences, is perceived as a liberation from certain traditional obstacles and limitations in Indian society, and 2. for the pursuit of important traditional goals. 3. Yet, these newfound developments also encourage traditional forms of oppression as well as ‘debased forms’ of certain traditional Indian ideals; and 4. consequently, employees aspire to certain modern values as a corrective of these distortions of tradition. These results provide evidence for why we should understand globalization as neither a homogenizing convergence, nor a ‘clash’ of tradition and modernity, but as a hybridizing phenomenon of ‘multiple modernities,’ where tradition and modernity can be at times mutually enabling as well as mutually constraining.

Key words: India, Offshoring, Call Centres, Narratives, Globalization, Culture, Multiple Modernities, Boltanski, Thévenot, Chiapello
Sommaire

L'émergence des centres d'appel en Inde, suite à l'externalisation des services à la clientèle des entreprises occidentales, est un phénomène qui a pris beaucoup d'ampleur dans les années récentes. Jusqu'à maintenant, la plupart des travaux scientifiques effectués sur ce phénomène soulignent que les employés des centres d'appel travaillent les nuits et doivent s'entraîner dans des accents étrangers pour servir des clients occidentaux— pratiques dénoncées au nom du «locational masking» et de «l'impérialisme linguistique». Ces travaux laissent à penser que les employés sont des victimes passives, colonisées par un capitalisme homogénéisant qui érode leur culture. Ainsi, ces travaux ne tiennent généralement pas compte de la capacité de ces acteurs de faire leurs propres jugements sur l'influence de la mondialisation dans leur vie.

La présente étude, en utilisant les cadres de Boltanski, Thévenot et Chiapello, examine le discours dans des récits de 20 personnes travaillant dans des centres d'appel de Bangalore en Inde. Les résultats montrent comment: 1. le travail dans les centres d'appel en Inde, malgré des effets pervers, est souvent perçu comme une libération face aux limites et contraintes que leur impose la société indienne; 2. cette libération permet à ces personnes de poursuivre des buts traditionnels importants; cependant, 3. le travail dans les centres d'appel encourage aussi des formes traditionnelles d'oppression et de distorsion de certains idéaux traditionnels (surtout dans la relation supérieur-subordonné); conséquemment, 4. les employés aspirent aux valeurs modernes (notamment, le professionnalisme) et les considère comme un correctif aux distorsions et corruptions caractérisant la société indienne traditionnelle.

Ainsi, cette étude démontre la nécessité de comprendre la relation tradition-modernité non pas comme une convergence pure, ni comme une divergence pure, mais plutôt comme un phénomène hybride de «modernités multiples».

Mots clés : Inde, externalisation, centre d'appel, narratives, mondialisation, culture, modernités multiples, Boltanski, Thévenot, Chiapello
# Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................. ii
Sommaire.............................................................. iii
Index of Tables and Figures....................................... vi
Preface................................................................. vii
Acknowledgements .................................................. xi

**Chapter 1: Introduction** ........................................ 1
   1.1. Tradition and Modernity.................................... 2
   1.2. Globalization and Culture............................... 6

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** ................................ 14
   2.1. Call Centres in the West ................................. 15
      2.1.1. Call Centre Labour Process ....................... 18
         a. Rationalization....................................... 18
         b. Flexibilization....................................... 19
      2.1.2. Impacts on employees............................... 20
   2.2. Offshore call centres in India......................... 21
      2.2.1. Labour Process in Indian Call Centres .......... 23
      2.2.2. Impacts on Indian Employees..................... 25
   2.3. Conclusion................................................. 28

**Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework and Methodology** ......... 31
   3.1. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks................. 32
      3.1.1. Strong Evaluations and the ‘Economies of Worth’ 33
   3.2. Methodology............................................... 38

**Chapter 4: Narratives** .......................................... 46
   4.1. Girish and Nikhila........................................ 48
   4.2. Julie....................................................... 63
   4.3. Sally....................................................... 74
   4.4. Tarun....................................................... 87
   4.5. Ajay........................................................ 99

**Chapter 5: Analysis of Results** ............................ 115
   5.1. Comparison of Narratives............................... 115
      5.1.1. Experience of Work.................................. 117
         5.1.1.1. The BPO/Call centre industry.................. 117
         5.1.1.2. Types of Companies............................. 118
         5.1.1.3. Labour Process.................................. 119
            a. Night- and shift-work............................ 119
Index of Tables and Figures

Tables
Table 2.1: Literature on Offshoring and the Call Centre Industry ........................................... 17
Table 2.2: Literature on Indian Call Centres .................................................................................. 24
Table 3.1: Basic Interview Guide .................................................................................................. 41
Table 3.2: Summary of respondent profiles ............................................................................... 43
Table 5.1: Summary of respondents’ evaluations across codes ............................................... 116
Table 5.2: The Domestic Logic in Indian Call Centres ............................................................... 153
Table 5.3: The Industrial Logic in Indian Call Centres .............................................................. 161
Table 5.4: The Logic of Opinion in Indian Call Centres ............................................................ 165
Table 5.5: The Market Logic in Indian Call Centres ................................................................. 168
Table 5.6: The Logic of Inspiration in Indian Call Centres ...................................................... 171
Table 5.7: The Civic Logic in Indian Call Centres ..................................................................... 172
Table A.1: The Economies of Worth Model ............................................................................... 208
Table A.2: Summary of respondents’ judgments across codes .............................................. 213

Figures
Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework .............................................................................................. 32
Figure 6.1: Tradition and Modernity in Indian Call Centres .................................................... 177
Figure 6.2: Debased forms of Tradition in Indian Management Practices .............................. 186
Preface

In April 2005, I visited Bangalore for the first time in about 10 years, and was astounded at the major facelift the city had undergone. The once quiet and easy-going "garden city" was now a thriving metropolis, dotted with an ever-growing number of shopping malls, coffee shops, glass-paneled office towers, and the infamous golden arches of McDonald's franchises. But besides these usual symbols which serve anywhere as a proclamation that 'globalization has arrived,' there was one development which struck me as being particularly conspicuous in the Indian context. This phenomenon, which was being heralded as the key to India's future, was the Business Process Outsourcing or Offshoring industry (referred to commonly as BPO).

While I was aware that corporations in the west had started outsourcing their telephone-based sales and customer-service operations to India, I was simply clueless as to how widespread this industry was in India, or to the magnitude of its impact on society. "BPOs" were apparently the new rage. People—young adults mostly—were flocking in droves to join these call centres which usually work through the night to cater to clientele from the US, UK or Australia. People were dropping out of college or quitting other jobs in order to enter this booming industry. There were now Call Centre Training colleges and companies that had emerged around the city, apparently presenting a viable alternative to the standard career routes of engineering or medicine that most middle-class Indians generally aspire to.

As I came to know more about this phenomenon (mostly through hearsay), I grew disturbed by the fact that these call centre workers often had to undergo accent and culture training in order to serve their western consumers. Not only were they working unusual hours as a result of time-zone differences, but they would also have to give these customers the impression that they were, in fact, denizens of that other society. This was to be accomplished by, in addition to what they called "mother tongue influence elimination," an inculcation in the most trivial details of their customers' local weather conditions and sports. Surely, I thought, this would create some serious identity tensions! Additionally, my observations seemed to be supported by the (relatively few) academic studies available on this phenomenon, which denounce these new forms of imperialism
and colonization. What I couldn’t understand, though, was what made this apparently sinister phenomenon seem so attractive and appealing to these employees that they were flocking to it in such numbers, and with such enthusiasm. I wanted to understand their own points-of-view: how, according to them, were these new instruments of globalization affecting their lives and their societies? These were the questions that motivated my research.

In trying to grasp, from their telling of their own stories, how call centre employees assessed this phenomenon, I came upon some surprising discoveries. For starters, the nature of the accent-training phenomenon seemed to have changed over the last few years, and had effectively become rather irrelevant to these respondents. No longer was there a pressure to hide from foreign customers the fact that these agents were in India. Nor were they interested in trying to mimic American or British accents anymore. The new emphasis was on a “neutral” accent that could be understood by any speaker of English anywhere, a process allegedly no different than what they went through in grammar school. Of course, here, “neutrality” seemed to differ depending on whether one was talking to an American or Australian or a Brit; with different parts of India having different regionally-influenced English accents, it raises the question of who precisely becomes the reference-point for such neutrality.

In any case, what I had initially denounced as insidious had apparently undergone a metamorphosis into something different, thus evading some of the initial criticisms that were launched at it.\(^1\) Furthermore, new higher-level processes are now being outsourced to India, which recruit employees with advanced foreign degrees. In these cases, the relevance of accent-training disappears altogether. My suspicions were further assuaged by the fact that almost all my respondents looked with derision at those who would “put on a fake accent” in public. They all seemed quite comfortable with their own (Indian-English) accents, and insisted that it was not required of them to sound any different on the phone (although some boasted of the ‘skill’ of being able to sound British or American at will). Similarly, my suspicion that, due to the enterprise of serving foreign customers in a different time-zone, these employees might bear some sense of tension or

\(^1\) On this idea of the metamorphosis of capitalism in other contexts, see Ellul (1967), and more recently, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999)
even embarrassment at being Indian, turned out to be false, at least in the case of my respondents. All of them exhibited a strong sense of pride at being Indian, although it also seemed that what it meant to be Indian was by no means homogeneous across respondents.

There were cultural tensions, however, but of a different sort than I imagined, and which emerged from two distinct sources: their managers and their society. The first was what they called an ‘Indian style’ of management, which they felt was present throughout Indian organizations, and was characterized by various forms of corruption, power-abuse, sycophancy and negligence. Almost all my respondents expressed the sentiment that they had been or were being exploited and cheated by local managers, and felt there was nowhere they could voice their concerns. However, rather than taking collective action or pursuing corrective measures, they found it easier to switch jobs, or to simply ignore the corruption, since it would be found wherever else they might go. Yet, at the same time, they wanted very much to preserve their jobs and the industry as a whole. Most of them also expressed a preference for certain elements of western culture that they found in their foreign managers, particularly the respect for subordinates, the dignity of labour, and a sense of ‘professionalism,’ which usually meant honouring contracts and rewarding merit. The above discourse strikes somewhat of a blow to contemporary management wisdom which tends to preach the primacy of local cultures and modes-of-organizing.²

This opens up an important avenue of future investigation: if employees (and clients) are indeed being cheated by local managers—or at least, suspect that this might be the case—then it would be important to know how rampant this phenomenon is. My study is not designed to make accurate representativeness-claims about the larger population of call centre workers, but rather, to gain depth of insight into the lived experience of individual employees. I used a snowball sample precisely because I wanted respondents who had a good deal of experience and were willing to talk candidly about their experience.³ My 20 respondents, representing (to use the term loosely) a total of 13 companies, were contacted through 10 distinct sources, and no more than 3 respondents

---

² However, it does confirm some recent observations on the value of foreign methods of management in ‘third world’ countries. See Hofstede (2001); d’Irbarne (2003)

³ Though an initial idea was to construct a case-study of one call centre, the requirements of HR managers in the companies I contacted would have made it impossible to guarantee the kind of confidentiality that I wanted to assure my respondents.
knew one another. Even with this meagre data, the consistency of the complaint against managerial corruption suggests that parent companies should take much more seriously the need for improved transparency, and the importance of providing lower-level employees in India the means for anonymous whistle-blowing when needed.

Aside from problems with managers, a second source of tension becomes evident in employees’ struggle to defend themselves against the increasingly negative perception of call centre workers in Indian society and media. My respondents unanimously agree that the BPO phenomenon has ushered in unprecedented opportunities and freedoms, which can be used either responsibly or irresponsibly. While they admit that there are many who behave irresponsibly (which for them means abuse of alcohol, smoking, drug, sex, or spending habits), they insist that this does not warrant dismissing the entire phenomenon as evil. Many of them take pains to describe why and how they see the BPO phenomenon as a good thing for them and for India, despite all sorts of negative elements that should indeed be denounced. At the end of the day, I was forced to dismiss much of the ‘neo-imperialist’ reading of this phenomenon that I favoured at the start. And it looks as though some of the recent research on this phenomenon is headed in this same direction as well, recognizing Indian call centres as “contested terrain.”\textsuperscript{4} Clearly, this does not eliminate the detrimental elements of the BPO / call centre phenomenon, such as the negative impacts on employees’ health, lifestyles and relationships. But instead of unqualifiedly denouncing the phenomenon from on high, what I have tried to do here is to show, through these agents’ own evaluations, how they make their criticisms while simultaneously justifying the importance of this phenomenon for their lives. This helps us better understand the tradition-modernity dynamic here.

This project was intended to be an exploratory basis for a more rigorous investigation of this phenomenon in the future. While case-studies have been the standard approach to examining Indian call centres thus far, there is rich potential for micro-level ethnographies as well as large-scale quantitative studies. Approaching the phenomenon from such different angles will give us much insight into the dynamics of hybridization that characterize an ‘Indian modernity’ at the dawn of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, and should also inform our understanding of globalization and modernity in general.

\textsuperscript{4} Taylor and Bain (2005); Mirchandani (2004)
Acknowledgements

It is my great pleasure here to thank the many people without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

I thank first of all my director, Professor Linda Rouleau, who was fascinated by this topic from the very beginning, and suggested the possibility of a serious research project along these lines: thank you so very much for your persistent encouragement.

This undertaking would have been impossible without the generous assistance of CRIMT (Centre de Recherche Interuniversitaire sur la Mondialisation et le Travail): thank you for believing in this project, for the scholarships which made this research possible, and for the office space so I could work on this.

To all my other professors at HEC Montréal, especially Alain Chanlat, Allain Joly, Jean-Pierre Dupuis, Richard Déri, Emmanuel Raufflet, Michel Patry and Ann Langley, for teaching me how to think through most of the ideas contained in this work.

My heartfelt thanks to my family, for standing by my decision to return to grad school despite all the uncertainties it involved, and for your continuing encouragement.

To my dearest Claire, for putting up with me through this madness and marrying me nonetheless, and to the Peterson family for your constant encouragement through it all: I can’t thank you enough.

To Alisha Ruiss, Mariachiara Restuccia, Dan Cere, John Zucchi, Richard Bernier, Robert DiPede and all my dear friends at Newman, and especially to Fr. Bob Pelton: I couldn’t have done this without your help.

To Charles Taylor, Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot, Ève Chiapello, Christian Smith, and everyone else on whose ideas my work here is built: thank you for your important contributions to helping us better understand our world.

Most of all, to all my informants and especially my respondents in Bangalore: for helping me rediscover India, and for welcoming this stranger into your lives with such graciousness. I have tried to do justice here to what you have entrusted me with, and I hope that this work will be at least a small step for your voices to be heard.

Thank you all, so very much!
Chapter 1: Introduction

The recent development of Business Process Outsourcing and the proliferation of offshore call centres across India is a topic which has garnered a fair bit of attention in popular literature and media (Addelman and Mallal, 2006; Bhagat 2005; Debold 2003; Friedman 2006; Merchant 2003; Stitt 2002; Tehrani 2006) as well as in scholarly studies (McMillin 2006; Mirchandani 2003, 2004; Ramesh 2004; Taylor and Bain 2005; Upadhyya and Vasavi 2006). This is not surprising, given that the industry is steadily growing, with current employment figures at over 700,000 employees and an annual turnover of over US $10 billion (NASSCOM 2008).

Underlying the discussions around this issue, there seems to be a polarized debate that is rooted in more basic assumptions about globalization. Each of these poles presents a certain story about tradition and modernity, where ‘tradition’ either disappears in the face of modernity, or stands in opposition to it. Part of what I hope to show here is how both these accounts are flawed and lead to inadequate accounts of phenomena such as Indian call centres. The common assumptions of the tradition-modernity relationship as being one of either ‘convergence’ (e.g., Rostow 1960; Fukuyama 1992) or ‘clash’ (e.g., Said 1979; Huntington 2002) lead to the neglect of some important dimensions of the phenomenon which emerge from my study. In order to tell a more accurate story about how our contemporary world works, I want to argue that we need to first revise our understanding of the relationship between tradition and modernity as being neither a convergence nor a conflict, but a hybridizing dynamic (e.g., Gusfield 1967; Eisenstadt 2002, 2003).

The present work is an exploratory study along these lines, using a Narrative Research methodology to examine how Indian call centre employees understand and evaluate their experience of work and its impact on their lives. While such a qualitative approach can make limited generalizations to the larger population of Indian call centre workers, it can give us deeper insight into how individuals working in these environments make sense of their experience. This, in turn, can help us to better grasp the relationship between tradition and modernity in their lives. This should serve as an important contribution to the literature, since prior studies focused on the labour processes but not
so much on the relational aspect of this phenomenon (i.e., relationships with managers, colleagues, family and society). These findings also provide support for an emerging paradigm in the social sciences called the Multiple Modernities thesis (Eisenstadt 2000, 2003; Oommen 2004; Smith 2006; Taylor 2007), which holds that “the best way to understand the contemporary world [...] is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs and cultural patterns of modernity” (Eisenstadt 2003:27).

While there is a good deal of uniqueness and context-specificity to these forms of modernity, there are also certain patterns and mechanisms which can work similarly in different contexts. This study will try to highlight some of the peculiarities of the BPO phenomenon in India as well as some of the dynamics and mechanisms present here which may be characteristic of globalization and modernity in other cultural contexts. Specifically, my results show that when we examine how these call centre workers narrate their own stories about their work experience and its impact on their lives, we see that they perceive their work, despite its negative consequences, as a kind of liberation from certain traditional obstacles and limitations, as well as for the pursuit of certain important traditional goals. Yet, these newfound developments also encourage traditional forms of oppression as well as ‘debased forms’ of certain traditional ideals. The promise of liberation can, ironically, open up new forms of enslavement. Consequently, however, most of these employees aspire to certain modern values as a corrective to debased forms of oppressive traditions.

I will first address some of my own assumptions here in the introduction, before proceeding to look at how all this plays out in the case of the phenomenon at hand.

1.1. Tradition and Modernity

It is difficult to avoid conflating terms such as modernity, modernization and globalization. While we can make definitional distinctions for theoretical purposes, in practice, a particular phenomenon such as Offshoring can be seen as instantiating all of

---

5 This notion of capitalism as liberation I derive from Boltanski and Chiapello (2005:433).
6 The notion of ‘debased forms’ of ideals I borrow from Charles Taylor (1991), who notes how the relativism and subjectivism prevalent in contemporary Western society need to be seen not as merely a loss of values and ideals, but as debased forms of ideals that are worth aspiring to.
these interrelated terms. Nonetheless, it would still help to lay out some simple distinctions before we proceed, contestable as they may be, in order to get a sense of how these terms are related, as well as how they are misconstrued. I should also specify that for the purposes of this study, I will treat globalization as an offshoot of modernity.

'Modernity,' for starters, can be understood simply as a set of values and related structures and institutions, e.g., liberty, equality, scientific progress, rationality, democracy, etc., which were first vigorously promoted in the Enlightenment in 17\textsuperscript{th} century western Europe (Scruton 2005). As Taylor (1989, 2007), Eisenstadt (2000) and others have noted, it is crucial to recognize that it is a particular cultural and political project which emerged in history, and one that contained within itself several tensions and contradictions, e.g., the tension between autonomy and control (Wagner 1994).

In common usage, however, the term most often appears in contrast to the notion of 'tradition.' The tradition-modernity dichotomy, despite arguments for why we should discard it altogether (see Lauer 1971; Tipps 1973), has become the standard heuristic through which people try to make sense of the multiplicity of curious and sometimes bizarre hybrid phenomena which have developed across cultures over the past century or so. But the complexity inherent in the phenomena referred to by these terms is often neglected. In addition, the dichotomy is not the prerogative of scholars but part of popular discourse. What prevails, therefore, is the idea that traditions (composed of traditional forms of life, customs, religious beliefs and practices, etc.) are static, coherent entities which are threatened by, and/or will eventually dissolve into, a singular, homogeneous 'modernity.' This perspective became popular in the post-Second World War period, and was instrumental in the activity of making predictions of how the world's disparate traditions were going to converge into a somewhat uniform modernity, similar to the industrialized, rationalized bureaucracies of the West. This served as the central idea for what became known as 'modernization theory.'

The term 'modernization,' as Tipps (1973), Barger (1987) and others have noted, also rose to popularity after the second world war, and usually implied industrialization—particularly of developing societies—as well as the adoption of the values and institutions of modernity. Modernization theory was in many ways a continuation of the Enlightenment ideas of universalism and evolutionism. According to Weinberg (1969:1),
the theorists of convergence, like the Enlightenment *philosophes*, assumed the "perfectibility...of all 'mankind'"; indeed in this era there seemed little reason to assume diversity when taking into consideration the notion of progress. Added to the notion of evolution, there was ready theoretical support for why modern societies would have "common destinations, despite their origins" (Weinberg 1969:2).

As Wagner (2001:9949) notes, the notion of modernization assumed a "profound rupture" between the past and the present, i.e., between traditional and modern society, brought about through the development of key institutions, namely, the market, democracy, and the scientific establishment. Talcott Parsons (1951) is credited with having famously set up the antithesis between tradition and modernity as two distinct and opposed sets of 'pattern variables' (which are fundamental relational choices). Here, 'tradition' is characterized by ascribed status, collective orientation, particularist action (i.e., emphasis on special relationships such as family), and relationships which are diffuse (which fulfill a large range of needs, e.g., a parent), and affective. Conversely, the values of modern social orders would be achieved status, individual-orientation, universal norms, relationships which cater to only specific needs, and affective-neutral or impersonal relationships. Now, if understood as only an ideal-type—a heuristic device or caricature used for comparative purposes and to explain specific components of a situation or action (Weber 1949)—the tradition-modernity distinction might make good sense. But as Shiner (1975) demonstrates, this dichotomy has been wielded in a variety of ways—an extreme (or empirical) type, a classificatory scheme, or a theory of change—and those who use it in either of these ways neglect to mention in what precise way they wish to use it (p. 275).

Similar definitional quagmires surround the notion of 'modernization.' It often tends to be understood as "the use of inanimate resources for the multiplication of human effort, with manifold consequences for structural arrangements in an interdependent social system" (Weinberg 1969:8). This sounds no different from the notion of industrialization. Furthermore, this process is assumed to universally entail an evolution from small traditional kinship-based and undifferentiated social orders to large, industrial and highly differentiated ones. In this way it is transformed from an ideal type to a hypothesis or even explanation: modernization can be postulated to lead to increased
differentiation, individualism, bureaucratization, extension of state jurisdiction, technologization, and so on. Levy (1966, cited in Weinberg 1969:7) for example, insisted rather bluntly that modernization would lead to increased "structural uniformity [...] regardless of how diverse the original basis from which change took place in these societies may have been." Theodorson (1953) argued, along the same lines, that industrialization anywhere would bring about patterns similar to those in the west.

It was perhaps only natural that zealous enthusiasm for this view of progress would lead to the early work in development economics. However, the underlying assumption that if these structures were implanted in other societies, they would replicate the western model of economic success, soon proved to be a colossal error at the policy level (Piasecki and Wolnicki 2004). Several factors, both empirical (e.g. the Latin American crisis and the unexpected rise of Japan and the 'Asian tigers') as well as theoretical (e.g., the postmodern critique and the postcolonial critique) served as a strong affront to convergence theories of modernization. Ethnic and national revivals emerged as an unexpected challenge to the convergence thesis that such primitive forms would disappear in modern society (Harle 2000; cf. Deutsch 1953, Parsons 1967), thus refuting what Weinberg calls evolutionist fallacy of "total transformation," i.e., the assumption that "‘traditional’ patterns of action are bound to disappear" (1969:10).^{7}

The assumption of industrialization as a necessary threat to tradition turned out to be false, with scholars putting forth evidence suggesting that "a considerable amount of traditional life can flourish at a higher level in the process of industrialization" (Lauer 1971:885). The evolutionary argument failed for a host of other reasons as well that Lauer (1971:886) points out: Developing nations were already well aware of the process of modernization, and were not incapable of assessing its pros and cons; in addition, modernization at the social or political level could happen independently of industrialization; consequently, it is possible to conceive of modernity without modernization!

---

^{7} Harle (2000:2) notes that Parsons assumed that modernization would produce emotionally-restrained and self-interested individuals who would simply be unaffected by racial or ethnic concerns; it would not take much effort to use Weberian ideal types to put forward such an argument. But it is not obvious that this in fact was Weber’s view. Similarly, Deutsch (1953) had argued that agriculture would be replaced by industry, and local/tribal values by universal ones.
If, for such reasons, talk of ‘modernization’ seems to have waned in recent years, it looks as though some of these underlying ideas have only been transferred to another popular term, ‘globalization’.

1.2. Globalization and Culture

In the decades since Theodore Levitt (1983) coined the term, globalization has become a popular buzzword and a privileged object of study across the social sciences. Here again we see the resurgence of the old convergence narrative of modernization, now presented as “the inevitable homogenization of economic and cultural practices, driven by competitiveness in a global market and by new technologies of communication” (Cox 2002: 1). Many contend that what we are now living is a ‘post-traditional’ and even ‘post-industrial’ reality, which is being severed more and more from the past at an accelerating pace (see Bell 1976; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994).

In light of these apparently ubiquitous changes, thinkers such as Roger Scruton argue that “[g]lobalization has led to the extinction of the inherited (folk) cultures of Europe and America, and their replacement by [...] commercialized mish-mash” (2005:5) which is now spreading throughout the world, creating a mass global culture which is universally impoverished.

There is undoubtedly some truth to all this, but it is surely not the whole picture. When some speak of “the installation worldwide of western versions of basic socio-cultural reality: the West’s epistemological and ontological theories, its values, ethical systems, approaches to rationality, technical-scientific worldview, political culture, and so on” (Tomlinson 1997:144, italics mine), it gives the impression of a world that is being rather passively homogenized; it “simply assumes that the sheer presence of western forms has a self-evident cultural effect on Third World subjects” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:17). This hermeneutic is prevalent throughout the critique of various

---

8 Rapid innovation has changed the nature of work to something more and more complex and intangible in the ‘knowledge economy’ (Giddens 1999). See also Bridges (1994), who declares the end of very the notion of ‘jobs’. In addition, we can see a shift from mass production to mass consumption, even to the point of narcissistic consumption of oneself (Lipovetsky 1983); a shift from the importance attributed to bureaucratic rationalization to an increased focus on the subjective dimension. Alain Touraine (1995) writes about how modernity introduced a split between the ‘rational’ and the ‘subjective’ dimension, and how the former has collapsed over the past couple of centuries, the weight shifting now towards ‘subjectivation’. We see this in the rising importance of ‘careers,’ personal ‘fulfilment’ and ‘development’ in companies worldwide. Castells (2000) and Lafontaine (2003) also make similar observations.
developments of globalization, including Indian call centres (with the exception of some of the most recent studies. I will address this literature in Chapter 2). But from the discussion thus far, we should be able to see how the above perspective treats modernization or globalization as simply a matter of the development of certain structures or processes—science, technology, instrumental rationality, differentiation and specialization of institutions etc—which might as well occur in any socio-cultural context, and which should basically yield the same results seen in western industrial society, viz., the decline of tradition, secularization, economic growth, and so on.

Such an account is what Charles Taylor (1995:24) calls an "acultural" theory of modernity. This approach neglects the important fact that there are human beings—agents who are not merely passive pawns of structural forces—who are embedded in particular socio-historic contexts, and who evaluate these developments in reference to their shared standards and principles. In other words, these developments have a 'cultural' significance to the actors who embrace them, which should lead modernization or globalization to unfold in distinctive ways across contexts. This also means that we need to recognize "prior social givens like the existence of a generalized system of morality that are ultimately non-economic in origin" (Fukuyama 2003:3). E.g., when we talk about capitalism—a key institution of globalization—we should be aware that capitalism itself does not fully dictate a single, optimal set of institutions on which all societies will necessarily converge as a result of ever-more ruthless competition. There is a degree of variance among functionally efficient institutions, and the choice that any given society makes among them is often the result of norms of path-dependencies that economics as a science cannot explain (Fukuyama 2003:3).

Similarly, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) argue that capitalism—an allegedly amoral system—needs to be supported by shared ideological elements which allow its proponents to see these developments of modernity as attractive, justifiable, and even liberating, in order to generate a commitment from these actors who embrace them.

But it is not enough to merely talk about 'culture'—yet another term that eludes definitional consensus, as Cuche (2004) notes—because even here we can succumb to the static/homogeneous portrayal which we have been criticizing above. We see this problem, ironically, even in opponents of convergence theory who want to emphasize cultural divergence, i.e., that distinct cultural values and forms still thrive across the
world despite modernization and globalization. Here, authors such as Hofstede ([1980] 2001), d’Iriabarne (1993), and Huntington (2002) seem to unfortunately rely upon a somewhat rigid and essentialist concept of national culture (or civilization, in Huntington’s case), which fails to adequately account for the empirical reality.\footnote{I should note that some of d’Iriabarne’s later works (e.g., 2003) seem closer to the notion of hybridization or what some call ‘crossvergence’ (e.g., Jacob 2005), which resonates with the Multiple Modernities thesis. See Appendix 1 for more details on this discussion of cross-cultural management.}

This error is not limited to simply the national level, but extends to another misleading dichotomy—that of East versus West. In the discourse on globalization we often find the tendency to categorize certain values and practices as being exclusively ‘eastern’ or ‘western’, which makes separating ‘modernization’ from ‘westernization’ another thorny issue.\footnote{Das (2000:291-309) elaborates on this, and we will look at this in the Indian call centre discourse as well} As Amartya Sen (2000) has convincingly argued, this error spills over into two faulty notions: “cultural boundary” claims, where values such as liberty, justice and rationality are considered exclusively ‘western’ (as opposed to, e.g., discipline or spirituality being ‘eastern’), and “cultural disharmony” claims, which assume an incommensurability of cultural values, leading to an inevitable ‘clash.’ Again, all this is not to say that we should discard altogether the East-West dichotomy when it comes to cultures, but we need to be wary of essentializing claims.

In order to avoid such errors, it would help to construe neither ‘culture,’ nor ‘tradition,’ nor ‘modernity’ for that matter, as static or homogeneous phenomena. Cultures are not fixed in space and time, but can undergo changes due to intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors. Traditions, furthermore, can contain a plurality of elements which can come into conflict with one another. Modernity, with its own share of internal contradictions, can work itself out differently in different cultural contexts over time.

What I have argued for here are the central contentions of the “multiple modernities” paradigm, which has been gaining popularity among scholars in recent years (Eisenstadt 2000, 2003; Kaya 2003, 2004; Smith 2006; Taylor 2007). Though still under development and not a unified theory by any means, at the heart of this argument is the notion of a “cultural theory of modernity” (Taylor 1995; Friese and Wagner 2000), which pays serious attention to the actors in different socio-historic contexts with their specific culturally-bound motivations for embracing the developments of modernity.
Under this view, different cultural starting-points—traditions, if you will—take divergent paths leading to different-looking end-results, all of which could be considered varieties of modernity. Thus, we should understand that modernity does not always push tradition out of the picture; nor is it fundamentally or necessarily in conflict with tradition. The two can in some ways challenge each other, and in other ways, be mutually reinforcing (as Gusfield 1967 also noted).

While it seems plausible at a theoretical level to talk about the hybridizing dynamic of tradition and modernity, or the notion of ‘multiple modernities,’ we need to look at concrete examples in order to make better sense of this. As Gusfield noted, “[w]e cannot easily separate modernity and tradition from some specific tradition and some specific modernity” (1967:361). In examining the peculiar phenomenon of Indian call centres, it seems to me that we should be able to make some modest (as opposed to sweeping) generalizations about how the interaction between elements of tradition and modernity might work in similar ways in other cultural contexts. Specifically, what this study proposes is the following mechanism:

Traditional ideals can serve as the basis for pursuing and sustaining the developments and structures of modernity. Yet, these very structures can provide the means for certain actors to perpetuate traditional forms of domination and control. Nonetheless, modernity can also be seen (especially by oppressed or weaker individuals and groups) as offering desirable ideals which serve as a hopeful corrective of such ‘debased forms’ of tradition. Such an account necessitates that we understand both tradition and modernity as each containing a plurality of sometimes internally-conflicting elements, where some aspects of tradition can support (or challenge) certain developments of modernity, and some aspects of modernity can reinforce (or weaken) other elements of tradition. I will develop this argument over the course of the next few chapters.

The way in which the offshore call centre phenomenon is approached depends very much on one’s starting assumptions of tradition, modernity, globalization and culture. As I will show in Chapter 2, there is often a tendency in the literature to present the Indian call centre phenomenon as being yet an instance of convergence towards the western model. Some extol what they consider a ‘flattening’ of the global playing field
(Friedman, 2006; Narayanswamy and Bhargava 2005). Other studies (e.g., Upadhya and Vasavi 2006) note the global spread of the tension between rationalization and flexibilization that is characteristic of the labour process in call centres—the tension between, on one hand, Taylorized, highly routinized, standardized work, and on the other, the emphasis on quality, flexible work forms, and participatory managerial discourse. In India, these studies show that not only is the emphasis more on the rationalization aspect, but also, in addition to such routinization and scripting, Indian call centre workers are subjected to accent- and culture-training, which are denounced in these studies as neo-imperialism or neo-colonialism (Ramesh 2004; McMillin 2006; Mirchandani 2003).

Alternatively, there are others who focus on aspects of cultural divergence, such as the problems faced by Indian employees in bridging the cultural divide, especially when it comes to western accents and culture (Cohen and El-Sawad 2007; Merchant 2003; Taylor and Bain 2005). Still others highlight the forms of resistance employed by these employees, such as how they reconstruct their image of Americans (Mirchandani 2004). While some authors are mindful of the fact that call centre workers are not merely passive victims (Mirchandani 2004; McMillin 2006) and note the need for further contextualization (Ellis and Taylor 2006), such factors tend to fade out of focus in the moralistic and denunciatory tone of these studies that are inspired by critical organizational theory and postcolonial theory. In addition to the problematic ‘convergence’ and ‘clash’ assumptions that we criticized above, what maintains this deficiency is that we do not have a sufficient sense of the agents’ own points-of-view and assessments of this phenomenon. Since most of these studies neglect the “critical capacity” (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999) of agents, as well as the internal contradictions within Indian culture and tradition, they are unable to give us sufficient insight into why Indian call centre workers are drawn to and persevere in these jobs, despite the evidently negative consequences described in these studies. In order to address this deficiency in the literature, the question I set out to investigate was: how do Indian employees evaluate their experience of working in offshore call centres and its impact on their lives?

My concern with employees’ evaluations here is shaped by two related theoretical ideas: Charles Taylor’s (1985, 1989) notion of “strong evaluations” (i.e., our capacity and tendency to make qualitative distinctions of worth between what we consider noble/vile,
superior/inferior, and so on) and Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1991, 2000, 2006) theory of ‘orders of worth’ that are implicit in argumentation (i.e., when people make appeals to certain standards or common principles as a basis of judgment or evaluation). As I will argue in Chapter 3, such evaluations reflect the shared cultural frameworks upon which people must rely in order to make sense of their lives and narratives. Furthermore, these frameworks are not merely abstractions, but are threaded together by individuals in their personal narratives. An investigation at this level of cultural meanings and values can help us get a better sense of the relationship between tradition and modernity in the lives of these individuals.

In my pursuit of this research question, I conducted a study using a Narrative Research methodology, specifically, narratives of practices, or récits de pratiques (Rouleau 2003). I will describe this approach in Chapter 3 as well. The study itself was carried out from January to March 2007 in Bangalore, where I conducted repeated in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 call centre employees. My understanding of the phenomenon was also aided by informal interviews with 25 other informants, including friends and parents of call centre workers, social workers and activists, journalists, religious leaders, HR managers, management professors, and a psychiatrist. While my methodology offers limited generalizability to the larger population of call centre workers, it allows us to gain deeper insights into the cultural dimensions of this phenomenon than existing studies are able to provide.

Since a serious deficiency in the literature is that we are unable to understand the meanings that the BPO / call centre phenomenon work has for these employees, it would help to see a few examples of these narratives in order for us to get a more in-depth sense of how they understand their experience, as well as of the diversity of their stories and experiences. So in Chapter 4, I will present five narrative cases, based on the stories of six employees who can be considered somewhat representative of my sample.

In Chapter 5, I will then proceed to examine the similarities and differences between the narratives, as well as analyze my respondents’ evaluations using the ‘Economies of Worth’ framework of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991, 2006). To summarize the results which I present in these chapters:
1. While their narratives support many of the observations in the literature (the difficulties of night-shifts; monotonous, scripted work; etc.), researchers’ criticisms of accent-training, customer-abuse, and neo-imperialism seem to be of marginal importance. The dominant refrain in the concerns of these respondents, which has been completely overlooked by prior studies, is what they consider abuse by local Indian management, i.e., various forms of corruption, power-abuse, sycophancy, and negligence at the hands of untrained managers. Such factors, they argue, have roots in broader Indian culture and traditions. As a corrective to these ‘debased forms’ of certain cultural values, they aspire to what they consider to be key ‘western values’: professionalism, respect for individuals, and the value of labour and merit. Thus, while call centre work is seen as offering a sort of liberation (confirming an aspect of Boltanski and Chiapello’s (1999, 2005) theory of capitalism), for many, it fails in practice to deliver on this promise, primarily due to the strength and persistence of debased forms of certain traditional values and structures.

2. Using the *Economies of Worth* framework, we will see the dominance of a traditional ‘Domestic’ logic in the discourse, which is centered on one’s duty and the importance of hierarchical relationships. However, this logic includes desirable as well as ‘debased’ elements (to borrow a notion developed by Taylor (1991:12)), both of which sustain different aspects of the call centre phenomenon. Similarly, the logic of ‘Opinion,’ i.e., the importance of others’ approval and of one’s social status, also finds support in traditional elements, and at the same time sustains the pursuit of modern developments. On the side of what is typically considered ‘modern,’ we see that ‘Industrial’ and ‘Market’ logics are used to support debased as well as desirable forms of domestic values. The weakest elements in the discourse are the logic of Inspiration and the Civic logic; although employees express some desire for some aspects of the latter (e.g., workers’ rights, unionization), these elements do not find adequate supports due to a pervasive climate of mistrust.\footnote{This echoes Sennett’s (2006:68) understanding of “low informal trust.”}

To better understand the cultural sources of Boltanski and Thévenot’s categories in the Indian context, we will see in Chapter 6 that these principles and logics find support in classical Hindu principles of *Dharma* (duty, particularly towards family), *Artha* (worldly success and renown), and *Kama* (pleasure), which are still ‘in the air,’ so
to speak, in Indian society, and constitute the implicit frameworks through which even non-Hindus live their lives. Taking these values into consideration we can see how most employees see this work as allowing them to pursue important culturally-valued goals, specifically, supporting their parents/families, and building a successful career which gains them respect and status in society. It is along these lines that they try to defend themselves against criticisms from their own society that they are losing Indian values and becoming ‘westernized.’ It is also due to ‘debased forms’ of certain traditions (humiliating and exploitative management) that they aspire to modern values such as professionalism as an antidote.

Recognizing these factors does not by any means eliminate the need for observers and researchers to offer their critiques of the phenomenon. It does, however, help us take these workers more seriously as protagonists rather than victims, and thus affords them more of a sense of agency than is typically done. At the very least, this dimension should form an important part of the picture in accounting for this peculiar phenomenon.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Among the various forms of economic restructuring that accompany globalization, perhaps none has gained so much attention and importance on a worldwide scale as Business Process Outsourcing or Offshoring. Defined as “the procurement of goods or services by a business or organization from an outside foreign supplier, typically to gain the benefits of labour arbitrage” (Brown and Wilson 2005:vii), offshoring has become a key issue in global business strategy. Major consulting firms such as McKensie and Deloitte have begun to specialize in the area, and an abundance of literature has emerged with recipes, formulas, and strategic considerations on how to best capitalize on offshoring (e.g., Aron and Singh 2005; Brown and Wilson 2005; Farrell 2006). The main processes being outsourced are customer-service call centres, telemarketing, payroll, insurance claims, credit-card promotions, applications for loans, and recently, even more high-skilled functions such as consultancy and research (Cacanas 2004:46; Taylor and Bain 2005).

In light of the growing phenomenon of customer service outsourcing, industry analysts have started to make contrary recommendations to improve the business value of call centre operations, such as moving them back to company headquarters to show the importance the organization accords to customer concerns, to talk to customers longer, and even to get executives involved in answering calls (Arussy 2002). Such prescriptions, however, are taken up only rarely; cost-reduction pressures dominate strategic concerns, and the phenomenon of outsourcing is steadily on the rise, with reports abounding of the numbers of call centre jobs being outsourced, especially to India (Cacanas 2004).

The topic of offshore call centres in India has been receiving a fair bit of interest in the popular press as well as the academic community. Here, despite the ardent support of industry enthusiasts, the process of outsourcing customer service processes to far away lands has been far from the ‘seamless integration’ hoped for by most companies. In fact, it seems to have generated no shortage of complaints from frustrated consumers (Debold

---

12 Bardhan (2006:2n2) argues that it is incorrect to call this phenomenon Outsourcing, implying that the term Offshoring is more appropriate for transnational outsourcing. Since the rest of the literature does not follow this as a convention, I will need to use these terms interchangeably.
2003; Taylor and Bain 2005; Tehrani 2006), leading recently even to job repatriations by companies such as Dell (Taylor 2006). While India is still the preferred location for much of the offshoring activity from the English-speaking west, owing to its large pool of ready-made, cheap, highly skilled English-speaking labour, analysts are beginning to note its ‘overheating,’ due to over-burdened infrastructure, rising wages, and particularly, the increasing employee turnover and burnout (Farrell 2006). Nonetheless, the phenomenon is still thriving, and does not by any means appear to be waning in importance.

In this chapter, I will examine the research available on the call centre industry in the West as well as in India. In both these cases, the focus of studies is on the labour process, where we see a similar tension between the processes of ‘rationalization’ and ‘flexibilisation,’ manifested through Taylorization, tight controls, heavy scripting and emotional labour on one hand, versus teamwork and ‘fun’ activities on the other. The Indian context, we shall also see, has its own particularities such as night-work, accent- and culture-training, and interaction with (often-abusive) foreign customers, which takes an additional toll on employees.

However, this literature, focused on postcolonial criticism of the labour process, is unable to tell us much about how these employees make sense of these new jobs or the impact this phenomenon has on their lives and societies. Hence we know little about why many of them persevere in this work despite its negative consequences. In addition, these employees often come across as being passive victims of a homogenizing process of globalization, often denounced in these studies as a new form of imperialism and colonization. While many of these same authors note the need for further contextualization, recognizing the fact that these employees should not be seen as merely passive victims, there is little evidence offered to support these statements. The present study hopes to address such deficiencies in the literature.

2.1. Call Centres in the West

The typical call centre operation can be characterized as an organized setup of personnel, computer systems, and telecommunications equipment in order to provide telephone-based customer service (Gans, Koole and Mandelbaum 2003). Call centres are generally of two types—inbound, which receive calls from customers looking for
assistance, and outbound, where agents actively solicit current or potential customers. The typical workplace is made up of several open cubicles where agents can speak to clients using headsets, while simultaneously being able to access information on products, services and customers, via databases and intranets on their computer systems (Ojha 2006:1).

The rapid growth of the phenomenon of call centre outsourcing can be attributed to a combination of factors including technological innovations, economic motivations (particularly in relation to labour costs), and various political changes (such as the rise of neo-liberalism). Ellis and Talyor (2006:109-110) provide an account of how these factors fostered the growth of call centre outsourcing in the UK. With the growth of this phenomenon, a fair bit of scholarly research on call centres has been conducted in the UK (e.g., Deery, Iverson and Walsh 2002; Houlihan 2002; Taylor and Bain 1999), and some journals have even put out special issues on the topic of call centres.13 As for North America, scholars have noted a surprising dearth of publications (Bain and Taylor 2004:569).14 One reason for this might be because the study of Human Resource Management in the UK is more focused on new forms of control, whereas the concern in the US is more with productivity (Kitay 1997:6).

The primary focus of these studies of call centres is the labour process, i.e., mechanisms of control and resistance, the de-skilling and re-skilling of employees, and in general, structural tensions between capital and labour (Thompson and Newsome, 2004). Such concepts are generally associated with Labour Process Theory, a somewhat heterogeneous body of work which, as Kitay (1997) notes, is in turn grounded in a broadly Marxist framework. However, key scholars of Labour Process Theory such as Braverman (1974), Burawoy (1979), or Knights and Willmott (1986, 1988, 1990) are rarely cited in the call centre literature; in fact, theoretical sources in general are scarce here.15 Some of this might owe itself to the fact that Labour Process Theory as an approach has become rather contested in recent years, leading scholars such as Storey (1985) to announce its effective demise. Kitay (1997) notes that as a theoretical approach,
it lacks a coherent perspective, even though its central concepts are still important. Such observations only seem to confirm Edwards’ (2006) claim that Industrial Relations research in general tends to be atheoretical, or at least, lacks significant theoretical moorings. While we will see that the research on Indian call centres often draws on postcolonial theory, part of my effort here is to propose alternative theoretical perspectives with which to approach this topic.

For now, we will focus our attention on the main studies on call centres in the West (summarized in Table 2.1.) In particular, we will concentrate on the tensions within the labour process. Consequently, we will examine the impacts of call centre work on employees.

### Table 2.1: Literature on Offshoring and the Call Centre Industry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Results of studies</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of outsourcing</td>
<td>Lessons MNCs can learn from emerging markets</td>
<td>Prahalad and Lieberthal (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ offshoring</td>
<td>Strategic importance of India for offshoring</td>
<td>Cacanus (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of offshoring; Strategies of effective outsourcing</td>
<td>Brown and Wilson (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoiding common mistakes in offshoring</td>
<td>Aron and Singh (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New emerging markets for offshoring</td>
<td>Farrell (2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call Centre</td>
<td>Improving Call Centres</td>
<td>Arussy (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different models of call centres</td>
<td>Batt and Moynihan (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call Centre Labour Process</td>
<td>Call centres as sweatshops, panopticons</td>
<td>Fernie and Metcalf (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Panopticon; tight controls over time, actions, scripting</td>
<td>Buchanan and Koch-Schulte (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Assembly lines in the head’; Taylorization</td>
<td>Taylor and Bain (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘engineering model’</td>
<td>Deery and Kimnie (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibilisation</td>
<td>Teamwork, training, empowerment</td>
<td>Kinnie et al (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High commitment practices</td>
<td>Hutchinson et al (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘professional service’-based call centre models</td>
<td>Batt and Moynihan (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customer and service orientation; flexibility</td>
<td>Deery and Kimnie (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emphasis on employee well-being; diverse and challenging work</td>
<td>Holman (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impacts on Employees</td>
<td>Employee resistance</td>
<td>Knights and McCabe (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Covert resistance</td>
<td>Sturdy and Fineman (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional labour, burnout</td>
<td>Buchanan and Koch-Schulte (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subversive use of humour for resistance</td>
<td>Taylor and Bain (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional labour, withdrawal, exhaustion, burnout</td>
<td>Deery and Kimnie (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Opportunities to “help” customers solve problems; supportive colleagues and work-environment</td>
<td>Frenkel et al (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social interaction, peer support, rewarding, ‘fun’</td>
<td>Deery and Kimnie (2002); Buchanan and Koch-Schulte (2000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

16 While the approach of Critical Realism he offers might indeed serve to be helpful, it will not be explicitly considered in this study, although it is very much compatible with the approach I propose here.
2.1.1. Call Centre Labour Process

Scientific studies on call centres in general are none too flattering when it comes to the depiction of life and work in these environments. Some of the pioneering studies conducted were strongly critical in their assessment of the nature of call centre work itself. Fernie and Metcalf (1998) and Buchanan and Koch-Schulte (2000), for example, have described the work environment using the image of the Panopticon\(^{17}\) or total-surveillance prison, where inmates can never tell whether they are under scrutiny, and this constant uncertainty itself serves as a means of control and punishment. Indeed, these depictions of the constant monitoring of every aspect of work, from efficiency to quality to the use of emotions and even the way people dress (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000:36-37), paint a sombre and sinister picture of call centre work.

Yet, this 'sinister' portrayal of call centres as prisons or sweatshops (Fernie and Metcalf 1998) has come under criticism in light of more recent research, as being rather inadequate and simplistic, as Ellis and Taylor (2006:107) note. These criticisms, emerging from a more developed and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, stem from the recognition of two conflicting tendencies that are inherent in the nature of call centre work, and perhaps in the larger phenomenon of modernization itself. These can be considered in light of the distinction that Rouleau (2000) makes between the tendencies of rationalization and flexibilization (which can perhaps be linked to Wagner’s (1994) observation about the tension between control and autonomy being a central characteristic of modernity).

a. Rationalization

Most studies recognize call centres as being essentially driven by the need to minimize labour costs. Hence the standardization, the tightly controlled and monitored environment, maximization of the use of workers’ time, the computerized environment to maximise efficiency, individualized pay, scripting of conversations, and so on—all of which make for what can been called “assembly lines in the head” (Taylor and Bain 1999). This strong “engineering model” (Deery and Kinnie 2002:4) inherent in call

\(^{17}\) This notion was developed by Jeremy Bentham ([1787]1995) and later analyzed by Michel Foucault ([1977]1995)
centres has been identified as a strong resurgence of Taylorism or "scientific management", which refers to the early-20\textsuperscript{th}-century management theory developed by Frederick Winslow Taylor.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, as some have noted, "a combination of 20\textsuperscript{th} century technology and 19\textsuperscript{th} century scientific management is turning the office of the future into the factory of the past" (Garson 1988:10). More recent studies, however, note that the deterministic depictions of sweatshop-like oppression overlook the fact that employees are not totally constrained by these structures, as is evidenced by the possibility of various forms of employee resistance in the workplace (Bain and Taylor 2000).

b. Flexibilization

On the other hand, call centre research also reveals another polarity towards what we can call 'flexibilization,' reflecting the focus on customer-orientation and quality of service in these jobs. Studies which highlight this element emphasise the range of diversity found in call centre work, and how it can be perceived as challenging, interesting, and contribute to job satisfaction and employee well-being, and to a greater extent than, say, shop floor manufacturing (Holman 2004). Teamwork, supportive peers and supervisors, and the investment in training can be empowering to employees, even "fun" (Kinnie, Purcell and Hutchinson 2000; Ojha 2006). Such studies focus on the importance of 'high commitment practices,' and changes in workplace organization such as flatter organizational structures (Hutchinson, Purcell and Kinnie 2000). In contrast to Taylorist, "mass production" models of call centres, there is evidence of "professional service" models as well, where the goal is high-quality service (Batt and Moynihan 2002). Additionally, the importance of employee discretion and judgment to address customer needs, of employees' attitudes and emotions in serving customers well, and of flexibility in response to customer demands, all provide constraints to the criticism of Taylorization (Frenkel, Tam, Korczynski and Shire 1998). Indeed, the demands of cost-

\textsuperscript{18} Scientific management was F. W. Taylor's attempt to come up with the "one best way" to maximize the efficiency and productivity of workers, by breaking down tasks into their simplest components. The method was criticized even from its early days as being dehumanizing. This served as the basis for the Human Relations movement which arose in the 1930s, and it might not be far-fetched to see the 'flexibilization' phenomena in the next section as an extension of this movement. For a discussion of this history, see Kanigel 1999; O'Connor 1999; Rouleau 2007.
cutting and the need to increasing the volume of incoming calls as well as the speed of handling calls, are at odds with the demand to provide high-quality customer service.

And yet, this is not the only tension which is manifested in these call centres; in fact, there is evidence for a whole host of other problems, such as absenteeism, turnover, and health problems, in whose light these reports on job satisfaction, based on quantitative studies of a small number of variables, can be accused of reflecting the "abstracted empiricism" decried by C. Wright Mills (1959, cited in Ellis and Taylor 2006:108).

2.1.2. Impacts on employees

The evidence from studies on call centre employees reveals a peculiar paradox. On one hand, there are aspects of the work that seem to be considered positive, rewarding and enjoyable, such as the social interaction and peer support (Deery and Kinnie 2002:9). Contributors to the high level of job satisfaction sometimes reported include opportunities to help customers with their problems, supportive colleagues and supervisors, and even satisfaction with the monitoring and controls (Frenkel et al. 1998).

On the other hand, employees consistently report high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, leading often to absenteeism and employee turnover (Deery and Kinnie 2002:8-9). As some researchers have noted, the nature of call centre work demands significant "emotional labour" (Hoschchild 1993), where employees are expected to respond to call after call with energy, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude. Thus forced to suppress their own emotions and instead express contrary ones, the inevitable consequences they suffer are emotional exhaustion, withdrawal, and burnout (Deery et al. 2002). Researchers also note that the burden on women tends to be more severe, since there is a higher expectation on them to be more sympathetic, understanding, and patient; additionally they have to often handle a "second shift" of emotional labour if they have families (Deery and Kinnie 2002:8).

Yet employees are not confined to passive 'suffering' either; rather, as several researchers note, they engage in various forms of resistance. Such resistance is usually covert (Sturdy and Fineman 2001), such as redirecting calls to other service operators and hanging up on problem customers (Knights and McCabe 1998, cited in Deery and Kinnie
2002:9), or various forms of subversive workplace humour (Taylor and Bain 2003). Thus the paradoxical nature of the call centre work environment—a confluence of reports ranging from the monotony, routinization and de-skilling characteristic of Talyorism, to self-reported job-satisfaction, to emotional labour, stress and absenteeism, to various forms of resistance. This gives us a sense of the tensions between rationalisation and flexibilization in call centre work processes, and how such factors can impact employees. These features play out with additional particularities in the case of call centres outsourced to India, as we shall see.

2.2. Offshore call centres in India

Since its inception in the mid-1990s19, the Information-Technology-Enabled-Services and Business Process Offshoring (ITES-BPO, or simply BPO) sector in India, which comprises call centres as well as services such as transcriptions, document processing and online technical support, has seen enormous growth. Its revenues have grown from $565 million in 1999-2000 (Narayanswamy and Bhargava 2005:9) to over $10 billion in 2007-2008 (NASSCOM 2008), making it the fastest-growing industry in India (Budhwar, Varma, Singh and Dhar 2006). As a result, many observers have expressed a great deal of enthusiasm about the phenomenon, celebrating for instance, the ‘flattening’ of the global playing field (Friedman 2006), or India’s new role as the privileged back-office of today’s transnational corporation (Narayanswamy and Bhargava 2005). Many see this development as a tremendous benefit to India:

[T]he range of social opportunity afforded by BPO is huge, vast and ubiquitous. This is because it offers untold and unaccounted numbers of talented, educated, but unemployed youth with a genuine promise of income, status, livelihood and productive and responsible citizenship. The real talent in a country like India does not lie in the major metros of New Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai and Mumbai but in emerging townships like Gurgaon, Mysore, Coimbatore, Madurai, [...]. It is the small towns of India that form the repository of this budding talent who find the push and pull of BPO irresistible (Narayanswamy and Bhargava, 2005: 9-10, italics in original).

19 Texas Instruments, British Airways, and General Electric were the first companies to capitalize on this offshoot of the Indian software industry in the mid-90s. Industry growth began to accelerate after 2001.
However, as we will see, most of the scholarly studies on this phenomenon denounce these developments as new forms of imperialism and colonization. Nonetheless, both the above perspectives seem to assume to some degree the convergence thesis of the steamroller-effect of modern global capitalism.

What feeds this assumption on one level is the fact that many of these call centres belong to large foreign firms such as GE, Convergys and Accenture, which have significant resources to be able to meet the demands of their global customers. These companies set up what they (perhaps appropriately) call ‘Captive’ offices in India. However, in recent years, several smaller third-party service providers, e.g., Mphasis, 24/7 Customer, have emerged in India, which specialize in specific areas or ‘verticals’ (e.g., banking, healthcare, etc.) and handle processes from several foreign companies simultaneously. These companies have the advantage of being financed and staffed through local resources, thus offering the client company significant savings. In addition, they provide expertise in handling specific kinds of processes. This results in the foreign client having less control over the Indian operations. More recently, hybrid partnerships have emerged where ownership is distributed between the foreign and local company to varying degrees.

Taylor and Bain (2005:268) note that the key factor driving the development of call centres in India is the same as that underlying its inception even in the UK: cost reduction. The labour cost differential in India, they note, is 70-80%, and the readily available educated English-speaking workforce, supported by the recent Indian economic reforms such as liberalization, privatization, tax incentives and telecom deregulation, opened up the perfect opportunity for companies in the English-speaking world facing pressures to cut down labour costs. With a steadily growing workforce numbering over 700,000 employees (NASSCOM 2008), the ITES-BPO sector in India employs more workers in this sector than in Ireland and the Philippines combined (Budhwar, Luthar and Bhatnagar 2006) and serves as a key source of employment in Indian cities.

We will now examine the tensions specific to the call centre labour process in India, and the impact on Indian employees.
2.2.1. Labour Process in Indian Call Centres

The literature on Indian call centres reveals workplace tensions in many ways similar to the west, although there are also elements distinctive to the Indian situation. A similar tension to what we have seen earlier between rationalization and flexibilization exists in Indian call centres, as Upadhya and Vasavi (2006:139) note. Several studies point out that it is the rationalization aspect which is much more dominant, particularly through draconian management; Taylorist management practices with high-surveillance (Ramesh 2004; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; McMillin 2006); standardized work environments and processes (Taylor and Bain 2005); heavily monitored, low-skill, low-autonomy jobs (Batt, Doellgast and Kwon 2005); and heavily scripted, monotonous work (Ramesh 2004; Mirchandani 2004).

Thus, by and large, it seems that these Indian call centres fall into what Batt and Moynihan (2002) term the “mass production” model of call centres, characterized by highly standardized and scripted work, high call volume, low-value customers, and low skill levels—services such as debt collection, telemarketing, and credit card promotions. The strategy of most such call centre companies in India is to start at this lower level and “move up the value chain” (Taylor and Bain 2005:270) as they grow in expertise. The workplaces themselves are modeled after their western counterparts, with identical software and architecture. Despite (or perhaps because of) the state-of-the-art technology, various studies point out that these are tightly-controlled environments with a high degree of standardization (Batt et al. 2005). Target-setting follows strictly specified Service Level Agreements (SLAs) with client companies, thus creating an environment that is experienced as “demanding, pressurized, and frequently stressful” (Taylor and Bain 2005:271). Hence, despite the lucrative pay and lack of alternative job prospects due to highly competitive markets, employee turnover and attrition in the industry is remarkably high (callcentres.net 2003:34; Budhwar, Luthar and Bhatnagar 2006). However, some companies do report very high retention rates (Budhwar, Varma, Singh and Dhar 2006).

---

20 The experience of Indian employees seems not too different from what is expressed by one Canadian call centre employee: “I’m burnt out on phones. The thought of tethering myself to another desk, to be stuck there for eight hours, only being able to move within a ten foot radius, for eight hours doing the same thing every 90 seconds [...] I don’t think I could do it anymore. I just don’t have the patience to handle it” (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 1998:56). Such similarities tend to serve, for some, as further evidence of the convergence / homogenization thesis.
In addition, many companies have attempted to import “a ‘new age’ management ideology based on flat structures, lack of bureaucracy, openness, flexibility, and employee empowerment” (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006:ii). Studies note that many of these jobs and work environments emphasize the importance of ‘fun’ at work, attempting to boost retention and motivate employees with games and various non-standardized activities (see Upadhya and Vasavi 2006:121, 131, 139, 150-152), leading employees in various companies to report high job-satisfaction in surveys (Ojha 2006).

However, researchers, for the most part, are highly critical of the Indian call centre phenomenon. Much of the literature serves as a postcolonial critique of western neo-imperialism (e.g., Mirchandani 2003; McMillin 2006). A summary of the studies focusing on Indian call centres is in Table 2.2. We will now proceed to examine in more detail what these studies tell us about the impact of this labour process on employees.

### Table 2.2: Literature on Indian Call Centres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Results of studies</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>Burnout, monotony, boredom&lt;br&gt;Difficulties with night shifts, especially for women&lt;br&gt;Negative reputation of call centre workers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2.2. Impacts on Indian Employees

Owing to time zone differences, call centre work in India is primarily night-work—some call it “colonization with time” (Adam 2002, cited in Taylor and Bain 2005: 277)—and is often characterized by ‘graveyard shifts’ that start after midnight and last from 9 to 12 hours. In addition, employees often have to commute long distances to get to and from work. The work environment itself is characterized by a lack of fresh air; artificial climate control in a building that usually has 24-hour occupancy, and in India’s often humid weather, leads to health risks of its own. This combination is “a sure recipe for health problems”, in the words of one respondent (Taylor and Bain 2005:272); sure enough, empirical studies in India have confirmed various health problems owing to the lack of sleep and highly stressful environments (Sudhashree, Rohith and Shrinivas 2005).

A host of problems that Taylor and Bain (2005) consider identity tensions also characterize the Indian call centre situation, such as role confusions, perceptions of the work as demeaning when employees hold advanced degrees (p.272), and tensions because of the false identity adopted in the process of trying to live a lifestyle that Merchant (2003:13) describes as “America by night and […] India by day.” Several studies as well as newspaper reports note that Indian agents usually adopt a false anglicised name, in order to conceal their identity and where they are calling from (see McMillin 2006:238), which would be a plausible source of identity tensions. Additionally, they also generally undergo training in the accents and cultures of the regions of the world they are calling. While a few years ago the focus was on trying to mimic accents, at this point the focus of training has shifted towards developing a ‘neutral’ accent instead (Merchant 2003). This is partly due to irate customers who are unconvinced by fake accents or angered by “locational masking” (Mirchandani, 2003:16), and can become aggressive and even overtly racist (Taylor and Bain 2005:273). As a result, some the more recent studies note that there is less emphasis on adopting a foreign accent, or even pseudonyms for that matter (McMillin 2006; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Cohen and El-Sawad 2007).

Yet overall, similar to the studies we have seen earlier on call centres in the UK, these accounts depict a deplorable situation, comparable to sweatshops (Ramesh 2004; McMillin 2006:239) that employees do their best to cope with. In addition to typical job
pressures, Indian call centre employees have to contend with what has been decried as linguistic imperialism (Mirchandani 2003), referring to the processes of accent-training. Despite the fact that India boasts of a large English-speaking population, language is paradoxically the highest reason for customer complaints (Debold 2003; Merchant 2003; Budhwar, Luthar and Bhatnagar 2006; Tehrani 2006), making language and accent-training a high priority for Indian call centre managers (Taylor and Bain, 2005:275).  

However, despite these denunciations, some studies note that employees do not see this sort of work as interfering with their identity in any way (McMillin 2006:238; Cohen and El-Sawad 2007:1256). In fact, Cohen and El-Sawad (2007:1245) note that accent-training is actually seen by employees as valuable because it allows them to be seen in society as more sophisticated or better educated.  

Also, some of McMillin’s (2006) respondents greatly appreciated the opportunity to interact with foreign customers.

While there may be some dispute in the literature about identity tensions, there are other stressors which are consistently highlighted: the emotional labour of responding quickly and adequately to customer needs in a heavily standardized environment with top-down management methods, strong hierarchical workplace cultures, and the lack of union organization and employee voice (Taylor and Bain 2005:273; see also Upadhya and Vasavi 2006:49,153,161). Yet, employees still have opportunities and creative means for resistance, such as adjusting their behaviour when they know that supervisors aren’t monitoring them, manipulating mandated procedures if needed to solve customer problems, or giving customers hoax situations (Taylor and Bain 2005:274-275). Along these lines, other studies have shown how Indian employees construct an image of their foreign customers and managers as being pitiable (Mirchandani 2004; Cohen and El-Sawad 2007). Despite all this, studies such as Ojha (2006) report high job satisfaction among Indian call centre employees.

Recent press reports have also begun to note that with employees working for up to twelve hours daily, especially late into the night, the tense workplace environment also

---

21 For example, one of the problems noted here is that many Indians often translate into English from their mother-tongue. As Merchant (2003:13) notes: “A phrase such as ‘tonight’ is rendered ‘today, night’. ‘Thank you’ is frequently said at the wrong moment. The overall effect can be unintentionally to halt a conversation. Indeed, trainers say Indians’ ‘conversational English’ is highly deficient, a function of an education system whose focus is on the written word.

22 We should remember that English has been spoken in India for over three hundred years now, and this legacy of colonialism still matters when it comes to social status.
becomes the default venue for romances and even sexual encounters. With reports of escalating abortions in Bangalore over the past two years, and changing lifestyles of partying, drinking and sex, the call centre industry has even the Roman Catholic archbishop of Bangalore voicing concerns on the need to preserve moral values and family traditions despite national modernization (Haines 2006). Sexual incidents are reported more frequently in the BPO sector, but this matter gets further complicated when office cameras catch employees having sex in cubicles (Ghatak 2005)! Yet, surveillance becomes a necessity due to the highly confidential and customer-sensitive information involved, and this is no small concern with recent incidents of theft and fraud that have cast an ugly shadow over the reliability of Indian call centres (Puliyenthruthel and Rocks 2005; Vijayan 2006).

However, such elements touted by newspapers, especially the impacts on employees’ lifestyles, their habits, and their relationships with colleagues and family, have been examined only by one (unpublished) study till date (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). This is a detailed research report on the Indian Information Technology industry, based on a two-year sociological study. However, several of their results corroborate some of my own findings, and it is worth listing a few here: they note the large proportion of Christians among Bangalore call centre workers, due to cultural and language skills (p.126); BPO companies tend to recruit from the urban middle-class, again due to language-skills (p.127); many employees claim to have learned valuable skills for their future from their call centre jobs, such as confidence and professionalism (p.136); their respondents gave the impression of friendly workplaces with a high level of socializing with close relationships (pp.151, 153); half of their respondents noted that their lifestyles were no different from their parents, yet many adopt western clothing styles in place of traditional ones (p.151); the results of their study contradict newspaper reports of hedonism and consumerism among call centre workers (pp.151-152); call centre work as a profession is criticized by family and society (pp.152-154).

23 These authors note that they have forthcoming journal publications planned, but thus far nobody else in the literature has cited their important study. I too did not know of this report, unfortunately, until after I had collected my data, so it did not inform the problematization of my research.
24 There is some ambiguity here as to whether call centre work contributes to or takes away from one’s social status. According to Cohen and El-Sawad (2007:1242), call centre workers gain a sense of social prestige by working in reputed transnational companies. Upadhya and Vasavi’s (2006) study
These authors mention difficulties they encountered in achieving their sampling frame (p.175), which could pose limitations on the generalizability of their conclusions on BPO / call centre workers. Besides, the focus of their research is on IT workers in general and not just call centres. Nonetheless, their findings make a substantial contribution to our knowledge of the BPO/call centre phenomenon. Further investigation along these lines is important in order for us to get a more adequate picture of the impact of such work on these employees.

2.3. Conclusion

The literature we have examined above illuminates several important elements of the call centre phenomenon. These studies reveal tensions in the labour process, both in the west as well as in India, between the tendencies of rationalization (through Tayloristic processes of routinization, standardization, monitoring, and so on) and flexibilization (variously emphasizing quality, service, fun and job satisfaction), with the dominant element in the Indian case being the former. The overall sense we have of the impact of this labour process on employees, both in the West and in the East, is negative. While emotional labour and de-skilling are shared concerns in both cases, the Indian situation has added particularities, including health problems and possible identity-tensions. Studies inspired by postcolonial theory offer a poignant critique of the accent- and culture-training, ‘locational masking’ and night-work that are characteristic of Indian call centres, denouncing such activities as new forms of imperialism and colonialism.

However, focusing on the work environment and labour process alone fails to reveal some of the important cultural and contextual factors driving these new developments. (In fact, at times it even makes their choices to take up and persevere in these jobs appear irrational, or as a product of imperialist brainwashing). I share Ellis and Taylor’s complaint of a “general failure to contextualise” in these studies, and agree that it is important to develop “a wide-angle lens, to broaden the perspective beyond the workplace” (2006:108). While some have tried to provide an analysis of the economic highlights more how the general negative reputation of irresponsible workers in call centres poses difficulties when it comes to, for example, arranged marriages, especially for females (p. 153). My respondents, as we will see, also provide evidence for both these contradictory phenomena.
and political factors driving the development of call centres (Ellis and Taylor 2006; Taylor and Bain 2005), such efforts offer only a partial structural analysis, neglecting for the most part the role of culture. While many of these studies mention important lifestyle changes that Indian call centre employees experience, little work has been done to investigate these changes in detail. It is arguable that factors such as family relations, traditional religious practices, and so on, have an important relationship to employees’ sense of identity even at work; conversely, it may be possible that these new developments of modernity create tensions with traditional relationships and practices. These are factors well worth examining. What I propose here, therefore, responds to Glucksmann’s (2004, cited in Ellis and Taylor 2006:108) critique of the general tendency in such studies to treat call centres as “self-standing” and isolated from their broader environmental context by focusing narrowly on their internal dimensions.

While the studies inspired by postcolonial theory attempt to highlight some of these cultural elements, they fall prey to a misleading reductionism and even essentialism, as Cohen and El-Sawad (2007:1239) note. Aside from the questionable dichotomization of eastern vs. western values (see Sen 2000 for a critique) or the conflation of modernization with westernization, such an approach leaves little room for human agency, and inadvertently leaves us with an impression of these employees being merely passive victims of imperialist forces. Consequently, we know little to nothing about what motivates these employees to take up and persevere in such jobs, or how they

---

25 For example, in their attempt to trace the development of call centres in general, Taylor and Bain (2006: 109) identify several developments and innovations which fostered the integration of telephone and computer technologies, e.g., optical fibre technologies, Internet Protocol (IP)-based architecture, the Automatic Call Distribution system, etc. (See also Taylor and Bain, 1999; Miozzo and Ramirez, 2003). In India, additional factors include the availability of an educated, English-speaking workforce, and the economic reforms of 1991. However, this sort of approach, which treats the political-economic context without also considering the socio-cultural dimension as well, can mislead us into taking such developments merely as a “culture-neutral” consequence (Taylor 1995) of the emergence of certain ‘structures’. This is not to deny the possible causality entailed by the adoption of these structures. Rather, my contention is that an exclusive focus on the development of such structures without also taking into account what ‘motivates’ people to adopt them in the first place can lead us to erroneous conclusions.

26 Sainsaulieu (1977) insists upon the importance of external factors (“hors travail”) on one’s identity at work. This is very much the case in India, as Kumar and Sethi (2005:67) note.

27 This of course is the argument of classical theories of modernization and secularization, which we examined briefly in Chapter 1. While such theories have been heavily criticized for making unwarranted predictions, we should be careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater; rather than being an all-covering law, there may be certain patterns or tendencies of such a decline of traditional forms in certain kinds of situations.
make sense of these tensions in their lived experiences, or about the impact they see these developments having on their society.

In all fairness, despite the problems with the east-west rhetoric, there is undoubtedly some value to criticizing the political dynamics inherent in the phenomenon of Indian employees pretending to be British or American in order to serve (abusive) clientele in these countries. However, confining ourselves to such an approach neglects what Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) call the “critical capacity” of the agents being studied. Instead of contenting ourselves with the denunciations of scholars, we need to recognize and examine the capacity of persons as actors—even protagonists—to evaluate their own situations with reference to shared principles that are significant to them (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000). Taking this into consideration might allow us to address some important questions which remain unanswered in the literature: How do these call centre employees make sense of their experience of working in these jobs? What draws them to these jobs and enables them to persevere in them despite the negative consequences that we saw in the above studies? How do they evaluate their work experience as well as the impact of these jobs on their lifestyles, families and society? How do they justify and criticize this phenomenon? Such concerns form the basis of my research question and methodology, which I will present in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

From the previous chapter, our analysis of the prominent literature of the Indian BPO / call centre phenomenon allows us to recognize some gaps and limitations in the studies thus far. Firstly, this literature, while being strong in terms of empirical observations and case-studies of call centre environments, is weak in its theoretical moorings. Secondly, the neglect of these employees ‘critical capacity’ to evaluate their own situations makes it difficult to adequately comprehend why Indian call centre employees find this phenomenon so attractive, despite its evidently negative elements. Thirdly, most studies mention important lifestyle changes that these employees experience, but very little work has been done to investigate these changes. Finally, the ‘isolated’ conception of call centres does not adequately account for important contextual influences. Arguably, factors such as family relations and traditional religious practices can affect and be affected by these new developments; therefore, they merit further investigation.

One important step towards addressing such deficiencies would be to see how these employees narrate their own stories of their experience of the call centre phenomenon. Such an approach should afford them more of a sense of agency, and in turn allow us to grasp why they pursue call centre work in the first place, how they see it impacting their lives, as well as how they evaluate this phenomenon as a whole. Furthermore, such an approach can shed light on the relationship between various elements of tradition and modernity which constitute their lived experience. These are the concerns at the heart of my research question, which is: How do Indian employees evaluate their experience of working in offshore call centres and its impact on their lives?

In this chapter, I will first present the conceptual and theoretical frameworks which underpin my research, drawing on Charles Taylor’s concept of ‘strong evaluations’ and a simplified version of Boltanski and Thévenot’s ‘Economies of Worth’ model. Following this, I will describe the Narrative Research methodology that used in this study.
3.1. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The present study is built on a general conceptual framework (Figure 3.1 below) which emerges from the gap we observed in the literature review on Indian call centres. What I have proposed is a more contextual analysis of call centre work in India, in order to respond to the criticism of the narrow focus on the labour process and the workplace in the literature. This attempt aims to broaden the scope of analysis of this phenomenon, and consists of the following dimensions: 1. The experience of Call Centre work itself, including the labour process and relationships with managers and colleagues; 2. The Impact on one’s lifestyle, including habits, activities, and relationships with friends and family; 3. The Impact on oneself, including physical health, mental health, and one’s personality; 4. The Impact on Indian society, including employees’ perspectives of how the call centre industry affects their society, as well as their response to the way in which they are perceived by their own society.

Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework

However, the theoretical anchoring of this research will be based on the notion of ‘evaluations’ which is central to the research question. The conceptualization of this term draws heavily on two theoretical sources: Charles Taylor’s (1985a, 1985b, 1989) notion of “strong evaluations” and Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1999, 2000, 2006) notion of “worth”. Both these ideas are based on the philosophical assumption that every culture
and language has some capacity to make judgments of certain things being qualitatively more ‘valuable’ or ‘significant,’ or ‘mattering’ more than others. Such judgments reflect something more than merely personal preference or interest. They involve an appeal to ideals that are collectively considered ‘higher,’ and as somehow making demands on us. Any appeals to a course of action as being legitimate (a justification) or illegitimate (a criticism) would entail making such judgments. Thus, if we can grasp how call centre workers make such evaluations of their experience—an attempt that could be considered an exercise in ‘moral sociology’—we should have a good deal more insight into the relationship between tradition and modernity in this phenomenon. We will now consider an analytical approach which can serve this purpose.

3.1.1. Strong Evaluations and the ‘Economies of Worth’

Human beings, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) insists, are self-interpreting animals. This means that certain things have more ‘significance’ for us, or ‘matter’ to us more (Taylor 1985b:261). This is revealed in the fact that we can stand back from our initial desires and often make qualitative distinctions of ‘worth’, between superior/inferior, higher/lower, noble/shameful. Charles Taylor terms these as “strong evaluations” (1985a), which can be identified in that they use a certain language of qualitative distinctions—these are “contrastive and hierarchical” evaluations by which we judge something we desire using a sort of vertical axis of higher/lower, noble/shameful etc. (Abbey 2000:17).\(^{28}\) Taylor considers this capacity a “human universal” (1994: 249), even though what is considered ‘shameful’ or ‘superior’ may vary in content across cultures and individuals.

Even without being consciously able to articulate it, we often operate “with a sense that some desires, goals aspirations are qualitatively higher than others” (Taylor 1994:249), and such evaluations are always made against a background of “frameworks” or “horizons”, which we share in common with others (Abbey 2000:33). Our horizons are “an essential part of that out of which we evaluate and determine the meaning of things for us” (Taylor 1985a:35). We may, of course, undergo change and adapt a different

\(^{28}\) This can be contrasted with a ‘weak evaluation’, which is something is judged as good simply in that it is desired, e.g. our preferences and tastes.
framework altogether (e.g., in adopting an entirely new belief-system or adapting to a different culture), but here too we are never completely detached from some framework of meaning.

Additionally, Taylor insists that we cannot do without orienting ourselves to some concerns of what we love, what sort of life we aspire to, or what kind of person we want to become. This ability to say where we stand on issues that ‘matter’ to us is a necessary dimension of our identity, so much so that a person without such horizons or frameworks would be unable to know where she “stood on issues of fundamental importance, would have no orientation on these issues whatsoever [and] would be outside our space of interlocution”; we would have to consider this as pathological, or an identity crisis or personality disorder (Taylor 1989:31). Part of our concern in this investigation is to get at the sense of identity of Indian call centre employees, which is constituted at least in part by what ‘matters’ to them, and what standards they appeal to in making their strong evaluations. I will argue in section 3.2 that in order to do this, we would do well to examine their narrative accounts of their lived experience.

Taylor’s notion of strong evaluations also resonates with some of the work of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991, 1999, 2000, 2006), who similarly recognize the importance of qualitative judgments based on appeals to shared standards. What these authors offer, in addition, is a sociological model to capture the various conflicting logics of action (termed sometimes as ‘registers of argumentation,’ or ‘repertoires of evaluation’) which we can see employed by people when they try to justify their actions against criticism.

Boltanski and Thévenot’s model was developed through an analysis of discursive argumentation. They discovered that in order to justify their action in the face of criticism, individuals would draw upon certain ideals above and beyond simply their particular preferences—they appeal to a sort of higher order, by expressing their particular situation as an instance of something more ‘universal’ (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000:214). This is the basis of their notion of “justification,” which is defined as “an attempt to move beyond stating a particular or personal viewpoint toward proving that the statement is generalizable and relevant for a common good, showing why or how this general claim is legitimate” (Thévenot, Moody and Lafaye 2000: 236). In making such
justifications, people draw from a variety of ideals, which sometimes can conflict (or, conversely, different principles can overlap or ‘compromise’ in support of a certain course of action). Yet the number of such principles cannot be unlimited either, since what people drawing from has to be shared, accepted, and recognized as an appeal to a form of the common good. This gives rise to a limited number of ‘superior common principles,’ similar to Charles Taylor’s notion of ‘hypergoods’ (1989:63), which are certain ideals that are evaluated as being higher than others. Additionally, these common principles have a “capacity for validity in an a priori unlimited number of particular situations,” and for a diversity of people (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005:23).

However, these common principles are not merely abstracted, but are embedded in a more or less coherent logic or grammar, which is what these Boltanski and Thévenot refer to as ‘orders of worth,’ deriving from particular common principles. As Thévenot et al (2000:236) note, “[e]ach order of worth offers a different basis for justification and involves a different mode of evaluation,” such that “[t]he critique of justifications from one order usually rests on the evaluative basis of another order” (p. 237).

Initially, six such orders of worth or logics of justification were identified as characteristic of modern society, each one based around one such principle:

1. The logic of Inspiration (valuing creative inspiration);
2. The Domestic logic (based on family relations and traditions);
3. The logic of Opinion (based on reputation);
4. The Civic logic (based on collective solidarity);
5. The Market logic (based around price and competition);
6. The Industrial logic (ordered around the principles of efficiency and productivity). 29

These realms of justification operate at two levels: 1. what they call ‘cities,’ which are theoretical constructs based primarily on key texts of political philosophy 30;

29 To this a seventh one was recently added in a recent work (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), although I will not use it in my analysis since it does not seem to be of much relevance in Indian call centres.

30 This is because the different forms of the common good that we make reference to in western society have been developed in the classics of political philosophy; in fact, “the constructions of political philosophy are today inscribed in institutions and mechanisms (for example, polling stations, workshops, the media or concerts, family gatherings, etc.), which are constantly informing actors as to what they must do in order to behave normally” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 20n55). The sources of the six cities are: 1.
and 2. ‘worlds,’ which are the observable dimension of these logics of argumentation in people’s discourse. See Appendix 2 and Table A.1 for more details on their model.

One of the key strengths of Boltanski and Thévenot’s model is that it is able to take into account a plurality of values within a culture, unlike certain approaches which reduce national-cultural values to a single ‘core’ dimension (e.g. d’Iribarne 1993, 1997). The six logics listed above include aspects of tradition (e.g., family) as well as modernity (e.g., industry), and using this model in the analysis of peoples’ narratives can allow us to see the dynamic of these values. Though intended primarily for discursive analysis in western society, the model can also be useful in understanding cultural dynamics in different contexts (see Lamont and Thévenot (2000) for a cross-cultural comparison of the US and France; see also Hernandez (2000) for an application to the African context). Additionally, unlike the categories of Hofstede ([1980] 2001) and Trompenaars (1993), this model offers more flexibility in that it can allow the contents of each ‘world’ to differ across societies (e.g., we can compare the domestic logic in France vs. India).

In trying to bring together narratives and evaluations, the present study attempts to bring together Bruner’s (1986) two categories of thinking or understanding: paradigmatic and narrative. The paradigmatic mode for Bruner is akin to logical-scientific reasoning, and the narrative mode to storytelling. The former has to do with formal arguments, testing laws, abstraction etc.; the latter has to do with imagination, drama, experience Bruner (1986:11-12). In a sense, I will attempt to use both aspects of here: one is to present narratives of my respondents—their stories as they have told them to me, what they consider marking events/incidents, etc. But there is also their attempt at abstraction (and this might serve as a criticism of Bruner): in telling stories, it is difficult to escape making judgments which take us to a higher level of abstraction, a principle which the storyteller assumes the listener shares, a principle which the storyteller makes

the inspirational city: Augustine’s Civitate Dei; 2. the domestic city: Bossuet’s La Politique tirée des propres paroles de l’écriture sainte; 3. the reputational city: Hobbes’ Leviathan; 4. the civic/collective city: Rousseau; 5. the commercial city: Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations; and 6. the industrial city: Saint-Simon’s works.

31 This critique of d’Iribarne’s reductionism is offered by Dupuis (2004). See Appendix 1 for details.
appeal to in calling an action unjust, or a moral obligation. The Economies of Worth model allows us to grasp this dimension as well.

While the ‘Economies of Worth’ model can be helpful in the analysis of evaluations in the narratives of call centre workers, it does suffer from some limitations, and I will mention a few pertinent ones here. Their language is often unclear, and many of the concepts are not adequately elaborated on. There is some inconsistency in the terminology (e.g., the use of various terms ‘repertoires’, ‘logics’, ‘regimes’, ‘grammars’, etc. to refer to what appears to be the same concept), which might just be a function of the fact that every English translation of their works seems to use a different terminology. Additionally, certain elements of the model seem unnecessary or incidental to its use. Since some have even posed additional new ‘cities’ (Corcuff 1998), it looks as though the model is subject to constant revision, which might be understandable since it is not possible to capture all the different common principles that are exist in a society.

Given that the authors themselves don’t give us a clear enough sense of what they mean by the common good, and whether their usage is necessarily compatible with others who use this term, the model is left with a great deal of ambiguity. This, however, might also be a strength, since the model can then be somewhat loosely applied in different contexts and can still yield important results. Furthermore, the model does not seem to be able to take into account a progression over time that is characteristic of the notion of ‘narratives’ (though I would argue that it can be useful to analyze narratives). Finally, even if the model allows us to compare ‘worlds’ in different cultural contexts, it is, in itself, not capable of telling us anything about the sources of the distinctive features in a different context. In the Western context, while these authors have traced the sources of key principles to texts of political philosophy, it seems debatable to me whether their choices are the most appropriate (e.g., Rousseau with his romanticist philosophy seems a much better representative of the city of Inspiration than Augustine.)

Such weaknesses notwithstanding, the ‘Economies of Worth’ model can still serve useful as an analytical framework since it allows the possibility of a pluralistic dynamic of values, which could include both traditional as well as modern ones. For the

---

33 E.g. they stress on the universality of certain axioms on which their model is built (principles of common humanity, dissimilarity, etc.): it is not obvious why these are necessary, or what they are based on.
purposes of this study, rather than attempting to apply Boltanski and Thévenot’s model in its entirety and complexity (see Appendix 2, Table A.1 for a sense of the larger model), we will use only the broad framework of these six worlds or logics to analyze the narratives of Indian employees. Such an approach should suffice for the purposes of highlighting at least some important aspects of the relationship between tradition and modernity inherent in this phenomenon.

3.2. Methodology

Since our interest is in the evaluative judgments found in narratives of these call centre employees, a qualitative methodology would be most appropriate. It should be noted that the BPO/call centre phenomenon is in serious need of substantive quantitative research. However, given the deficiencies we have observed in the literature, further qualitative groundwork is still necessary in order to understand the phenomenon beyond the labour process. By exploring such dimensions, the present study can more adequately prepare the contextual ground for large-scale generalizable quantitative studies.34 This is especially important since scholars of cross-cultural management have noted that survey questionnaires too often tend to be tainted with researchers’ own cultural baggage (Adler, Doktor and Redding 1986: 311) due to an inadequate understanding of culture-specific aspects of various phenomena. Even in renowned quantitative studies such as Hofstede’s ([1980] 2001) comparisons of IBM subsidiaries across cultures, recent critics have shown that “the considerable subjectivity of the choice of questions used [...] is] easily concealed under the apparent objectivity of the figures” (d’Iribarne, 1997:46). In the case of India, Sinha (2004:15) comments on the unreliability of survey data from Indian managers and employees, whose responses often tend “to be tilted to meet the normative demands of the organizations”. He elaborates:

> Years of field experience have convinced me that Indian managers give socially desirable responses to a questionnaire unless the investigator establishes a good rapport with them, observes them, records their behaviours, and thereby creates the impression that he or she knows their ways of working and relating with others and that their responses to structured items of a questionnaire are merely for validating of what has already been documented (2004:14).

---

34 This is not to say that qualitative work should serve simply as a preparation for quantitative studies; in fact, this phenomenon merits serious ethnographic research as well.
Additionally, even if we were to come up with a random sample of employees from a representative sample of call centres—itself a formidable challenge—gaining access to these employees for research purposes is often difficult, as Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) have attested.

In order to focus at the level of individual call centre agents and their evaluations of their experience, the methodology that seemed most appropriate was one that has been gaining prominence in the social sciences in the past couple of decades, known as Narrative Research (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Czarniawska-Joerges 2004; Chase 2005). Perhaps because it is used across a wide variety of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, there is no definitional consensus among researchers who use this methodology, as Lieblich et al’ s review shows (1998: 2). Nonetheless, we need to say something about what we mean by narratives and why they are methodologically important.

Narratives, according to Polkinghorne (1998:13), are our “fundamental scheme[s] for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite.” Smith (2003: 65) offers more precision in defining narrative as “a form of communication that arranges human actions and events into organized wholes in a way that bestows meaning on the actions and events by specifying their interactive or cause-and-effect relations to the whole.” Bruner (1991) undertakes a more systematic definition of narratives as cultural products that are diachronic, entail intentional states (e.g., beliefs, desires, etc.), consist of particular events that are expressed through generic and cumulative stories which have breaches or interruptions, and which contain normative elements and referents to reality. Underlying all these conceptions is an assumption of human beings as “storytelling animals” (MacIntyre, 1981: 201); our conduct has a fundamentally “storied” nature (Sarbin, 1986), which is evident in our need to construct adequately meaningful stories about our experience of reality.35

35 This is arguably a cultural universal, which is no less true in modernity, as Smith (2003: 64) has argued: “[F]or all of our science, rationality and technology, we moderns are no less the makers, tellers and believers of narrative construals of existence, history and purpose than were our forebears at any other time in human history. But more than that, we not only continue to be animals who make stories but also animals who are made by our stories. We tell and retell narratives that themselves come fundamentally to constitute and direct our lives.”
Narratives are a crucial element of Charles Taylor's conceptualization of human self-understanding. For Taylor, "just as the self is and must be oriented by frameworks which maps a moral space, it must also be located in a narrative which tracks its unfolding in time" (Smith 2002:97). We understand our lives with a sense of where we have come from, where we are going, what we aspire to and who we look up to, and constantly tend to measure our lives and stories against such standards as well. This notion of narrative, which takes into account the history of not just individuals but also of peoples, seems particularly useful in examining the complexities of globalization. For example, Das (1997) describes how the changing Indian narrative today looks up to business leaders and entrepreneurs such as Tata and Ambani rather than political leaders such as Nehru and Gandhi. Mazzarella (2003) analyzes the interaction between contemporary advertising and Indian identity narratives, examining cases such as the marketing of KamaSutra condoms. Ganguly (2005) describes how different sub-castes in India have been reconstructing and retelling their narrative in recent years.

My interest in this study is to understand how Indian call centre workers make sense of their lived experience—not just of work, but of the impact of these new jobs on their lives and society. In light of this, one helpful approach, though not commonly found in studies in the English language, is a particular form of life-history narrative research called 'narratives of practices' (récits de pratiques) (Bertaux 1997; Rouleau 2003). While 'life history' proper implies a complete autobiography, such narratives of practices focus around specific events or time periods. In our case, we want employees' narratives of their total call centre work experience, including what they consider significant events, as well as their sense of gains and losses. Such an approach allows us to develop a diachronic understanding of our respondents' experiences and logics of action. Additionally, we should be able to grasp the interactions between their professional lives and their socio-historic contexts, as well as their perceptions and evaluations of these changes and transitions (Rouleau 2003).

Following Rouleau (2003), this method relies on repeated interviews with the same individual in order to gain further depth of information on their experience. On average, three interviews, each lasting at least an hour, were conducted with each respondent over a three-month period. The interviews themselves were conducted
according to the Long Interview format of McCracken (1988). A preliminary interview guide (Table 3.1) was developed such that each of the three interviews would focus on a certain aspect of the respondent’s story: background, work experience, and sense of lifestyle / societal / cultural changes. Since the method involves understanding specific narratives with greater depth, the number of cases used is limited. I conducted repeated interviews with 20 call centre employees.

Table 3.1: Basic Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Interview</th>
<th>Second Interview</th>
<th>Third Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Researcher’s introduction</td>
<td>- Reminder of goals of research and interview objectives</td>
<td>- Reminder of goals of research and interview objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Goals of research, objective of interview</td>
<td>1. <strong>Background and professional life</strong></td>
<td>3. <strong>Cultural changes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Consent form</td>
<td>a. Can you tell me something about your background?</td>
<td>a. What would you consider to be traditional Indian values?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- where did you grow up?</td>
<td>- do you find any of these personally important or worthwhile?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- family</td>
<td>- are there any you don’t like, or think are bad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- education</td>
<td>- are any of them important in your workplace?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- previous jobs held</td>
<td>- are any of them challenged or opposed by your job? By your friends? Family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- aspirations</td>
<td>b. What would you consider to be western values?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- what interested you in call centres?</td>
<td>- do you find any of these personally important or worthwhile?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- are there any you don’t like, or think are bad?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Can you tell me about your experience of call centre work?</td>
<td></td>
<td>- are any of them important in your workplace?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- what does your job involve?</td>
<td></td>
<td>- are any of them challenged or opposed by your job? By your friends? Family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- work environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Relationships with others:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- people (managers/colleagues)</td>
<td>a. What is different about your life since you started working in the call centre?</td>
<td>- relationships with family / circle of friends / religious leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- positive aspects (what do you like / find motivating)?</td>
<td>- work hours, leisure time</td>
<td>- are people supportive?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- positive / enjoyable experiences ?</td>
<td>- any new opportunities / improvements ?</td>
<td>- any criticisms? how do you respond?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- negative aspects (challenges / frustrations / dislikes)?</td>
<td>- any new difficulties / problems?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- difficult/challenging/painful experiences?</td>
<td>- health / sleep habits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- what are your future plans?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Overall, how do you evaluate your experience of your job in the call centre?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Appreciation and thanks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Objectives of 2nd interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Scheduling date for 2nd interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial methodology planned was to conduct a case study of one call centre. However, after contacting several companies towards this end through local references, it
became clear that I would not be able to guarantee them confidentiality about the sort of biographical information I was looking for from respondents; companies insisted on complete access to the data gathered. As a result, I decided to use a non-random sampling method in the selection of respondents known as snowball sampling, where each respondent would refer me to other potential respondents. This method is particularly useful when looking for individuals with particular desired characteristics or who may be hard to locate (Bernard 2006:193). Since I wanted respondents who could give me in-depth information about the call centre experience and its impact on their lives, I limited myself to respondents who had a decent amount of work experience in the call centre industry (at least one year)\textsuperscript{36}, as well as respondents who would be willing to endure repeated interviews and talk about their lives in detail. Of course this reflects a bias in that it screens out employees who have only a few weeks' or months' experience, or who are not willing or able to articulate their stories. In other words, the sample generated could not be considered representative of Indian call centres in general. But my research question is concerned with looking at how individuals whose lives are impacted by working in these environments tell their stories, and further, what an analysis of their evaluations in these stories can tell us about the relationship between tradition and modernity. To assess whether these types of narratives obtained are indeed typical or representative in the industry should indeed be the object of further investigation in the future.

The pool of respondents was developed through several initial contacts, including college students, professors, and relatives. In addition, I was able to generate a second pool of informants, comprising journalists, social workers, activists, friends and parents of call centre workers, and religious leaders, totalling an additional 25. Informal interviews and repeated conversations with these informants served to provide further insight about the phenomenon at hand. Furthermore, observations from the time I spent with respondents in colleges, coffee shops, pubs, restaurants, gyms, youth groups, and a couple of office visits provided additional contextual information, and also helped facilitate these respondents' sense of familiarity with and trust towards me. My 20

\textsuperscript{36} However, I did interview two respondents with only about 6 months' experience (DE and KJ in Table 3.2) who were initial contacts who provided other useful leads.
respondents, who were from a total of 13 companies, were contacted through 10 distinct sources, and none of my respondents knew more than two others. In addition, during the course of my stay in Bangalore, I helped organize a 3-day national conference on this issue, which brought in 150 delegates, including activists, media professionals, health professionals, and managers. This event was especially useful in giving me a sense of the conflicting ideals in the discourse.

As can be seen in Table 3.2 below, most respondents were in their early- to mid-twenties (although four were over 40) and had either returned to the workforce or needed a career-change. Most respondents had between 1-5 years of experience in the BPO / call centre industry. For some, it was their first job; others had worked several call centre jobs, and some of the older employees had had several careers. My sample had a fairly equal distribution of current and former employees of captive as well as third-party companies, in fixed and variable shifts, and in inbound as well as outbound processes.

**Table 3.2: Summary of respondent profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Years in industry</th>
<th>Type of Process</th>
<th>Type of Company</th>
<th>Type of Shifts</th>
<th>Currently in BPO job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>TP, CAP</td>
<td>F, V</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CH</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>TP, CAP</td>
<td>F, V</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>TP, CAP</td>
<td>F, V</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DE</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FR</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>TP, CAP</td>
<td>F, V</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>F, V</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KR</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KU</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>TP, CAP</td>
<td>F, V</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NG</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50-55</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OF</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>TP</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TE</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>I, O</td>
<td>CAP</td>
<td>F, V</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Interview transcripts were fed into QSR NVivo 1.3, and coded along the main categories of the conceptual framework: Call centre work, Impact on Lifestyle, Impact on
self, and Impact on society. Each of these main categories was divided into pertinent sub-categories in an emergent fashion. NVivo allows for codes to be categorized into ‘Trees’ as well as ‘Free Nodes.’ The former were helpful in structuring the main categories of analysis (e.g., Call Centre Industry, Call Centre Colleagues, etc.), listed in Table 5.1 in Chapter 5, while Free Nodes captured elements present across these categories (e.g., Background, Event, Money, etc.), which served useful in threading together common themes. Similarly, Trees were used for each of the six worlds of the Economies of Worth model (Domestic, Industrial, Opinion, etc.), and Free Nodes captured specific component terms (Family, Performance, Cost, etc.) within each category. These form the basis of the analysis in Section 5.2.

While this approach, as we will see, offers us a good deal of depth of insight into the phenomenon, it has its share of limitations. As Wood (2000) has noted, narrative research tends to look a lot closer to journalism than social science. This criticism can be addressed at least to some degree by the analysis in Chapter 5. However, replicability and generalizability remain also important concerns, especially due to the limited sample size. Furthermore, the non-random sampling method defies representativeness. The credibility and reliability of sources becomes yet another problem in such studies. To add to it, this study is focused on Bangalore, which, while being one of the most important offshoring destinations in India, might look different in some aspects than Delhi or Mumbai, or even the new smaller offshoring destinations such as Mysore. Nonetheless, similar problems plague most of the other studies available on this phenomenon, which are mostly non-representative case studies (e.g., see Upadhya and Vasavi 2006:175).

Despite such limitations, however, we do have some bases of comparison in the literature we reviewed in Chapter 2 (although none of these studies was based on a representative sample). Several of the observations in this literature were verified in my study: the difficulty with night-shifts; the monotonous, scripted work; insufficient breaks; health problems; surveillance; difficult and sometimes abusive customers; attempts to create ‘fun’ workplaces; the perception of call centre jobs as temporary solutions; and the lack of unionization. However, there were also some discoveries in my study which have gone unnoticed in previous studies: employees’ criticisms of their local Indian managers due to corruption, power-abuse and sycophancy; employees’ resentment of societal and
religious criticisms of call centres; and employees' aspirations towards modern values such as 'professionalism', 'dignity of labour' and 'merit.'

As for elements extraneous to the labour process, Upadhya and Vasavi's (2006) report, which I did not come across until after collecting my data, serves to corroborate many of my findings here (listed earlier in section 2.2.2). One observation which might seem surprising to the reader is that several of my respondents were Christians, which reflects the fact that most schools in Bangalore in which the medium of instruction is English are Christian schools (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006:129). Since each interviewee also speaks a fair bit about what his or her colleagues and other call centre workers are like, the information gleaned overall might allow us to make some humble generalizations about the phenomenon, or at least, retain some reasonable suspicions to investigate in future studies.

I have presented in this chapter the conceptual and analytical frameworks as well as the methodology of this study. While the findings are not meant to be representative of the population of Indian call centre workers, they should give us a better, in-depth sense of how the dynamic between tradition and modernity plays out at the individual level. Furthermore, there may be something about this dynamic that we can reasonably generalize even to other contexts. The contextual depth gained here can also serve as the basis for more elaborate studies in the future.
Chapter 4. Narratives

In this chapter, we will look at how Indian employees narrate their experience of working in offshore call centres and the impact of this work on their lives and their society. The aim of this study is to give us better insights into how individuals working in offshore call centres make sense of these new developments in Indian society. More specifically, we want to grasp the logics of evaluation underlying their narratives in order to understand the relationship between elements of tradition and modernity at the heart of this phenomenon. For this purpose, it would help to examine some of these narratives in sufficient depth. Thus I have chosen to present the data by focusing on five detailed narrative cases in this chapter, which comprise six individuals—two of them being a couple—three males and three females.

The cases that will be presented here (these are respondents A, G, J, N, S, and T listed in Table 3.2 earlier) have been chosen along the following criteria:

1. Reasonable representativeness of my sample: I have tried to select examples of narratives that can be considered somewhat representative my sample of interviewees. While this is not an clear-cut choice, given that there are various dimensions to these stories, it is possible to see that these cases represent my sample along certain salient criteria (listed earlier in Table 3.2), namely, gender, age, type of company worked (captive/third-party), type of process worked (inbound/outbound), type of shift worked (fixed/variable), and whether or not they are still working in a BPO company.

2. Sufficient distinctiveness: I have also tried to present narratives such that there might be sufficient diversity between cases, so that no one case could be simply ‘collapsed’ into an instance of the other. At the same time, each of these cases is comparable to a few other respondents whom I have not presented in such detail (In Appendix 2, I have summarized the narratives of the rest of my respondents, as well as mentioned which of these 5 cases each of those narratives resembles.)

3. Length and clarity of interview: These are factors that affect the quality of the data. The narratives presented are among the longest interviews, and therefore allow us a richer analysis. In addition, it was also important to take into account the content of the interviews (a couple of respondents had little to offer in terms of personal examples, and
were more given to offering economic and political speculations on the fate of the industry, the country, and the world. While these comments offer interesting material for analysis, they are less pertinent to the research question than personal lived experience.)

Below are summaries of the five narrative cases presented in this chapter. For the sake of confidentiality, all personal names, as well as names of companies, have been disguised. I present these narratives chronologically in time, according to when the respondent joined the industry.

1. **Girish and Nikhila**\(^{37}\) (worked 2001-2006) are a lively and talkative couple, both of age 23, who joined the call centre industry right after high-school. They have worked in four call centre companies, both captive as well as third-party, and have now moved out of the industry completely, swearing never to return. Their profile and experience, they themselves believe, is typical of many call centre workers who “get sucked in” to the sort of ‘wild’ lifestyle that Indian media and society have become very concerned about.

2. **Julie** (worked 2002-2007\(^{+}\)) is a cheerful 24-year-old who has been working for a third-party call centre company. She is mostly positive about her experience, and is currently in the process of becoming a trainer for her company. Her interview was very similar to a couple of other women I interviewed who are very positive about this industry, especially for the opportunities it provides for women, and aspire to build life-long careers in it.

3. **Sally** (worked 2005-2006) is a 47-year old lady who took up a call centre job in order to return to the workforce after a long illness. Her story is quite similar to the other older employees I interviewed: all of them found it hard to fit in, felt demeaned by their (young) managers, were disturbed by the ‘moral corruption’ of the young, and wanted to go on to become trainers or counsellors in order to help the young.

4. **Tarun** (worked 2005-2007\(^{+}\)) is in his early thirties, and represents the increasing new trend of the reverse-brain-drain that is returning from overseas to work in India. While he is in a management position in a reputed global information systems

\(^{37}\) The interviews with this couple also included a friend of theirs, CH, who was present for some duration in a couple of interviews. Since his input is brief and mainly corroborates their stories, for the sake of simplicity I have retained the narrative as only that of the couple.

\(^{38}\) + indicates that these respondents were still working in these companies when the interviews were conducted (Jan-Mar 2007).
company, he considers his actual job as being no different from that of a call centre
worker, except that it is a higher-value process.

5. Ajay (worked 2006-2007+) is a 22-year old who had to drop out of college in
order to take care of his family. He has worked in two call centres for a little over a year
in total, and has found it a very conflicting experience. He has started his own business
on the side, which he hopes will be his ticket out of this industry.

For ease of comparison, the body of each narrative, encapsulated by the
respondent’s Background and Future Plans, will be presented along the main categories
of the conceptual framework: The Experience of Work, Impact on Lifestyle, Impact on
Self, and Impact on Society.

4.1. Girish and Nikhila

“You get trapped in call centres…”

Girish and Nikhila met and fell in love in a call centre. Upon graduating high-
school, they both took up jobs in a third-party call centre, and for the next four years,
generated the need to work together in three other call centre companies. For them, it was good
money, and it afforded them a lifestyle that would have been previously impossible in
India unless you were highly skilled. Yet all of this came at a price. Their jobs took a
serious toll on their health and other relationships, and they grew increasingly frustrated
with bad management practices. Consequently, they both left the industry about a year
ago, and swear they will never work in a call centre again. Nonetheless, Girish credits
this experience for landing him a job at an international event management firm, where
he has just been promoted to manager for their branch in South Africa. Nikhila returned
to college full-time to complete a degree in photography.

Background

Girish originally hails from Sri Lanka. Along with his parents and his younger
brother, he moved to India when he was fourteen, and went on to complete his high-
school education in Bangalore. Nikhila’s family, on the other hand, is from Bangalore.
Her father is a businessman who does a fair bit of trade with the U.K., and when Nikhila was about four, their family moved to England and settled in Manchester. When she was twelve, they returned to Bangalore.

Upon completing high-school, Girish and Nikhila, like several of their classmates at the time, decided to get summer jobs in the emerging BPO industry. Neither of them had ever worked before, and it seemed like a great idea to make some money for a while and save up for college. A call centre job seemed straightforward enough. Nikhila says that the main factor that led them to the job was “just the money.”

I didn’t even think of outbound or inbound; I just went for this interview. They offered me 7500 bucks\(^{39}\), which for a 17-year-old is a lot of money. I’m thinking, “I’ve never seen this much money in my life!” When they ask, “Is that good enough?” I’m not even in the mood to negotiate with them; I said, “That’s fine,” cuz I’m a fresher\(^{40}\). I’ve never had any kind of work experience, so they con me and say, okay, this is big money for you [...] So, for me I’m thinking, ok, I have 3 months of the summer, I’m going to collect lots of money, so I can comfortably live out my college year. And in my head I’m thinking, “I’m quitting this job after 3 months; I’ll wait for my next hols,\(^{41}\) get another job for 3 months, and do that.”

But things didn’t turn out the way they planned at all. For Girish and Nikhila, as for many others, once they started working, it just wasn’t all that easy to stop.

**Experience of Work**

Girish and Nikhila came to meet on their first job, which was in TP1\(^{42}\), one of the first third-party call centres to open in Bangalore. They worked there for about a year in processes serving an American bank. For the first few months, they were with an outbound process selling credit cards, and then they were transferred to an inbound customer-service operation for the same bank.

Both Girish and Nikhila are of the opinion that outbound work is much more stressful and demanding than inbound. Ironically, Girish has now returned to outbound sales (although now a higher-level operation), primarily because sales commissions can

---

\(^{39}\) About 190 U.S. Dollars.

\(^{40}\) Fresher: slang for freshmen (in school/college) and also for people just starting out in the job market.

\(^{41}\) Slang for holidays.

\(^{42}\) Throughout these cases I use TP to mean Third Party company, and CAP to mean Captive.
generate significantly higher incomes. Nikhila found outbound work at TP1 “most
dreadful,” particularly because of the way the system was set up there:

We have an automatic dialler that just keeps dialling, so, as soon as I click off the phone, it hardly
takes me 2 seconds to be at the next call. So I don’t even have enough time to take my headset off,
so I’m just sitting there until I take my break. It’s not even 2 seconds, it goes—beep—there’s the
call, and you’re: “Hello, I’m calling from, lalala…” Per day, I roughly take about 500 calls; not
necessarily all of them have to be a 10-minute conversation, but it’s 500 calls!

“There’s absolutely no breathing space for an outbound,” Girish elaborates,
whereas inbound work “is very chilled; I mean, you get your breathing space, you have
good fun on the floor. In about 8 hours you take up to about 20-25 calls, and it’s just, you
know, queries and questions which you can answer for them. So we basically answer,
like, you know, these people call and it takes us sometimes 10 minutes—sometimes it
takes us 1 hour—trying to answer the customer, depending on what the problem is. But
normally it takes about 5-10 minutes. And after that, you take your break for about half
an hour, where you’re waiting for another call. So you get your breathing space, you get
to talk to your colleagues, you can spend some time with your colleagues.” In outbound
processes, on the other hand, you don’t even have the option of putting your customer on
hold, since it is your automatic dialler that has called them. In addition, you were
expected to bag a sale within a very short time-frame:

[They say.] “Do not waste our money cuz we’re paying for these phonecalls! Do not go on
blablah with your customers!” We need to wrap up the call within a certain amount of time, and
we can’t exceed it [... ] I have to try and convince this person to buy this credit card in less than 4
minutes. If it goes above, I’m called into the boardroom and they’re going “Look at your call stats,
you’ve been on a call more than 4 minutes, which means, we have to pay that much for dalala, so,
don’t do it!”

When it came to dealing with customers, they found outbound processes more
demanding, because it meant calling people to sell them something they usually didn’t
want. Many of them, Nikhila says, would “just abuse you left, right and centre!” It takes a
few months at work to learn to deal with such customers. Agents have to learn to “just
like, switch off,” says Nikhila. Girish concurs: “Ya, you have to switch off. [If y]ou take
it personally then it’s horrible. Sometimes these guys are just so irated43…” Nikhila

43 Referring to irate customers as “irated” was consistent among my respondents (including
trainers and managers I spoke to), and is, effectively, industry jargon.
jumps in: "You need to switch off! You know sometimes we just, what we do, we just take the headset and dump it on the table, we don't hear what they're saying. We'll put it back on after 10 minutes and say, 'Okay, we're really sorry for calling you; we'll put you on our not-calling list, thank you,' and that's it. We won't even listen to what they're saying, we just keep it away." Yet, the pressure to perform remains nonetheless, leading some employees to resort to any means possible to make the sale:

[Trust me, we wish for people who don't speak English properly, especially if we get like, Arabic people or Chinese people or Indian people and they don't really understand English really well. So I mean you kinda trap them in the conversation into saying a yes.

For example, with credit cards they would emphasize that it is "free—you're not gonna have to pay anything," but when it comes to reading them the part where they would need to do a credit report check on a customer, "you tend to hold the mic a little away so they don't tend to hear the subtler portion, then you put it back on." Some, while reading their script, "take their headset and fluctuate it up and down [gestures] so that their words aren't really clear. And you don't hear everything; you're not hearing every word I'm saying, or at least, the words that I don't want you to hear." Of course, such behaviour could get the employee into trouble: "You can get caught and get fired for doing it. But if you're just that desperate, like, I know lots of people who do it."

But not all customers are nasty, Nikhila insists: "No, no, no, the majority are nice. Most of them are nice." Girish concurs; at least, for inbound customers:

I mean you get a lot of really nice people, you get, as far as I was in customer service inbound [...] I got a whole lot of very, very, very sweet people. It was very rare that I got an irated customer who would really get psyched or would yell at me[...]It's just about handling their queries and they're more than happy with you helping them because, half the people there do not know how to read their credit reports. So they call you to basically assist them and tell them what what means.

What they think enrages customers is when the agent is incompetent, or is unable to understand their problem. This sometimes has to do with understanding accents, hence the emphasis on accent-training in call centres. But Girish and Nikhila don't think that accent-training is as big a deal as many people make it out to be. They were quite comfortable speaking to US or UK customers in their 'normal' Indian accent, which they believe can be understood by English-speakers anywhere. As Nikhila puts it,
[A]s long as you speak like, how we’re speaking, and as long as the person abroad can understand what I’m saying—it’s not muffled, it’s not pronounced differently, it’s a normal pronunciation, they can understand what I’m saying—I don’t see the need to use an accent!

Girish adds, “[A]s long as you don’t talk like mallus,\footnote{Mallu: Slang (often derisive) for Malayalees, i.e., inhabitants of the south-Indian state of Kerala and speakers of Malayalam. It should be noted here that English is spoken with very distinctive regional accents even within India. English-speaking schools in India, as a result, also try to foster such a ‘neutral’ English accent based on UK English.} like you don’t say ‘kofi’ instead of ‘coffee,’ okay? So as long as you have a neutral accent.” He admits that initially he had trouble pronouncing certain words that he hadn’t heard before: “I had problems in the beginning pronouncing ‘delinquent,’ okay? Because I was not familiar with the word, so [...] somebody taught me how to pronounce that, so, good.” But they think that accent-training is overrated; they have never heard a client say “Oh, you don’t have our accent, you can’t have a job!” They think such demands come not from clients, but from Indian managers, who create an excessive sense of fear and awe around “the Client”; employees are not allowed to contact the client company for any reason.

Girish and Nikhila say that their main problem was with neither clients nor customers, but with their local managers, many of whom were cheating clients as well as employees. In TP1, Nikhila narrates an example when a manager from the client-company was visiting their office. At one point, he went up onto the floor to congratulate the employees for their excellent performance the previous month, and then asked them what they bought with the $2000 he sent them.\footnote{That amounts to 88,000 Indian rupees, which, even when distributed among 50 employees, is a fair bit of money for a bonus.} Nikhila and her colleagues were surprised: the only thing that their management had given them recently was “a packet of biscuits, like cookies!”

And he went, “They got you cookies for 2 grand?” And we were like, hmm, yeah. So my manager was actually fired, cuz all she spent was 300 Indian Rupees, and she took the rest of the money without anyone else knowing. So, that happens, that happens a lot.

In Girish’s project, incentives for sales started to diminish over time. At first, there were fairly generous cash incentives, but a few months later, “there was no sign of incentives. Packs of biscuits; a small little table-clock, worth 50 bucks maybe [...] Can you believe it? Small things, you know? Table clocks! That’s 50 rupees! And they give it to 10 people only!” They are convinced that this was due to managerial corruption rather
than the alleged mandate of cost-cutting. Nonetheless, they stayed on for a year at TP1, at
the end of which Girish was promoted simultaneously to trainer and team-leader. He was
shocked to discover, though, that his paycheque was still the same; only now, he was
working twice as much: “I used to work like, 12-13 hour shifts, and they still paid me 9
[khousand rupees]. Not a rupee more than that!” Nikhila adds that they made “shitty
excuses,” such as “we’re just gonna test your loyalty to the company.” Girish retorts:

You’re on probation! Like, you have to pay me man! I’m working 13-14 hours, it’s not a joke!
And I’m handling 2 different, you know, completely...training is one side, team-leading is another
side! They’re 2 different kinds of operations I’m trying to head and you need to pay me for that.
I’m not gonna do it for free. I’m not coming here to do social work kind of thing!

But the company refused to pay him until he had been in the position for a few
months longer. Girish “lost interest in the entire job” and quit. Nikhila left with him, and
they and took up higher-paying positions at TP2, which is one of the largest third-party
companies in Bangalore. To Girish’s dismay, the mandatory training they had to undergo
here was “like school: they tried teaching me grammar and how to pronounce words and
stuff like that!” Previously, at TP1, training was focused more on building confidence,
and the trainers there, he says “were geniuses! They were just superb people; very nice
people to work under, very understanding. Very good with people, they know [...] people-management skills.” Nikhila adds, “I wish our trainers had been our managers!”; their managers didn’t relate to people very well. In comparison to this, Girish found the
training at TP2 demeaning. One day, as he was taking notes sitting with one leg crossed
over the other, his trainer demanded that he sit up straight. Since he found it easier to take
notes sitting this way, he remained as he was. The trainer snapped: “[S]he was like,
what’s with you, what’s with your attitude? You think you know too much?” and then
went on a tirade for several minutes. She would then keep insulting him throughout the
session. After a while, Girish couldn’t take it anymore and stormed out:

I was...I lost it; I went up to her, I said, “Look, you’re not the only one who can give me a job. I
can find a job anywhere else [...] I said “I don’t want your job, fuck you! [...] I wouldn’t be able
to learn anything from an arrogant bitch like you anyway!” [...] And I quit immediately.

Nikhila stayed on for a couple of months, until the process was suddenly shut
down when managerial corruption was uncovered. A manager from the client-side
announced one morning that he would be visiting the operation in a few days hence. The
very next day, Nikhila found, to her bewilderment, her HR staff “standing out on the street handing out flyers, and...literally walking up to people saying, walk in, walk in for 2 weeks, part time for 2 weeks, we’ll pay you 10 grand for 2 weeks!” They even called Girish and several previous interviewees back: “They apologized to me: ‘We’re really sorry; do you want your job back?’” Nikhila then came to discover that “the client was under the impression that he was paying the salaries of 500 sales executives,” while there were only 80 of them employed in the process. The rest of the money was being pocketed by management, who were now desperate to prove to the client that they had the numbers on staff that they claimed. “But he found out anyways,” Nikhila smirks. When the client came down, and noticed that there weren’t enough employees, her managers tried to make excuses: “‘Ah, they’re working different shifts,’ lala...” But the client stayed the whole day. “And there were no more people. And he closed it down immediately.” Such corruption, Nikhila believes, is rampant in third-party call centres, and occurs most often in the negotiation of starting salaries:

They tell the client, ‘Oh we’ve got 10 employees who’ve got 5 years experience so we’ve promised them 20,000 bucks’. But to us they’d be like, ‘no, 15 [thousand]’ Or even if they go 18, it’s still 2 grand into their pockets! If you can imagine 10 employees and 2-2-2- [...] in their pockets!

Following this, Nikhila left the company and applied to TP3, where Girish was now working. She applied to work as a trainer, and went through an uncomfortable interview with the Managing Director:

He goes, “So, what religion do you follow?” And I said, “Does my religion matter? [...] Hinduism I guess?” And he goes, “Oh, so you follow religion?” and I said, “No, not really, but religion doesn’t mean much to me.” And he said, “Why not?” [...] He found it very surprising that I said, “I’m not religious but I’m spiritual and there’s a big difference between the words.” And he went, “Can you explain what you mean by that?” and I went, ‘This is an interview and I don’t need to explain to you what my spiritual beliefs are, or what faith I have!’ [...] He asked[,] “Have your grandfathers and great-grandfathers not taught you anything?” and I was like, ‘Am I gonna be telling people that over the phone? That I believe in lalalala?’

Despite this, she still got the job, though the very next day she discovered the first problem: “The work atmosphere was so...filthy! They had rats in the training room, running around the closets...They have water, snacks, and all these things stored in those cupboards with rats scurrying around the place!” She stuck around nonetheless, until
another incident a month later prompting them both to leave TP3. A foreign manager from the client company visited the office, and decided to motivate the employees on the floor. “[H]e was walking around, and he took out this big bundle of money from his pocket and he went, ‘Next sale gets 5 notes out of this bundle!’ And he went, ‘Next sale, next sale...guy’s, come on, let’s do this,’ raising the value of incentives.” After a while, the Managing Director came up and asked to have a meeting with the employees, without the foreigner being present. When the latter left the room, the manager proceeded to castigate the employees: “That was demeaning! How can you all put up with this; there’s some guy in white skin walking around with money and waving it at you all and you all are grabbing it like beggars?! I will not put up with this! Even if he offers you money next time, you don’t take it!” Several voices piped back in opposition: “Ya, cuz you don’t take anything? We’re putting in an effort here! [...] So why do you work for a white guy?” Girish and Nikhila were disturbed: “He took his services, but he doesn’t want him coming and throwing out incentives on the floor? So then both of us got psyched; that was the last day we worked there, we just walked out of there [...] We said, fuck it, we don’t wanna work there.”

Their next job was in a Captive company CAP1, which, when they joined, was managed entirely by staff from the UK. It was outbound sales again, but it was a higher-level job that entailed marketing events rather than products. And they found the whole setup very different from the get-go: “[F]or our interviews, it wasn’t like, ‘Can you speak English? Can you read a newspaper so we can see how your pronunciation is?’” [which was the nature of some of their interviews in third-party companies] They just went, “This is what the company is, this is the job, and would 20 grand be enough for your basic sal[46]?” And you went, ah yeah, fair enough!” With these UK managers, they felt that they were treated with much more respect than their previous Indian managers.

“For them [the UK managers], it’s a learning process of: ‘We’re here, we’re looking at you guys, and we want to know how your day goes.’ So, they bother to find out what our social lives are like, what time we wanna work...lots of stuff, like, would 20,000 bucks be enough for us? They make an effort; that was the best part.”

In previous companies, they felt that managers were constantly trying to interfere in their affairs, such as sometimes even ordering them not to sit next to each other at the

---

cafeteria. There were no such problems at CAP1: "They never said, you’re a couple, you should never talk to each other at work, etc.; they never did any of that!" Here they felt that managers were genuinely interested in getting to know them, to the extent that they would close the office on local Indian holidays, and even celebrate with the employees.47

Everybody was just super-friendly. There was no kinda problem between each other. Every Friday night as soon as we finished work—we used to finish work one hour early—as soon as we finish work the managers—all the senior managers—and everybody in the office would head straight to a pub. Or we would go to a manager’s house, drink in his home, no worries. It was all like a friends’ circle working together [...] like a family basically [...] You work hard and you play harder!

It was a “very motivational” work philosophy, Girish explains. Their manager would tell them, “[Y]ou spend half your life with your co-workers; you spend nine hours a day with your co-workers [...] you might as well make the best of it. If you don’t enjoy your job there’s no way you’re gonna do well.” In this company, they felt that “effort counts”—Girish was given a promotion and a Rs.10,000 salary hike in 6 months—whereas in their previous jobs, promotions were “not based on performance.” Here they were even given more autonomy at work, e.g., they didn’t have to stick to reading scripts; all that they were given was “the skeleton,” and were told, “you add the flesh to it,” which allowed them more flexibility. In addition, they felt that this was the first time that they could treat their managers “like your friends”; here, you worked “with them” and not “under them,” emphasizes Girish. These managers were always available to attend to any problems: “And your issue, it’s dealt with like that [snaps fingers].” Nikhila gives an example of how when a customer she called—the CEO of a small company—became abusive on the phone, her manager came to her assistance and even encouraged her to “give it back to him!” Girish adds without hesitation, “[T]hat’s my best work experience, really.” Nikhila readily agrees. Sadly, it didn’t last long:

G: They were pulled back. They were whites, right? So they got pulled back to the UK to different places. And after that the entire company changed. It was again taken over by Indians.

N: The style of management changed

G: Again the bitching started, and lot of people talking behind your back

N: Indians became in charge, and they were power-crazy people!

47 Nikhila narrates an example here when one of the British managers decorated his own house and invited employees over to celebrate the Hindu spring festival Holi, where people throw coloured powder and water.
Girish and Nikhila couldn’t get along with the new management. In addition, both of them by this point had had enough of call centre work, particularly because of the effect it was having on their lifestyles, and decided it was high time to look for other options.

**Impact on Lifestyle**

Although call centre work had its challenges, what seemed to make it worthwhile for this couple, at least for a few years, was that they could now afford a “better” lifestyle. For Nikhila, it was “a newfound independence”:

I’m earning my own money and you don’t get to ask me what I’m doing with it. So I do with it whatever I want; I’m shopping. I’m having more cups of coffee than I normally would, I’m going for more movies…

It was the same experience for Girish as well: “When I was in college I used to get pocket money, and there was a limit for everything. But once I started working, like we said, the lifestyle changes, and you start drinking and getting bills of 3-4 grand in one weekend.” And as you stay on in the industry, “you step up in your lifestyle” with every promotion and salary-hike, says Nikhila: from beer to Shivas Regal, from “a cheap pair of pants at Pepe Jeans” to Levi’s, with a view that “I can afford it, so I’ll get it.” The sorry consequence of all this, says Girish, is that “there’s no way you can save up money!” After working for over four years in the industry, Nikhila laments:

[We’ve not saved a buck till date! And it’s like we’ve earned lakhs and lakhs of rupees—I’m talking about lakhs, not thousands, I’m talking about lakhs—there’s not a single rupee I’ve saved, till date! Not even a single rupee!]

To add to it, both of them became increasingly steeped in credit card debt, which meant they had to keep working in order to clear up new debts. “I was 19 when I got 2 credit cards,” Nikhila confesses. “And you go, oh I’m earning, so, swipe-swipe-swipe, and then you go, aw I’m in debt! And then you need to work more to be able to pay off your debt. And trust me, they call you and go like, “Are you working for a call centre?”, and you get a pre-approved card!” As a result, says Girish, “you get trapped in call centres.” It was not long before he had collectors knocking on his door: “I was really

---

48 1 lakh = one hundred thousand
49 A curious fact: There are call centres in India now which focus exclusively on selling credit cards to other call centre employees in India!
screwed over cuz I had 2 credit cards which I’d just swiped it out, hadn’t paid for it so, finally these guys came home, and I somehow managed with that.”

But it was more than their finances that were affected. Their shifts would start from anywhere between 6pm and 1am, so including the transportation time, work would consume 12-15 hours of their day. This left them with little time or energy for anything else but to sleep through the day. Girish used to play basketball regularly in the evenings; now that was “wiped off the list”. However, whenever they had weekends or days off, they would take full advantage of it to go drinking with friends: “Soon as you get an off, you’re off straight to the bar, get a couple of drinks,” says Girish. They admit that they also became more dependent on smoking and drugs once they started working in call centres. In Nikhila’s words,

You just feel you need more stress-busters if you’re working in a call centre. Cuz your breaks are just 5 minutes, and you wanna get enough stress busted out of you in those 5 minutes. So, normally, how I would take 5 minutes to smoke one, now I would smoke 3 in 5 minutes. Soon you go puff-puff-puff-puff-puff and there’s one packet!

Drugs, Girish admits, are “a very very very big thing” in call centres, since kids now have all this new-found money. Nikhila says that “with call centres, doing drugs has become a fad [...] like a fashion-statement.” Teenagers never had access to this kind of money before. For example, her father refused to give her money to spend on cigarettes. But now, with a call-centre job, “I’m gonna be like, ah, screw them, I can buy 10 packets of cigarettes if I feel like, cuz it’s my money! It goes the same with drugs.”

Their main regret in their lifestyle is the loss of their relationships, especially with their families. According to Nikhila, a call centre job “strains family relationships. At least, if you have a good one it makes it bad, and if you have a bad one it makes it worse.” In her case, she used to have a very close relationship with her mother, but once she started working, she says, “I hardly ever saw her. And for her it’s like, ‘I don’t even know what my daughter’s up to these days.’” Her father told her once, “You’re just like a PG, except you’re not paying us anything during the month. You’re making your money; you’re in and out whenever you feel like. I don’t even know who you are anymore.” Girish says that similarly, the job ruined his relationship with his brother: “I

---

50 PG: Paying Guest. It is common in Indian cities for families to rent out single rooms in an apartment or house, usually to students or out-of-town workers.
had absolutely, you know, no time for him. Cuz he used to tell me everything that goes on in his life, that’s happening. And all of a sudden where I didn’t know what’s happening with this guy.”

**Impact on Self**

This line of work, with its strenuous schedules, both Girish and Nikhila insist, “affects your health very badly.” Both of them lost a lot of weight, and admit that the increased cigarette and alcohol use, coupled with the lack of exercise, didn’t help either. The job didn’t help their mental health either. According to Girish, “what happens when you start working in a call centre is that your creative side shuts down.” This is due to a combination of monotonous work and rigid rules, especially in their jobs prior to CAP1, where they were reprimanded if they tried anything “out of the box.” Nikhila adds that the machine-like work affected her output at college: “my papers, my photographs, my creativity […] I had nothing creative flowing through my head!” Additionally, when they started out in call centres, they found themselves becoming increasingly frustrated and irritable. In Nikhila’s experience,

I became so short-tempered after that, you know? Cuz I’d be so frustrated by so many things I’m doing I’d be like snapping at anyone […] If I came home and my mom was like, “How was work?” I’d be like ‘Screw you, I don’t wanna talk about work! Don’t ever ask me about work!’ […] You know, it gets so monotonous that you’re in the cafeteria with your friends: “Hey, how’s it going?” ‘Same shit, different day. Don’t ask me that again!’

Nonetheless, they both insist that the call centre experience has been very helpful for them in other ways. Nikhila says that the job has taught her how to be more independent and more confident. Girish confesses that he used to be rather timid before, and would have been unable to strike a conversation with a stranger, much less give a presentation before an audience. Thanks to his experience over the last four years, he says, he has grown leaps and bounds.51

---

51 He gives an example from CAP1 when he was afraid to make a cold-call to a CEO. His manager came up to him and explained: “It doesn’t really make a difference: he pisses, he shits, he eats, he drinks coffee—maybe he smokes a cigarette or maybe he doesn’t—but he does things the same way as you do […] So why should you be scared?” And that, he says helped him tremendously!
Impact on Society

While Girish and Nikhila both agree that the call centre industry has done a great deal for the Indian economy, particularly with providing job opportunities, they are also of the opinion that the industry’s future in India doesn’t look very bright, particularly with the rise of cheaper outsourcing destinations such as the Philippines. “If you ask me personally, I don’t see a future in the call centre,” says Girish. Nikhila also note that society’s perception of the call centre worker has become increasingly negative:

4 ½ years back when I started working, it was a big deal to be in a call centre. Like, I had people in my family go, “Oh my God, she’s working and studying, how responsible […] how are you managing? lala”. But now if you look at anyone working in a call centre, you go “What do you do?” / “Oh I’m working in a call centre.” / “You’re shit.” You’re just shit! […] You’re looked down upon! You’re so… your life is so demeaning that you have to work in a call centre!

This is partly because it has become more commonplace; anyone can drop out of college and join a call centre. In addition, call centre workers have gained notoriety in the media for being irresponsible, spoiled, and westernized. Girish and Nikhila tend to agree with such a perception. Nikhila comments on many of her colleagues who have taken to imitating westerners:

I’ve seen people who never used to wear pants in front of their parents—they’d just wear the regular Salwar kameez;52; they’re used to putting their hair in plats, oils and flowers, that kind of people—but after working there for 6 months they’re in jeans, they got funky hairdos all of a sudden! They’re starting to wear make-up, you know, all of a sudden they wanna be like those people because the majority of the time is spent pretending to be one of them!

Girish elaborates: “they think being more westernized is cool.” For, example, “live-in relationships,” which were “unheard of before” and are “an absolute no-no in India,” have in recent years become common among their colleagues. They are also critical of how culture-training in call centres entails watching Hollywood movies, which they think nurtures an inaccurate picture of the west:

They’re like, ‘watch that movie, watch this movie, you’ll see their culture.’ You know movies. Not all Indian movies look like our culture, right? It’s really not. We’re not part of anything that they portray in a Hindi movie or the lifestyle they portray in a movie. And neither is it in the west. Not everything is based on your culture. Like, you don’t do half the stuff they do in movies. But still, it gives you a different impression, like you’re looking at Britney Spears with her outfits and

---

52 Salwar Kameez: Traditional clothing worn mostly in North India and Pakistan; in recent years they have gained popularity in the south as well, since they are more convenient to wear than Saris.
you’re going, ‘If I’m in a call centre and I’m gonna be like them then I might as well dress up like her to be more like them’. So, that happens.

They point out that they themselves, due to either having travelled, or having interacted with foreigners, have more self-esteem than “most Indians [who have] “some kind of inferiority complex compared to a white person, so they think they need to be nice and sweet and suck up.” This is compounded in the case of someone with white skin: “You say, ‘Oh my god, look, it’s a foreigner. Oh my god, he must be really rich, he’s a manager, we’d better lick ass!’” Indian managers then impose this view on call centre employees in regard to clients, Nikhila claims:

Like you start off at a job in a call centre and you’re told, ‘Do not approach the “client,”’ the client, he’s the “client”, he’s a white guy; you do not approach him, you come to us.’ So all of a sudden you’re like intimidated, you’re like, oh-my-god he’s a white guy and he’s a ‘client’! And yeah, it happens, I’m serious! […] I don’t think it’s necessary to show him, like, a uber amount of respect just cuz he’s a white guy and he’s the client! I’ve seen people stand up just because he’s standing next to them, just because he’s the ‘client’ and he’s white. And I’m all bowed-head-and-answering-questions […] You might as well touch his feet and go ooooh!

Girish believes that this sense of inferiority originates in families. Some of his own “older generation” look down upon the fact that he is “still in India.” They would compare him to others who have, “say, gone abroad, worked there and come back; they would look up to him than me.” He adds: “They would look and say, ‘Look, he’s gone abroad, he’s done so many things; what are you doing? Why are you still in India?’” Nikhila says she is proud of the fact that she isn’t like some of her cousins who visit Australia or the US for three months and then return with an accent:

I’ve lived in the UK for 8 years, I don’t have a UK accent, why? But maybe some of my words are funnyly pronounced; but I don’t talk in that accent! I don’t see the need to learn how to speak like them. I have my own Indian accent; I speak whatever Indian languages I can normally!

Girish elaborates: “I mean, there’s certain ethics and principles and values that I have in place. And maybe part of them are influenced by western culture and part Indian, but it’s like a mixture of both. And so is it with everyone of us here.” But he says he can’t stand people who “put up an accent when they talk even in a normal crowd like this.”

At the same time, they think it would be good “if they had more foreign people come down” to work in India. They feel that it is other Indians who treat Indians badly, especially in companies: bosses are “just authority figures; you just look at them and
you’re supposed to get really scared of them and be intimidated by them. That’s what they portray themselves to be.” They felt that with their Indian managers, you can’t “crack jokes” with your boss—“they feel a need to assert their power: ‘Don’t you know who I am? I am so-and-so; I’m in charge of so-and-so’—whereas with their foreign managers, they felt “more free.” Girish believes that “the more you are ordered around, the less committed you are to the job. The less you are ordered around, and the more creative freedom you are given, it strikes you at one point of time that ‘Okay, I’ve been given so much freedom, let me work for it.’” But he does admit that “some people need to be ordered around, otherwise they wouldn’t work,” which is where he thinks Indians might come in handy. He also believes that one of the strengths of Indian culture is that “Indians are very hardworking.” But he adds a caveat: “I’ll work hard as long as I know I’m gonna get something. Once I don’t see myself not getting anything, getting anywhere [...] then I’m gonna drop my work ethic.” This is why they believe that India stands a lot to learn from what they call the “professionalism” of the west. They feel that Indian culture needs to learn to respect workers more: “I mean we shouldn’t be taken for granted. I mean, we’re working for a living, you know what I mean? It’s like, when we deserve this much, you give us that much. If we work 4 hours extra, pay us for that!”

They feel that the problem with Indians in this regard is that the culture trains them to be “always submissive.” “There’s a few troublemakers like us,” Nikhila explains, but as for the rest: “They’ve never been able to stand up to people. They’ve never said no to their parents, they’ve never said no to any relatives; they’ve never been bad students at school, they’ve always submitted their assignments on time…” This is why they feel unionization will never be successful in Indian call centres.

Half of the people that work in call centres are working just for the salary; they don’t want to lose their job, stuff like that. So they’re scared to protest. So if I were to do this and say, ‘Okay this is not happening, let’s do this,’ there will be at least 100 people that wouldn’t stand up.

They are therefore of the opinion that initiatives towards transparency to combat the corruption in Indian companies need to come from the west. They want client companies to take responsibility for the lower-level employees who do the outsourced

---

53 N: I’ve never heard any one of [the foreign managers] say, “I’m paying you this much money, just do your job...it’s never been, not even one!”—G: But the Indians will tell you that—N: Ya, absolutely, absolutely!
work, and are being exploited by their local managers. “[W]e need rights as employees,” Nikhila insists; “There should be a limit to how much shit they can put us through!”

**Future Plans**

Both Girish and Nikhila came to feel that the call centre lifestyle, despite all the perks it afforded them, was having a detrimental effect on them overall. Nikhila decided to stop working altogether and focus on school, and now finds it challenging “to come down” from her old lifestyle. She has just graduated with her BA in Photography, and hopes to pursue graduate work in the U.S. Girish doesn’t find the need to get a degree at this point, since he is quite content with his new event-management job. He has just been promoted to branch manager for the company’s Cape Town office.

**4.2. Julie**

*“I love my job!”*

A cheerful and lively 24-year-old, Julie is an employee of TP4, a reputed Indian third-party Business Process Outsourcing firm, where she has been working for the past four years. Having started out as a call centre agent working nights, she was promoted to a day-shift position which involves drafting legal documents. Despite some negative experiences with managers in the company, she says that she loves her job, and that her experience has been very positive overall, so much so that she has turned down opportunities elsewhere. Presently she is working towards becoming a ‘soft-skills’ trainer[^54] in the company.

**Background**

Julie calls herself “a hard-core Banglorean,” having been born and brought up in the city. She found herself taking an interest in the BPO phenomenon from the very beginning. In the summer after her second year of Pre-University College (equivalent to

[^54]: Soft-skills training consists in developing communication skills and personality traits such as optimism and persistence.
the final year of high-school), along with some of her friends, she managed to land an interview with one of the very first offshore call centre operations to be set up in the city. She remembers travelling several miles out of the city into Whitefield for the interview, and when she arrived at the building, it was still under construction. Nonetheless, she found herself simply awestruck at what she saw. The building was over twelve stories high, with glass surfaces and spacious interiors, where each employee would even have their own cubicle—an exceptional ambience for India, she says, where “our idea of offices here is not too good; we have just tables and chairs. That’s what we’ve seen so far, unless you’ve worked in a very good post!” She found the interview remarkably easy, since “all that they were looking for is communication skills: if you can talk well, without making a lot of grammatical mistakes.” And they were offering 8000 to 9000 Rupees a month—a great deal of money for someone without a university degree. The offer was “so tempting” that she decided to defer getting her degree, even though she had already enrolled at university.

Fortunately—she says today with hindsight—she expressed her decision to withdraw to one of the administrators at her college, and the lady persuaded her that she should finish her education first: the industry was new and would be around for some time yet, and with a degree, Julie would be in a better position to earn more money. Consequently, she is “very happy” today that she heeded this advice. Once she successfully completed her B.Com. in Marketing three years later, she was able to land a better job, this time with TP4, one of the most successful Indian third-party BPO firms.

Initially, however, Julie’s parents were concerned about her working a night-job; by this time the papers had already started to generate negative publicity about the industry. However, she proffered a barrage of arguments to convince them otherwise: their financial situation was not very good; this industry offered significantly more income than anywhere else she could apply; the company was one of the most reputed Indian firms and was “known for taking very good care of its employees,” offering both job security as well as ensuring safe transportation for its workers, this latter being her

---

55 2nd year PUC: In Bangalore, only some high schools are set up to offer grades all the way to 12. The majority of students attend one of the various PUCs, which are akin to Junior Colleges, offering Grades 11 and 12.

56 Whitefield is an area to the north-east of the city, which was once a quiet, rural suburb, but has in recent years become a bustling hub for several technology firms.
parents' primary concern. In addition, it held for her the promise of strong career prospects as a woman. “After I told them everything’s gonna be fine, they were okay with it.” And thus began her call centre career.

**Experience of Work**

The call centre process in which Julie started working handled customer service operations for an American mortgage bank. Employees were given initial training on the job requirements, which, however, did not prepare her in the least for the several adjustments she had to make.

The most arduous among these was adapting to night shifts. Not only did she have to adjust to working a schedule which overturned her sleep cycle, but these shifts would rotate on a monthly basis, which would make it even harder for the body to adapt. She is sure that, given a choice, employees would prefer “to stick to one shift for the rest of their lives,” and here the majority would definitely “pick a shift that is closest to the day, where they’d get more time in the night to sleep.” However, she thinks this wouldn’t be fair in practice, because it would mean that only some would have the shifts they wanted, whereas others would be permanently disadvantaged. And this, for her, is enough justification for the rotating shift cycles, although she does admit that she doesn’t see the need for the rotations to occur as frequently as monthly.

Safety is a serious concern in the industry, not only data safety, given the highly confidential nature of operations such as banking, but also the safety of personnel—especially women—who work in these environments at night. Julie is proud that there have been no problems with data security in her company. However, the city was recently shaken by an incident where a female call centre worker was raped and murdered by a taxi driver. She mentions that since then, security measures for night-workers, especially for female employees, have improved significantly across the industry. Julie also mentions a few cases of employee deaths in her company due to automobile accidents, either due to reckless cab drivers—a constant problem in the city—or when tired employees travel back home in the early hours of the morning on their motorbikes.

The call centre process she served was an inbound operation; she did not have to make any calls to customers. Nonetheless, handling incoming calls had its own share of
challenges. Customers were calling usually because they had complaints or problems with the company; they were often upset, and at times abusive. For Julie, her training in no way prepared her for “the whole ‘yelling at’ thing.” Additionally, as with most companies in the industry at the time, there was a pressure to hide the fact that the calls were being routed to India. In recent years, the industry seems to have given up on hiding—she says that “now everyone knows”—the fact that the calls are being routed to India. However, the initial attempt to mimic accents was a disaster. “Although I am taught how to speak the way they speak, it’s not the same when you actually talk it,” Julie explains. Consequently, when agents “goof up” with their accents, or inevitably “get panicky,” customers would demand to know where they were located, and finding out would only enrage them further. Julie encountered many who would “call up and abuse and say ‘you’ve taken our jobs away!’ They’d call us ‘cheap labourers!’” And despite the terrible verbal abuse that they had to face at times, there were company policies and standards which she had to follow in this regard, even though they seemed “ridiculous” to her: “you just cannot disconnect a call on someone’s face. Although you could be abusing me, I have to warn you thrice!”

Julie quickly makes it a point to emphasise that such difficult callers were only a small percentage of the eighty or so calls she handled everyday. Of these, only about five or so, she says, were “rude”; fifty were “average”—people who simply wanted to get their job done quickly—and the rest were in fact “absolutely sweet and compliment you a lot.” Some callers were even of Indian origin, i.e., expatriates or immigrants, and Julie says that over time her accent had developed to such an extent that they would refuse to believe that she had been in India all her life. Some customers, she says,

[would even] call their wives and children and made me talk to them. Such sweet things happen once in a while. It’s exciting. I’ve got Tamilians57 who ask me what is my mother-tongue, and they wanted—they’re interested in talking in Tamil with me!

Julie considers herself a “people-person,” and loves talking. This is why she emphatically insists, “I love my job!” despite the various negative elements. She considers it “an amazing experience being in a call centre,” so much so that even though

57 Tamil is the language spoken chiefly in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and Bangalore, being in the adjacent state of Karnataka, boasts a sizeable Tamil-speaking population.
she has been promoted to a day-shift job in a higher-value process, she often finds herself envious of those on the floor answering calls:

I was so tempted to go back to take calls. It was always strenuous and all, but it’s a lot of fun. Just interacting with people with different mindsets: that’s a lot more amazing than just sitting on a system and doing—I think this is more monotonous than…very boring than talking to people! At least that’s how I found it.

Another attractive aspect about her job is her colleagues, whom she describes as a “fun crowd” of “really nice friends.” Several of Julie’s colleagues are actually old college-mates who interviewed with the same company and joined at the same time as her. Additionally, the job-pressure helped bond them closer together, and she emphasizes that “[i]f you don’t have a nice bunch of people out there, you’d probably quit.” A few of her colleagues also share her spiritual beliefs, which for her is a further motivator. Some of them started sending each other inspirational quotations and articles, online and within a couple of years this little group expanded to over fifty people, including some of the company’s customers in the U.S. She does admit that it annoys her when some of her colleagues flutter around her managers in an obsequious fashion. Such *chamchaagiri*\(^{58}\) happens quite often, but she is glad that it is only petty and “never extreme”:

[I]f a manager walks up to me and says ‘get me coffee’ I’d be like ‘no,’ but there are people who’d fall over and “can I get you a coffee” and…Actually you can just make out. Their behaviour is a lot different: you’re concerned about your work and they’re concerned with seeing whether the manager is there and the manager’s this and the manager’s that.

Yet she can understand their motivations: “Everyone wants to grow. Some people want to work hard and get there, which is the lengthier way; other people would use short-cuts and cut corners.” After her recent promotion, however, she found it difficult adjusting to her new colleagues: “I prefer the call centre crowd to the crowd that I work with now […] The day-shift crowd is a lot more sober; the call centre crowd is a lot of fun.” Julie finds her present colleagues too serious and lacking a sense of humour, which becomes a point of frustration for her, despite the ‘higher-value’ job:

But there just aren’t too many funny people, aren’t too many lively people, and I just… don’t like to work in a place like that. But hey, I wanted the day-shift, so I said, I’m gonna make these

\(^{58}\) Hindi slang. The word *chamcha* denotes sidekick or fawn, and *chamchaagiri* refers to the habit of sycophancy or sucking-up to someone. This, we will see, is another consistent theme among respondents.
people be like me, you know, I’m gonna do a lot of fun. So I used to giggle, laugh all the time, crack jokes, make people laugh. Initially people would just stand up from their seats and give me like, stern looks from there, like, really really dirty looks. Like, I didn’t create a crime, I just… laughed loudly, you know? And I don’t think I should get that reaction [laughs] But today it’s like, moved on to a place where everyone on the floor is a lot more casual than they used to be before.

While things seem to have improved in recent times, she did face several hardships when she initially moved into this process, particularly from one manager. Her supervisor in this new process would constantly criticize her for not being “serious” enough. This bothered her especially because she considered herself more productive than the rest of her colleagues on the floor, who “used to just stare at their systems and do their work, even forego their break. I would not forego my break. I would take extra minutes, but I would finish my work before them, I used to be a lot more productive, and my quality was good!” When quarterly evaluations came around, despite receiving a good performance appraisal, Julie was pulled out of the team and put into another process, one that she found even more mundane—a “copy-cut job” of feeding legal information from documents into software. This came as a severe blow to her:

I was pissed off that they did this to me, okay? It hurt! But then, by the end of the day I realized that I didn’t really have a say. They had already taken the decision. I cried a little bit about it […] I didn’t want to be there. That was not the job I wanted to be in. And the thing is, I got pushed. You made a career decision for me—my career decision—and you made it for me! That’s the most ridiculous thing I have ever had done to me!

Although this made it hard for her to be at work, Julie reminded herself that the problem was with a few managers and not with the company as a whole. She did have other good managers who were “lenient and understanding,” and, for example, let her go home when she was sick. Julie feels that the best way to deal with such corruption is to “choose [not] to know much about it,” and to “see that I am not in it.” And even if it were to impact her, she says that it shouldn’t warrant her leaving the company. Forms of personal prejudice and communalism (where managers prefer and promote people from their own linguistic or ethnic background, or discriminate against people from a certain ethnic background) exist in other companies as well, and her belief is that “you can do little about changing it.” In addition to all this, she faced an internal struggle, feeling that in order to stay true to her religious convictions, she had to somehow forgive this manager who treated her unfairly.
It’s not like these things help God, me forgiving this guy or anything, but this obedience—they say obedience is greater than sacrifice—just being obedient to whatever the Lord had to send me; he’s rewarding me, for my own good.

The “reward,” Julie says, in fact came in the form of a new manager, one who was very good to her, and recognized her aptitude to become a trainer. With his encouragement, she has started working in this direction, quickly discovering that this job made the best use of her strengths and interests. In addition, the company has made significant improvements, such as in its catering services—she is thrilled that they have even employed a dietician—as well as some of its policies, so as to allow employees to have more of a say when it comes to what promotions and job openings they would like to be considered for. Such developments, she says, have considerably brightened the scope of her future with the company.

**Impact on Lifestyle**

Offshore call centre work, due to the unusual working hours, directly impacts Indian employees’ habits and activities. When asked whether she had to make any sacrifices as a result of choosing this profession, Julie’s immediate response was:

I sacrificed my lifestyle! Like before that, I had my life, as a normal individual. After you get in the call centre, it’s not a normal life. [...] The country is sleeping when I am up!

This experience of working on an American clock while living in India felt “bizarre,” especially in the beginning, although she says it did not make her feel any less Indian. What she found most difficult was adjusting her sleeping habits, particularly since the shift timings varied monthly: “Your body’s just getting accustomed to one shift. And it’s almost a month, and then, bang, there’s another shift!” In addition, sleeping at home during the daytime was nearly impossible: she is a light sleeper, and would find herself frequently awakened by the disturbances around her:

Everyone else in the house would be getting up, and doing a lot of things. So even if I have a complete dark room, music is playing, my mother’s cooking and, a lot of ... hurry, hustle-bustle everywhere. You’re used to sleeping in the night and things being silent around you. It’s very, very difficult.

This “sacrifice” of her lifestyle extended even into the realm of her activities: “I was losing out a lot on the things I could do.” She was previously used to spending evenings and weekends with family and friends. While working nights, she would hardly
get to see her family. As she came in exhausted from work to get some sleep, they would just be starting their day; by the time they would return for the evening meal at the end of the day, she would have already left for work. “And Saturday-Sunday I would just sleep through the weekend,” she adds.

Julie is a practicing Roman Catholic, and is glad that she has been able to keep up her involvement in her church choir and youth group during the weekends, which allowed her to maintain her social life and religious activities. In fact, she says that working nights in call centres actually made her more religious:

When I was in the call centre I used to land up going very regularly. So people in the Church know me for someone who worked in the night, would stay up, about 2 hours, just so that I could go for the 6 o’clock Mass, sit there in front of the Blessed Sacrament for about an hour, and then come back home by 8. I would do that, you know?

Now that she has a more “normal [...] 8 to 5 job,” she finds, paradoxically, that it has become more of a struggle to maintain this practice. This she attributes to the fact that she felt a greater sense of difficulty and need when she was initially working the call centre job. Additionally she felt more alone then, since her work timings would leave her unable to speak to her friends as often as she is able to these days.

Impact on Self

Most night-shift workers in Indian call centres experience various health problems as a consequence of the job. Julie considers herself fortunate in this regard, since she has never had to see a doctor for anything work-related. However, the initial adjustments were very a struggle, since her body found it very difficult to get used to her shift timings. During this initial period, she often went several days with only a couple of hours of sleep, which affected her performance at work to such an extent that her manager made her take a few days off to recover. Another problem during this initial period was the poor nutritional quality of the cafeteria food which she found “too oily.” “I think I was very thin when I joined. I put on a lot of weight,” she says. However, with her new day-shift job and the improved catering facilities at the company, Julie says she has no present health complaints.

The job also made significant demands on her mental health, although she claims that this too abated after a few months. The sleep-deprivation would leave her “easily
irritable;” the slightest thing could set her off. She says that she also found it especially difficult at first to handle abusive customers, and she would break down crying. Within three months, she says, she learned not to take it personally.

When you’re new in the industry, yes, you take every call personally; you feel you’re worthless, like “why was I born in this country”? [laughs] But then, you get to a place where you understand and it no longer upsets you.

Despite all this, Julie says that she has found this experience invaluable. She feels that she has “grown as a person,” having broadened her horizons by learning about and interacting with people from another culture, which she had previously known “only in terms of movies [...] But getting to interact with these people directly is a very different thing.” Her English-language and communication skills have significantly improved. Additionally she cites character developments, such as having “grown exponentially” in her sense of patience and self-confidence.

**Impact on Society**

In Julie’s eyes, the call centre industry has definitely opened up a lot of opportunities for Indians. Even though it demands sacrifices, she and several others are more than willing to work as what her western counterparts consider “cheap labour.”

She is aware that call centres have generated a lot of negative publicity in the media. However, she considers this a lot of hype and exaggeration. Julie insists that these activities for which call centres are criticized—the consumerism among its employees, these youngsters’ growing disrespect for their parents and tradition, their penchant for western-style clothing, food, coffee shops, alcohol and smoking habits, nightclubs, etc.—are not inventions of the call centre industry:

It’s not that it was not happening [before], it’s just that it is a new industry, everyone’s eyes are on it; everyone wants to know what’s happening out there and stuff like that. I think people outside are doing the same old thing, all the not-nice things that they’re not supposed to do, but no one really knows about it.

Criticisms of the influence of western culture are common in India. For Julie, however, “westernization” is not “a negative thing.” She says that she loves “western clothing,” for example, and thinks it a “good thing” that “families nowadays go out for lunch and dinner, which never used to happen before.” She does admit, however, that
such westernization can be overdone, and many tend to easily “get carried away.” There are several aspects of westernization that she does not support, for instance, women coming to work in “plunging cleavage and neck-lines,” and “people who want to be in live-in relationships recently here, which is devastating.”

Another source of criticism of call centre workers comes from religious establishments. Her own background being Catholic, some people she knew at her church were against her working in a call centre, and even told her that it was “not the right profession” for her, and that “God does not want you to be there.” Julie took offence at this: “I was like, [laughs] you know, very pissed off! And these were people who are concerned about me, but hey, it’s not the right way to put it. It’s by the end of the day a profession, and if I’m handling it well, then it’s good!” She is quite glad that she did not listen to them, and that she stayed on. She feels that she has not had to compromise her religious beliefs as a result of working in this environment; on the contrary, she credits the experience for even having developed and strengthened her faith. She mentions how she would exchange spiritual quotations and articles with several colleagues and customers online.

She also proudly narrates an incident when she shattered an American customer’s stereotype of Indians. Although he called about his mortgage, she says, he started to pick on her name: “How do you like your name? I mean, don’t you feel bad about your fake name?” When she responded that this was indeed her real name, and that she was a Christian, the customer was incredulous, and started to interrogate her Christian beliefs:

And I told him, ‘Listen, I know Jesus personally!’ And he was very very surprised, cuz their concept of India is cows, buffalos, snakes, terrorists, everything not-nice. And I told him how much of Jesus I know. And he was very very zapped […] And he’s like, ‘what??’ [laughs] I said, ‘Ya, I have a prayer group that meets here every Saturday!’ And he was very very zapped! And especially just the privilege I got to introduce Jesus to someone in America who thinks that an Indian has no clue what Jesus is all about!

Additionally, she mentions the existence of various inter-denominational prayer groups that have started in call centres such as her own. One of her colleagues even started a “Call Centre Church,” in order to cater to the spiritual needs of call centre workers. Such ecumenical groups are seldom seen in Indian Christianity, where, she notes, the divide between Catholics and various Protestant groups often tends to be rigid.
For such reasons, she feels that religious groups and institutions should “change their perspective of the call centre” and abandon their preconceived notions:

For example, even now I had talks with Protestants on the point about incidents about priests, you know, doing things that they are not supposed to do. And I always get back and tell them […] that there are lot more people doing an amazing job; how about talking about them? I have the same thing to tell the Catholic Church. Yes there are things that are going wrong—these are people who are young, who don’t know how to handle their lives, especially when money has been given to them. But there are other people who are not like that!

Julie is reluctant to offer generalizations about the call centre phenomenon as a whole. She believes that this development of globalization has opened the doors to all sorts of freedoms and opportunities, but different people respond and react differently. However, in assessing the phenomenon as a whole, her optimism wanes:

[N]o can’t generalize; how I am going to take it as a person will be different, how you are going to take it if you were in my place is really different. There are pros and cons. But ya, it seems that a larger percentage is not doing the right thing. Smaller percentage is… knows how to handle things.

**Future Plans**

As she looks at her future, Julie intends to pursue higher studies at some point. She was considering doing graduate coursework at a business school in Bangalore, but doesn’t see herself being able to manage working and studying at the same time. She is also a musician, and it has been an aspiration of hers for some time now to pursue music courses at an institute in Australia. But none of these rank high on her list of immediate priorities. For now, she is content with working towards becoming a soft-skills trainer in her company. She is reluctant to look too far into the future, and feels some regret that the five-year-plan she drew up when she initially joined the company was shattered thanks to the decisions of one manager. Nonetheless, she feels that the future of the industry, as well as that of her company, looks bright. And consequently, so does her own.
4.3. Sally

"They don't know what they are doing!"

At the age of 45, after having recovered from a long illness, Sally found herself in need of a career change, and thought herself ideally suited for a job which required little more than English-language communication skills, since she had grown up speaking English at home all her life. After working for a year in a third-party call centre, Sally grew tired of feeling constantly demeaned by her young managers, as well as what she saw as the moral corruption of Indian youth. Consequently, she decided to quit, and is presently devoted to full-time care of her ailing mother. Despite her own negative experience, she insists that call centres have done a lot of good, and that it is up to individuals to use their conscience and make responsible choices.

Background

Sally spent her early childhood in the middle-eastern country of Bahrain, where her father was working at the time. While there, she studied in a British school, and her parents encouraged the children to speak English at home. As a consequence, she confesses with some embarrassment, she does not speak any Indian languages fluently. When her family returned to India, they settled in Bangalore, where she and her siblings completed their education.

Sally began her career in journalism, and worked first for a newspaper and then for a magazine. Seeking a less hectic environment, she took up a job as an office administrator in an Italian granite importing firm in Chennai, where she worked for several years. After a management changeover, she left this job and then worked with a Dutch shipping line for a while. During this time she suddenly took ill, and was unable to work for a few years. Upon her recovery, she decided to return to Bangalore and wanting to make a fresh start at life, she sold off all her possessions and decided to embark on a spiritual quest for "answers." She attended a Bible college for two years, and after this, she tried looking for work again in the granite industry. However, she felt that the

59 Formerly known as Madras, a major metropolis south of Bangalore.
companies with which she interviewed wanted her to reveal information about clients of her previous company, which she was unwilling to do:

[How can I do that? If I do that and come and work for you, won’t you be worried that I’ll do the same and give your clients’ names out to someone? This is what I said, because when you have a very clear way of thinking, you know, it’s very hard to take this. So you know I started coming across all this nonsense, this corruption.]

She then decided to look for something different from an administrative position, someplace where she would be relatively free from having to deal with corporate corruption. The new call centre industry seemed to provide such an opportunity: all she would have to do is “go and sit and take calls. I mean, I am just sitting and helping some customers and coming home; that’s the way I looked at it. Because I can’t help the corruption, you know, that’s going on in the company, as it wouldn’t put me directly in a position of being corrupt.” Unfortunately for her, this wouldn’t turn out to be as easy as she had hoped.

**Experience of Work**

Sally’s job at TP1 involved answering incoming customer-service calls regarding credit cards. During her first three months on the job, she served a UK bank; after this process shut down, she served customers of an American bank for the rest of the year. Customers would call in to sort out problems with their payments, or to check their credit histories.

The first month on the job involved a fair amount of training on how credit cards work, calculating interest rates, and so on, which she found very helpful. The training also involved voice-and-accent training, so that agents could accurately understand customers as well as make themselves clearly understood. Here, Sally makes it clear that the trainers do not try to get Indians to imitate foreign accents. Rather, they “encourage people to maintain a neutral voice. They said we don’t want to hear this pseudo-American.” While she thinks all of this is a good thing, at the end of the day, she feels that no amount of training could be adequate for the job, because of the cultural divide. Having spoken English all her life, and having had the exposure to various cultures throughout her career, Sally feels that the way in which she is able to understand her customers simply cannot be imparted through a training module.
You can train and train and train an Indian, you know, to do a particular job. But when you have to deal with people from another country, the training won’t reach you. The training does not help because they don’t have a feel for it. They don’t have that exposure to the world, they don’t have a feel for it and they don’t know how to actually relate to the other person.

As a result, she was not surprised when customers often became frustrated at Indian agents. She emphasizes that it’s more than just a matter of accents. It takes a deeper understanding of the other culture, she says, to know that some things matter very seriously to them. Sally thinks that the way in which training and education are imparted to Indians makes them dependent on scripts and formulas, and unable to understand the other person. This in turn only leads to poor customer service, she explains:

So now suppose someone calls with a problem with a [credit] card, you know. It’s not just a technical problem we’re dealing with, we’re dealing with part of a human being’s emotions as well. There is some frustration, something needs to be done; whether the company can do it or not, that’s not the point. But you see, they don’t know how to handle that. They cannot understand that mentality. It’s never going to happen; it’s never going to happen, that’s what I feel.

Sally complains that her call centre colleagues would take things such as credit history “too lightly; they simply do not understand the repercussions of having some black marks, you know, because of your error. It’s not fair!” She says she understands this very well because she’s been on the other end in similar situations, where her own concerns have been made light of. She feels sorry for customers who call, only to discover that their calls have been routed to India, and then become enraged when these agents are unable to recognize the seriousness of the issue at hand. In fact, the first process she worked in—the UK-based bank—was repatriated principally because of such customer outrage. Sally thinks these customers are quite justified in their anger. But the blame for this, she argues, does not lie on the Indians, but on the foreign company which outsourced the job to another culture to begin with, simply because it “thinks it’s getting a good deal.”

Another problem she found was her colleagues’ blatant disrespect for those who didn’t speak English very well. For example, they had a fair number of immigrants calling from the US:

“If it’s an American with an American accent—[...] that way there is inconsistency of behaviour—automatically their attitude changes on the phone! How can that be? So we talk about
Americans being mean to the blacks, what are we doing then? Being mean to the Vietnamese callers because their English is so bad?

She feels that her managers didn’t seem to care much about making customers happy, and the pressure would be on finishing calls as quickly as possible in order to meet the prescribed quota. “[T]he company says that we are not paying you to make the customers happy, but we’re paying you to take another 100 calls.” Sally herself found the customer interaction fairly straightforward. She even took delight in being helpful, and says that many customers would express their gratitude and ask for her extension number, in order to speak to her the next time around as well. When it comes to relating to either people from the US and UK, she says that since her family has “[had] that exposure; we have mixed with the people, we know what we’re talking and we understand their mentality, we relate to them easily.” She says she isn’t too bothered by angry or rude customers: “[W]ho cares really? Does he or she know who I am? Can they see me? So if they’re angry or nasty, who cares really?”

Sally did find the work schedules taxing, especially since they were on a rotating shift. Every hour on the hour between 6pm and 1am, a batch of employees would log in. And each employee’s schedule would vary on a weekly basis, which meant that they would change before the body even had a chance to adapt to it. In addition, Sally found it difficult to handle the cafeteria food, especially what was available on the later shifts, and the breaks did not allow enough time to get to and from the canteen and eat. She found it pointless to voice these concerns to her managers, since “they just don’t care!”

Sally’s main problem with the company was, in fact, her managers. To begin with, she felt that she couldn’t fit in at her workplace because all her managers were “youngsters.” They had probably been answering phones for a couple of years, and then managed to get promoted. For this reason, Sally found it difficult to tolerate their lack of respect for the fact that she was older and had more experience.

I always felt that in order to run a place properly, paper qualifications are not everything. It does not teach you how to manage people. And you know, they won’t accept it when I used to tell them. It’s life experience again; it is not age, but about what kind of life experience you’ve had in this world that’ll enable you to make the right decisions, to know what’s going on.

Since they are young and immature, she says, “all that power and position goes to their heads!” As a result, they need to give the impression that they are in control, which
includes refusing to entertain any suggestions or even questions from employees. She found their behaviour capricious and irrational: “See, I am a person who likes logic; if there’s no logic, I cannot accept a thing. I always look for the logic behind a thing. There is no logic here. There is absolutely no logic!” For example, in the case of her shift timings, since there were some employees who enjoyed the later shifts while others found them harder, she proposed that if employees be allowed to work the shifts that suited them best, it would help improve productivity:

So I suggested ‘Why don’t you do a reshuffle after a couple of months and change the teams around? And those who enjoy it, let them be around for that shift, and put us with the shift we like. And if we are happy with our shift timings our work is better also.’ ‘Out! When you are a manager, you talk to us!’ That’s what I was told.

Oddly enough, her team-leader used to confide in her after work-hours about his personal issues, such as family problems, about the girl he wanted to marry, and so on. “Yet,” says Sally, “in the workplace they don’t want you to show that you are better than them.” She felt that they especially could not stand the fact that she was right about most things: “you know, when you know better than them, and they know you know better than them, nobody wants you around. That’s my problem in life.” They did want her around, though, but not for her advice: “After six months, I said, ‘I want to leave, I want to leave, I want to go.’ They made it difficult for me to leave. They didn’t want me to leave. Because they find it hard to get good workers.”

Sally found her managers to be obsessed with power and control. “You are thoroughly exploited,” she says. And in order to justify their actions, these managers would conveniently transfer the blame to America: “we get our rosters every week and they shout and yell at the employees and say that it is coming from the U.S.” These rosters at times apparently demanded that the employees work several hours without a break:

And I said, “It’s not good for the health to sit continuously in front of the screen.” […] You feel like a dog, just chained to your system! Even to take a toilet break they are so nasty! Because they say America insists, that once you log in you have to put in this many hours in, and if you take your 2 or 3 minutes off to go and come, you have lost so many calls! Everything is calculated in terms of dollars, so even to take a toilet break for 5 minutes, they calculate and make you feel so guilty, put all this guilt trip on you! They calculate in terms of dollars to say how much dollars the company lost because you went to the toilet! They do it!
Additionally, she said that they used to encourage sycophancy among employees: “You have to suck up to them. They expect that.” She added, though, that this was by no means unique to call centres: “believe me, it’s everywhere! In the hospital itself, believe me, if I was praising those nurses and all they would have done a lot more, you know?” But in the case of her managers, she felt that she had to “keep acting like an idiot to please them! When you are not an idiot why should you act like one, that’s all I said, you know? I couldn’t act like an idiot!”

Sally was further enraged when she discovered that the salaries they were receiving were much lower than what the US office thought they were paying the Indians: “There is just sheer corruption here! Because what the US company pays us, we don’t even see one-tenth of it. The Indian company that started the call centre is eating up the money. We never get to see it!” She didn’t feel there was any point in speaking to the American visitors about this: “I’m sure they’re aware of it [...] Their attitude will be, why should we care when we are getting a good deal? Why should we probe into it too much? Why should they?” After having experienced corruption in just about every company she had worked in thus far, she had come to believe it was everywhere. At one point, she wanted to try starting a union, but grew discouraged:

There was a point when I used to say I want to start a union, a union, a union, you know, to come up. But you know even in the union you will have a corrupt person coming in and using the union for pushing a corrupt purpose.

After a while, she started to find her managers unbearable, and would criticise them openly. “I used to answer back, because I didn’t care; I knew I wouldn’t stay long.” She was too valuable for them to fire her, she says, and so they would resort to various tactics to put her down. She narrates an incident when she called in sick and couldn’t come in to work. Her team-leader asked her to come in just for a couple of hours and he would send her home after. She complied, and then when she asked to leave, he said that he didn’t have the authority to let her go, and that she would need to speak with his boss, the Area Manager. She went to his office.

And you know what he turns around and tells me? He said you should inform in advance if we want sick leave. I said, ‘Which person in their right mind wants to be sick?’ Which AM [area manager] will talk like this? I mean, can you respect such people and work for them?
They would resort to other methods as well, as Sally experienced: “In little ways, in not-so-obvious ways, they will try to make your life miserable.” For instance, when it came to the company cabs that would pick up and drop-off employees, in her case it meant “not giving you your cab on time, not picking you up late at night, making you walk up the road in the middle of the night [...] saying, ‘It’s a one-way road’, or ‘we can’t find the turn, you just go.’” Sally also says that they knew she was particular about attending Church services on Sundays—she is a Pentecostal—so at times on purpose they would assign her a shift on Sunday, even though they had initially agreed to give her the day off.

What she resented the most about these managers was how they would force certain activities on the employees, which she felt were irrelevant to the job, and against her beliefs.

For instance [...] they took us all to the disco. And, I am 47 now—I was 45 then—and I said, ‘I’m a Christian, it’s against my thing, and I don’t like that kind of music, I only listen to spiritual music, I hate it.’ I said, ‘Who are you to force me to the disco?’ I said, ‘I am not going.’ You know what happens, if you don’t go to these type of functions? You are marked absent; they take attendance, you are marked absent, and you lose a thousand rupees! You lose a thousand rupees they cut! So these things are forced on you. So those people who have never gone to discos or to five-star hotels are now being exposed to that crap. And I don’t know, if you are constantly in that company it does something to you, especially if you are a weak-minded person!

Sally felt that these activities corrupted the young employees there. It especially saddened her to see kids from poorer backgrounds who were working these jobs because they needed the money badly, and were forced, under the pretext of work, into activities that she found morally offensive. “We all need money, we all need to make money, but not under such circumstances. In the end, you know, you feel like you are selling your soul!” It was a difficult struggle for Sally to witness what she saw as the moral corruption of these youngsters, although she doesn’t know how much of this was encouraged by management, and what they might be picking up from other sources. “Even people who initially talk so decently use bad language after a while. It’s not taught to us in our homes. It’s not acceptable; it is not acceptable in our community!” One of the reasons Sally gives for this is that these employees think it “stylish to copy [...] Americanisms.”
For example, when the client company sends American employees down as “spies” to see what goes on in India, she says:

[Indian employees] mix around socially with the Americans, and so, you know, they think that this is the way to impress these people. Or they think that’s the footing where you can meet that person. It’s ridiculous! Where did rubbish become the footing to meet someone? [...] But they feel that by doing this they are meeting the Americans halfway, you know?

However, she thinks that the Americans expect and encourage this as well. While on one hand, she appreciates their professionalism at work and that “they can be very strict [...] during work hours,” she disapproves of the fact that “after that they just let loose. How can they...? I mean, I can’t understand it! I am a person who believes in consistency of behaviour whether you are at a party or in the house or at work.”

She does insist, though, that many of her colleagues are decent and responsible; many of them work hard to support their families, and she still stays in touch with some of them. She gives examples of one young man who worked there to help educate a younger sibling, and another woman, the mother of a six-year-old who worked there to supplement her husband’s paltry income.

Sally remained in the company for six months longer than she initially wanted to. Her managers knew that despite the fact that she stood up to them, she would be difficult to replace, and urged her to stay on. Additionally, she says she wanted “a relieving letter and things like that for support,” which could help with future job prospects. She also wanted “to leave with some goodness,” rather than walking out in frustration. Despite her difficulties with her managers, she says, “I don’t hate them. I don’t hate them; they don’t know what they are doing, that’s all! In the end you can’t hate people when you realize they don’t know what they’re doing.”

Soon after she resigned, her mother fell ill and came to stay with her, and Sally is now dedicated to her full-time care.

**Impact on Lifestyle**

Since her shifts varied according to a weekly rotating schedule, Sally found it a hassle trying to constantly adapt to different sleep-timings, but she doesn’t consider this a major complaint. She didn’t like the food that was served at the cafeteria, and this meant at times that she would go the night hungry.
I couldn’t eat that food, you know? There’s not enough of proper food being provided. Because I don’t eat idlis and dosas\(^{60}\); I am just not used to it, I can’t eat it. And sandwich, sandwich, sandwich, just gets to you.

It didn’t even help when she would cook, which usually happened at the behest of some of her young colleagues who were not from Bangalore and lived in rented rooms without kitchen privileges\(^{61}\). “The canteen is right at the top and you have half an hour exactly, including the toilet break. By the time you climb up the stairs, by the time you stand in the queue, the break is over. So you don’t have time to eat.” The breaks were too short to have a proper meal.

She also complains about mandatory activities organized by company for employees. These would include, for example, a trip to a resort on a weekend. She didn’t approve of some of their activities, and would rather have been taking care of her chores at home, but non-attendance meant a salary deduction:

I said, “I can’t spend my weekend sitting in some fancy place!” And I don’t enjoy it; I don’t enjoy their company! Of course, [alcoholic] drinks are forbidden, but that’s on the surface. But all these boys, they carry their drinks with them; they sit, they get drunk, they talk rubbish; there’s nothing sensible! And the vulgar jokes! And I said, “I don’t want to be part of some vulgar conversation, […] Why you are insisting that I should come for the outing?” So the second time when this came up again I was fierce! I went to yet another higher-up person and I made such a noise […] I said, “There is a girl in my team with a 6-year-old daughter; I want that daughter to take my place.” She went on my trip in my place.

Since she was living alone at the time, Sally doesn’t feel that the job had much of an impact on her social activities. She was also able to save a fair bit of money through this job, which allows her now to support her mother.

**Impact on Self**

Sally doesn’t think that the call centre job affected her health in any serious way, though it couldn’t have been good for her physical health in any case. She found it a mental strain having to cope with the constant disrespect of her young managers, as well

---

\(^{60}\) South-Indian snacks

\(^{61}\) This is what respondents refer to as PG (paying guest) accommodations, which are single rooms rented out in houses or apartments, are a common means of housing for college students and out-of-town workers in Indian cities.
as the various activities of her colleagues which she personally found offensive, namely, their swearing, smoking, drinking, immodesty, parties, and so on.

On the other hand, she did find it somewhat of a rewarding experience to help customers sort out their problems, especially since her colleagues seemed incompetent and careless in this regard. She also found herself in a mothering role at times, bringing in a home-cooked meal, or when her colleagues approached her for advice (the latter, she thinks, might have been merely a pretext for food). In any case, she wanted to make a difference and set an example. She feels she was able to do so, despite the opposition she received, and is confident that what she did was important: "The minority never has a voice. But at the same time we can go on speaking. We can die and go, but someone somewhere will remember those words and they will also say, let me take this course of action." She believes that many youngsters in these environments are led astray because they are "weak-minded" or insecure, and they should be encouraged not to make compromises: "If you train and you teach and you give that love to the individual and give them confidence in themselves, why would they want to imitate others?" Ultimately, though, Sally thinks it comes down to people's freedom of conscience to make responsible decisions about how they want to live their lives:

This thing about imitation and copying, I feel it is each individual's choice of life. It's your choice. We all know right from wrong, we all have a moral conscience, we all make our own choices. So I never really go into that area which is the individual choice. If they have chosen to live their life that way, that's their choice.

But she cannot condone the criteria by which she thinks her colleagues make their choices and live their lives "Where is your standard?" she wants to ask them. "You have to have a standard, and I always asked them, what is the basis, what is the standard? They don't answer. But it's the money game! The standard is the money game; it's how much you make. And they're not really happy also, these people. I always ask them, what is it you want? I mean, I don't know. It's their choice." Then, however, she reminisces about her own life, and remembers that not too long ago,

I was like the rest, I could say. I used to have 20 pairs of shoes [laughs], I had full collection of Pink Floyd and, you know, it just goes on and on. But something just snapped one day, like, it's all rubbish! The call of God, like, whatever way, it just, everything became so meaningless. All I just gave away everything [...] The only thing I want is that wisdom, wisdom, wisdom. That's what I tell people. I had an unbelievable amount of money, it never made me happy. I never had
happiness, I never had peace of mind. So I gave it all away, and I said, then let me see what happens!

She feels she has gained some “wisdom” even through her call centre experience. She feels that she is no longer bothered by “petty” problems, such as people “getting promoted or getting more salary on some unfair basis.” When it comes to dealing with corruption, she says, “I’m only bothered about ‘did I do my part right?’ That’s all that bothers me.” One lesson that she definitely appreciates from her call centre experience is a renewed confidence that “I can start from scratch, at any age also!”

**Impact on Society**

When it comes to evaluating the impact of the call centre industry on Indian society, Sally is somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, she feels that these environments contribute to the moral degradation of young Indians. “What [these kids] are doing is they are throwing out values,” she complains. “If they are earning and someone in a regular kind of job is not earning as much as them, they feel that they have the right to tell their parents and elders that they earn more, so they know better!”

But at the same time, she wants to insist that these call centres are also doing a lot of good, and by no means does she condemn the phenomenon *tout court*. In fact, she even left her own church when her pastor started preaching that it was sinful to work in call centres, because of the lure of money. Sally found this simply unacceptable:

> And you know, they are hypocrites, okay? It is all very well for a pastor who is receiving money to talk like that. Until you are down to nothing and have suffered like that, you shouldn’t tell people how to earn their money! You should never do that, it is wrong. […] Because when you secretly look at these church people’s lives, they all are having the best of everything is what I see! So why should you tell other people it’s a sin to do that?

She has no trouble citing examples of former colleagues of hers who took up call centre jobs because of their family situations; the industry was a blessing to them. Similarly, she also disapproves of when journalists paint call centres in a negative light:

> Newspapers put out some articles that call centres are evil places and all that. I said no, basically they are just youngsters trying to earn money. They are not bad people—all good people—that’s what I said, we are all good people with bad habits. We’re not really evil; none of us are evil like that! Just wrong habits.
In fact, she thinks that most of the problems associated with this phenomenon are “not call centre problems, but they are universal problems.” People anywhere can “become arrogant because they earn more, and the more arrogant they become, the more blatant they get. If you go to a village it’s the same thing! [laughs]” Call centre workers, she thinks, have only become more “blatant about it; they just flaunt it,” and that is why they get talked about more. Sally rejects any depiction of Indian culture being some pristine Eden being polluted by the stain of globalization. Rather, she thinks that some of the problems she experienced in her company are only reflective of deeper problems in Indian society. For example, she feels that Indian society tends to generate only “textbook people,” who are “programmed” to follow scripted orders and procedures, but cannot deal with specific persons and cases. “If you can have that feel or, you know mentally relate to the person, we can solve their problem. You’ll not always find the solution on the computer!” Now that she is taking care of her mother, she faces such problems with unhelpful hospital administrators and nurses, and believes them to be typical of Indian organizations.

A second problem that she points out relates to sycophancy. “Indians, you know, they have an inferiority complex. And they always have that thing, they have to please, please, please someone.” She concedes that sycophancy is by no means a purely Indian phenomenon; in fact, when she worked on the shipping line, “[t]he Dutch also were like that, you praise them, you jump, you do this, you do that…” However, in their case, no matter how much you tried to flatter and please them, what ultimately counted were the results you produced. “But in the call centre,” she notes on the other hand, “if you are on some very close intimate terms with your Team Leader or the managers on top, your chances of promotion will happen very fast. Very fast. That’s what is happening in India, with the Indians.”

Another societal cause she points out for some of her problems with call centre workers is a certain “Indian mentality” that links prosperity with God’s blessings. This, she thinks, is why Indians neglect their consciences and try to emulate foreigners:

The minute someone is doing well they think that God is pleased with this man, therefore he is getting his blessing from God. And they don’t seem to understand the concept of God and the devil! They see this American doing well, he is blessed by God, so if they copy his behaviour they can also get blessings like his. They don’t understand!
America, she thinks, has become morally degenerate, and is on the verge of collapse, like the Roman empire of old: “America has reached its peak and they don’t know what they are doing anymore, and what goes up will come down.” But she believes that Indians are blind to this because today’s generation lacks an education in literature: “Nowadays people study MBA and, you know, nowadays it’s a computer age and technology and only those things come first.” Yet at the same time, she sees that India can learn a lot from the west. She thinks, for example, that one of the reasons for corruption in India is because they lack a social welfare system like in the US:

There are so many of the poor in India willing to dance to someone’s tune to get something out of them. Because it is the poverty in India that makes people behave like this. Now in the West, America for example, even if you don’t have a job you get earning in the dole system, or welfare. So something is being given somewhere, so that makes a difference is what I think. So they say why should we take this nonsense from this person? We might as well live on welfare.

Similarly, she admires the sense of dignity of labour that she saw in the Europeans that she worked with: “[The European] will not wait for an underling to come and help the system; he will do it himself. Because this concept of having peons and servants or whatever is not there. […] If they have to assemble something they will do it from every screw and nut and whatever, will be done by them. […] And they are thorough.” Indian organizations, on the other hand, she thinks, are fraught with negligence. “Here they are not thorough. Because they are so used to, you know, lording it over someone else.”

In the final analysis, for Sally, the question of the impact of call centres “will always come back to the individual.” She has seen people pick up good as well as bad elements, but people need wisdom and guidance in order to make responsible decisions.

I don’t know when things will change here. I have always believed, somehow if people could get some enlightenment about God, you know, and change their standard, that basis. You need a basis, you know? You need some reference: why do you do this? […] If people could only change that way then things will be better, but, I don’t know.

**Future Plans**

Sally, like many of the other older respondents I interviewed, wanted to become a trainer or counsellor in order to help these call centre ‘kids.’ But she felt they would never listen to what she had to offer. At this point, she wants to dedicate her life to
teaching and writing, which have been her lifelong aspirations. She has always wanted to do something independent, and “never wanted to go work for anyone.” At the moment, she has started writing a book on the meaning of suffering. Now that she is occupied with taking care of her mother, she hopes that she can perhaps do some independent contract work from home during the day, and then offer free Bible classes at home in the evenings. “It doesn’t matter where you do it,” Sally says with a tired smile; “God is for everyone.”

4.4. Tarun

“Dirty Indian politics!”

For the past two years, Tarun has been working as a corporate account manager for CAP2, an American firm which is one of the world’s largest software corporations. While his job isn’t typical call centre work, he insists that this is what it effectively amounts to in the end: a night-job which involves selling products to American customers via the telephone. Having spent a considerable amount of time studying and working overseas prior to this job, Tarun finds his experience in this company disappointing in many ways, particularly what he considers “dirty” office politics. He continues to stay on, nonetheless, treating the job only as a “short-term stop-gap situation,” which offers him sufficient advantages for the moment.

Background

Tarun was born in Bangalore, where he spent most of his early childhood before being sent to a private boarding school a few hours south of the city. After grade 10, he moved to Oman, where his parents were working as medical doctors. He completed high school there, and then decided to return to Bangalore to pursue an undergraduate degree in Management. This was followed by an MBA in International Business in England. He then returned to the Middle East and worked with an international technology firm. Within a couple of years, he was promoted to Business Development Manager, a job which involved a fair bit of international travel and decision-making. Although his career
seemed to be flying along smoothly, he felt the need to return to India and be with his parents, who had retired and moved back to Bangalore.

With his international background and experience in the technology industry, he saw this as “a brilliant move” for his career: Bangalore had become a global software giant, the national economy was booming, and it was now increasingly common for Indians who were educated and working overseas to return home. The BPO boom was also in place, and highly-reputed global companies were starting to outsource even their higher-value jobs to India.

In light of all this, it seemed natural for Tarun to look to CAP2. The global software giant had outsourced some of its management functions to Bangalore; the company’s name would be a definite asset to any résumé. The cost of living in India was much cheaper than London or Dubai. It was an unprecedented opportunity to pursue a world-class career without having to leave India. And on top of it all, he would be able to spend more time with his parents. It was the best of all possible worlds, or so it seemed at the time.

Experience of Work

Tarun’s job involves managing CAP2’s corporate accounts with twenty-five Fortune-500 firms. What was “not very clearly stated during the interview,” however, was that this would be primarily a direct-marketing job, where most of his work would involve making sales on the telephone. The challenging, or perhaps glamorous element, was that these calls would be to senior executives—CEOs, vice-presidents, or technology officers, depending on the size and nature of the company—in order to convince them to adopt CAP2’s information systems across their firms. Evidently this is not the typical outbound telemarketing job where the employee calls several hundred customers a day and reads out a verbatim script. As Tarun explains,

[Y]ou end up talking to a CEO! I mean I can’t tell him I’m selling him an egg or an egg-beater or something! I need to put a germ of an idea into his head [... such as,] ‘Listen, what I’m actually proposing to you here is, wouldn’t you like to see the sales of your organization quadruple in the next one year? Not just quadruple, I will tell you who’s buying what, where and when!’ The guy’s like, ‘okay, I’m listening.’ And you start telling him, ‘what we can do—I’m not talking technology here—I will give you an interface in front of you where you can actually see on a day-to-day basis
what is happening in your organization. You roll down to the person who’s made the best sales, see what salary he’s drawing. I can tell you what’s moving in which retail outlet of yours!"

This is a higher-value process involving a lot of groundwork. CAP2’s reputation gives Tarun enough credibility to directly access these potential customers, but in order to convince them, he needs to very clearly present what specific advantages their systems will offer the customer’s firm in its present context. This involves a great deal of research and strategic analysis on the company, its financial and mission statements, the industry, its competitors, and so on. As important as all of this might seem, Tarun has come to regard it as being little more than a glorified call centre job. Ever since joining the industry, he has come to realize that in India, anyone working in these night-based offshore organizations tends to get branded as a call centre worker.

And once you get that tag, there’s very little value associated with you, because, a lot of HR people or departments see you as adding very little value to the organization. Because, you’re sitting in front of the phone or in front of the computer doing… nothing much really […] At the end of the day the guy just looks at the title or the organization: ‘Nah, he’s a call centre employee’; it’s trashed. […] Normally the CV is just tossed into the bin. Or it’s kept for another potential call centre job. You know? So, that’s exactly what happens. You’re kind of put into a sort of… whacked niche where nobody really wants to touch you! There’s no value perceived.

Tarun admits that he feels deceived. He was under the impression that he “was joining the mother organization”; then he realized that the Indian branch is effectively a direct-marketing division. Now he considers himself simply a high-value call-centre worker. He does note that some typical features of call centre work, such as pseudonyms and accent-training, would be irrelevant here, since “the kind of people who are entrusted in those kinds of calls are highly educated,” and what matters is convincing the potential customer through the fruits of one’s research and analysis. But at the end of the day, he feels that his job still fits into the profile of the hundreds of thousands who work at night making telephone calls trying to sell products to Americans. The pay in his case, he says, is very good for Indian standards. Plus, there are all sorts of perks:

It’s got [...] a fantastic facility: you have information at your fingertips; the systems that you have, the IT systems; the state-of-the-art technology. They treat you well, the food is good, they feed you; they take you out periodically; they have these team-building sessions, they have technical trainings; they spend a lot of money on you for that, which is good. You want to do a specific kind of training within a certain industry, they entertain it. [...]So they treat you well, they put you up in 5-star luxury, whenever they can. They pay you well.
These perks come at a price—"they draw blood," as Tarun puts it. "[F]or every little benefit that they give you, they draw 10 times out of it!" Even this he finds understandable and only to be expected in today's high-tech world, and he is no stranger to hard work. What upsets him, though—and this is his chief complaint about the company—is that the fruits of his diligence, dedication, and talent are stifled by what he calls "dirty Indian politics":

It's sad. It's an American multinational organization, being run as an Indian organization. It's a joke. You know? When it suits their needs they use the Americans—or they cite the American...this is what the American is, this is how we're going to do it—when it's just convenient, they do that. Otherwise they just implement their own stupid policies!

These "stupid policies" that Tarun decries include various forms of "bureaucratic red tape" which have been put into place in the Indian office, leading to all sorts of inefficiencies in communications and decision-making. The Indian division also has a mandatory formal dress code, even when the global policy of the organization leaves employees free in this regard. Tarun finds this especially irksome since his workday is spent on the telephone; he doesn't see the point of dressing as if you're taking a client out to dinner. Additionally, in India they disregard the global policies on overtime pay:

[T]he policy also states that if I keep you any longer than 15 minutes overtime, I pay you overtime. But do you catch them doing that? Not a chance. You'll probably work for 10 extra hours but, you won't see a single rupee!

However, what he says they have adopted from the Americans is the "hire-and-fire principle," which gives them the ability to fire employees arbitrarily and without warning, as he has seen happen. "They adopt that conveniently: 'Hey, the American policy states that we can fire you at will!' And so they exercise it!" The company knows that "in terms of the legal system in India, it will probably take the person twenty years before he can make a substantial claim, saying that this company fired me unjustly and...it's a lot of hassle so people just forget it, just move on." In this manner, they've adopted the "worst practices" of East and West.

What also seems to be standard in this environment is sycophancy. "[T]he more you suck-up, the better your chances. And that is something I've always frowned on, I'll never take to. [...] I'm not going to suck up to them!" Tarun feels he has worked very hard to get to where he is, and is a firm believer in rewarding people on the basis of effort
and merit. He says that while managers here use the lingo of their management textbooks, what happens in practice is quite the opposite: "It's somebody who's hardly doing any work, not even putting in much effort; he's got his nose right up the right people's posteriors, you know what I mean? That's frustrating!"

Another thing that enervates Tarun is the autocratic manner in which managers in this company tend to treat their subordinates. He speaks fondly of his previous managers in the UK who would actually take the flack for him if he did something wrong; they would take responsibility for their subordinates. In addition, "[t]hey would reprimand me in private, never in public! And I learned! And you know the amount or respect and loyalty that resulted, after this?" This is how Tarun tries to treat his own subordinates.

You don't go blasting them around in the office! Here, there is a typical way of, you know, humiliating people in public to try and make them work, and commending them separately. I mean, it's not very motivating at the end of the day. Whereas you motivate them in public and you reprimand them in private, it makes such a difference!

Tarun notes that there is an expression in India for this sort of autocratic organization: a "Lala company," where the mentality is that "I have to have power and control over every single aspect of the company. And as long as you work for me, you're my slave." This is the only approach to management that he believes these managers have been exposed to, and so they emulate it.

That's typically the same attitude that, 'okay, when I was a kid I was beaten up, so as an adult I'm gonna start taking it out on the next kid, and screw the rest of the world. And when he grows up let him deal with it and decide what he wants to do' kind of thing.

If it were up to him, he would send these managers overseas for training, so that they could at least be exposed to other ways of doing things. In addition to autocracy, Tarun indicates corruption as another serious problem with the company's management. Recently, Indian employees have been accused of stealing sales commissions from their U.S. counterparts who actually put the work into the deal. Employees who work on a particular sale get a percentage of the deal they have closed, and some Indian employees have been illegitimately entering their names against deals they hadn't worked on, thus

---

62 *Lala* is a common name found among the *Marwari* people, who are an Indian merchant caste originating in what is present-day Rajasthan (a state in the north-west of India). Marwaris are generally renowned for being shrewd entrepreneurs, and comprise many of India's large commercial and industrial houses.
depriving those who had actually done the work. Though this is unethical, Tarun notes that “the management out here chooses to overlook it, primarily because they get paid on it as well.” This situation has now escalated to the level that people in the U.S. office are further enraged at these very Indians to whom many of their colleagues’ jobs are being outsourced. All of this trickles down to adversely affect Tarun and his colleagues, who are subjected to more scrutiny and bureaucratic controls:

And people who are actually putting in real effort, like me, I’m suffering as a consequence! […] I mean, you can’t just bloody get along with your work when people are digging into, ‘How did you do this? Who did you contact? Why did you contact this person?’ They wanna know whether it’s something that you nicked from somebody else. […] If I sit and explain how I contacted so-and-so and this-is-what’s-happened and this-and-that and that-and-that, one hour of my time is wasted. And then […] at the end of the day they’re like, ‘Ah, how come you didn’t meet your [objective]?’ And then what are you going to say, “You’re the asshole who’s actually sat with me and asked me everyday what happened on this-that-that-that!”? ‘No, that doesn’t matter, you should find the time to do your work!’ See again, dirty Indian politics!

Tarun finds it hypocritical that these very managers who are part of the problem are subjecting him to micro-management controls, such as looking through his computer, tapping into his phone calls, and so on. In addition, cost-cutting pressures on the Indian office have increased, which has resulted in Tarun and his colleagues losing a fair bit of their compensation.

[If I don’t get paid—and if the top management get paid in any which case—and if I don’t get paid for having slogged on that, you know, something is wrong! I don’t want to work for a company that kind of cheats its employees! And in sales, one of the few things that’s important is the salesman’s compensation; you take that away from him, or you strip him in half? Then why should I put in that effort?

All of these factors have made things very difficult at work for Tarun. But in spite of this, he feels it is worth staying on with the company, particularly because his “prime priority” now is his career. “And from that perspective”, he says, the money’s good, […] overall the organization treats you very well. There are the associated stresses and problems, but, I’m young. And that holds good for a lot of people in the industry as well.[…] There will be a time where I tire completely of this and would definitely like to go back to regular work timings, a 9 to 5 where I can meet up with people […] But till such a point where that becomes a priority for me or my focus, I don’t see a problem with this kind of situation.”
He emphasizes that he is still a bachelor, and that his responsibilities are limited. As soon as marriage to appear on the horizon, he would leave such an environment with no second thoughts. For the present, despite the health problems and the hassles of office politics, Tarun is going to persevere. “I’d say they are a risk I’m willing to take at this point of time […] knowing that it’s not going to be a long-term situation. I’m willing to take it.”

**Impact on Lifestyle**

Right from the beginning, the new job started to have an effect on his lifestyle. “Food habits are kind of warped,” he confesses. “You don’t know when’s breakfast, when’s lunch, when’s dinner, so you tend to go a little wonky.” This took its toll on Tarun’s physical health in the beginning. Additionally, the high stress of the job led him to heavy smoking, and he notes that 80% of his division, women included—which is apparently rare in India—have developed the habit. Thankfully he has a steady shift from Monday-Friday, so at least his sleep habits are somewhat regulated:

This is a permanent setup so […] your natural cycle tends to shift completely around. So you sleep in the days and you work through the nights. And in sync with the region you’re servicing. In my case it’s the Americas. So you start with the Eastern Coast, which is about 6.30 [p.m.] here […] and tends to shut with the West Coast, which is about 7 o’clock [a.m.]. So it’s well over 12 hours. But technically for all general purposes, the company says you work East Coast time, which should technically wrap up at around 3.30 in the morning. But the reality is otherwise. We have customers who are on the west coast, so you tend to stick around till about 7 in the morning. So you come back, you go back to sleep, you get up, have a quick bite and then back to work again. Generally this is the rigmarole that happens during the week.

The worst aspect of this schedule is the impact it has had on his social and family life. “I don’t see my family even though I’m living under the same roof,” Tarun laments; during the week, they are usually asleep when he returns, and then are not home when he wakes up in the evening. He finds this ironic since the main reason he returned to India in the first place was in order to spend more time with them. His work forces him to miss out on a lot of family gatherings, parties, and so on, which usually happen in the evenings. He notes that his parents have recently started urging him to quit and look for work elsewhere, and this is the first time that his father has tried to discourage him from pursuing something:
They’ve always been very supportive—I mean, they’re still supportive of whatever I wanna do—but, he’s disturbed, because of what all is happening, the health repercussions and... He’s a doctor and he’s getting to see the problems that have been happening around here. It is a cause for concern. You may not realize it in the short term. But in the long term it can screw up your life. You know? And that holds good for working at night anywhere. Not just for call centres, but anywhere. In the long run it will screw up your life.

Nonetheless, he thinks it’s justifiable in the short-term. Tarun also regrets the loss of his active social life, where he would meet up with friends everyday after a day’s work over a cup of coffee. This situation, he feels, has forced him to bond with his colleagues at work, whether he likes them or not. Since all his other friends would be at work when he has free time during the day, he feels he has “no choice but to fall on a couple of colleagues who are also free,” since they share the same schedules. This bothers Tarun, because he would like to keep his personal and professional lives separate. One of his reasons for this is so that he can avoid the kinds of problems some of his colleagues are facing:

I know of people who have started having affairs in here. Because they end up spending more time with their colleagues than with their wives. You know you come back home to your wife and you’re sleeping during the day because you’ve been working through the night. So the active part of your day is spent with your colleagues. And if she’s throwing vibes at you, you end up in rather awkward situations. So it has, I do know of cases where [...] it’s happened. And I do know of one case where the marriage has actually broken up as a consequence.

**Impact on Self**

Not long after he started on the job, Tarun started experiencing several health problems, which he came to discover were common among his new colleagues. It started with indigestion, due to the change in food and sleep habits. Then there were mild headaches which could build up into migraines. Such odd aches and pains, including chronic feelings of nausea, are all clumped into what Tarun’s doctor jokingly calls the “BPO syndrome,” since these complaints are common among employees who work night-shifts in these high-tech environments. “Eventually they’re kind of controllable,” Tarun says, as your body cycle adjusts to the new timings, but only as long as they are stable. He realizes here that he is more fortunate than employees in many other call centres whose shift timings change on a monthly or sometimes weekly basis.
The job has affected his mental well-being as well. Tarun regrets having become a compulsive smoker as a result of the work stress, although he feels that he is young and is willing to take the risk for now. He finds himself increasingly frustrated with his managers and the office politics, and feels discouraged and disillusioned with the company. Earlier on, one of the things that motivated him to stay on with the company was the hope that he could make a difference, and perhaps change their ways of doing things. “But it’s like, ‘once an ass always an ass’ kind of thing, and they’re just bloody reluctant to move!” His idealism and zeal have now run dry. Having had to suffer pay-cuts and increased surveillance as a result of other people’s unethical actions, Tarun is left with a sense of bitterness at this injustice. He is glad that his job has given him the experience of getting to interact with CEOs and senior executives, even though it’s only on the telephone. But he also feels anxious about how the future will pan out, since he fears that his having worked a BPO job might tarnish his résumé.

**Impact on Society**

Despite all his complaints about his job, Tarun asserts rather unqualifiedly that the call centre industry is a good thing for Bangalore and for India. “It’s providing employment, first of all; it’s boosting the economy. The trickle down effect is what you find. The city has become saturated, which is good.” Tarun is delighted that people have started flooding into Bangalore, and are investing in the city. “Good money [and] good jobs [are] coming to India!” These new companies are “keeping jobs in India” and “actually curbing the knowledge-drain.” While previously, highly educated people would leave the country in frustration because they were unable to find work, now they can “just step into Microsoft and get a job,” and not “have to go all the way to the States.” Furthermore, people such as himself and his parents who had left the country are now returning because of such opportunities. He even insists wishes that he had the chance, when he was working abroad, to outsource work back here to India. “I would have done it. Because from a corporate perspective it makes a hell of a lot of sense!”

He admits that there are still terrible infrastructure and pollution problems, but he is confident that these will only continue to improve, as long as the government continues
to support such initiatives. At the moment, however, he feels the government is still too steeped in bureaucracy and corruption, and effectively ends up stifling development:

Over here if there’s one company decides, hey, let me pave the road, the next day he is served with a notice saying, “Hey, why the hell did you pave the road?” How come? […] He probably told them many times; […] nobody’s come and bothered to replace the road. The moment the road is paved by you, with your own effort, the next day you’re served a notice saying “why the hell did you develop it? Where is your authorization for it? You will pay the BTC x amount for it, for having breached their roads […] For the work they didn’t do!

Tarun thinks that the government could, in theory, take various initiatives which could improve the BPO / Call centre industry. They could provide added security in the areas where call centres are located, legislate a minimum wage for night-workers, and create avenues to promote transparency and report unethical practices. But since he thinks that rampant corruption makes it impossible to ensure the practical implementation of any legislation in India, Tarun is sceptical about whether any public policy initiatives will ever work.

He is also critical of the negative publicity that has been generated about call centre workers, which has helped create the stereotypical image of youngsters living “a fast, frivolous kind of life; there’s a lot of partying; kids blow up their money; they have no sense of values, there’s a lot of rampant sex; anything can happen in the office, in the night, mind you.” Tarun thinks that such problems are not exclusive to call centres, but it’s simply that call centre stories make more “juicy news.” He resents the fact that there are social stigmas and taboos associated with call centres, especially for women. In a country where arranged marriages are often the norm, what one does for a living is of utmost importance, and “when they find out that a girl is employed in a call centre, it’s like, um, uh…perhaps we can consider someone else, because, you know what the image is around them. What if people start talking? Things like that.” Such prejudices, he believes however, will wear out eventually. In addition, he is convinced that these youngsters will very quickly grow up once responsibility sets in, as it inevitably does in India. Marriage and family will force the immature ones to grow up. He doesn’t believe that Indians can ever really lose the sense of importance of saving and investing.

---

63 Bangalore Transport Commission
Tarun also rejects the socially-widespread concern that call centre work has a detrimental effect on peoples' religious practices. "If you really wanted to go to the mosque or the church or whatever, you'd find the time, it doesn't matter. Even if it's 15 minutes before you go and meet up with your buddies, you'd find the time," he insists. In the cases of those who lose their religious practice, he argues that it is simply a reflection of what their real priorities are. As to the suggestion of identity tensions among these kids due to on-the-job accent-training or the imitation of westerners, he rejects it outright, because "culture is too deeply imbibed in a person" to be threatened by a short-term job. The change in tastes and habits is something he attributes more to television:

[T]he level of traditions and everything we have out here are too deeply rooted in the system. And it's very hard to change. [As for the changes,] a lot of it has to do with the media and what is perceived to be the in-thing at that time. Crazy music, head-banging, go wild, drugs—that's just perceived to be the in thing—that doesn't come with the job! [...] This is more of a media influence over people [...] That's what they see on TV.

And as for people who adopt western accents or "imitate those guys, have a earring, you know, punk your hair up or something like that"—these, he is sure, are nothing but fads that they will eventually "grow out of." The cases where they don't, he believes, are rare: "Some people are stuck in it, but then, that happens anywhere, anywhere in the world. Some clown decides that 'I'm going to go into Yoga' in the States. He starts wearing orange and starts imitating [yogis]..."64 Such cases, he believes, are few and far between.

Tarun is not all that charmed by western culture, and chides those who are concerned that Indian culture will be eroded by globalization. He thinks that such fears are unwarranted. He is especially critical of what he considers the lack of family-values in America: "[T]hey have no care whatsoever about the family [...] I mean, by the time they are 18, people move out of their house in America. Out here that's not going to ever happen! Out here it's family, it's family, it's family!" He also complains that Indians have been all too willing to accommodate foreigners, who, in their turn haven't reciprocated:

---

64 He is referring here to the saffron garb worn by Hindu holy men and gurus, and adopted by groups such as the Hare Krishna movement.
We have assimilated their culture and say, okay, business is business, let’s do it; we work that way. But, they haven’t made that effort to work backward […] They haven’t had to. I mean, it’s never been enforced in their culture that, hey you’re dealing with Indians; these people are important and these things are important to them! It may not be important to you; you walked out of your house at 18. To them it’s important. Ask them how their mom and dad is. It will help bond. They’re not interested. No way!

Tarun thinks one of the strengths of the Indian family system is that it creates a kind of security blanket which prevents people from having to shoulder financial responsibility for themselves at an early age: “[T]he way it’s built around is, ‘Okay, fine, listen son, if you don’t like your job, quit; it doesn’t matter. Your mom and dad’ll take care of you for a bit.’” That sense of security, he thinks, prevents young adults, at least in families with decent income, from becoming enslaved to their paycheque: “It’s not like you’re going to be chucked out or asked to pay rent or something.” He also argues that India has a much better educational system, which tries to open its citizens to the world. In contrast, he illustrates “[w]hat an American’s idea of the world is—America, huge; small little portion on top, Canada. There’s an area down below there, which is Mexico. And then there’s the rest of the world, which is a small little thing. That’s the perceived idea. It’s sad.”

Tarun is also critical of the outrage in the west caused by the outsourcing phenomenon. He thinks that the American public is reacting this way because now it’s their white-collar jobs that are being threatened. When blue-collar jobs were being outsourced, he argues,

nobody gave a shit. They’re just lower down on the food chain, big deal! ‘I work in an office and I’m an employee; I’m in management, it doesn’t harm me’. It’s the same thing like what happened in New Orleans. Did the government do anything? No. why? Because they were Blacks! It’s sad!

To those making a hue and cry about outsourcing, Tarun quips, “if you’re so concerned, come and work here! You’d probably get a sixth of the amount you’re making now over there, and you can live like a king! But no! People know their little shell. They’re afraid to venture out!”

But despite his critique of these elements of the west, Tarun thinks India needs to learn a lot from them. He laments the fact that there is no dignity of labour in India. Out in the west, he says, even a trash-collector is well-paid, and if “a millionaire’s daughter” decides to fall in love with “some slob who’s swabbing the barnacles off the side of a
ship,” their culture encourages them to get married. Whereas in India, “you know what kind of protesting would happen if something like that happened? I mean, the whole family would be up in arms against an idea like that! I mean, somebody on the same calibre or a little higher or, something like that, you know?” He feels that Indians, especially Indian companies, stand a lot to learn from the “professionalism” of the west: to honour policies and contracts, to treat subordinates respectfully, to root out corruption, and to reward merit rather than “seniority and sucking up.” He rejects the notion that imposing such changes would be an affront to Indian culture: “this has nothing to do with culture; it has everything to do with autocracy and bureaucracy in management!”

4.6. Future Plans

Tarun believes that the industry has reached its peak, and in a few years will consolidate into a few big players. He is certain that India will be a less viable outsourcing destination in the future, as companies will look to other countries such as the Philippines. While he thinks he will stay on at CAP2 for a little while longer, he admits that he is becoming increasingly frustrated and impatient, and will probably leave the company pretty soon.

4.5. Ajay

“I don’t have a choice!”

Twenty-two-year-old Ajay dropped out of college a couple of years ago to take up a call centre job in order to support his parents. He worked for six months in a third-party call centre, TP5, which he considers a painful job experience. He currently works as a customer-service representative in the printer ink-and-toner division for CAP3, one of the world’s largest PC manufacturing firms. In contrast to his previous job, he says he loves CAP3, primarily because of its “very employee-oriented” policies, so much so that he has turned down other job opportunities in reputed companies. However, Ajay confesses that the gap between policy and practice at the end of the day is significant, and finds many of the company’s practices frustrating. Without a college degree, he feels that his growth opportunities in the industry are very limited, and so he has started a real-estate business,
which he operates during the day. His hope is to become successful enough at this so as to not have to work nights anymore.

**Background**

Bangalore has been home to Ajay all his life. Growing up in a lower-middle-class family, financial difficulties were always an obstacle to his aspirations. “For me, my dream was music,” Ajay confesses. “From when I was small, I always wanted to sing […] If and only if my parents had that kind of money and they could, you know, take care of my education, I would have been in Berkeley school of music by now!” Ajay constantly strove hard to overcome his limitations. When he wanted to learn the guitar, since he was unable to afford lessons, he says, “I learned it all by myself. I used to look at people and go at home and play the same thing, you know? Music, music, music, and you know, music has been my life, it’s been my dream!”

When he was fourteen, his dream received a staggering blow when his parents’ marriage fell apart. His mother was forced to leave the country and live with her relatives in Dubai, where she could find a job to support herself and her son. Ajay stayed back alone in Bangalore. “I didn’t have anybody, even though Bangalore was the place where I had been born and brought up […] I just had to stay in PG⁶⁵, I had to stay in my friends’ places. See, I was a football, and I was just being kicked from one guy to another.” He failed high-school and wanted to try start working instead, but at his mother’s behest, he tried again, and finally obtained his diploma. He then tried to pursue his other childhood dream: a B.Com. degree from a reputed college in Bangalore. He recalls how he went in to see the Principal for admission, who looked at his grades and bellowed, “52%?? What do you want me to give you? You want me to give you a seat in my college? […] I am sorry, please get out of here!”

Fortunately he was able to enrol in a B.A. degree there, which had a much lower entrance requirement. He fell in love with the college environment, and started to gain the recognition he dreamt of by playing in a college rock band. But misfortune struck again. A few months into his first year, his mother lost her job in Dubai and returned to India. She was of retirement age by this time and unable to find work, so now he had to support

---

⁶⁵ Paying Guest (PG) accommodations are single rooms in houses or apartments that are rented out
her. As a result, he decided to quit college. The new BPO phenomenon was flourishing by now, and seemed to offer lucrative job prospects even for someone without a college degree. A call centre job seemed the perfect answer to meet his immediate needs.

**Experience of Work**

Ajay’s first job was in a third-party call centre firm, TP5. It was an outbound process which involved selling credit cards and credit protection plans for an American bank. Right from the get-go, Ajay found the set-up incredibly demanding:

Six days of work, and 13 hours of job. If it’s a new process, you work, plus you have training, plus cab delay. As soon as your job is over, you have to wait for a period of 45 minutes in the parking lot waiting for your cab to come. So, it is 2 ½ hours of journey one-way, so let’s say 4 hours of journey 2 ways, plus your 9 hours of job, plus 1 hour of training. With just 45 minutes as your break: one half-an-hour break, one 15 minute break!

To add to the tedious schedule was the steady flow of calls. On average, he would make 170 calls per day. Furthermore, they were bound by regulation to read the same spiel to each customer: “Compliance is required by the US government, to follow certain steps to sell, such as telling them every single detail about the product. And it all has to be verbatim. *Verbatim!* You sound so monotonous, because you’re reading the same thing, to 170 people, every single day!”

The monotony was worsened by the fact that Ajay found their selling tactics somewhat deceptive. “We say ‘complimentary,’ but complimentary means people think they are getting something from the bank […] But no! They are getting enrolled in [the scheme]! You’re gonna start paying for it. And how’re you gonna unsubscribe to the thing is never written.” Not surprisingly, most customers wouldn’t make a purchase. Yet, the company would call some of these same customers repeatedly. “We used to have customers saying, ‘This is the 9th call for the week!’ Now, that is annoying! That is annoying!” Ajay sympathized with them, and would make it a point to leave notes on their file saying “Customer irate, stop calling,” although even this didn’t seem to make a difference, since the names stayed on the lists. “[We] read a verbatim saying that it will take 30 days to take your name off the list! Now 30 days is a long time, talk about a week! You do get paranoid!”
Ajay could clearly understand their frustration, even when they would curse him on the phone. He says he would probably do the same were he in their shoes. Yet he felt he couldn’t do otherwise: “I don’t have a choice, [...] that’s my job! They don’t understand that I do need to make that sale!” Making even one sale a day was a tremendous challenge, but “you have to meet your targets! They put a lot of pressure!” Ajay even understood that his managers had pressures of their own, but this didn’t help his situation:

They need to achieve their metrics; we’ve got to achieve our metrics. They need money, we need money, and for them to make money, we have to make our money! And it’s competition: “His team works so much, my team didn’t.” So he gets back hard on us, in the room, probably in front of everybody. Tension! How would you sell, how would you communicate when you’re tensed? Would you be yourself when you’re tensed? No! They don’t understand that. “You just need to achieve it!”

His colleagues, he felt, were in a similar bind: “Loads of pressure, man; loads of pressure! They take the pressure because of their situations: family, financial situations.” Either a parent has passed away, or has been laid off, so the imperative is the family’s survival, which in turn depends upon performance. “I have seen people literally crying in my workplace. Literally crying! They tell ‘I don’t have a choice, I have to work, I have to make a sale!’ Now, when you come into a situation like that, you sell it the wrong way.” This means “twisting words,” in order to somehow coax the customer into saying yes. “You know, if you know how to play with words, you can survive in an outbound call centre.” But such ploys are usually discovered, leading to the imposition of increased compliance regulations, more verbatim scripts, increased monitoring of calls, and increased monotony. Ironically, these very managers would encourage unethical behaviour:

This was the same statement that my team-leader made: “If you want to be something, you have to achieve your numbers, by hook or by crook.” Now that’s a harsh statement. You don’t follow... ethics don’t come into place there. Ethics don’t come into place there.

Another survival mechanism in this company was to suck up to managers: “You need to be something with the manager. Oh my God, everybody got promoted from the trainer to the team-leader! That was the way. I have seen it!” Sometimes this is done at the detriment of another employee, as Ajay found out: “[T]hey suck up to these managers and say, ‘This is what Ajay was telling.’ [...] I wouldn’t have even said, they just
manipulate it! And the manager himself came and told me, I said ‘What? I said that? Who told you?’ This opportunistic backstabbing on the part of his colleagues, Ajay believes, fostered in this manager a sense of mistrust and animosity towards him. A few weeks later, Ajay contracted typhoid, and was feeling terribly ill at work, and asked the manager if he could go home. “You know what he said? ‘Just go to the pantry, have a lemon tea, and meet me in 15 minutes to login’. Flat statement!” He forced himself through the day, and even dragged himself into work the next day, but simply couldn’t manage it. “You know, you have to keep running to the loo, you’re dehydrated, [...] you just need to have the presence of mind when you talk, but you don’t have it!” The manager’s response this time was worse.

[The statement that he made was, “I don’t see that interest in you in the business. So you can leave. I need your badge. I need your badge and your locker keys.” I kept it on his table, and I walked out that night. And he didn’t provide me transport. I had to catch a rickshaw by 1 o’clock at night, and come home, all alone. There wasn’t transport arranged.

Ajay was completely devastated: “I was catastrophic, man! I didn’t know what to do; where would I go next? I had to take care of my mother! I was the only source of income at home!” His manager knew that he was in a difficult situation, and Ajay believes he took advantage of this fact: “he knows that I don’t have another job, I can’t go anywhere else, which is why he just kicked me out of my place, thinking that I would come back the next day.” But Ajay would not beg and grovel; he had had enough: “I don’t need a job like that.” He was thrown out for no fault of his own: “Did I get typhoid by myself? They never used to provide us food by the company!” The company had discontinued its caterers, and employees were given meal passes to eat at a nearby establishment which was very unhygienic, where they had to drink bore-well water.

Ajay was in desperate need of rest. It took him 45 days to recover, during which time, in addition to being emotionally distraught, he lost a lot of weight. Upon recovery, he returned to the company to try claim the money they owed him, particularly the commissions from his sales. “I was the top seller, and I was the top 2nd person in the company for making sales; I used to make 9 sales a day, when people used to reach 2 or 3.” These commissions were to be paid out at the end of six months. “And when I asked for it, they said, “What incentives? You’re just joined!” And I said, “But I have been in

66 Rick: Slang for auto-rickshaw, a scooter-powered taxi common in South Asian countries.
the company for 5 ½ to 6 months! I do need to get my incentives!" They told him that the financial period ended on the 20th of the month, and since he had quit before that, they could not pay him. "They're not gonna give it to me! I lost 26,000 rupees!" In addition, they didn't even pay him half of that month's salary. "Where did my money go? Who is eating my money? It's my money!"

Upon his recovery, he applied to a couple of Captive call centre companies, where he hoped to find more professionalism. He was amazed that he managed to clear interviews with the two top PC manufacturing firms. He accepted the first offer, but throughout the induction on the first day, he felt something wasn't right. Even though it was a "beautiful" and "huge" company, he kept asking himself, "Should I be here? Should I be here?" At the end of the day, he called them up and apologized, saying that he couldn't continue with them, and felt he should take CAP3's offer instead. The personnel officer immediately offered him a salary hike if he would reconsider and stay.

When you want to quit, they increase your salary. Why? Because one day's induction the money they spent on you goes. They started making my ID already, access card, etc.—they have to pay the IT department—plus my food and everything, it was already paid for. But something just kept telling me, '[CAP3].'

He considers this divine inspiration, because, to his surprise, he ran into several of his friends from his old company at CAP3. They had all apparently quit TP5 soon after he did, in search of something more secure:

[S]ee, would you like to work in a place where you see all your friends dropping away one by one? They're kicking out people for nothing. Then you will start thinking, "Oh shit, they kicked [Ajay] out. Now what's the next thing? It could be me, it could be me." There's no job security. They would search for a place where there is job security.

As a result, many of them moved to CAP3, which, for Ajay, meant that he didn't have too much trouble adjusting to the new environment. In addition, the new job is an inbound process, which he finds much, much easier. Here, customers call in order to purchase products whose specifications and prices are already available to them online, which is much easier than coaxing them through a cold-call to buy something they don't want. There is, nevertheless, an important sales component in this job as well; employees are expected to "up-sell" i.e., to get the customer to buy more items than he or she
initially intended. While this is challenging enough on its own, Ajay points out that there are obstacles built into the work process that render this practically impossible.

The first problem is the Average Handling Time (AHT) constraint. Employees are expected to resolve a call within 390 seconds. Ajay finds this ridiculous, because the amount of time it takes to build rapport with a customer varies significantly. In addition, he needs to gather all sorts of information each time. “Different kinds of part numbers and things are there, credit information, shipping address, changing the address if they have to. Everything takes time! [...] You can’t tell the customer, ‘See, my AHT’s getting over, could you please hang up?’” He admits that some managers are reasonable about this, but the problem is that it still counts towards his metrics. Some customers require additional work, such as documents and forms that have to be faxed or emailed to them. Ajay was told to save these for the end of the shift, and stay back overtime (without pay) to complete them, but he refuses to do. There have also been instances where there have been difficult customer problems which have taken a long time to resolve, and here he feels that he was treated badly and unfairly by his managers.

[1] If there are calls in queue, they don’t even send us for dinner! [...] There would just be extension calls. And going on taking extension calls, and they’ll send us for training, saying we’re exceeding the time limit, exceeding the time limit, exceeding the time limit. And not one of them has the courtesy to come down and say “What is the issue? Can we solve it for you?” No! They want to achieve their metrics, so they achieve it. Very selfish behaviour. Everybody’s like this in the call centre!

The second problem he points out is that there simply aren’t enough employees working there. “Because for the entire U.S., there’s 260 people in Bangalore, and there’s about 400 people in Panama. But still, having 680 people, or let’s say a thousand people, do you think it’s enough?? Well, everybody has [CAP3’s] products. Everybody has my company’s products. Everybody, it’s that famous!” This leads to a tremendous call pressure, which gets overwhelming for individual employees. At the same time, customers’ wait times are increased: “All of a sudden you see so many calls, 70-80; abandoned calls 70-80. Customers who have called and they couldn’t wait so they slammed the phone down.” This simply doesn’t make good business sense to Ajay: “How many sales we could have made? I still wonder. How many sales can we make? We cannot, because there’s not enough people!” But the HR department only recruits
“sloowly: one per day, two a day.” Unless they did so, Ajay speculates, they would have nothing to do; this way, “HR have a job everyday in my company. They recruit every single day […] That keeps their job going.” The problem worsens because employees are expected to first go through the drill of verifying customer information, and then up-sell, to already-ennaged customers:

[One customer] said, “This is absolutely ridiculous! I wait 45 minutes, and then you ask me a bunch of questions?”—I cannot help it—“you ask me a bunch of questions, and then you start up-selling?? I don’t want all these sales tactics; give me what I want!”

If all of this weren’t bad enough, there is yet another problem which has customers calling up infuriated with the company: a good number of customers who sign up for “faster shipping” don’t receive their goods on time. So they call customer support, which of course is routed to Ajay and his colleagues, who can do absolutely nothing about the situation. His department is not responsible for the shipping process:

I don’t go and deliver it at their doorstep! But still, for the customer, you spoke to me, so I am responsible for it. It’s not DHL or UPS that’s gonna be blamed, okay, but it’s me […] I’m getting blamed at. I say, “Mr or Mrs Customer, I do understand that, I’ll make sure I get that done.” I can promise them I’ll get that done, but what am I gonna do? I just gotta transfer their call to the other department, and they just have to wait over the automated phone system. He or she is already irated. […] How long will I keep them waiting? He or she is on hold, and yet, selling ‘faster shipping’ is a metric!

The consequence is that the employee is left with a sense of helplessness and absurdity. To add to it, they are called in to further “training” sessions with “sales coaches,” which consist mostly of being yelled at: “‘Why you have not achieved your metrics?’ Things like that, 20 minutes or an hour of bombardment!” Ajay has come to accept this with resignation: “When you walk out, you always walk out with a laugh, because you can’t do anything! If the customer calls and says I want only 1 black and 1 colour, you can’t sell him 2 black and 2 colour! He’s already seen the price on the net; that’s his budget!” When asked how they are expected to up-sell under these conditions, Ajay exclaims, “Exactly! It doesn’t make sense!” Yet, they are still expected to perform. “You don’t have a choice, […] you just have to sell. It sounds funny, see even now if I think about it I laugh at it because, we don’t have a choice. Because, if you don’t up-sell, ‘You have not followed compliance’: I get dinged on it. If I don’t get the sale, I don’t get my metrics; my incentives go down!” And yet, somehow Ajay and his colleagues are
able to manage their metrics. How? According to Ajay, "it all depends on luck!" He gives a recent example to illustrate this. His revenue at the end of the previous week was $109 and his requirement was $120. Fortunately for him—he could do nothing to produce this situation—the very last call at the end of the day was a business customer:

And she said, 'I want this, I want that'; it came up to $1500! [...] I just put the 1500 on my tracker. As soon as I put it on the tracker, it showed me $185, as in my revenue for the week, and I was the #1 for my team. It's LUCK, pure luck! That they don't understand. "No matter what, we need to see your metrics, otherwise you lose." It's luck, [...] we can't do anything about it!

In this case, Ajay was able to convince her to buy more than she initially wanted, because her company already had a corporate account with CAP3; she wasn't paying for it herself, and she didn't even have to read a credit card number. "But if you are using a credit card, very few customers say okay. They're just putting it onto their account, and paying it monthly."

Yet even in spite of such problems, compared to his old job at TP5, "this company is much, much better [...] 10,000 times better!" Ajay attributes this primarily to CAP3's "very employee-centred" policies. While in the previous company, promotions seemed to depend on your manager's judgment or how close you were to him,

here we get to choose; they keep sending us mails every week—every week—saying that "these are the opportunities at present, these are the departments, these are the vacancies". You can apply for it. You apply for it, they see our metrics, have an interview, and then aptitude test and [...] very professional like that! That way I love [CAP3]. The HR policies are absolutely superb!

Yet he also confesses that he can't trust whether policies will actually be implemented. For example, the company has an open door policy, where "you can just go and talk to the manager. But you get noticed: 'Him, he's just a representative! How can he talk this way?' All that comes into play. So you never know. As I told you, I don't trust anybody. He might be very sweet to you and talk to you and everything, but you never know how they accept it. [CAP3] might tell it's an open door policy, but you never know who plays with you how!" He is also saddened by the fact that without a degree, his opportunities for growth in the company are very limited. Yet, he would prefer to stay on with CAP3, since there is much that he appreciates about it:

Every once every quarter, or probably twice or thrice every three months, we go for an outing. Anywhere in the south. Or we go for dinner together, and the company sponsors it. Now that's called a company, you know? It's a beautiful company, nice place to work in, good people to be
with, good people around you. The best part—what matters to me—is there's no unethical work over there. There's no unethical work!

**Impact on Lifestyle**

The transition into working at nights affected Ajay’s eating habits. In his first job, the company shut down its cafeteria, and employees had to eat from a nearby “shed” which served poor-quality and unhygienic food. While his present company provides decent food, for Ajay “[h]ome food is always the best.” But the problem at CAP3 is that call volumes are so high that employees are sometimes forced to go without a break. Ajay’s sleeping habits also suffered. In his first job, shifts would change on a weekly basis; presently, they change on a monthly basis. In both these cases, it is difficult to sleep properly: “It takes at least 2-3 months to get settled […] in a particular sleeping cycle.” Nowadays, since he works on his real-estate business as well during the day, he is forced to go some days with only a couple of hours of sleep. Consequently, he says, he developed a drinking habit:

I never used to drink. [...] You don’t get sleep. Even when you have offs, on Saturday and Sunday, you know, you don’t get sleep. So that I slowly started; let me also start, have a quick one and then get to bed. So that became a habit. Every weekend I have to drink. Have to drink. I am 21 years old, I just drink too much; I’m wasting money. Plus I am lying to people, saying that I don’t—my girlfriend! [...]Now I’ve said no problems if I don’t sleep, but I’m not going to drink. I somehow control it. I’ve not made a promise, but I somehow control it.

Ajay notes that the job stress has driven many to take up smoking: “So when we go to the cafeteria, most of them smoke; it’s become something common.” When he asked a colleague why she smoked, she said, “Man, you just come out of your work, you just want to release your tension in some way, so the smoke is the best! You don’t know how it helps! I say, why don’t you try it?” [He] said in reply, “No, it’s okay.” He wonders, “What does it mean so much to you all that you praise it so much?” He thinks it’s probably comparable to the high he had experienced from marijuana, well before his call centre days, and recalls an Ozzy Osbourne song in praise of weed. “So I don’t want to try it, because I’m scared I’ll get caught in it. But if I try it I’m sure to know what hypes them.” As to drugs, he says that only a very small percentage of call centre workers take to it: “Out of a huge group, one or two. It’s not that big. You don’t get the time
basically for it. No matter how bad you are, you get into a call centre; all that you need is sleep. Nothing else!"

Ajay feels that his work leaves him with very little time for anything else, especially with his real-estate business. He mentions that some of his colleagues manage to continue their education during the day while working at nights—the company pays for this—but he feels he could never balance both at the same time: "I wanna keep both my feet on one platform; I don’t wanna keep half, one foot here and one foot there.” He enrolled himself in distance-learning courses, but confesses: “I have still not touched my books. I don’t know where they are in the first place!” There are too many other priorities: “[O]nce you see that money in your hand, once you go through that tension at home, once you have a business plus your work, where would you even think about taking your books and studying?” His work has also cost him his relationships:

And you know I’ve lost that relationship I had with everybody. Because you have that kind of frustration, you’re angry, you’re tired, you’re restless, you need sleep, you need to do this. So that kind of thing, when anybody talks to you, back at home, when I come back home, the people below me or the people with me that I can throw so much of anger on is my family. Dad I don’t talk to, so my mother. I throw all my frustration on my mother. Probably my girlfriend; I throw all my frustration on my girlfriend.

Impact on Self

Though Ajay has been working in the call centre industry for only a year, it has taken a heavy toll on his physical health. He contracted typhoid in his first job from drinking bore-well water since the company didn’t provide decent catering.

Before I had that typhoid, I was 52 kilos, which is quite less for my age. After I got off from my typhoid, my illness, I was 42 kilos! I had lost 10 kilos in a matter of 30 days. 10 kilos. Imagine, to get that... now I am 46. I am 46! Yes! For my age, being 22, do you think that is the normal weight [...]? No! I’m 5’7”- 5’8”. And for that age I don’t think that weight is anything! I can really feel my bones! I’ve lost my health very badly!

The work also seems to have affected his mental well being; the year has left him feeling angry, bitter, frustrated and helpless in many ways. To add to the stresses and contradictions of the job, since he doesn’t get enough sleep, he says, “your voice aches, you get irritated, you just wanna burst somebody’s face out who is beside you, because without sleep you get that ...that kind of irritation, your body aches, every small thing
that somebody says you get so...you get paranoid!” He feels that his job experience also “damages” his ability to trust people, and has made him more “professional”:

I don’t want to trust because, see, when you only trust people will somebody be able to break that trust. If you don’t trust them, then you would not tell them, and you would not face that problem. So this is my... this is my perception about it, this is the way I look at it. If I don’t expect, I won’t be disappointed. Only if I expect will I be disappointed, right?

Ajay says that he has learned a lot from the job. He has gained a great deal more confidence in himself and in his ability to persuade people. For this reason, he considers himself as being “gifted for being in an outbound call centre first;” now he is better able to deal with inbound customers:

[When he or she gets irate, you would be so confident, you know, confidence will be there, because I know I can convince him. If you can convince an American in an outbound call centre, convincing an American in an inbound call centre... it’s just nothing. Because over there you were calling them, and you convinced them not to hang up

He has also learned about “the way you have to live your life, your responsibilities. See, you know you need to take care of your family—for me it’s like that. So, no matter how the business is, you have to take it. You have to be patient, no matter how much your customers yell. I have learned to be patient.” These lessons haven’t come easy though: “I’ve learned a lot. Probably though the hard way, but if that’s the way life has to teach you things, well, I have learnt it.”

**Impact on Society**

Ajay is of the opinion that the offshore call centre industry is doing a great deal of good for India. His own situation, he feels, would have been utterly hopeless without these jobs which allow him to earn money for his family.

[Call centres are the only business that provides so much of, and gives you so many opportunities, where an individual, who is an undergrad, can say “I can work. If this job doesn’t pay me, I can work somewhere else [i.e., in another call centre].” He has that confidence. If that same thing is not there, where would we go? We probably cannot go—we cannot lift sacks! Or even if we do get a job it would be full; you would have to wait to even lift sacks!

In addition to having “[o]pened up a lot of opportunities,” the industry, says Ajay, has “brought up our lifestyle.” For example, “people go out to coffee-shops,” and the night-life is booming. This he thinks is good because “when night-life grows, even
thieves will think twice to rob you in the night. There’s always people around. Plus cops [who have a reputation for being lazy and corrupt] have some work to do, with all these people in night-shifts!” Ajay thinks this industry has taught Indians “how to keep an environment clean […] because] Indians are used to dirty the place.” He also thinks that aesthetically, it has made Bangalore look “beautiful with all these buildings.” He also speaks very highly of the skills that the industry imparts:

[C]all centres really have benefited Indians in general: taught them culture—different culture, different language; taught them language, and that is very important. I think if you know how to communicate, you can survive anywhere. So that’s taught them how to communicate: communication skills, selling skills—selling is nothing but convincing people—convincing skills, they teach them all that.

Yet, he acknowledges that there have been negative consequences as well. Ajay thinks these effects are detrimental especially to Indian women: “You know I can tell you, call centre is not the place for girls. And I’ll tell you why. Because once they have the night life and everything, you know, they tend to start pubbing, drinking…” Ajay has seen a significant shift in the lifestyles of Indian girls, and he finds it disturbing:

[When we look at Indian girls, now it’s something different, […] what we have seen and what we see now. They have become more westernized, you know, it’s something “cool” for them, as you say; it’s something “cool”: “I’m going pubbing”, or “I listen to metal and it’s cool”, “I’ve got three boyfriends, that’s cool”. It’s not! And it is because of call centres.”

A few years ago, he says, “[y]ou wouldn’t even see a girl outside after 10 o’clock in India. Walking alone, or in a rickshaw, or with a guy on a bike, you know? It’s absolutely drastic!” The first problem he finds with the current situation is that “[i]t’s not safe! My girlfriend: there have been incidents where people have followed her and everything. So I make sure I take care of her, she is at home before 6:15-6:30.”

Additionally, in Indian society, it can also impact the girl’s reputation: “See, for a guy, the society over here doesn’t care. […] The society, the way they look at that girl is different, but not the guy! […] For] the girl, the rest of her life will depend on that!” He has heard that this can be a problem where arranged marriages are concerned: “Because a lot of them, they do look at that; once you’re in a call centre it’s over! I mean, I’m not like that, but that’s the kind of thing that […] happens.]” He points out as well that “at least 70% to 80% of girls” in his team at work are smokers, “which again is something that was bizarre for us 4-5 years back.” Ajay finds this problematic: “When you get married,
this will affect you. It affects guys, but it affects girls very badly; it affects their health. I have read it.” Ajay is also reluctant to portray them as passive victims of modernization: “[I]n the end it always depends on the individual to make his or own choice.” He thinks that parents play a crucial role here in educating their children to make good choices, and expresses a regret that his own parents were not there for him in his adolescent years when he needed them. He thinks that without such ‘grounding,’ young call centre workers are susceptible to the wrong influences from the west: “[W]hen they have American clients coming down, every one of them smoke. I’ve seen so many smoke. Even the women smoke!”

On the other hand, Ajay also sees many positive elements in western culture: in India, “there’s no dignity of labour, they don’t respect labour,” and you are expected to “work non-stop” without adequate compensation, whereas “for an American, if I’m gonna work extra, you pay me extra!” He continues:

I would say that 90% of them behave very professional. That’s one thing I like about Americans: punctuality. And professionalism. Because that’s one thing I’ve learned from them, their punctuality and professionalism. If it’s 10 o’clock, it’s 10 o’clock; if it’s 11 o’clock, it’s 11 o’clock. You are gonna send me those cartridges tomorrow, fine.

Ajay wishes that such qualities were emulated in India. Particularly within organizations, he feels that Indians have created an environment that is susceptible to corruption: “Over here we look at friends: ‘Oh, the manager is good to me, so I have to work.’ ‘He gave me an off that day.’ They highlight these points: ‘I gave you an off that day, remember? So now I’m asking you for a favour and, come on…’ He’s a friend of mine, but, friend for what? For a manager, if you are a friend in need, you are a friend indeed!” Ajay also resents the fact that in India, too much emphasis is put on one’s credentials, particularly college degrees: “[T]hey don’t respect labour; they just need that tag!”

5.6. Future Plans

Despite the many problems he has outlined with his company, Ajay insists that he is “blessed...with a beautiful place to work.” He adds: “I had six offers from various other companies. But I said, I just love this place; I don’t want to work any other place
other than in this place. It’s close by, it’s near my place, they treat me well; that’s what the main thing is.”

He dreams that one day his company might send him to America, perhaps for training, but often sighs and dismisses this as wishful thinking. Without a degree, he doesn’t see much scope for growth, and doesn’t expect to be able to study while working. Ajay rests his hope on the possibility that his real-estate business will flourish, which would allow him the possibility of a more normal day-job. He still hopes to pursue his musical aspirations someday.

**Conclusion**

I have presented five narrative cases above which represent some of the diversity found in the stories of my respondents. These cases give us an in-depth sense from these employees own points-of-view of how they make sense of their work experience, what they consider significant events, as well as how they assess the impact of these jobs on their lives and society. We can also see differences here as a function of the respondent’s age, gender, social class, previous work experience, and the type of process and company, among other factors.

In addition to this diversity, several themes are consistent across these accounts. Jobs in offshore call centres are initially seen as an unprecedented opportunity for financial independence and career growth; however, the reality of the experience of working these jobs turns out to be very different. The challenge of adapting to night-work and fluctuating shifts is exacerbated by difficult and sometimes corrupt local managers. Some find themselves trapped in these jobs, either due to serious family needs, or as a result of a newly-developed lifestyle of consumerism, debt, and even addiction. Thus, the initial promise seen in these new developments, for many, turns out to be a tremendous let-down. Yet, they still insist that the BPO / call centre phenomenon is a ‘good thing’—for some a short-term stepping-stone and learning opportunity, and for others, a viable career. Furthermore, they aspire towards avenues of reform, hoping that Indians can learn to overcome corruption, nepotism, autocracy, and so on, possibly by adopting more transparent and meritocratic systems.
In the next chapter, we will examine in further detail the main themes which emerge from the interviews. Following this, we will use the 'Economies of Worth' model to analyze the evaluations and judgments in these accounts, in order to better grasp some elements of the underlying dynamic between tradition and modernity that is at work here.
Chapter 5: Analysis of Results

The labour process in offshore call centres, in the East just as in the West, is fraught with several tensions and contradictions. Yet, as we saw in Chapter 2, not enough work has been done to examine the cultural and contextual aspects of this phenomenon in India, particularly its effects beyond the workplace. The motivation for the present study was to get a better sense of the dynamic between tradition and modernity that drives this phenomenon by drawing on employees’ narratives and evaluations of their lived experience.

In the first section of this chapter, I will present a comparative analysis of respondents’ narratives, highlighting the key similarities and differences in their responses along the lines of the initial conceptual framework. Next, we will use the categories of the ‘Economies of Worth’ model to analyze the underlying evaluations and judgments.

5.1. Comparison of Narratives

Table 5.1 on the following page summarizes the judgments of the six employees whose narratives were presented in Chapter 4. The main interview themes were coded along the various dimensions of the conceptual framework, namely, Experience of Work (EW), Impact on Self (IS), Impact on Lifestyle (IL), and Impact on Society (IS). A similar presentation for all the respondents is available in Appendix 3, Table A.2. While this might come across as an attempt to reduce qualitative narrative complexity to stultifying Likert-type categories, it is intended only to provide a cursory overview of the key analytical themes in the interviews. Of course, we should recognize that individual respondents judge something to be either positive or negative for very different reasons. Also, an individual’s assessment (e.g., of the call centre work environment) can be both positive and negative with regard to different elements (e.g., office equipment, building maintenance, ventilation, work space, facilities, etc.). In other cases, individuals may be ambivalent simply because they tend to see both good as well as bad aspects of things, or because they have had both positive as well as negative experiences (e.g., in different companies).
## Table 5.1: Summary of respondents' evaluations across codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>EW</th>
<th>IS</th>
<th>IL</th>
<th>SOC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EW-INDUSTRY</td>
<td>Overall assessment of the BPO industry and its future</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW-LP-INDUSTRY (Labour Process)</td>
<td>Call centre environment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHF</td>
<td>Night / shift - work</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRA</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>Accent-training</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUS</td>
<td>Customer interaction</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POL</td>
<td>Company policies</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW-MGR-IND</td>
<td>Indian managers</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW-MGR-FOR</td>
<td>Foreign managers</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW-TP</td>
<td>Third-party call centres</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW-CAP</td>
<td>Captive call centres</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW-COLL</td>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS-PHY</td>
<td>Impact on physical health</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS-MEN</td>
<td>Impact on psychological health</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS-PERS</td>
<td>Impact on personality</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-HAB-</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep</td>
<td>Impact on sleep habits</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>Impact on smoking habits*</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Impact on alcohol habits</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>Impact on drug habits</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Impact on saving habits</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-ACT-</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Impact on religious activities</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Impact on other social activities</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-FAM-</td>
<td>PCC**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELSHP</td>
<td>Impact on relationship with family</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC-PCC**</td>
<td>Society’s perspective of call centres</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC-IDEN</td>
<td>Impact on Indians’ sense of identity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC-REL</td>
<td>Religious groups’ perspective of call centres **</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC-IND-</td>
<td>Perception of Indian society</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Call centres’ impact on Indian society</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>~</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC-WES</td>
<td>Perception of western culture</td>
<td>~</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Legend

- **++** Judgment: strongly positive
- **+** Judgment: somewhat positive
- **~** Judgment: ambivalent
- **-** Judgment: somewhat negative
- **--** Judgment: strongly negative
- **/** Not applicable / No opinion
- "~" indicates worsening of habit

**FAM-PCC**: [Family’s perspective of BPO/call centres], [Respondent’s agreement (√) or disagreement (x)]

**SOC-PCC**: [Society’s perspective of BPO/call centres], [Respondent’s agreement (√) or disagreement (x)]

**SOC-REL**: [Religious institutions’ perspective of BPO/call centres], [Respondent’s agreement (√) or disagreement (x)]

In certain cases, respondents felt they had little knowledge or no opinion on the matter, or to whom certain questions did not apply (e.g., for those who had not worked with foreign managers, or who said they were not aware of the opinions of religious
organizations on call centres). In certain other cases, questions were not asked of respondents either because they avoided responding to the question (nobody directly refused to answer a question, but they were sometimes subtly evasive), or because we ran out of time.

In comparing the similarities and differences between the respondents in the rest of this section, we will see the significant complexity that characterizes this phenomenon.

5.1.1. Experience of Work

5.1.1.1. The BPO/Call centre industry

Similarities: Almost all the respondents interviewed had a generally positive opinion of globalization and the development of the call centre industry, and believed that it contributes significantly to India’s prosperity. Where they are more critical is on the impact on the values and morals of young workers. But there was a general sense that this phenomenon, particularly because of job-creation and the participation in the global market, was ‘good for the country.’

Differences: Not all respondents were optimistic about the future of the industry. While Julie, TE, FR, KR, CS, and LA thought that the industry was here to stay, and would continue to provide opportunities for their own growth as well as for others, Girish, Nikhila, Tarun, NG and CH, for example, were of the opinion that the decline of the industry was imminent. They were sure that new markets for outsourcing, such as the Philippines, would take jobs away from India, and that the country would be left with a poorly-educated workforce that couldn’t do much more than answer telephones. Some complained that the industry, despite providing new jobs and income, was also contributing to the rising cost of living in cities, making things unaffordable for others. Tarun and CS object to this view, expressing the opinion that there was a good trickle-down effect on other industries.
5.1.1.2. Types of Companies

Similarities: Employees speak of two general types of companies in this industry: third-party firms, which are locally owned and contract processes such as sales or customer services from several foreign client companies simultaneously; and captive firms, which are subsidiaries of a parent company. Respondents were generally of the opinion that captive firms such as Hewlett Packard or Dell were better to work in than third-party companies. This view was held by most employees working in Third-party companies, and can be confirmed by the fact that those working in Captives do not see Third-party jobs as attractive. Many respondents who worked in Third-party companies experienced the sort of disillusionment expressed by KR here:

It really sucks, yaar, because, being freshers, there will be an image of the company in our eyes [...] When you enter into the company you know, it sucks man! [When asked to specify what exactly, he responds.] Everything, man! I'll give you 10 of my friends' numbers, you give a call; ask them, “What do you think of the company?” They'll say the company's a bullshit crap man!

The most common reason they gave for this was “professionalism”: they believed that captive firms would have more consistent policies and would treat employees better. Many saw a third-party job as only a stepping stone to a better job in a Captive company. To quote KR again, who wants to build a future for himself in this industry:

See, it’s like, until and unless you get a very good job, you have to work in a company like this. Or, until you gain experience, you can work in a company like this. [...] See, if you work for a company called IBM or HP or called as Microsoft, you see a lot of professionalism over there.

We will look at this common theme of ‘professionalism’ a little later. Related to this, a commonly reported problem in Third-party companies is that many of them have policies forbidding employees from contacting the client company, which then leaves the door open to various forms of managerial corruption, another theme which we will examine in detail later. Respondents also believed that working for a captive company would look more impressive on their C.V.s, and give them better job prospects in the future.

---

67 Although many companies in recent years are adopting hybrid forms, employees still see them as being either predominantly Indian or foreign.
68 Hindi slang, equivalent of ‘buddy,’ ‘man,’ etc.
69 As noted earlier, ‘freshers’ can be either high school or college freshmen, or people who are new to the job.
Differences: From the interviews, it becomes clear that not all captive companies live up to their reputation. Ajay, AS, CA and Tarun complain that their captive offices are run no differently than any Indian firm, and global corporate policies (especially with regard to overtime compensation, abiding by contractual agreements on sales commissions, etc.) are frequently violated. Of all my respondents, Julie is the only one who is very positive about working in a third-party company. Her company, though, is considered one of the most reputed firms in India, and viewed in esteem even by those working in captives.

5.1.1.3. Labour Process

a. Night- and shift-work

Similarities: Most respondents have found it challenging to adjust to night-based work. One common difficulty is being unable to sleep during the day, particularly when they live with other people and there is activity at home. Most have also of the conviction that night-based work is "unnatural"—‗natural‘ implying that human beings are built to sleep at night—and will lead to various problems in the long-term (KR, CJ and FR are insistent on this). This concern is one of the main reasons that many of them hope to move into a daytime job as quickly as possible. Even if respondents can tolerate night-work, what they find more demanding is to have to change work-shifts—not just hours of work but also the days of the week they are scheduled to work—on a weekly or monthly basis. Managers, on the other hand, insist on the rationale of ‘fairness,’ i.e., all employees should have to work on every shift.

Differences: Some employees, e.g. Julie, seem to be in support of such policies, saying that every employee if they had their way would simply opt for a day-shift. On the other hand, others such as Sally find such uniformity more burdensome than helpful. She insists that individual circumstances need to be considered:

[T]here are people who don’t care if Sunday is off or whatever. So let the Christians who are particular have it off! You know, you don’t have to try to say “I want to be fair.” It doesn’t work that way, you know? Everything is not so cut-and-dried. There are people who enjoy that late-night shift; they can be shuffled around and rearranged. And put these people, you know, together; let those who enjoy the earlier shifts come in early!
Still others concede that the fairness argument makes sense when employees are working sales-based processes where certain days or hours would have more high-value customers (what they call ‘hot shifts,’ as opposed to low-sales ‘cold shifts’), thus providing the opportunity for more commissions. One respondent, CS, a former software programmer and now voice-and-accent trainer, finds call centre employees’ complaints unwarranted; he argues that their situation is no different from various other established professions where people have no choice but to work variable night-shifts. This claim is corroborated by two other respondents, one a hotel-management student, KU, and another a medical student, DE, both of whom worked in call centres for a few months as a respite from the strenuous demands of their own programs!

**b. Training**

*Similarities:* Respondents on the whole seem very positive about the importance of training, both process-training (which is about the technical details of their process, e.g., the credit-card system) as well as pre-process or soft-skills training (handling people). While the former is rather technical and straightforward, it is the latter that many of them experience as ‘fun,’ since communications and team-building exercises usually involve simulations and games. In addition, respondents in general spoke highly of their trainers. For example, Girish and Nikhila who decried bad management practices at TP1, considered their trainers as “geniuses”, because they were “understanding,” had “people-management skills,” and didn’t “assert authority” over employees. Other respondents such as Ajay, CJ and KR shared their sentiment that their managers desperately needed such training.

Accent-training is an important component of pre-process training, and most of my respondents found aspects of this helpful, such as improving their vocabulary, or learning how their customers pronounced certain words. There is also unanimous agreement among my respondents that the emphasis of accent-training is no longer to mimic foreign accents, as it once was, but to develop a “neutral” pronunciation that can be understood by English-speakers anywhere. Respondents saw this as necessary because even within India, English is spoken with often strong regional accents, which can be difficult for people from other regions to understand. NG elaborates:
A Tamilian would say ‘yegg’[egg], a Sardarji would say ‘jheero’ [zero]; this is not a problem because in his language there is no ‘z’, there is ‘j’; he will say ‘jheero’. A Bengali will say ‘ishkool’ [school].

Respondents do admit, however, that some people still get carried away by accent-mimicking, though they note that this is simply a fad, and wears off quickly once they realize that people disapprove of fake accents.

Differences: There were also differences among employees on the value and importance of training. Sally, for example, is convinced that an Indian who has had little interaction with western cultures in his or her life simply cannot be helped by a few training workshops; she insists that understanding a person from another culture is impossible without sustained exposure to that culture. Similarly, another respondent NG notes that even at the level of language, there are words that Indians would not pronounce correctly unless they had had prolonged exposure to English-speaking cultures. And this leads to interesting problems on the phone:

So, an agent asks, Can I speak to Beat-Rice? B-e-a-t-r-i-c-e. ‘Beat-Rice’ is Beatrice! But they would not know that; for me it is automatic! Champagne is ‘Champa-g-né’!!! It’s not like Hindi or Kannada 70; English is not spoken phonetically; exactly as you see it you cannot pronounce it. It’s not ‘pitch-rescue’, it’s picturesque! It is very very tough!

Other respondents, such as Girish and CJ complained about some training programs being demeaning, with authoritarian trainers and a ‘grammar-school’ approach. Girish, Nikhila and CJ also question the alleged benevolence of accent-neutralization programs in India, when there are no such programs for call centre workers in the US, UK or Canada who may have thick regional accents of their own. 71 NG, who worked in a process that served US and UK customers at different times of the day, found that several of his colleagues had a hard time switching from one supposedly “neutral” accent to another:

[I]n the first round, you’re talking to UK customers. In the second round, you’re talking to US customers! […] As Indians, we speak the Mother’s English, from England. So when we say ‘cup’, we explode the ‘p’; ‘cut’, we explode the ‘t’. The Americans don’t. You simply cannot change your language at the drop of a hat. You can try all you want but it’s just not possible!”

---

70 Regional language of the state of Karnataka, where Bangalore is located.
71 These complaints resonate with some of the respondents of Mirchandani (2004), who argue that this “neutralization” isn’t all that neutral, since it is tailored in function of a particular kind of English.
An additional point of divergence was expressed by Sally, CA, and MA, who are critical of the appropriateness of some of the training activities and materials. MA, who works as a soft-skills trainer after having stepped down from her previous career as a school principal, feels appalled at having to appeal to the "vulgar" sensibilities of her trainees. She says that in her company, the trainers who are the most highly rated by the employees are those who play training games which involve sexual innuendo, and she finds this simply unacceptable.

c. Customers

Similarities: Respondents agree that customers can be often difficult to deal with, since they are either calling about complaints, or are being called by agents who have to sell them something they probably do not want to buy. Handling abusive customers becomes especially painful when policies forbid agents to hang up on them. Additionally, they note that you have to learn not to take it personally, a process which for many people takes a great deal of time and psychological energy; as a result, many do not persevere in the industry longer than a couple of months. However, my respondents also insist that such callers constitute only a small percentage of calls, and that most customers were pleasant and cooperative, and simply wanted to get their matters dealt with.

Respondents also mentioned adopting various ‘short-cuts’ in dealing with customers, e.g., putting the headset aside while an angry customer ranted on. Some would resort to unethical means, such as purposely muting or mumbling through the fine print in contracts they wanted customers to agree to. They also mentioned co-workers who would try to take advantage of vulnerable customers (e.g., old ladies or immigrants), perhaps as a means of finally getting to exercise power over somebody.

A few respondents (Ajay, Sally, AS, NG) felt that their companies were using Indians merely as scapegoats: customers would call back irate at the employee who made the sale, while the fault lay in another division (usually back in the west) and the employee would have simply no capacity to influence the shipping process. NG relates his frustration at this:

One thing which hurt me a lot was, I am promising the customer something, and after 3 months the customer called me back and said I was not given what you promised; that hurt me a lot. It never reached him! Even after I had taken his credit card number from him, taken that money also
from him, he never got it. [...] I believed the company and I promised him and they did not fulfil the promise. But he knew my name and that this was the number, and he kept calling and firing me.

However, almost all of my respondents worked in the industry for at least a year,72 and many of them seemed to gain a sense of usefulness from solving customer problems. It made a big difference to them when customers expressed their gratitude, and they narrate with a sense of pride how these customers want to call back the next time asking to speak to them. Those who were in outbound or sales processes also mentioned the sense of accomplishment they derived from making a sale. However, it was also a common complaint from several of these respondents (Ajay, Sally, Tarun, OF, KR) that the commissions from sales were being denied them by management, and all of them suspected corruption as the reason. We will see this point a little later in the section on Indian managers.

Differences: An important motivator for several of my respondents (Julie, Ajay, KR, DE, KU, FR, AS) was that call centre work gave them what they considered an "exciting" opportunity to interact with a different culture. For a few others (Nikhila, Tarun, Sally, NG, CJ), however, this didn’t seem to matter at all. One likely explanation for this is that the former group is from lower-middle-class families and would not have had much opportunity to interact with people from the west prior to this job. Julie and AS, for example, express a sense of gratitude for having been able to speak to people from a culture that they had previously only seen on TV or in movies. The respondents in the second group are more widely-travelled, or at least, have interacted with westerners prior to this job, so, as Nikhila puts it, “it’s not such a big deal.” Girish and Nikhila also think that this fascination with the west comes from a deep-rooted inferiority complex among Indians vis-à-vis westerners (which, interestingly, none of my respondents would admit that they felt themselves, or at least, not anymore).

72 It should be noted that KU and DE, both of whom worked for only 6 months, had a very positive experience, and only left because their education was a bigger priority. In fact, they said they would work these jobs again part-time if they needed to (part of their positivity perhaps could be attributed to the fact that they knew they were going to leave soon, and weren’t by any means stuck in this job or industry).
d. Policies

Similarities: Although there is a fair bit of variation in policies across organizations, both between third-party and captive companies as well as within each of these categories, there are several common elements that come to the fore. For example, many respondents mentioned improvements in safety policies, both of data as well as of employees. Also, all of them expressed satisfaction with the stringent policies against sexual harassment in the workplace, and many of them cited incidents where managers or employees who tried to behave with women in appropriate ways were thrown out. The case was similar for theft, although there were several examples where employees and managers were able to perpetrate such actions for a while before having been caught. Respondents also mentioned other policies which they appreciated, but were never implemented, such as additional compensation for night and overtime work, dress codes, open-door policies, addressing managers on a first-name basis, and so on.\(^{73}\)

Additionally, several policies almost unanimously come under criticism. Most employees complained about the insufficiency of breaks, both in number and duration. Several employees didn’t buy the “fairness” rationale behind variable shifts. Employees also criticised the mandated verbatim reading of scripts, which led to an aggravating sense of monotony\(^{74}\). Another policy that was criticised in third-party companies was that employees were forbidden to contact the client company, under pain of termination. Employees were told in such cases that these policies were mandated by the client company, but they don’t believe this. Nikhila elaborates:

> It’s not even from the client: it’s not like the client has told the Indian managers ‘Don’t let your employees contact me’. It’s because the higher management doesn’t want any of their deep dark secrets to be leaked out to them!

One policy decried by many respondents is that in order to take a day off—even for a sick-leave—employees have to notify the company a week before their date of absence. CJ retorts: “I mean, what if someone dies? Do I know that they are gonna die, like, one week in advance? And they’ll say ‘Oh, what can I do about it? Now who’ll fill

\(^{73}\) This corroborates with the findings of Upadhya and Vasavi (2006: 69).

\(^{74}\) These points have been elaborated on more than sufficiently in other studies of Indian call centres, and my respondents’ sentiments resonate with those of participants in other studies.
your position? And they give you one long story!” The other policy criticized by most employees is the Average Handling Time requirement, which leaves employees feeling conflicted between quality of service and the mandate to handle a certain number of calls a day. This puts employees in a situation where you want to get rid of ‘slow’ customers (immigrants, old people, etc.) as quickly as possible so as to move on to the next call. While this becomes the one venue where employees get to assert their power over someone else, it also tends to lead to negligence, which can become a serious problem for customers in processes such as mortgages, credit cards, etc. Furthermore, the repercussions of such behaviour can translate into anything from pay cuts for employees to the client company’s withdrawal from India altogether.

**Differences:** Many employees (Girish, Nikhila, CS, CJ, FR, KR, KU, NG) expressed the belief that captive companies had better and more reliable policies than third-party companies. While this was true in the case of Girish and Nikhila in CAP1 (at least, while their UK managers were around), Tarun, Ajay, AS and PJ indicate that the situation in captive companies is not so idyllic. Girish, Nikhila and AS give examples of how when Indian managers took over a captive company’s management, there was a marked decline in professionalism. On the other hand, some third-party companies, such as the one Julie works for, are also renowned for trying to foster transparency and eliminate corruption.

**5.1.1.4. Managers**

**a. Indian Managers**

**Similarities:** One of the rather surprising discoveries of this study is the nearly unanimous criticism voiced by call centre employees against their managers, specifically their local Indian managers. This becomes especially clear in cases when employees make comparisons with their foreign managers (either the ones they have actually worked with, or their perception of such managers). This critique seems to be of five interrelated elements: power-abuse, corruption, sycophancy, negligence, and lack of training.

**Power-abuse:** Respondents note that many of their immediate managers are usually former colleagues in the company who get promoted, and start to abuse their power and position. Such behaviour is attributed to a master-slave mentality, which is
what the superior-subordinate relationship in Indian organizations often tends to look like. Tarun and his colleagues call this a “Lala company” mentality, signifying an autocratic and capricious style of leadership. Nikhila spells it out further:

You know what it’s like to give power to someone who doesn’t know how to use it? Always happens: there’s people going, I’m going to be operations director, I’m in charge of all these things, all these people come under me. They don’t believe in working ‘with’ the people; they want people working ‘for’ them.

This attitude, they believe, creates in the superior (or the subordinate who has just been promoted) a sense of omnipotence, which they take as a warrant to “lord it over others,” as Sally puts it. Such managers seemingly need to present the image of an authority figure who is always ‘in charge.’ Tarun, Sally, AS and CS believe that such behaviour is simply an imitation of their superiors who had bossed them around. Unless they have been exposed to something else, “that’s all they know.” Tarun notes. NG adds: “They’re first-timers, no? Never handled [power] before. They’ve been listening to people all these years, they’ve been begging for money. Now they’ve got the money there, they got the power in the hand. Immature!” This ‘immaturity’ is evident in the lack of respect with which they treat their subordinates—“like a slave,” Sally insists. In the case of AS, the language used by his managers is quite telling:

Even to take a call: “Ehh, you buffalo, can you take the call?” “You dirty animal, can you take the call?” It doesn’t make sense! Not in a workplace which actually demands…I mean it looks nice and funny for youngsters to talk like this, but then not at the managerial level! I’m talking about the managerial level; managers speaking like this to an agent! [...] People using words like, you know ‘bastard’ and all that stuff—to an employee or a subordinate, the manager’s using such words—it’s pathetic! You cannot address another human being in such a way. “What the fuck you’re doing, pick the call you bastard!” Is that the way you talk? It doesn’t make sense!

What employees consider an abuse of power includes managers humiliating and demeaning their subordinates in public (as Tarun notes), or not listening to their input, especially any form of questioning, the latter being seen as disobedience or insolence (Sally, AS, KR, and OF attest to this). This mentality seems to be present in the many reported incidents of sexual harassment. AS gives an example from a captive company:

At one point we had around 7 girls in our team and 3 guys. And all good-looking girls. So the area manager was...he was this cheap guy who used to walk up to the girls and say, “My wife’s not at

---

75 See Kumar and Sethi (2005:68-69) on this point
home, why don’t you come over tonight?” I mean you think that’d really happen in [CAP3]?...[T]here was a time when he asked a girl to stand next to his cabin for more than an hour and a half. “Stand there, don’t do anything, just be there. I feel nice when you stand by me.”

At one point, the girls who had been working for this manager got together and complained to a foreign manager who was visiting, who immediately marched into the perpetrator’s office and fired him on the spot. Similarly, almost all cases of sexual harassment mentioned by my respondents were resolved, usually by the termination of the perpetrator, and this was the case in third-party as well as captive companies.76

Another common instance of what respondents considered an abuse of power was “communalism” or “groupism.” Julie, Ajay, NG, KR, FR, MA, CS and OF give examples of managers who would “show favouritism” towards members of their own ethnic groups, such as selecting them exclusively into their teams, or preferring them for promotions over allegedly-better-qualified others.77

**Corruption** is the second theme that emerges in this section. What employees label as corruption among their managers seems to consist of two interrelated aspects. The first was mentioned by most respondents as either a complaint or at least a suspicion: managers were pocketing money that was rightly owed to their employees. Girish, Ajay, Tarun, CH, NG, and KR express their frustration at unexplained cuts to their benefits, commissions and sometimes salaries. Ajay and KR mention not having been paid commissions that were owed to them, on the grounds that the rules had changed. The sense I got from respondents is that these managers can get away with this because they know that employees will probably do nothing about it, and at the very worst, will probably just quit. This seeming inability to take action becomes a terrible source of frustration. If employees lose their commissions despite their hard work, while managers

76 There are a couple of exceptions, but these seem closer to discrimination than harassment. Nikhila recounts one example of a friend of hers who left a call centre job because her team leader was making moves on her, and began to treat her unfairly (e.g., increasing her workload) once she made it clear that she wasn’t interested. Nikhila also narrates a personal example of a jealous team leader who tried to give her a hard time; she was sure he felt threatened because she was earning more commissions than any of the other agents. Another respondent, FR, left her first call centre job after a negative appraisal; she felt that she was not given a promotion simply because she was female.

77 Malayalee, i.e., those belonging to the state of Kerala, were criticised the most for this behaviour (except by my Malayalee respondents), perhaps because they have more close-knit communities, or because they are a minority in Bangalore. Several respondents noted the tendency of groups with similar ethnic-linguistic backgrounds to form in companies, despite heterogeneous team-divisions. But this is apparently common across India.
seem to be suffering no losses, Tarun protests, then "why should I put in that effort?" Similarly Girish, who found his incentives steadily dwindling, complains that he isn’t there to do "social work". In his case, after two of his managers were found out and terminated for not having distributed bonuses that were meant for the employees, he is suspicious that such behaviour is rampant. One respondent, OF, works for a third-party company on a customer-service process for one of the largest American multinational IT/consumer electronics firms, and recently came to discover a huge discrepancy between what the client company thinks Indian workers are getting paid and what he is actually receiving. "[T]he management is playing us big; they are just skipping off with the money," he says. OF discovered this after a conversation with a client manager who was visiting the third-party office:

He was shocked... "You get paid this much, how come? I mean, this is not possible because, [Client Company] pays so much!" I mean, he told us the amount, but I don’t wanna disclose the amount. But he said, "They are paying so much, why they are paying you only this much?" We said, "We don’t know; whatever the management gives us, we have to take it. We can’t fight against them because if you fight against them you’ll be thrown out of the company. Like that."

From Girish, Nikhila, Julie, OF and KR, we get the sense that employees in third-party companies are not allowed to contact the client company about their problems. The lack of unionization, the inability to trust that other colleagues would be willing to stand up in protest, and the abundance of similar call centre jobs make ‘exit’ a much more attractive option than ‘voice’ (to use the notions developed by Hirschmann 1970). It is evident here how this can open the door to a lack of transparency and thus encourage corrupt behaviour.

The second aspect of this corruption has to do with how managers negotiate the other side of the bargain, i.e., cheating the parent or client company. Similar to OF’s situation, we saw in Girish and Nikhila’s example in TP2 how the lack of transparency could allow third-party companies to give clients the impression that they have a certain number of employees working at a certain wage, when the numbers in reality are much lower. In addition, they have the power to bargain with the employee. In Nikhila’s words:

You know what happens—when you have Indian people employing Indian people, compared to a foreigner, an Indian person would know what the basic cost of living is— even thought the client thinks we’re getting paid 15 grand, he’s gonna go they don’t need 15—they’re just college kids— I’m gonna give them 6 ½. You know what I mean?
Consequently, the difference is pocketed by the management, or so they believe. It is hard to say how prevalent this is, but given the high degree of suspicion expressed by my respondents, it might seriously be worth investigating further. This fraudulent behaviour is not restricted to payroll claims. Theft is another common complaint. OF narrates the story of one of his managers who was caught for having pocketed a sizeable proportion of the funds allocated to buy gifts for employees. Another employee, AS, who worked for three years in a Captive IT firm, gives the example of a manager being exposed for having stolen several laptops and printers from the company. Yet another example he narrates is of a manager who would take his team out for ice-cream on a regular basis, but would forge the bills to make it look like a sizeable amount, the rest of which he would pocket:

The amount was around... I don’t know, it would have been hardly few hundreds. I mean it was just an ice-cream bill, which was around 8000 Rupees! It’s a big amount... For just 10 people, 8000—it’s close to 800 bucks each one’s eaten an ice cream? It doesn’t make sense! He was thrown out.

It is important to note that respondents did not think all their managers were corrupt. However, there was a general sense of suspicion among all respondents that such corruption is rampant, and most respondents had at least a couple of examples of managers who were thrown out for engaging in fraudulent and unethical practices. While this itself indicates that there are policies in place to put an end to such corruption, my respondents gave me the sense that the enforcement of such policies is weak. Most of them said that it would be a significant improvement if there were more foreign managers around, or at least, if they were better conditions in place to allow for whistleblowing, e.g., some direct means of contacting the parent company. In light of all this, and especially in the absence of more large-scale empirical data, it is difficult to say how widespread this corruption is. When asked if such corruption was simply occasional or in fact more pervasive, most of my respondents said something similar to OF:

Can’t say. Can’t say really. Where is the money going but? That’s the big question! Where is the money going? [The client company] is giving you so much money, why you all are not paying us well? Where is the money going then? We can’t go and ask our management where the money’s going... Really I don’t know; still it’s a big mystery to me.

78 A scoop of gourmet ice-cream would cost no more than 50 Rupees.
**Sycophancy** is the third problem that emerges along the theme of employees' criticisms of Indian management. An instant smile of recognition appears on the faces of respondents when asked about *chamchaagiri*, which is popular Hindi slang for obsequious servility towards a superior, often for opportunistic, self-seeking ends. The recognition that this term receives is simply because it is prevalent. Julie, e.g., when asked about this behaviour, laughed instantly, assenting to its omnipresence: That happens [laughs]... Everyone wants to grow. Some people want to work hard and get there, which is the lengthier way, other people would use short-cuts and cut corners.

"Everything is like that only, yaar," says KR when asked about *chamchaagiri*. There is an unsaid expectation that subordinates have to go out of their way to please their superiors. As Sally noted, getting to be on "very close intimate terms with your Team Leader or the managers on top" is the sure-fire way to climb up the ladder in Indian organizations. Another respondent gives the example of a troublesome colleague:

NG: About a year ago, he got promoted. He became a senior person, but he tried to order people around. That was not right. Then he tried it on me! And he had a lot of problems; his English was bad, he couldn’t speak properly.
I: How did he get promoted?
NG: *Chamchaagiri*—licking boots!
I: How did you deal with that?
NG: Just ignore!

Interestingly, while this idea of “sucking up” seems to be a given, there is a widespread contempt for it. None of my respondents were willing to admit that they engage(d) in this themselves! On the other hand, they give no shortage of examples of how several colleagues rise up in the company because of this, while they themselves insisted that they would refuse to stoop to this. Sally, for example, said that her managers kept expecting her “to act like an idiot”; similarly, Tarun refuses to ‘brownnose’ or curry favours with his managers, even if it means passing up opportunities for advancement. Another aspect of this behaviour is the exchange of favours: several other respondents note that when managers grant an employee a day off or an early break, they use it as a playing card in their future negotiations with the employee. It is as if they have deigned to bestow a favour on the employee, so the latter is obliged to reciprocate, usually by

---

79 Such servility is often parodied in comedy sketches of Indian organizations and restaurants.
working overtime or foregoing an “off-day”. Failure to comply here would mean, at the very least, losing favour in the manager’s eyes, which means that the opportunity would be open to another competing colleague.

The fourth theme, negligence, fits into the above categories as well, and expresses the idea that Indian managers tend to ‘let things slide’ much more than (respondents think) foreign managers would. In the example of sexual harassment given earlier by AS, he notes that an Indian manager would probably not have taken prompt and direct action in firing the perpetrator. The tendency among his Indian managers, he said, was to “[turn] a blind eye to a lot of what was happening, which was promoting direct unprofessionalism.” CS, who works as a soft-skills trainer, considers this problem endemic among Indian managers:

The Indian mindset is they don’t look at the future; they don’t look at what could happen, the repercussions. Let’s take a simple example, if there is a chair in the training room which has a slit. An Indian manager would probably say, “Let it be, let it be, we’ll take care of it, we’ll take care of that.” What he fails to understand is that the more you sit on it the worse it is going to get. You have to fix things when they need to be fixed.

AS, who worked for a captive firm, complained about how the code of conduct and standards went out the window as soon as American managers left the operations to Indians. One instance he mentioned was when a security guard routinely brought in pornographic CDs to watch on office computers with some employees. When I asked him if anybody reported this, he replied glumly, “[Y]ou know, there’s always an understanding, you know: ‘It’s okay, man; what happens? It’s okay, what’s there?’ All that ‘It’s okay’ stuff.” He continued:

Hardly few people would stand up and say, ‘Man, this does not happen in American standards.’ Even people who come here with that kinda idea, out here over a period of time they say ‘chalega yaar’ [let it be, buddy]... ‘What to do yaar, we can just manage! India hain naa?!’ [It’s India after all, right?]

The other complaint issued by employees is the lack of adequate training for their managers. Promotions usually occur within the ranks of the company when a superior recommends a subordinate. We have already seen that many employees voice a concern that promotions are unfair, and a function of office politics, personal preference and seniority. What frustrates them in addition is that managers are given no training on how to handle relationships with their employees. For this reason, Girish, Nikhila, Ajay,
CH, GN, CS, FR and TE expressed a preference for their trainers over their managers. As a manager, "you know the business, but you don't know how to handle people," Ajay complains; "People-management skills are nil! You need to spend time with an employee, to see what he's good at!" Girish echoes the same idea: "[T]rainers are trained in people-management skills." Nikhila adds, "I wish our trainers had been our managers... I don't think that I would have quit [TP1] if I had my trainers as my managers." In the absence of training, managers seem to have nothing to go on except to imitate the behaviour of their own superiors. Tarun's solution is to send managers to other countries in order to train them on how to understand other human beings:

'cuz [these managers] have been kicked around when they were in a junior position [...] they treat their subordinates accordingly. And the subordinate reaches a position where he's in power—he does exactly the same thing. Whether it's being vindictive or revenge or what, I'm not too sure but, that's typically what you end up doing; you emulate the person you learned from. Ideally if you ask me,[...]transfer the entire batch to a different country under different management. Let them learn! Then you send them back to India. Do a transfer: send the foreigners down to India and send these guys so there's no loss as such. But then when these guys come back to India, they will ape what they learned out there—that kind of management, that kind of style—rather than the nasty stuff that goes on here. And in that phased manner, eventually you evict the top management and it's slowly replaced by these people who've had constant exposure to different cultures and behaviours and everything.

Despite the above complaints, when asked whether these descriptions hold for all their Indian managers, employees are quick to admit that there are, in fact, some Indian managers who are kind and reasonable and motivating. However, it seems that the bitterness they feel towards several superiors who treat them badly seems to taint their perception of Indian managers in general.

Differences: While the above complaints were shared by most respondents, there were some exceptions. Julie, notably, was very positive about almost all of her managers. Several of these managers were colleagues of hers from college, so she got along very well with them. TE and DE were also rather positive about their local managers, and several others (Girish, Nikhila, CH, CS, KU, and LA) gave examples of good Indian managers who treated them well. However, when they criticized bad managers, it was almost always by characterizing their behaviour in light of some allegedly 'Indian'
tendency. This attribution was clearer in the case of most of those who made comparisons with foreign managers.

b. Foreign Managers

Similarities: The majority of respondents spoke very highly of foreign managers. Interestingly, while not all my respondents worked for foreign managers, they all seemed to entertain a similar perception of what they considered a western style of management (which seems to have been fostered either during their education or during training sessions). There are three interrelated aspects to what they unanimously seem to consider the central trait of western management: “professionalism.”

While they struggle to clearly define what they mean by this word, it is used unanimously by almost all respondents. In its first meaning, it is defined negatively, i.e., as an antithesis to the practices of sycophancy and communalism. Foreign managers are seen as having a serious commitment to the “task” without “mixing” personal preferences. In the words of AS, “You look at work separate, life separate, and the way you behave separately.” While such fragmentation might seem unappealing to any westerner, it seems clear that what Indian employees find attractive in their conception of this idea is that it seems to promise an antidote to the problems of corruption, personal favouritism, discrimination, politicking and so on. CS mentions how impressed he was in his first (captive) call centre job by the environment his foreign managers created instead of what he considers the ‘usual’ Indian climate of sycophancy and competition; e.g. when employees had problems with a co-worker, they couldn’t cosy up to the manager:

Even if you go to the manager, he’ll say, “Have you spoken to the person you have a concern with?” It’s something quite awesome; backbiting and backstabbing doesn’t happen. The manager asks you the question on your face: “Have you spoken to the person you have a concern with?”
And if you say no, the manager simply refuses to talk to you.

Another respondent, AS, felt that after his American managers left the Captive office to be run by Indians, “all this kind of dirty stuff” came back in. His Indian managers would use the same western jargon, but as Upadhya and Vasavi (2006: 68) note, this tends to remain at the level of discourse. AS seems to go so far as to equate professionalism with a moral virtue, in the absence of which his company started to worsen, specifically through communalism and ethnic discrimination: “[U]nder the US
management, things would have been different. Professionalism is professionalism; it’s not a mask. You don’t mask professionalism, you become a professional. That’s what I believe.”

In contrast to his Indian managers, he speaks very highly of the American managers he had, whom he feels used to encourage and respect him:

[M]y immediate manager was an American from Oklahoma City, he was from Texas. Sweet guy, his name was [...] And he gave me every freedom of thought. In fact he encouraged me to speak in one of the business meetings where you had the director, the area manager, and he said, ‘you speak, you speak out something’. [...] That was an exposure. Because he knew what I had within me, and he knew the interest that I had.

Another respondent CS mentions that it is precisely this sort of encouragement on the part of an American manager that inspired him to become a trainer, in order that he may similarly encourage and motivate others. Curiously, though, he says that the professionalism he admired in these American managers was not something he perceived as ‘foreign.’ When asked whether he learned these qualities that he categorizes as ‘professionalism’ from his American managers, he replies, “I think I learnt that from my mom.[...] I think [the company] really confirms a lot of things that I’ve already learnt.”

This reflects the second meaning embedded in their use of the term ‘professionalism’—a sense of respect for subordinates. This is also voiced by Tarun, who mentions how his UK managers would never reprimand him in public, and in fact, would “take the flack” for him with their superiors if Tarun had messed up. On the contrary, the Indian managers at his company now punish mistakes with humiliation, which he says is simply “not very motivating.” Another facet of this respect is mentioned by Girish, Nikhila and CH; their managers from the UK had a genuine interest in befriending Indians and understanding the culture, so they would take pains to get to know employees, and would “go all out” to celebrate local festivals such as Holi and Diwali, complete with catering, fireworks, etc. They felt that this was a “family” atmosphere of trust, which also encouraged a work-life balance—“work hard and play harder,” as they put it. Their Indian managers, on the other hand, would refuse such celebrations saying that the client would not allow it—an excuse that several employees simply did not believe.
A third quality of western management that was mentioned by several respondents was *the value of labour and merit*, which they felt were lacking in India, and as a consequence, fostered the exploitation of employees. Ajay and Girish complain about this particularly because without college degrees—without a "tag"—one is considered a nobody, despite one’s "performance." Sally, KR, NG, and OF also insist that merit is not valued enough; one has to curry the manager’s favour. Tarun protests against what he considers the ‘Indian way’:

[T]he guy who’s lowest in the rung...may be doing roaringly well, but since he’s new, let the guy stew for a bit: ‘What the hell, he’s young after all!’ Now that is being discriminatory in terms of the management style! Now in the States, if the guy were a yuppie guy about 18 years old, intelligent and everything, performs exceptionally well, the guy moves fast within the ranks, because his merit is recognized.

It is important to note that employees do not say that all Indian managers are incapable of managing along the above lines. Rather, the foreign managers that they encounter seem to embody the kind of leadership they are looking for which they do not find in most of their Indian managers. This might possibly be because foreign managers who are sent to India are extensively trained on how to interact with Indians, whereas companies don’t see the need for local managers to be trained on how to interact with their own people. Another factor to consider is that many of these employees have some college education in management, which probably use similar textbooks to those in the West.\(^{80}\) Additionally, when we look at what employees consider a good leader or manager, despite their use of terms such as ‘professionalism’ and their citing examples of foreign managers, the image they present of a nurturing leader who creates a family-atmosphere and encourages hard work, still has an Indian flavour to it. This is evident in the below quotation from a KR:

I’ll tell you how my manager should be[...] When you’re in the field, I can come to you. Come next to the people: ask what are their problems! Work next to the people! [...] See, I have done my BBM [Bachelor of Business Management]. So I know a little bit of management. So come here *yaar*, ask “What is the problem?” Nothing is there: the manager comes, she will just do her work, [and] get lost. [...] For me, [the] company is like a second family [...] See, where you are working, you have to enjoy your life, where you work. And when you are enjoying your work,

---

\(^{80}\) Jacob (2005) makes this point, and is critical of the fact that erroneous understandings of Indian culture from western perspectives (e.g., Hofstede) are fed to Indian management students as Gospel truth.
then only you can give 100% contribution of your work. [...] See it’s like, when you work in a company, you should give everything to your company, you should feel like that!

**Differences:** Not every respondent was unqualifiedly optimistic about foreign managers. While Sally praised western managers for their ‘thoroughness,’ she criticises them for what she considers a lack of integrity when they encourage discipline at work and “letting loose” on weekends; she cannot condone this lack of consistency. In addition, she worked for Italian and Dutch managers whom she considered corrupt and offensive. Girish and Nikhila found that some of their UK managers became susceptible to sycophants as well:

G: What these guys did was they went up to the managers and...
N: You know, they’re sucking up to managers, sucking up to white people...
G: They said, ‘Oh, you know, you’re paying us 20,000 rupees; I used to get 8000 rupees in my old company, this is so much more, my life is so much better, lalala… So, it made these westerners think, ‘Oh, we’re paying these guys…
N: a little too much’

One of my informants, a senior manager in the Bangalore branch of one of the top IT companies in the world, disagrees with my respondents’ assessment of what they called an “Indian style of management”:

When they say “Indian style of management”, I would mean “unprofessional management”. It need not be always Indian. Since the participants of your interview were Indian and since they may not have worked under any other management, they will term it as Indian. I don’t really think everything done by an American manager is good. At the same time, I can point out at least few positives about Indian managers. So, the concern here is lack of professionalism in work, not the ethical or geographical flavour of it. I have seen that many of the American managers are "cut-throat" in their approach where as Indian managers are good in empathizing with their subordinates [...] I have seen sycophancy in German managers. Some people call it racism. But my experience is that German managers give undue favour to other German employees and they knowingly or unknowingly give less importance or credit to the Asians or Browns. So, in short, the problem is not India-specific. You will see similar problems in all the countries. Only thing is that it will vary in its intensity. So, I would term it as “lack of professionalism.”

5.1.1.5. Colleagues

**Similarities:** There is no consensus in the way employees evaluate their colleagues. The interviews suggest a fair bit of diversity in age, backgrounds, and
motivations for work among call centre workers. Respondents’ general assessment is that their colleagues tend to be mostly recent high-school graduates, usually working to meet family needs, many of whom get caught up in a lifestyle of consumerism, smoking, alcohol, parties, and credit-card debt. There seems to be a general sense of mistrust among colleagues because of competitiveness, which has led Ajay, Girish, Nikhila, OF and KR to become wary of sharing anything of a confidential nature to a colleague, lest the latter go and reveal this to a manager in order to climb up the ladder. Jealousy, sycophancy and competition create what Richard Sennett (2006) calls an environment of low informal trust. This is the main reason why my respondents feel that unionization will not work in Indian call centres. In Girish’s words,

[H]alf of the people that work in call centres are working just for the salary; they don’t want to lose their job, stuff like that. So they’re scared to protest. So if I were to do this and say, ‘Okay, this is not happening, let’s do this’, there will be at least 100 people that wouldn’t stand up.

Differences: There are several particularities in how respondents describe their relations with their colleagues. Julie speaks most highly of her colleagues, whom she considers “fun”; many of them are college buddies, and include some very close friends who share her values. TE and DE are similarly positive in their appraisal. Tarun, on the other hand, feels forced to bond with his colleagues at work, when he would prefer to keep his personal and professional lives separate. Older employees such as Sally, NG, CA and MA voice a concern with colleagues who imitate certain “western” behaviours they find problematic (immodest clothing, foul language, etc.). Sally and NG found their colleagues incompetent in handling calls which required personal judgment rather than scripted responses, and also thought them to be disrespectful towards customers whose English was not as good as their own (e.g., immigrants).

5.1.2. Impact on lifestyle

5.1.2.1. Habits

Similarities: Most respondents admit that call centre work has an immediate impact on their basic habits. The impact of call centre work on food and sleeping habits seems mostly negative. Ajay, Julie, Sally, Girish and Nikhila complained about the poor quality of catering in their company cafeterias, although Julie’s company has recently
made significant improvements. Several respondents complained that break timings were too short to enjoy a full meal; in addition, many were not allowed to take their breaks when the call volume was especially high. In addition to eating, sleeping habits also tend to suffer, at least in the first couple of months. Some of those who are on steady night shifts can adjust after a while, though even here, many complain they are unable to sleep well during the day, because of the noise at home when the rest of the family is awake, talking, cooking, etc. As for those on variable shifts, none of my respondents have been able to adjust, and the consistent hope seems to be to get a straight shift. Several respondents admitted to having taken to heavy smoking in order to deal with workplace stress. Others mention a general tendency towards increased alcohol and drug use and "wild parties" among call centre workers; Girish, Nikhila and CH admit to having spent a good deal of their income in this direction. At the same time, respondents also admit that not everybody follows this pattern.

Differences: Some of my respondents claimed that they didn't have trouble adjusting to night-shifts. KU, for example, was accustomed to this from his training in hotel-management, where night-shift work was common. There were significant differences in the habits people developed as well. Some respondents spent their new disposable income on shopping, restaurants, alcohol and parties, sometimes landing up in serious credit card debt. Other respondents reported being more responsible with their money; Julie, Sally AS and PE were able to help their families financially, and did not take to smoking, drinking or drugs.

5.1.2.2. Activities

Similarities: Respondents are in agreement that call centre work tends to seriously curb their activities outside the workplace, since the job consumes so much of their time and energy. One main activity that tends to suffer is education. Respondents had a general concern that many in this industry give up on their education in order to pursue jobs which in the short-term may provide good income, but have a dubious future. The other concern that was mentioned was about religious activities. Several Christian respondents complained that they were forced to miss church services because they had to work Sundays. Hindu respondents were able to perform their regular puja rituals at
home, but suffered when it came to festivals, especially when their companies would refuse to give them days off.

**Differences:** Despite this consistent complaint, almost all my respondents tried to maintain commitments to activities outside the workplace. Julie and PE for example, regularly attended their church youth groups, and Julie mentions being involved in prayer-groups in her workplace. KR works part-time as a fashion model, and would manage the time to work out at the gym everyday. Girish, Nikhila, Ajay and CH, however, dropped out of college in order to keep up their call centre jobs. Nikhila struggled for a couple of years to work and attend classes at the same time, which worsened the toll on her health; having quit her job she now attends classes full-time. Ajay and Julie mention that while many of their colleagues were able to study while working their night-jobs, they felt that they couldn’t do this themselves.

**5.1.2.3. Relationships**

**Similarities:** “I have no social life” is a common complaint from most respondents. The all-consuming job poses restrictions on how much time one has to spend with family and friends. The toll is hardest on those who work night-shifts on a variable schedule, but night-shifts in themselves are a problem. Employees come home and try to fall asleep when everyone else in their household is waking up. Depending on one’s work-timings, it can happen that some employees hardly get to see the people in their own house. NG describes it only half-jokingly:

“[Y]ou’re sleeping in the day, the rest of your family is going to work or school. They come back in the night, you’re going for work. It’s a very good way of family planning I think. You don’t get to see your wife!”

Most respondents complained of becoming angry and irritable with family members or roommates who were getting ready for their own workdays. Ajay, Nikhila, Julie and NG admitted having lost their temper at family members because of sleep-deprivation and general frustration with work. Ajay, Girish, Nikhila and Tarun mention having grown distant from close friends and family because they are unable to spend time together. Several respondents mentioned that their families were growing increasingly unsupportive of their call centre jobs as a result. However, in many cases, the need for income seemed more pressing. In general, it seems that families are very hesitant to let
their girls work call centre jobs, mainly owing to the negative perception of call centre workers.

**Differences:** Julie, now that she works a day-shift, is better able to maintain her social activities, though she struggled previously to find time for friends and family. Her parents, as well as those of TE and FR, were initially concerned about letting their daughters work night-jobs, but they have grown more supportive over the years. PE also mentions having the support of his family; even after 3 years on the job, his parents wake themselves up—depending on his shift timings—either late at night to see him off before work or early in the morning to greet him when he returns. Tarun’s parents have grown increasingly unsupportive, mainly because of the toll the job seems to be taking on his health. He is glad, though, that he at least gets his weekends off, so he is able to participate in some family activities. Sally’s mother shares Sally’s opinion of the negative impact of call centres on youngsters who work there, and she also deplores the way Sally was treated by her managers. Girish and Nikhila’s parents were initially supportive that they were earning money. Very quickly, however, the children were spending hardly any time at all with their families; Girish lost the trust and closeness he had with his brother, and Nikhila’s mother felt that she had become a stranger. The visible effects on their health and spending habits made matters only worse. Curiously, while the two of them mention this devastating toll on their relationships with family and friends, they mention spending a fair bit of time on shopping, parties and clubbing.

**5.1.3. Impact on Self**

**5.1.3.1. Physical health**

**Similarities:** Respondents agree that the impact on their physical health has been negative, primarily due to poor eating and sleeping habits. Tarun’s doctor told him that he has what Indian doctors now jokingly call the ‘BPO [Business Process Outsourcing] syndrome,’ which is rampant among the crowd of young people that work in high-tech environments at nights: frequent headaches and backaches, digestive problems, eye and ear problems, sudden weight gain or loss, irritability. These findings corroborate those of other studies on Indian call centres in the literature. Julie, Tarun, TE and FR gained weight, while Ajay, Girish, and Nikhila lost weight considerably.
Differences: While the overwhelming majority complain of health problems, there are some, such as DE, KU, KR, and LA, who report no such effect (KR’s case might be unique because of his unwavering commitment to physical fitness.)

5.1.3.2. Psychological health

Similarities: Respondents’ main complaints here were of stress, frustration, and irritability. In addition to the tedium of the job itself, employees had to deal with harsh and demanding managers and, at times, abusive customers. The emotional labour of having to attend to each customer in the appropriate manner—helpful and welcoming for inbound processes or assertive and enthusiastic for outbound—was a further challenge, which resonates with studies in the literature have noted. Respondents mentioned that it took them a while to learn how to handle abusive customers, but this came easier to some than others, and those who couldn’t learn to handle this would quit within a couple of months. Respondents also noted that outbound telemarketing jobs were the most stressful and tedious; unlike inbound customer-service, where they could at least feel they were of some use to a customer, here they were calling people to sell them something they didn’t want. The monotony of one such call after another drove people like NG to desperation:

It’s something like you’re a slave. It’s monotonous, robotic: you pick up the phone, dial, pick up the phone, dial. That’s all you have to do. 8 hours a day. You have to make about 600-700 calls a day. You have to do it. They give breaks, but, there comes a point at which you will break! Imagine making 700 calls a day, saying exactly the same thing—Good morning, my name is so-and-so—exactly the same thing you’re doing. You become like a machine. And then what happens is you start trying to cut corners. Because you’re desperate to get a sale.

A psychiatrist I spoke to in Bangalore said that stress and burnout were the most common problems among BPO/Call centre workers he treated (and who were coming to him in increasing numbers). Many of his patients were developing somatoform disorders whose causes were primarily stress-related. Not only did employees not know how to properly handle their stress, but their relationships (especially with their spouses) were also strained, usually due to a combination of financial pressures and the infrequency of time spent with each other. What he thinks needs to be done is for corporate training to include basic life-skills training, such as handling relationships, work-life balance, and
especially assertiveness, so that they can learn to say ‘no’ to unreasonable work demands (Indians are generally reluctant to say ‘no’, especially to superiors).

Identity-tensions could be treated as another aspect of psychological health, and are suggested in some of the literature as a consequence of accent- and culture-training and the job of working night-shifts serving foreign clients (Mirchandani 2003; Taylor and Bain 2005; McMillin 2006). While it seems like a plausible hypothesis that this might lead them to feel uncomfortable with their Indian identity, or oppressed by foreigners, or something to that effect, my respondents did not seem to think so. Julie, Girish, Ajay, and KR, for example, mention that their job has taken away any sense of inferiority or bashfulness they may have felt towards foreigners. They do believe, however, that many Indians have an inferiority complex when it comes to dealing with westerners, which according to them explains why some of their colleagues begin to adopt western accents in their day-to-day lives. Most of my respondents claimed to be put off by people who used “fake accents”. They didn’t think that their jobs or training caused any conflict with their sense of being Indian. Part of this seems to be due to the fact that most companies now no longer require employees to adopt fake accents or pseudonyms.

Differences: Unlike employees who were working on the phone, respondents who became trainers (CS, TE, NG and PE) had no further complaints about stress, irritability and monotony in their jobs. Some respondents, such as Terry, Ajay, and KR, expressed a growing sense of discouragement and hopelessness in their jobs, and wanted to leave the company and even the industry as quickly as possible.

There seems to be some evidence for identity tensions in the early stages of the job, as well as in the when the industry itself was starting out a few years ago. This is probably what has been captured by most other studies of the phenomenon. Julie, for example, mentioned that when she started attending abusive calls at work, she initially experienced a sense of humiliation at being Indian. In order to compensate for this, she made it a point to develop an American accent at work to such an extent that customers would not believe her when she admitted that she was calling from India. In addition to this, she says that in time her image of Americans—some of whom included Indian immigrants who spoke her own mother-tongue—became more realistic, and this helped dispel the initial difficulties. Nikhila mentioned a further challenge of having to work
with a pseudonym in her first couple of jobs, and she resented having to “be someone else—this foreigner” at work. She refused to change her accent, however; she is proud of the fact that she does not have a British accent even though she lived in the UK for many years. AS, on the other hand, actually liked trying to sound like an American, and became quite defensive at the suggestion that accent-training created any identity tensions: “The accent has nothing to do with changing your life. It has only something to do with changing the way you speak; it’s as simple as that!”

Sally, however, finds the imitation of “Americanisms” rampant in call centres, which she thinks includes not just accents but also foul language and immoral habits, which she blames for weakening Indians’ sense of values. Tarun, on the other hand, insists that Indian culture and identity is too deeply ingrained in employees to be altered in any significant way by a call centre job. Western accents, fashions and the like, he thinks, are at best temporary fads. Besides, he insists, such influences come more from television and the internet rather than from jobs. This ties in to a later theme we will look at, on perceptions of the West.

5.1.3.3. Personality

Similarities: While respondents were mostly negative in their evaluation of how call centre work affected their mental or emotional health, most of them were very positive in their assessment of what they learned from this experience. They see their on-the-job training and work experience as having primarily helped them to develop useful attitudes as well as personality/character traits. They give the sense that these are qualities that help them achieve a certain kind of ideal self they aspire to, and usually this means developing the kind of traits that will help their careers. “Confidence” was the most commonly cited trait; many respondents say that they were shy and lacked self-confidence before working a call centre job, and the training exercises as well as having to talk to foreigners on the phone all day long were a significant help. They feel that learning to become assertive and to convince customers are valuable skills that will help them in future jobs. Many of them also mention having learned “professionalism,” which

---

81 While it would be correct to make some distinctions between these terms, for our purposes here it is easier simply to lump them under ‘personality’. Additionally, this was the term used by most respondents in describing what they learned from this experience.
again seems to be an ideal they are striving after. AS describes his experience when he started working for an American captive company:

I started translating everything I saw into me, so that I would become more professional. And so my professional life got built up. Which was translated even into my personal life. I started living the way that I thought, which wasn’t the case before. Earlier, my case was, if I think something, it was more a kind of a desire: ‘Can I do that?’ Because of the way that I was brought up, or the way that I grew. That started changing. Professionalism, personality. First two things. Drastic change… But everything positive, not negative!

Similarly, Julie sees improvements in her sense of patience, confidence, better vocabulary, and feels that it has been an excellent growth experience. Girish, CH, AS, FR and TE mentioned overcoming shyness, introversion, stage-fear, and a sense of inferiority.

Differences: Not all employees, however, were in need of such skills or traits. Tarun and Sally, for example, had a fair bit of training, work experience and travel behind them, so the job didn’t have the sort of appeal it did for certain others. Tarun admits that his work has improved his strategic analysis skills and his confidence in selling to foreign executives, though he feels that his talents are being wasted in this company. Sally has learned that she can “start from scratch at any age,” and believes she made some small difference by simply maintaining her integrity, beliefs and values in the company. She is discouraged by the discovery that there is no company free of corruption, and has learned that trying to do the right thing can lead to various forms of suffering.

5.1.4. Impact on society

5.1.4.1. Perception of Call Centre Workers

Similarities: All my respondents agree that the general perception in Indian society of the impact of call centres on its workers is negative. There is a positive image associated with the industry due to the economic benefits it provides and the new jobs created. However, the negative image has to do with lifestyle, and is propagated mainly through media reports of youngsters dropping out of college, earning high incomes which serve as merely pocket-money, living a “westernized” lifestyle, spending excessively on clothing, restaurants, cell phones, motorbikes, alcohol, drugs, nightclubs, raves, and
having sexual affairs and liaisons in the workplace. There seems to be a good deal of criticism from the older generation. NG, for example, is very concerned that kids are dropping out of college, and that their newfound independence is ruining them:

[Y]ou are going to have a generation of no degrees! They don’t care about the parents, cuz they’re earning more than dad: balls to you, like; I don’t want your money! Cigarettes, alcohol. You go to any pub and who is there, who do you see? Only kids! Call centre kids!

As a result, the call centre job, which was seen as being somewhat prestigious only a few years ago, is apparently no longer so. As Nikhila noted, call centre jobs today have become commonplace and “looked down upon.” While respondents are in agreement that this is the perception that their society has constructed of them, most of them are resentful of this fact; many of them argue that this creates a false stereotype, since many call centre workers are decent and responsible.

**Differences:** Girish, Nikhila and CH in many ways agree with the media description, since it resonates with their own experience of living a “wild” lifestyle. However, their own trajectory seems to be explained by Tarun, who argues that even if employees engage in such habits and activities, they eventually tire of this behaviour and grow out of it; “responsibility kicks in,” and this, he believes, is inescapable in India due to the family-consciousness that pervades the society. In addition, he as well as Julie are quick to point out that these sorts of things happen just as much in other industries, only they are not as newsworthy. The stigma can make things difficult, he insists, in a society where arranged marriages still take place; a call centre girl can be seen as less desirable. Sally shares these critical judgments as well, but notes that there are several responsible young adults in these environments who are doing their best to support their families.

**5.1.4.2. Religion**

**Similarities:** Many respondents spoke about the perception of the BPO / call centre industry held by religious institutions, though this was not a topic which concerned several respondents; many were unaware of what leaders in their religious traditions or institutions had to say about call centres, but they surmised that both Hindu and Christian
religious groups’ perspectives\textsuperscript{82} of call centres would be negative, resonating with the broader societal perspective. The negativity seems to be mostly about the problem of ‘westernization’, which includes consumerism and the loss of traditional Indian values. This includes the criticism that call centre workers are giving up on their religious practices, due to the new influences—money, peers, parties and so on—or simply due to the demands of the job itself, such as the abnormal schedules. While my respondents agreed that this case with some of their colleagues, they were reluctant to make a sweeping judgment here, since many of them did not see a conflict with their religious values and practices.

There is a further dimension to the theme of religion. Respondents felt that some of their problems with Indian management originated in elements of tradition and religion. Where Hinduism and Indian society are concerned, it becomes difficult to separate the religious dimension from the social. For example, when Sally complains that Indians tend to see a person’s material success as a sign of God’s blessing, or when Girish and Nikhila complain that Indians are conditioned to be subservient and to seek the approval of those in higher ranks, it is not possible to draw a neat line between religion and society.

**Differences:** While some of my respondents indicated that they were not religiously inclined (Girish, Nikhila, Tarun, DE), several others mentioned the importance of spirituality and religion, and some of these latter were involved in various sorts of religious groups. None of my Hindu respondents were involved in religious groups; their practice was more domestic and family-based. Some of my Christian respondents would attend church services or youth groups regularly, and mentioned that the opinion of call centre work was rather negative. Julie’s friends in her church youth group told her that she shouldn’t work in such jobs. Similarly, Sally’s pastor preached that call centres were from the devil. Both of these women, who consider themselves religious, oppose such perspectives. Julie thinks that the Church is unaware of all the good that takes place in call centres; she herself has felt free to share her beliefs with colleagues and even customers in the workplace. Various inter-denominational and even

\textsuperscript{82} I did not come across any Muslim respondents, so I do not have any first-hand information on how Indian Muslims perceive this phenomenon
inter-religious prayer groups have emerged in recent years that operate in her company as well as others. Sally left the church she used to attend, insisting that the well-paid pastor was a hypocrite to criticise her and her colleagues who were working honest jobs to support their families. She holds herself as an example that one can work in call centres without compromising their values or beliefs.

5.1.4.3. Perceptions of West and East

Similarities: Another theme which emerges from the data has to do with perceptions of Western and Indian cultures, from respondents’ own point-of-view, as well their reaction to the perspective of Indian society.

Many respondents seemed to think that India has an ambiguous and even hypocritical relationship with Western culture. In their opinion, on one hand, most Indians have an inferiority complex towards the west, and on the other hand, they denounce the ‘westernization’ of Indians, particularly when it comes to lifestyle habits. Most respondents agreed with their broader society’s perspective that the West lacks “family values”, apparently exemplified by the fact that children leave home at the age of 18 (this was a point made by most respondents). But interviewees were also critical of the fact that Indian society tends to equate Western culture with MTV and Hollywood. Most respondents, including the older ones who were critical of call centre youth culture, noted that what Indian society denounced as ‘westernization’ was, as AS notes, the imitation of a particular “perception of the American lifestyle, [which comes from] the way the American culture is portrayed, either on media, or the way people are speaking about it or gossiping about it.” Some respondents, such as AS here, admit to having entertained such perceptions at one time, and believe that their job allowed them to contact real people who could dispel these illusions:

I thought Hollywood was all America until I got a few [colleagues,] who stayed with me for more than a month. They were from the US and they told me a lot of stuff, they said ‘All that’s crap. This is the real America.’ So, it makes a lot of difference, you know?

There were other aspects of ‘western culture’ that were common among respondents. Many cited the importance of “fairness,” which they felt was lacking in
Indian culture. Sally, AS, CS and a few others mentioned “thoroughness,” which they set in opposition to the “negligence” of Indians.

When it came to talking about Indian culture, most respondents mentioned the importance of traditions and values, especially the primacy of the family. This includes duties and obligations, deferential respect for elders, and the importance of spirituality. While respondents acknowledged these elements as positive, there was a common complaint about what “Indians don’t realize,” and this had to do with the claim that several problems endemic in Indian society have deep roots in Indian culture and traditions. Key examples here mentioned by several respondents are: autocratic superior-subordinate relationships, a lack of respect for persons in lower positions, lack of dignity of labour, incessant need to please superiors, tendency to curry favours with or suck up to people in powerful positions, lack of respect for ethical standards, and lack of collective/civic commitment (e.g., unions). Most respondents believed that Indians needed to develop these values. There were also a few curious stereotypes shared by many respondents, for example the idea that any action could result in a lawsuit. Another common idea of the Western lifestyle was something like what Ajay mentions here:

Every American has a minimum of 8 credit cards, and let’s not talk about the debit cards. If they have to pay the credit cards they swipe one and they pay that out, and it if they have to pay this one they swipe this and pay the other. When time comes, they will pay the company within the 30-day period. That’s the way they manage their finance.

And strange perceptions are by no means limited to those who have no exposure to the West. Here’s a rather strange quotation from Tarun, who talks about how Indian immigrants, because they have a strong sense of family, are much more successful in life than, for example, the typical Canadian:

You get a whole [Indian] family of sons staying under a roof: a mother, father, sons, everybody, okay? Canadians: the moment they’re 18 they try to venture out on their own; they try to mortgage a house; end up paying for it for their whole life. Here, you have 5 families staying under one roof, okay? Probably a decent-sized mansion. Within six months, everyone’s income is enough to buy the house out; they buy it. And they go on to the next. By the time they’re like 3 years down the line they’ve acquired their 2nd house, their 3rd house, 4th house. Now the father’s got his own house, the son’s got, the grandparents have got their own house. By the time they finish about 10 years, they own 6 houses! I’m talking fairly sizeable houses here! And what has the Canadian got? He’s still paying his mortgage on his first house! So he’s pissed off! What the hell, yeah? It’s...it’s
petty but then, they wouldn't take the whole in-laws and everyone under the house. I mean, no one's... cuz the question of sharing also is not there! The kids are not gonna pump in money so that the parents can buy a house, and the parents are not gonna contribute their thing so that the kids can buy their house. It's cultural differences. But, the same guys start at the same time; they get pissed off. You're 18 and you finish college; the same Indian guy's come from India with a Sikh family; he's finished college. Right now, ah, he's staying in a little shanty one-bedroom apartment with his family and then you take out a mortgage—Canadian—and you say, "I've got a little house that's fantastic here." You finish paying up probably 1/8th of it by the time you're 25 or whatever; you finish paying off about 1/8th of it. And here this Indian guy who started off with you, he's got 4 houses!

This long polemical rant from an Indian who has lived a fair chunk of his life in the West is worth quoting because we get a sense here of the primacy of the family for Indians, which in their self-image often becomes a point of superiority over the West.

Differences: Respondents were appreciative and critical of India and the West to different degrees. Some, such as KR, were unabashedly patriotic, boasting of the greatness of India. Even while some others such as Sally, AS and CS were more critical in their view of Indian society, none of them expressed any sense of being ashamed or embarrassed at being Indian. For example, Girish, Nikhila and CH, who would be criticized for having become 'spoiled' or 'westernized', would refuse to modify their Indian accents.

Tarun, despite being the most vocal critic of the 'Indian style of management,' speaks in most detail about the positive elements of Indian society, though his discourse here is geared towards explaining India's potential for success in the global economy. He feels that Indians have a talent for the service industry, since they are generally subservient, accommodating, polite, hospitable, and diplomatic. Like many of my respondents and informants, he believes that Indians work harder than westerners, don't say 'no' to requests, and have stronger family values and better education than Americans. He thinks the outsourcing of call centres to India makes good economic sense—he would do it himself if he could—and feels that the social stigma will fade away in time. He also believes that the sense of family and responsibility is deeply engrained in Indian employees, and will eventually kick in as they mature. Thus he is optimistic about the future of global capitalism in India in a way that others (Sally, Girish, Nikhila, CH, AS, CS) are not. These others believe that the rampant poverty of
the country is responsible for its spirit of self-seeking and corruption, found especially in the government, and they don’t see much hope for improvement there. They also criticize the country’s inferiority complex towards the west, the incessant need to please superiors in a servile manner, and the hypocrisy of wanting western goods and structures while rejecting the values upon which they are based (such as dignity of labour, equality of individuals, etc.). AS describes this schizophrenic attitude of modern Indians well:

Indians have the colloquial spirit so imbued in them that they always want to look outside. Anything new is, “wow, it’s nice, it’s good”. But at the same time when the colloquial spirit is kindled within them saying that, “What are you trying to do? You’re trying to look at something that is outside?” Then we say like, “My God no, let’s get back now, let’s be where we are.” You know? So they are trapped in between these two thought patterns, neither able to go in front, not able to sit back. So I sit in-between. And now I start a generation which is in-between. We’re born out of a kind of “Oh my God, what to do, we’re kinda nowhere!”

The above quotation does indeed evidence a kind of identity tension, but not the sort typically painted by the ‘convergence’ or ‘clash’ narratives. Rather, I would argue that it is an attempt to make sense of new hybrid realities given a whole new world of choices and opportunities, along with the fear that one could lose oneself in this process.

5.1.5. Summary

We have looked thus far at the main themes which emerged from the narratives of respondents. Several of these themes resonate well with observations made by previous studies on the labour process, specifically the difficulty with night-shifts; the monotonous, scripted work; insufficient breaks; health problems; constant surveillance; difficult and sometimes-abusive customers; attempts to create ‘fun’ training programs and workplaces; and the reluctance to unionize.

However, as we have seen above, there were also several discoveries in this study which touch on elements of this phenomenon which have gone mostly unnoticed: 1. A concern about the future of the BPO industry in the wake of emerging outsourcing markets such as the Philippines; 2. The generally high regard employees have towards captive rather than third-party companies, usually because of ‘professionalism’ and status/reputation; 3. The sense of usefulness many employees find in helping foreign customers (and this cultural interaction being seemingly more attractive and enthralling.
for those of lower-middle class backgrounds); 4. The tendency in some companies to leave Indian call centre workers to handle customer complaints about problems beyond their capacity (e.g., product delivery failures in the home country); 5. The nearly-unanimous criticism of local Indian management due to power-abuse (humiliation, exploitation, harassment), corruption (stealing company products and employees' commissions; deceiving parent company), sycophancy, negligence, and lack of training; 6. The high regard held for foreign managers and a 'western' style of management, consisting primarily of 'professionalism' (discouraging sycophancy/communalism, respecting subordinates, and the value of labour and merit); 7. Pervasive mistrust of colleagues in an environment of competitiveness and self-preservation (a possible basis for the reluctance to unionize); 8. Duty to family as a pervasive rationale for the pursuit of call centre jobs (which can ironically result in relational problems); 9. The opportunity of an 'upgraded' lifestyle can foster consumerism and unmanageable debt (encouraged by local credit-card companies which target call centre workers); 10. Positive 'personality improvements,' particularly, "self-confidence" and "assertiveness"; 11. Employees' construction of 'East' and 'West,' with the attempt to assert the superiority of family values and industriousness in India, while aspiring to the professionalism and 'thoroughness' of the West.

Overall, we see that these employees try to justify the BPO / call centre phenomenon as a good thing, and to defend themselves against criticisms of irresponsibility and westernization. In the next section, we will examine their justifications and criticisms in more detail, and try to grasp the underlying ideals and logics drawn upon in this process.
5.2. Analysis of Evaluations: The ‘Economies of Worth’ model

In this section we will analyze the content of employee narratives using the six ‘worlds’ or ‘logics’ of the Boltanski and Thévenot’s (1991, 2006) model, which can help us grasp important elements of the underlying dynamic of values in the Indian call centre phenomenon. I will stick to their 2006 English translation of On Justification (pp.159-211), and will retain the italics from the original, even though this looks rather clumsy at times, because this can help us validate the relevance of at least some of their terminology in the Indian context. The more significant terms in these six logics (Domestic, Industrial, Opinion, Market, Inspiration and Civic) are underlined, and also reflect the coding categories (Free Nodes in NVivo) that I used here, which resonate with Boltanski and Thévenot’s theory. There are, as expected, some differences between the contents of these logics in the original model and the Indian call centre context.

While this model can help us make distinctions in the discourse between different logics and ideals, it cannot tell us anything about the cultural sources of these ideals in different cultures (which, of course, was not the intention of these authors or their model). So in this section we will only examine the contents of these ‘worlds,’ and leave the question of their possible roots or sources to address later.

5.2.1. Domestic logic

Of the six different ‘worlds’ put forth by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) in their Economies of Worth model, the one that is predominant in the Indian call centre context is the domestic world. It seems to form the basis of many of the tensions and arguments around the call centre phenomenon, at least in the narratives of my respondents. The domestic logic is based in the sphere of the family, though it is not confined to family ties. Rather, this logic has to do with “personal relationships,” such that the worth of persons and objects is based on a hierarchical order.

---

83 The authors do not make a clear distinction between the concepts of ‘world’ and ‘logic.’ While it is only the former concept that receives explicit theoretical treatment, it often appears that the two are used interchangeably.
Boltanski and Thévenot explain: “It is through reference to generation, tradition, and hierarchy that order can be established among beings of a domestic nature” (p.164). The person who is “less worthy” is in a “bond of personal dependence” with a “superior”—always constructed in the image of the father, whose state of worth is highest because he is the incarnation of the tradition.” What their model presents essentially is the logic of what is held up as worthy or unworthy at level of ideals. In the Indian call centre context, however, there are norms and practices which are considered commonplace and pervasive, but are criticized by subordinates. Thus, it appears that the ideal they aspire to is similar, i.e., benevolent rather than capricious paternalism; arguably, the former can be considered a ‘desirable’ form and the latter a ‘debased’ form of the same ideal. Table 5.2 lists some of the similarities between the ‘domestic logic’ of Boltanski and Thévenot’s account and the context of Indian call centres, as well as certain particularities of the latter case.

**Table 5.2: The Domestic Logic in Indian Call Centres**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Particularities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of “generation, tradition and hierarchy”</td>
<td>Punctuality follows an industrial (efficiency-based) rather than domestic (politesse-based) logic here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependence on superior</td>
<td>Poise, bearing and predisposition are not as important as adherence to duties and tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior in the image of father, incarnates tradition</td>
<td>Separation of professional duty and family ties is encouraged as an ideal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinates seek superior’s approval and appreciation</td>
<td>Practices:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with intimates = thoughtful and attentive; with superiors = cordial</td>
<td>Superior tend not to give “positive feedback” or to express affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with superiors: deference; with subordinates: benevolence, wisdom, inspire trust</td>
<td>Obsequiousness / flattery is pervasive and considered normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of good habits and keeping good company</td>
<td>It is common to seek closeness to superiors for opportunistic purposes (though criticised)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranks and titles are important; one seeks to rise in rank</td>
<td>Those who rise in ranks tend to treat their new subordinates in a bossy manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primacy of duty; rejection of selfishness</td>
<td>Superior in general tend to be “distant, bossy, [and] humiliating”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of household roles and relations</td>
<td>‘Growing up’ and assuming responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Growing up’ and assuming responsibility</td>
<td>Women: should be modest, polite, not flashy or excessive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Dangers’: familiarity, envy, gossip, betrayal</td>
<td>‘Dangers’: familiarity, envy, gossip, betrayal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

84 Louis Dumont’s (1966) famous analysis on the Indian caste system and its implications centralizes the notion of hierarchy. Addressing the nuances of his approach or the myriad debates surrounding it are beyond the scope of this study.

85 The terms in this column are from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 164-178)
There is indeed ample evidence for this sort of ‘paternalistic’ order in Indian organizations. In this ‘world,’ there is very clear delineation between superior and subordinate, and the distinction is made felt. One is to listen to the superior without question; obedience and submissiveness are considered more admirable than ‘doing one’s own thing’ or self-assertiveness. This appears to be a consistent characteristic of the Indian ethos of management.\(^\text{86}\) My respondents confirm this element, although they don’t subscribe to it themselves. Tarun, Girish, Nikhila and CH note Indians as being generally “submissive,” “subservient,” and “obedient.” Girish and Nikhila are critical of this attitude, because people consequently don’t “stand up for themselves” (a more ‘civic’ virtue).

Boltanski and Thévenot add that it is important in this domestic world for people to be appreciated and valued by their elders and superiors. This sort of appreciation or “distinction” accorded to a person or object is different from “fame” in that it relies on the superior’s preference for this person (2006: 166). Sally is critical of this need of Indians to “always […] have to please, please, please someone.” There is an additional difference in the Indian context: while the subordinate should seek the superior’s approval, the latter’s preference is rarely manifested as ‘positive feedback’. Rather, what superiors express is disapproval; what is unsaid is to be considered an affirmation.\(^\text{87}\) This understanding, however, seems to be lost on my respondents, who find it a problem that their superiors don’t have the courtesy to affirm or thank them. KR, for example, argues that he would appreciate at least a “please” or a “thank you” from his boss when the latter asks him to stay overtime.

Boltanski and Thévenot mention the importance of punctuality, which in their case is seen as “the politeness of kings” (p.166). In the Indian context, however, the value

---

\(^\text{86}\) An example Negandhi and Prasad cite is of an Indian executive with a doctorate from a prestigious American university: “What is most important for me and my department is not what I do or achieve for the company, but whether the Master’s (i.e., an owner of the firm) favour is bestowed on me… This I have achieved by saying ‘yes’ to everything the Master says or does… To contradict him is to look for another job… I left my freedom of thought in Boston” (1971, cited in Hofstede 2001: 128).

\(^\text{87}\) Roland (2002) cites an example of such misunderstanding in a Vedanta center in the US when American monks were concerned that the Swami never thanked them, despite their reverence for him and all they did for him. Roland notes that “for the swami to thank them, he would experience it as being insulting to them. In insider, familial relationships such as those in the center, it is assumed that you are appreciative of what is done for you, and this is conveyed nonverbally. You only thank outsiders” (2002 n27).
of punctuality does not seem linked to the domestic realm, and seems closer to an industrial logic of ‘professionalism.’ The industrial realm also fuses with the domestic in the context of Indian call centres when it comes to positions, titles, and rising in ranks (p.170), by taking the form of academic credentials or qualifications: “the tag: [Ajay], graduate.” Ajay clearly suffers as a result of lacking “qualifications” (industrial), which prevent him from rising in the hierarchy (domestic). He complains about his colleagues who “don’t understand that without a degree, they can’t get anything […] They grow laterally, they don’t grow vertically.”

Boltanski and Thévenot also note that the domestic logic also works differently depending upon who the parties in the relationship are. When it is between “intimates,” then “thoughtfulness,” “attention,” and “propriety” are expected; towards visitors, it is “cordiality” (p.166). This is something Ajay likes about many of the American customers he speaks to: they are “familiar rather than friendly,” and “very appreciative.”

In terms of relationships with one’s superiors, Boltanski and Thévenot note that what is expected is “deference,” which “does not imply obsequiousness, opportunism, or flattery” (p.166). Here, however, there are ambiguities in India, where approval-seeking becomes sycophancy and flattery—“licking boots”, as NG puts it—with opportunistic motives, such as ‘rising in the ranks.’ And this too would be usually justified in the name of one’s duty to one’s own family. Also, according to Boltanski and Thévenot, “less worthy persons ‘avoid familiarity with their hierarchical superior, even if they know him personally, especially in front of third parties, and they are equally reserved if the superior is a relative’” (p.166). Here as well the Indian logic is ambiguous, in the sense that it is considered normal to use one’s “influence”—relatives especially are supposed to exhibit ‘loyalty’ to their own—and employees exhibit a degree of pride if they manage to become close to the boss, perhaps a sign of the latter’s ‘preference.’ This confluence of sycophancy, opportunism and familiarity is expressed in the Hindi slang term chamchaagiri, which, though criticised, is to be expected everywhere.

As for a superior’s relationship towards a subordinate, the former are to inspire “trust”, to be “informed,” “wise,” and “benevolent,” according to Boltanski and Thévenot (p.166). Most of my respondents complain about the absence of such qualities in their Indian managers, and rather, seem to find them in some of their western managers. Tarun
mentions his bosses in the UK who “took the flack for [him]” when he did something wrong; these managers, in face of their own bosses, would take responsibility for their subordinates and only reprimand them in private, rather than “humiliate people in public” as his Indian bosses did. For Tarun, this inspired “loyalty” and “trust.” Similarly, another respondent AS gives an example of an American manager who invited him to an important meeting, and encouraged him to contribute his suggestions, even though he was only a lowly customer-service rep. Boltanski and Thévenot domestic world considers unworthy those who are “distant, bossy, [and] humiliating” (p.167), but this is the description of Indian bosses that comes across from my respondents. The solution Tarun proposes is to send them to other countries so that they can learn non-authoritarian behaviours from other cultures. Several other respondents similarly insist that their managers should be trained in relational skills.

Boltanski and Thévenot also note that in this logic, it is considered “despicable” when “the person who, moving up to a higher station, behaves disagreeably with his subordinates on the pretext that he is now the boss. This is where upbringing shows its full value” (pp.166-167). Again here, respondents such as Tarun, Girish, Nikhila, CH and NG argue that it is natural for a person to emulate what is taught them, and the ‘benevolence’ idealized by the domestic logic is rarely to be found. The sort of ‘upbringing’ that Tarun, Girish, AS and CS refer to when making this criticism is their experience of foreign managers who have treated them well. Ajay, Nikhila, Sally and NG argue that this basic decency in dealing with people should be taught by families.

Good habits play an important role in the domestic world, though in our particular Indian case this does not relate much to Boltanski and Thévenot’s emphasis on notions of “poise,” “bearing,” and “disposition” (p.167). In the Indian context, the importance seems to be given to fidelity to tradition. Girish’s and CH’s parents, for example, reprimand them on wasting their time and money hanging out in coffee shops when they could just as well have coffee with the family at home. Additionally, smoking, drinking, partying and drugs are seen by the media, parents, older employees (Sally, NG, MA and CA) and even many of the young (Julie, OF, CS, AS) as bad habits which morally corrupt the Indian youth. While Sally and NG bemoan the fact that traditional values are “being lost,” several other respondents think that these habits wear off as kids “grow up”
and assume “responsibility.” Sally, Julie, CS, OF and AS see it as a mark of character not to succumb to peer-pressure, and several others attest that they have grown in patience and perseverance.

Boltanski and Thévenot point out that household relations—the sphere of the family itself—is important (p.168), and this is reflected consistently across my respondents. Many respondents repeatedly brought up the idea of how important the family is to Indians, especially compared westerners. At the same time, they are also critical of the sort master-slave dynamic that this can morph into in organizations, where superiors need to portray the image of being the ‘head,’ always in control, never to be questioned or criticized, and needing to constantly keep employees in their place. As Sally retorted: “I can’t keep acting like an idiot to please them! When you are not an idiot why should you act like one?”

Nonetheless, the family holds a primacy: there is great value accorded to doing things for the family, and making sacrifices for their sake. This is seen as the most legitimate ideal in Indian society, and is difficult to call into question, even when the means through which this ideal is pursued might be inappropriate. Boltanski and Thévenot note that the principal “investment” in this world is the “rejection of all selfishness”; worthiness relates to “duties” (p.171). This is evident in the call centre situation where despite the hardships suffered by employees, there is a glaring paucity of a rights-discourse (Girish and Nikhila being notable exceptions), and a much stronger domestic duty-discourse. Indeed, for most respondents, the decision to take up a call centre job had to do with wanting to improve the lot of their families.

Another important element of the domestic realm is the role of women. In this logic, there is a sense that girls should not be “uninhibited, impolite, familiar, excessive,” and should “avoid excessive makeup, flashy jewellery and glaring colors” (p.176). This echoes the criticisms of the “westernization” of girls in call centres. What is implied here is primarily immodesty: Julie criticizes “plunging necklines;” Ajay finds girls’ fashions today being too “short! Everything is short! You don’t get in the market these days that are long!” Others mention that it has become commonplace for girls to wear traditional, conservative attire to work, but once in the office, would change into outfits that their
families would never approve of. Girls are also criticized for smoking, which is considered inappropriate behaviour for a woman.

Yet another aspect of this world is the logic of gift-giving, which includes being grateful and thanking people (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006:169). In the case of Indian call centres, most employees express how important it is when their customers express their thanks; according to Julie, Ajay, Girish, Nikhil, AS and KR, there are as many “sweet” customers that they deal with as “nasty” ones. This logic of gifts can be twisted as well: when managers allow employees to take a day off or have a longer break, they treat this as a favour which the employee has to return, usually through overtime work, or coming in to work on a holiday. As Ajay puts it, “[managers] highlight these points: ‘I gave you an off that day, remember? So now I’m asking you for a favour and, come on...’” Even several of the contributions that respondents say call centres have made to India fall into a domestic logic. Ajay notes that the industry has taught people to maintain “clean” workplaces, while ordinarily, “Indians are used to dirty[ing] the place.” Similarly, a few other respondents such as AS and NG think that call centres have taught Indians “a little bit more courtesy.” NG notes that customer service on the phone in India has always been very blunt (perhaps he is calling to mind here his dealings with bureaucrats?): “This was not there before—‘Good afternoon,’ ‘How are you?’, ‘Have a nice day’—I mean, Indians never used to say this before.”

Boltanski and Thévenot also stress the importance of “good company” in this logic (p.172). This plays a role in call centre employees’ evaluations of their colleagues. KR speaks about how drug abuse spreads in call centres when some employees “are rarely with the good people” and “work with the wrong people.” Ajay admits having gotten into “bad company” for a while, and expresses the regret that his parents were not around to guide and nurture him when he needed them; he insists that it is their role to “carry the tradition” and “teach it” to their children, who would otherwise be easily led astray. OF, who considers himself as having been brought up with strong values, stays away from his colleagues whom he finds to be a bad influence because they are into “parties” which presumably involve alcohol and drugs. He, as a result, feels ostracised for not participating in their activities.
One point that Boltanski and Thévenot contend about this logic is that "professional life cannot be separated from family life," since "[t]here is so much interdependence between professional life and family life that problems arising in the workplace have their repercussions at home and vice versa" (p.175). In the Indian call centre context, on one hand, employees admit that work affects one’s family life, but on the other hand, they insist on the principle of the personal/professional split. For example, Ajay, Nikhila, Julie and NG talk about how their frustration and irritability due to work spills over into their relationships with their families:

Nikhila: “If I came home and my mom was like, ‘How was work?’ I’d be like ‘Screw you, I don’t wanna talk about work. Don’t ever ask me about work!’;

NG: “If you are not getting enough of sleep, you are prone to be very irritable. Tempers are high… you are like a walking zombie!”

Many of them also insist that work and family should be separate realms. Tarun, for example, insists that “as a matter of principle I generally don’t allow my professional life to influence my private life.” It bothers him that he has “no other choice” but to bond with his colleagues from work. While he adheres to this principle in the name of “professionalism,” Nikhila expresses a different rationale:

[Y]ou just make friends at work and you’re friends at ‘work’ and you just stay as ‘work’ [...] I just leave them where they are; I don’t make them part of my friends’ circle. They’re just office colleagues and that’s how I look at them. That’s the best way to be, trust me, cuz [...]otherwise] it just gets out of hand.

Her explanation here is similar to Ajay’s: the inability to trust colleagues who would take advantage of any vulnerability that you expose to them, and use it to get close to managers. As a result, he maintains a strong split:

I don’t trust anybody that I work with. Because you never know what will happen. See I don’t want to fail, and I also don’t want others to fail me. It’s not my intention. Just to be on the safe side I go do my job and hi and bye to everybody and just 2-3 jokes to everyone; he laughs, I laugh, then we go.88

This echoes the warning issued in Boltanski and Thévenot’s description of this logic: “Don’t trust familiarity and confidences. Be aware that the person in whom you have confided may be your subordinate or your superior tomorrow” (p.177). Nikhila

---

88 This attitude of low informal trust is mentioned by Richard Sennett (2006:68) as an “organizational deficit” which is becoming increasingly visible in the low-security, high-competition environments in the west.
echoes this sentiment in reference to her opportunistic colleagues: “They’re gonna go back and crib to my team-leader saying, this is what she did, she was on the phone to someone, she was telling someone she likes them, lala... it gets reported! It’s like a soap opera, it’s terrible! It’s like The Bold and the Beautiful with all the rivalry!” These are elements which, according to Boltanski and Thévenot, signal the ‘fall’ of the domestic world: the betrayal of trust (p.178), and the “malicious gossip” (p.177) that Ajay was a victim of. Flattery, treachery and gossip indicate domestic deterioration (p.176).

And yet, despite the ‘corruptions’ of this ideal that seem to be quite common in the call centre environment, it is clear that what these employees fundamentally aspire to is a restoration of this world. We see this clearly in the case of Girish and Nikhila when they speak fondly of the environment at CAP1, where they worked “like a family basically,” in contrast to their experience in their previous companies. KR describes how he thinks a manager should behave: “The things which can be done by giving an order, just by a simple request it can be done. ‘Come, please work on this day. Then I’ll be really happy.’ Like a friend, simple as that! [...] like family, simple as that!” And when an employee isn’t doing well, instead of public humiliation, he would like to advise his managers: “take him to a separate room [and say]: ‘It’s for the good of the company, for your growth, if you want a future like this in the company’, explain him in such a way. Almost 90% of Indians, if you speak to them in a very sentimental way, they will understand.”89 Curiously, many employees look to the Industrial world and to Western managers to provide the antidote to the domestic malady. The ideal upheld, then, looks to be a hybrid of the domestic and the industrial. As Nikhila puts it:

With these [foreign] managers, their job title is forgotten over the weekend. They don’t care if they’re managing directors or CEOs; these people would come down and have a drink with us. [...] [A]t work, we’re professional people—we work our asses off—but as soon as [work is done], we’re not colleagues anymore, we’re friends. So there’s no hesitation calling and saying, you guys wanna get a beer? We’re all together [...] like a family!

Yet even here, not all employees would be in agreement. Sally voices her concern at the lack of integrity and consistency in such behaviour, found in the dualism of managers who are “very strict during work hours and after that they just let loose.” What

---

89 This resonates with Kumar and Sethi’s (2005: 70) observations about organizational commitment among Indians: “the commitment shown by the Indian employee is personal rather than organizational. It is also more affective than instrumental.”
people such as Sally hearken to is perhaps a more ‘pure’ image of the wise, kind and benevolent leader—“wisdom” being Sally’s own preoccupation—who also embody the ideal in Boltanski and Thévenot’s model. All these qualities seem to find their home in what Sinha (1980) called the “nurturant task leader”, which he proposed as a model of leadership that would work well in the Indian context. This mode of leadership would involve attentiveness to both the familial (domestic) as well as the performance (industrial) elements rather than either purely autocratic or democratic forms of leadership (Kanungo and Mishra :326-327).

5.2.2. Industrial logic

The industrial world in Boltanski and Thévenot’s model is based on the logic of “technological objects and scientific methods” (p.203). Almost by definition, this world is ‘modern’. In this logic, one’s worth depends upon measures of “efficiency,” “performance,” “productivity” (p.204) and “output” (p.207). In the call centre context, this is the dominant language of work: ‘inbound’ or ‘outbound’ ‘processes,’ ‘protocols,’ ‘service-level agreements (SLAs),’ ‘average handling time (AHT),’ ‘targets,’ ‘metrics,’ and other such terminology. The attribution of worth is evident in statements such as Ajay’s: “in a call centre, everything is about numbers.” One’s survival depends upon one’s “metrics.” Yet, in the assessment of call centre employees, this logic often operates more at the level of talk than practice. Table 5.3 below compares the Industrial logic in the original model with our context.

**Table 5.3: The Industrial Logic in Indian Call Centres**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities(^{90})</th>
<th>Particularities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of efficiency, performance, productivity</td>
<td>Difference in the meaning of being ‘professional’: has to do less with functional efficiency and more with respect for subordinates and honouring dues and contracts (Domestic and possibly Civic logics).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on ‘metrics’ and results</td>
<td>Certain rationalistic performance measures come across as effectively irrational.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tension between efficiency and quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merit-based reward</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primacy of ‘qualifications’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of proper ‘functioning’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worth lies in functionality, predictability and reliability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unworthiness consists in inefficiency, or being unproductive, unemployed, unqualified, unsuited</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{90}\) The terms used here are from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 203-211)
Interestingly enough, call centre employees often use an industrial logic to criticize their work practices. Sally and several others speak of the Average Handling Time constraint—itself an industrial metric to maximize efficiency—as being "counter-productive," because it puts a pressure on the employee to get through the call as quickly as possible, which in turn leads them to treat 'slower' customers rudely, and also decreases the 'quality' of call handling. Several respondents complain that their company does not hire enough employees; as a result, waiting times for customers are quite long, which aggravates them further against the company. Additionally, respondents such as Ajay, AS, KR and NG note the pressure to 'up-sell' (a Market ideal). For Ajay and NG, the company's persistent failure to deliver goods on time makes it nearly impossible for them to meet their required 'performance targets.' Several employees also complain that varying shift-schedules are unhelpful (except in sales operations with 'hot' and 'cold' shifts) and only serve to reduce their motivation and performance.

All of my respondents also stressed the importance of compensation for their performance, specifically the desire to be rewarded purely on "merit," rather than (domestic) seniority or one's (opinion-based) influence on the manager. Tarun, for example, criticises the traditional preference for 'loyalty' using an industrial logic:

[Promotions in India are] still based on seniority. And the guys on the top might be grossly inefficient. But, loyalty states that hey, the guy's been with the company for the last 10 years, how can we sack him that's...Whereas, anywhere else in the world, inefficiency is frowned upon and if you're not good, you're not good; you're sacked!

This seems to be a reaction against the 'unfairness' (a civic virtue) of there not being fixed, universal criteria for distributing rewards that cannot be manipulated by currying the boss' favour. Girish, Nikhila and CH insist that middle-managers should be eliminated altogether; in their opinion, these managers claim to carry out various cost-cutting measures, but engage in unethical negotiations that in fact increase inefficiencies.

However, there are also problems within this logic. While some companies do have stable performance metrics, these can be composed of factors which are out of the employee's control. E.g., AHT and up-selling serve as performance metrics, when in fact the call handled by the employee is an angry complaint about a product that was not delivered by an external shipping company. Such metrics may fit well into a rationalized system, but in these cases they become effectively irrational. Thus the assessment of
efficiency and ‘proper functioning’ (p.205) of a system looks very different from the employee’s point-of-view. Curiously enough, respondents complain that their local managers, by entertaining practices such as sycophancy, hinder the ‘efficiency’ of the company.

The authors note that ‘worth’ in this world lies in functionality, predictability, and reliability; conversely, unworthiness lies in being unproductive, not working much, or being unemployed, inefficient, unmotivated, unqualified, or unsuited to the job (2006:205). Such discourse is pervasive in call centres, and is even reflected in some respondents’ critique of their co-workers (e.g., Julie, AS and CS mentioned that they were much more productive than many of their colleagues).

‘Qualifications’ matter a great deal in the industrial logic. Respondents insisted that while in the west, performance and merit are sufficient qualifications for better positions, in India one’s formal degree and credentials are of supreme importance, and limited how far one could go in the organization. Organizational structures and hierarchies matter here as well (2006:206), and respondents in most companies mentioned the numerous intermediary levels through which a person could get promoted. In the captive firm where Ajay and AS worked, a customer care agent had to climb 3 levels before becoming a Team Leader, then an additional 3 levels before becoming Area Manager, and an additional 3 levels to Operations Manager for India.

The notions of “progress” and “development”, the “price of efforts,” the interrelationship between “time and money”, the importance of “profitability” (2006: 208), which overlap with the Market logic, all feature prominently in the discourse as things that matter to managers as well as employees. “Control” is another notion which is important in the industrial world and is connected to a sense of “responsibility” (p.209), which is different from the domestic kind: control and responsibility here is about assuring results more than a matter of authority or position. Respondents seem to express a preference for this ‘objective’ element, seemingly out of frustration with domestic corruptions. The notion of being “professional”, which these authors mention here (2006: 206), comes up a lot in my interviews and is a value aspired to by most respondents, although not many of them are able to offer a consistent articulation of what they mean by this. However, this notion seems less related to an industrial logic of functional
efficiency than to subordinates’ desire to be treated with respect, to not be discriminated against (due to communalism or managers’ preferences) and to be paid what is owed to them on time.

A more current aspect of the industrial realm is “automatization” (p.210), which is a fear that some employees express with the increasing popularity of automated voice recognition. However, this only seems to be a natural extension of the scripting and routinizing that is characteristic of the industrial world. Sally makes an interesting point that Indians have a penchant for routinization and scripting, perhaps due to the traditional importance of memorization. Sally criticizes this as a sort of laziness which inhibits people from having to think and make judgments of their own. As a result, it seems to feed into what Boltanski and Thévenot call the “fall” of the industrial world (p.211), which is the tendency to treat “people as things”.

5.2.3. Logic of Opinion

This logic features very strongly in my respondents’ discourse, and seems indicative of values which are important for Indians. In many instances it ties in to the Domestic logic.

For Boltanski and Thévenot, this is the ‘world of fame’, where ‘worth’ comes “exclusively from the opinion of others”. Entities (persons and things), therefore, are “not qualified by properties inscribed in [their] being in a natural way” (2006:178). What really matters is “the opinion of others”, this is what the worth of a person or thing depends on; “public opinion determine[s] success” (2006:179). This emphasis on the opinion of others is rather central in Indian society, not just as a kind of vanity—which may sometimes be the case—but as a responsibility. One ‘should’ be well thought-of by others, especially others that ‘count’, such as elders and authorities. In this sense it ties in to the Domestic world.

Table 5.4 on the following page summarizes the logic of Opinion in the western and Indian contexts.
Table 5.4: The Logic of Opinion in Indian Call Centres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Particularities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What matters most is the good opinion of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Seeking recognition, attention, status and respect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Importance of brand name, image, and reputation, which can be tarnished by 'rumors' and bad press</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need to hook, attract and persuade customers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respect for 'big names' and 'celebrities'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unworthiness consists in being forgotten, or falling into ill repute</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Qualifications (industrial) matter a great deal for recognition and respect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reputation and opinion matters not only for oneself but also the 'good name' of the family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There is no mention of several elements from Boltanski and Thévenot's model: gaining fans, visibility, sensitization, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this world, these authors argue, "[f]ame establishes worth": people have to "distinguish themselves," be "visible, famous, recognized", and need the "respect" of others (2006:179). In the context of my respondents, 'fame' as such is not as important as respect and recognition. For several of my respondents, this logic plays an important role in how employees conduct themselves in the workplace, especially as they strive against what they consider 'competition' (here the market logic comes into play) for their managers' attention, and to be recognized in a way that distinguishes them from their peers. There are more formal means of recognition in the workplace, such as promotions, or more informal, such as being commended, or being recognized as "the top seller." In the workplace, we see that sycophancy and 'sucking up' are means often used by employees to gain the favour of their managers. But even employees such as Tarun and AS who eschew sycophancy, seem to think it important to be "recognized by others, to attract their attention, to convince them, to obtain respect from them, to earn or win their support" (2006:184).

What is also important here is a person's "role," in the sense of the status and respect accorded to him or her, and here a person's "badge" becomes a sign of status (2006:179). In India this is literally the case, where people working in these new IT or BPO organizations often wear their ID cards with pride, as a sign which proclaims them as members of a stable-income salaried profession (although they are also mocked by, e.g., college students, on precisely this account).

---

91 The terms used here are from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 178-185)
Furthermore, a company’s “brand-name” and “image” comes into play here, and foreign multinationals such as IBM or Dell are seen in very high regard. We see in most respondents the desire to put this highly-valued brand name on their résumé, even if it means having to work what they consider a horrible job, because it is worth the payoff in the long run. Related to the image of the company is the “atmosphere in relation to the message that the company wants to transmit” (p. 183). Employees talk about the impressive infrastructure that characterizes most call centres—western-style glass-paneled buildings with air conditioning and state-of-the-art technology—which wows not only aspiring employees but also potential foreign clients. In fact, when some third-party companies aren’t able to afford such infrastructure, this almost unfailingly becomes the object of employees’ criticism, since there is a general expectation that these foreign processes are well-funded (Ajay, Girish, Nikhila, CH, CS, KR and OF all raised the question of whether the lack of resources stems from corruption).

In addition to working for a ‘reputed’ branded company, it is something significant for most respondents that they are considered the ‘face’ of this multinational company to the customer (a curious analogy, since the customer will never really ‘see’ them, but their voice, personality, and attitude represent the company to the customer. Respondents such as Tarun, Ajay, PE, AS, KR, FR and CS considered this very important. As employees try to convince their customers to buy company products, efforts to “hook”, “attract” or “persuade, reach, interest […] or seduce” (p. 182) come into play. Then there is the importance of credentials. In India, there is a great deal of emphasis on a person’s college degree; as Ajay tells us: “I need to have the tag: ‘[Ajay], graduate’”. Another characteristic of this world here is the mention of “big names”: Michael Dell, Bill Gates, Narayana Murthy (the founder of Infosys), and Premji (founder of Wipro) were mentioned by several respondents, and in very positive light. Similarly, “celebrities” such as movie stars and pop stars were mentioned from time to time (e.g., criticism of people who try to dress like Britney Spears).

Other characters in this world include “journalists”, whom respondents believe have contributed to generating a negative “public opinion” (p. 180) on call centres.

---

92 This resonates with Das (2000)’s observation that these entrepreneurial giants are heroes for the new generation of Indians.
Boltanski and Thévenot's mention of the importance of "the press" and of "rumors" (p. 184) features here. Many respondents felt that the newspaper reports were exaggerated, and only gives the industry a bad reputation. We have seen that a good part of the critique of call centres is about 'westernization', particularly in relation to "fashion" (p.184): fads for western clothing, movies, music, and accents. The 'fake accent', Girish and Tarun note, is often adopted in order to gain popularity. In recent times, however, this seems to have lost its initial appeal, and seems to be now looked down upon, and even garners one a negative reputation.

Certain aspects characteristic of this world in Boltanski and Thévenot's model are not all that salient in the call centre context (p.182): there is no mention of "celebrity", or the need for an individual to "gain a following (fans) or a reputation". The need to "sensitize, mobilize [and] inform" (p. 182) is expressed not by employees but by social activists I spoke to, who are interested in raising awareness, among parents and in schools, of the problems associated with the call centre lifestyle; they are concerned with developing a "communications network", but this might be driven more by a Civic logic. The only need to "convey information" which comes up in the case of employees is in companies where they feel their middle-managers are cheating them and the company, and that the foreign client or parent company should be told about this. At the same time, they are torn because they don't want foreign companies to develop a mistrust of India to the extent of withdrawing jobs from the country.

The 'fall' of this world is to be lost or forgotten (p. 185). This comes into play in several ways. First, there is the concern of the employee that he or she is not noticed by managers, and so doesn't stand a good chance to be promoted. Secondly, several employees also have a sense that the industry as a whole will 'fade away', as jobs will be pulled out of India toward other countries such as the Philippines. Alternatively, the media frenzy about BPO call centres can simply cool down or be "forgotten" and "disappear" from public concern. People such as Tarun see this as a good thing, because the negative public image especially of girls who work in call centres will disappear. On the other hand, Nikhila complains, so does the initial sense of status associated with working in this industry, since call centre jobs have become commonplace.
5.2.4. Market Logic

This logic, according to Boltanski and Thévenot, is not restricted to the "sphere of economic relations" (p. 193). In fact, they caution against "relating the market world to subjective desires expressed in consumer demands while relating the industrial world to objective constraints inscribed in the functions of production" (p. 194). Instead, what they consider the key to this logic is that "actions are motivated by the desires of individuals, which drive them to possess the same objects [, which are] rare goods whose ownership is inalienable."

Thus, the ordering principle is "competition" (p. 196); competition prevails between companies (even to the extent of 'poaching' trained employees from other companies) as well as between employees (vying for their managers' favour in order to 'move up the ladder'). Another way in which this features as an ideal is when the BPO call centre phenomenon is judged as good because it makes India more competitive in the global playing field; low-cost skilled English-speaking labour is seen as India's primary competitive advantage. Table 5.5 summarizes the Market logic in Indian call centres, presenting similarities with Boltanski and Thévenot's model as well as certain contextual particularities.

**Table 5.5: The Market Logic in Indian Call Centres**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Particularities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Centrality of competition, between companies and employees</td>
<td>• Certain cost-cutting measures decried as demeaning (domestic logic) or unfair (civic logic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pursuit of wealth, acquisition of consumer goods, luxury items.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opportunistic behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Importance of one's marketability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sales activities; cost-cutting rationale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 'Fall' of this world: enslavement to money</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Boltanski and Thévenot note that in this logic, "[w]orthy persons are rich [...] they live the high life. Their wealth allows them to own what others want, valuable objects, luxury items, upscale products" (p. 196). This is seen as good and valuable by several respondents (Girish, Nikhila, Julie, CS, DE, FR, TE, KR) but is criticized by some others (Sally, OF, NG, MA). For Boltanski and Thévenot, this logic is characterized

---

93 The terms used here are from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 193-203)
by the love of things, or more precisely, the desire to acquire things (p. 197). Girish, Nikhila and FR mentioned how the high salaries from call centre jobs afforded them a better lifestyle: more luxuries, more shopping, credit-card debt, etc., people working ‘just for the money’.

Not surprisingly, this consumerist lifestyle is heavily criticised by the older generation, who express a strong opposition to what they see here as materialism. They see this as an “enslavement to money”, which Boltanski and Thévenot in fact consider the “fall” of this world (p. 203). However, there are also strains of Indian tradition which support such materialism. As Boltanski and Thévenot put it, “[f]late” can be transformed into “good luck” if one can “exploit the situation opportunistically” and “take advantage of opportunities” (p. 198).

The Market logic is concerned with what is “desirable, salable, [and] marketable” (p. 199), which is not simply restricted to products, but incorporates persons as well—employees who want to be seen as ‘marketable’ in order to assure themselves of better jobs. As we have seen earlier, this ties in to the logic of Opinion: employees choose companies with an important consideration on what would look good on the résumé, and thus increase one’s ‘competitive advantage’.

In order to attain worthiness in this world, it is important for persons to develop “emotional distance” (p. 200), which in Indian call centres becomes essential for being a good salesperson and handling rude customers. The dark side of this seems to be the ‘emotional labour’ that this demands (Taylor and Bain 2005), which seems related to an industrial logic of maximizing efficiency. Ajay, Girish, Nikhila, AS, CH, KR, TE, and FR feel that they have learned an important skill in persuading irate customers to buy things. The discourse in outbound centres is dominated almost entirely by Market logic, since it is a purely sales-based process. But even in inbound centres, as we have seen with Ajay, there is pressure to ‘up-sell’.

The market logic comes into play prominently in order to justify ‘cost-cutting’. KR complains about the series of reductions in his company in the past year in the name of cutting costs: “They had a web-access: [they] cut it off. Food: cost-cutting. Salary: cost-cutting.” According to him, most companies give sizeable perks, but not his own:

---

94 See Verma (2004:7)
"[I]n most companies they spend per day 500 to 1000 bucks for incentives. In my company they give not more than 100 bucks. What can you do with 100 bucks? After my workout it's like, not even one lunch!" Respondents find these measures unjustified and 'unfair', especially when, as Tarun notes, higher-ups seem to suffer no losses in their perks, while those toward the bottom tend to bear most of the brunt of it. This highlights another paradox within the call centre discourse: on one hand, most respondents say is that the money in this industry is great, and is one of the primary attractive factors which draws them into this line of work. But on the other hand, as Tarun puts it, "[these companies] draw blood for the money they pay you": the cost of night-shifts, variable-shifts, insufficient breaks, expected overtime, and so on, starts to weigh down quickly on employees, and soon, in comparison, the pay cheque starts to look terribly insufficient.

5.2.5. Logic of Inspiration

The world of inspiration, the authors say, has a certain "fragility" (p. 159), in the sense that it lacks the kinds of measures and standards of worth which provide the other worlds with a little more structure or stability. This is also because what is privileged here is *particularity*, so comparing the worth of persons becomes difficult. "[P]ersons may be more or less worthy inasmuch as they are all capable of experiencing the outpouring of inspiration and thus of acceding to perfection and happiness" (p.159).

General though this may sound, the logic of this world features rather modestly in the discourse of my respondents, at least, in comparison with the other worlds. Boltanski and Thévenot associate a host of terms here which illustrate this logic: illumination, spontaneity, feelings and passions, exciting, enriching, fascinating, creativity, love, imagination, passionate, poet, artist, awaken, dreams, deviation from categories of 'useful' or 'rational', risk-taking, breaking out of (industrial) routines and (domestic) habits, devotion to vocation, musician, humility, originality, genius, seeking freedom, emotional relationships, transformation, adventure, quest, finding one's path, images, myths, symbols, and metaphors (2006:159-164). A comparison with the Indian BPO context is presented in Table 5.6 below.
A few examples do emerge from the interviews. Several respondents mentioned their involvement in visual and performing arts: photography (Nikhila), music (Ajay, Julie, KU, AS), writing (Sally, MA, AS), fashion (KR). Spirituality, which was mentioned by several respondents, also fits into this world, but in different ways. Sally and Julie, though they consider themselves strongly religious, do not seem to conform to the views of many of their co-religionists, especially on the question of the legitimacy call centre work. They emphasize the possibility and importance of a sort of divine inspiration even within the mundane reality of call centre work; Julie talks about exchanging inspiring emails, and shares her spiritual beliefs with colleagues and even customers. Sally talks about inspiring her colleagues to make conscientious decisions. Of, on the other hand, finds the call centre to be a spiritually hostile environment, and particularly stays away from smoking, drinking, and parties; hence, he ends up feeling rather alone. Others such as Tarun, Nikhila and FR speak of being “spiritual but not religious” (one may wonder whether this term is adopted from western discourse).

Several respondents spoke of how the monotony and scripting of call centre work stifles their sense of creativity and originality. This relates to what Boltanski and Thévenot call the “fall” of the world of inspiration (2006:163-164). One respondent, CS, who claims to actively pursue opportunities for learning and ‘personal growth’ outside the work environment, considers the above an excuse which itself reflects a lack of creativity. As a soft-skills trainer, he himself tries to encourage his trainees to think “outside the box,” to “dream big,” engage in creative activities. A curious feature of the Indian BPO context is how training (typically an industrial function) consists of trying to make sure that employees have “fun.”

---

95 The terms used here are from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 159-164)
5.2.6. Civic Logic

In this realm, primary importance is accorded "to beings that are not persons". Boltanski and Thévenot note that what is more important than individuals are "the collective persons that they constitute by meeting together" (p. 185). "The things and arrangements included in the civic world are destined above all to stabilize and equip the collective persons, to objectify them in such a way as to give them body, permanence, and presence". And so we see the importance of the "collective conscience", "of [a person] subordinating his or her will to the general will". Such a Civic logic is rather weak in the BPO call centre discourse, but employees seem to wish it were stronger.

Table 5.7 summarizes the similarities and particularities between Boltanski and Thévenot's model and the Indian BPO context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Particularities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to the collective good</td>
<td>The desire for 'professionalism' seems to also reflect a desire for their rights as workers to be respected (e.g., honouring of contracts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes and policies; Codes of ethics</td>
<td>Channels of representation and Codes are often only rhetorical and symbolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of respect for rights</td>
<td>Weak sense of collective action: mistrust of co-workers; pessimism about unionization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legitimate channels of representation</td>
<td>The 'slavery' to particular interests reflects Domestic and Opinion concerns (preservation of self and family)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Fall' of this world: communalism; self-seeking individualism and slavery to one's own particular interests; exploitation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The notion of 'professionalism', a feature of the Industrial world, is found here as well in the sense of codes and policies that employees want implemented, chiefly as a means of liberation from managerial caprice or favouritism (i.e., debased forms of the domestic world). Most respondents expressed that they wanted their superiors to recognize their legitimate rights (to be paid for the work they do, and not to be exploited). They especially resent the expectation to work overtime without pay, and when their benefits are withdrawn with little or no explanation.

96 The terms used here are from Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 185-193)
The Civic logic is also seen in the need to respect principles, such as those found in codes of ethics. This was a dominant aspect in my interview with AS, who spoke with much admiration for the “code of conduct” in his Captive call centre firm. This he believed was embodied by American managers who treated even junior employees with respect. Once the management was transferred over to Indians, the code of conduct became virtually meaningless, and AS found himself the victim of communal/ethnic harassment. KR similarly notes that his company’s code of conduct is merely symbolic. Certain infringements of such codes, however, are taken very seriously, such as in the case of sexual harassment. Most of my respondents said that in their companies, perpetrators were promptly terminated.

In addition to policies, legitimate channels of representation are important here. Employees are to report concerns to immediate superiors, who report to theirs, and so on. Human Resources managers are supposed to try and get feedback from all employees regularly and foster their participation—an ideal which many employees complain is not often realized, and that such participatory rhetoric rarely crosses the level of talk. 97 Many feel that HR departments will be the first to squelch any sign of disruptive activity, such as employees trying to form a union. They seem to think that there is little hope of unionization, since middle-class Indians are highly unlikely to get together and protest anything; they are too preoccupied with their own life-situations. Only a minority would take a stand, they argue. As KR puts it: “See it’s like... one person can rise up...but the rest of the people, most of people are happy with their jobs—just come, work for 2 months, get lost.” In addition, some such as Sally think that unions themselves will be corrupt, which further weakens the commitment to collective organization. While there are unions and associational bodies in the industry, such as the Business Process Industry Association of India (previously the Call Centre Association of India), their predominant concerns include dealing with attrition and training challenges, lobbying to reduce taxes on multinationals, and improving efficiency and quality standards 98. None of my respondents, however, personally knew of any call centre associations or unions in existence.

97 This resonates with Upadhya and Vasavi’s (2006:59-60) observation of how ‘New Age Management’ is more a matter of talk and jargon than actual practices.
98 See http://www.bpiai.org/
Thus my respondents’ discourse in many ways confirms the complaint of Das (2000:81) and Raghunathan (2006) about the poor civic sense among contemporary Indians. There is a very weak sense of “social movement[s]”, “collective action”, “labour unions”, efforts or activities to “unify” persons, and so on, that Boltanski and Thévenot (2006:186) consider part of this world. Several respondents mentioned the weak collective spirit and the lack of interest in unionization despite the widespread feeling that employees’ rights and working conditions need to be improved. Curiously, most of them exhibit a strong sense of national identity and a positive sense of being Indian, yet, by and large, they feel they cannot trust the people around them.

Indeed, these call centre workers might arguably fit the description of what would be considered “unworthy” in the Civic world according to Boltanski and Thévenot’s model. These employees tend to become “isolated individuals”; they are, to some degree, “slaves of their own particular interests and condemned to powerlessness”; everybody is reluctant to “make themselves the expression of a general will and the embodiment of a general interest”; there is little effort towards “mobilizing” workers or making them “aware of their exploitation and of the need to fight” (2006:187). Self-serving individualism, forms of particularism (e.g. favouritism or communalism), and isolation—the conditions of the ‘fall’ of the Civic world (p. 193)—are rampant in the call centre discourse, standing in stark contrast to the ideals of the democratic project of nationhood which India undertook upon independence.

5.2.7. Conclusion

We have seen above that the Economies of Worth model can provide some helpful insights into the dynamic of evaluations in the narratives of BPO / call centre workers. Arguably, we could see these logics as reflective of traditional as well as modern repertoires of evaluation (at the very least, the Domestic logic, with its emphasis on tradition and family could be considered ‘traditional,’ and the Market and Industrial could be considered ‘modern’).

So what can we learn from this analysis about the tradition-modernity dynamic in this context? In the narratives of these employees, we see that a traditional Domestic
logic, centered on one’s duty and on hierarchical relationships, dominates the discourse. Furthermore, this logic seems to include what can be called ‘desirable’ as well as ‘debased’ elements, both of which sustain different aspects of the call centre phenomenon. While much importance is accorded to obedience and deference to superiors, the ideal superior-subordinate relationship aspired to by employees is a sort of ‘nurturant’ leadership model. However, what they consider the pervasive norm is an autocratic, capricious and humiliating style of leadership, sustained by sycophancy and corruption. In addition, we can also see how these employees defend themselves against the criticism of ‘westernization’ (defined in Market notions of consumerism and slavery to materialism) by arguing that many of them pursue these jobs in order to help their families, and that those who are being irresponsible will soon ‘grow up.’

Similarly, on the side of what might typically be considered ‘modern,’ we see that these logics are used to support debased as well as desirable forms of Domestic values. Respondents note how some managers use the Market logic of cost-cutting and the Industrial rhetoric of efficiency and corporate policy to exploit employees. Conversely, employees aspire to ‘professionalism,’ though its connotations here reflect elements of the Domestic as well as Civic world (desire for respect from superiors, to be paid what is rightly owed to them, and for their merit to be recognized), and desire more structures of transparency in the company to prevent local managers from exploiting them.

Similarly, the logic of Opinion, centered on the importance of others’ approval and of one’s social status, finds support in traditional elements (pleasing one’s superiors, gaining a reputable name for self and family), and also propels the pursuit of big and recognized brand-names. The weakest elements in the discourse are the logic of Inspiration and the Civic logic. While employees do express the desire for certain aspects of the latter (workers’ rights, unionization), these elements do not seem to find adequate supports among these employees, especially given the pervasive mistrust of opportunistic colleagues, and the primacy accorded to taking care of one’s own family.

In these ways, the Economies of Worth model affords us some valuable insights, and we can even make some comparisons of the contours of these ‘worlds’ or logics between India and the West, without falling into simplistic essentialisms of the typical East-West rhetoric. What Boltanski and Thévenot’s model cannot do, however, is tell us
anything about the *bases* of these particularities in the Indian context, i.e., what is it about these values that makes them all-pervasive in society? In the next chapter, I will suggest some plausible sources which can help address this matter.
Chapter 6: Discussion

The goal of this study was to understand how call centre employees evaluate their work experience and the impact of the BPO / call centre phenomenon on their lives. While we have seen the key themes in employees' narratives, and analyzed some underlying logics of evaluation, we need to say more about how these elements are embedded in the cultural context of contemporary India. In this chapter, I suggest a causal mechanism for how structures and values of tradition and modernity support and challenge each other in this context, thus serving to sustain the various tensions and paradoxes in the BPO call centre phenomenon. Based on the analysis of employees' narratives and evaluations, I argue that a fourfold process is operative here, schematized in Figure 6.1: (1) New structures of modernity are perceived as liberation from traditional limitations, and often (2) for the pursuit of traditional goals. Yet, these promises fail when (3) these structures support certain debased forms of these ideals; and consequently, (4) employees aspire to certain values of modernity as an avenue of reform. In the discussion that follows, I will spell out these four elements, and conclude with some implications for our understanding of tradition and modernity.

Figure 6.1: Tradition and Modernity in Indian Call Centres
6.1. Perceived Liberation

From the analysis of the interviews and narratives, we can see how developments of modernity such as offshore call centres, despite their negative impacts, are seen by the people who pursue them as opportunities, some of which support certain aspects of tradition, while others are challenged and criticized by other aspects of tradition. This resonates with the Weberian argument put forward by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999, 2002, 2005), that capitalism, in order to generate a commitment from the actors who embrace its structures and values, needs to be seen by these actors as attractive and even liberating in some way.

The notion of ‘liberation’ that these authors intend has to do with a perception of “emancipation” from obstacles that constrain or determine their pursuit of fulfillment, or from what they perceive as forms of oppression (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005:433). The criticism which often emanates from observers of the phenomenon (especially parents, journalists, and social activists) is that all that these workers are drawn to is the money, which consequently spoils them. From the stories presented in Chapter 4, we can see that these worries are not entirely unwarranted. However, we cannot overlook the fact that, in addition to simply providing money (which of course could then be used by some to satisfy consumerist whims), call centre jobs are seen as dispensing with certain obstacles:

a. For those lacking qualifications: Previously, it would have been impossible to secure a decent job without a graduate degree; masters-degree-holders in India are a dime-a-dozen. Now a high-school graduate with a decent grasp of English can make more money in a call centre job than the average person starting out with a degree in

---

99 The authors speak of an “emancipation from any form of determination liable to restrict the self-definition and self-fulfillment of individuals” (2005:433; italics in the original). One might think to argue here that this would simply be false in an Indian society where the primacy is not for the individual but the collective (Hofstede 2001). However, as several authors have noted (Teo 1973; Das 2000; Mines 2002; Kapoor et al 2003; Varma 2004; Raghunathan 2006), individualism is by no means absent from Hinduism, though it might take a different form than the ‘atomic’ individualism characteristic of the West. The focus, for example, is on one’s salvation (one’s personal actions determine one’s karmic fate) and more practically, on the needs of one’s immediate family or communal group, which figure well above strangers. As Das (2000:81) pointed out, “the social life of Indians revolves around the family or caste. It does not encompass the whole community. Perhaps this is why our streets are dirty when our homes are spotlessly clean.” Thus, it seems appropriate to modify Boltanski and Chiapello’s version to recognize the importance of the one’s immediate kin to the Indian self-concept.
engineering or medicine, although these latter professions offer better growth prospects in the long-term. For example, when OF started his career with his Engineering diploma, he earned only about Rs.5000 a month, whereas his new call centre job paid him and less-qualified colleagues Rs.10,000; in his case, most of these savings go towards his sister’s marriage.

Additionally, it would have been extremely difficult to secure a good education if one’s parents were not financially endowed. These new jobs allow employees to not have to rely on parental support; in fact, several of them said they were now making enough money to support their families as well. Furthermore, certain respondents expressed that they pursued these jobs hoping for ‘professional’ environments where they would not be discriminated on the basis of caste or ethnic/linguistic community. However, many of them admitted that respondents said that communalism, ‘casteism’ and sexism are still prevalent as forms of discrimination in several BPO companies. Many of them discover to their chagrin that even in these new forms of globalization, such discriminatory practices can still be present. The tendency is then to look for companies with foreign management, where they hope that policies against such discrimination are taken more seriously. Still, the industry as a whole appeals to them as an opportunity to ‘improve their lot in life’—for themselves and their families—\(^{100}\) and to pursue successful careers. While all of the above serve as justifications for these jobs, the ways in which call centre workers use their money and new-found freedom is not always seen as justifiable. I will examine this point a little later on.

b. For respondents from lower-income families and with little prior work experience, the BPO call centre industry offered what many of them considered an “exciting” opportunity to interact with people in western cultures. For many of them this in itself gives them a sense of superiority and status, in that they get to interact with foreigners, work in a global brand-name company, and speak ‘proper’ English—all of which serve as important social capital.\(^{101}\) However, this also earns them the derision of

\(^{100}\) Boltanski and Chiapello (2002:3) stress that the promises (e.g., security) offered by new forms of capitalism need to be seen by individuals as opportunities for themselves and for their families.

\(^{101}\) The argument could be made that this simply reflects the mindset of the ‘colonized’ person who aspires to be like the colonizer, and thus reflects a certain damage or loss of cultural identity (this critique is usually associated with the works of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi). However, it is
others from more privileged backgrounds who aren’t all that enthralled by the prospect interacting with westerners.

It is also interesting to see here how some of them construct the image of ‘the westerner.’ For employees who work these jobs for several months, their attitude is not—as one might initially suspect—one of subservience, but rather, a sense of indispensability, and at times even pity: ‘Those “poor Americans,” with all their credit cards, unable to manage their lives, in danger of going bankrupt, unable to understand their technology,’ and so on.¹⁰² For many, this seems to serve as a sense of empowerment.

c. Opportunities for women: Several of the women I interviewed were enthusiastic about the call centre industry because it opens the doors to new career opportunities with attractive wages, without traditionally-established glass ceilings and barriers to entry. TE, for example, a 27-year-old who is now a training manager in her call centre firm, was embarrassed with the Home Economics degree she picked up at college, which she felt was not respected as much as engineering, medicine or computer science. “I wanted to prove it to myself and others that I could do much more than being a housewife,” she said. However, the story is not all rosy, since the negative image of call centers has contributed to a social stigma for female call centre employees in some cases.¹⁰³

d. Older workers can now get a career change without needing a great deal of background expertise or arduous retraining. We saw this as being the case with a few of my older respondents, who were in their 40s and 50s and needed a new career for various reasons, usually due to financial difficulties. At the same time, while many of them were glad that this job afforded them a decent income, they found it more difficult than younger workers to get used to the strenuous working timings, and had an especially hard time dealing with managers who were much younger than them and whom they

---

¹⁰² Mirchandani (2004) notes this point as well, and we can see this among several of my respondents.
¹⁰³ Again, while women who have corporate careers are highly respected, we saw that this is not the case with women who work call centre jobs. This stigma, my respondents believe, is because of the popular stereotype of call centre workers as having become ‘westernized’ and ‘spoiled,’ indulging in taboos such as smoking, drinking, and so on.
considered incompetent and disrespectful. They often shared in the societal complaint that many of these “youngsters” were getting ‘spoiled’ or “losing their values.” However, they refused to condemn the job, and in fact, were very quick to rise to the defence of their many young colleagues for whom these jobs were justifiable and even necessary. Most of these older employees either became or wanted to become trainers, in order to influence these ‘youngsters’, and from a position where they would be treated with more respect.

In all these cases, we can see that it is not a clear-cut case of such ‘liberation’ being sought and attained; rather, these often appear to be cases of failed or illusory promises. Nonetheless, what is initially sought appears as an attractive opportunity. Furthermore, it would be erroneous to understand this pursuit as an escape from ‘tradition’ as such; in fact, often it is precisely forms of traditional goals that are being sought.

6.2. Traditional goals

Employees see these jobs as worthwhile because they provide a freedom from certain prior obstacles which prevented them from pursuing goals that they consider legitimate, if not essential. In order for these goals to be considered legitimate, they have to make appeal to some shared cultural standards or ideals. In this regard, Indian tradition provides certain clear ideals which participants in their discourse constantly appeal to in their justifications and criticisms. While these ideals emerge from the Hindu tradition, they are all-pervasive in Indian society, evident e.g. in the discourse about education and careers; in newspapers, cinema, and so on. I would venture to call them an important element of the ‘moral order’ in Indian society, so much so that they cannot but influence the way even non-Hindus make sense of their lives.

---

104 The notion of ‘moral order’ is another ambiguous notion which has been used in varied and inconsistent ways for centuries, by thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant, Wilberforce, Locke, Kniss, Wuthnow, Scruton, etc. (for a sample of citations from these authors, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/moral_order.) The way in which I am using the term here is closer to Taylor (2003), who uses it to refer to the unwritten sense of “how we ought to live together in society” (p.3); arguably this would vary across cultures.

105 I am not saying that the entire call centre discourse can be reduced in some way to these ideals which I am about to discuss; nor am I saying that there aren’t other values in the Indian value-system. What I would argue, however, is that we cannot bypass the system of purusarthas, i.e., they allow us to
In some ways here I draw on the work of Hart (1996), who points out how in America, the ambiguity or flexibility of certain key ideals—voluntarism, universalism, Christian love, this-worldliness, and other-worldliness—can be used in different and conflicting ways to make sense of economic life. Similar to Hart’s study, the ‘grammar of evaluations’ used by my Indian respondents does not necessarily make explicit reference to these terms, but does reflect the ideas they point to. While this might seem like little more than an extension of the Weberian Protestant Ethic thesis (Weber 1930), what is different here is that we are looking at a pluralism of values with a certain degree of ambiguity. It is this multiplicity and flexibility within ‘tradition’ itself that fosters the kind of dynamic we see.

Daya Krishna (2007) notes that no serious discussion on Indian tradition and society can skirt around the notion of the purusartha, which are the main aims or goals of human life according to the classical Hindu Vedic tradition. The four goals are: Dharma (duty or righteousness), Artha (material success), Kama (sense-pleasure), and Moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). Dharma serves as the ordering principle, to which Artha, and in turn Kama, are subordinate. Moksha is not a life-goal as such, in the sense that it is not pursued in the duties of life, but rather, is reserved for old age; it is the supreme transcendent value. Thus only the first three, collectively called the trivarga, are concerns of everyday activity (in everyday discourse there doesn’t seem to be even the faintest mention of something approximating the notion of moksha.)

Dharma is a word that takes on different meanings in different contexts—‘right conduct’, ‘supreme virtue’, ‘religion’, ‘duty’, ‘doctrines’, ‘truth’, or even ‘practical wisdom’. In the present connotation as the primary aim of life, it can be understood simply as ‘duty’, in the sense that a human being must fulfill those duties which are most appropriate to the phase or stage of life that he or she is in. The Vedic tradition lays out

understand why certain elements ‘matter’ more to modern Indians, including non-Hindus, than to people in some other cultures.

106 There seems to be some ambiguity in interpretations as to whether these are better understood as ‘goals’ or ‘needs’, but for our purposes the notion should be understandable despite the imprecision. This is only part of the ambiguity contained within these terms, as we shall see.

107 See also Hopkins 1971:78; Flood 1996:17; Sen 1978; Crawford 1982; Perrett 1998:50-62, on whom I base the below discussion.

108 Although sometimes artha is seen as subordinate to kama (e.g. Crawford 1998:50). Such ambiguities are precisely what allow for the inconsistencies and contradictions in the way these concepts are used as justifications within the discourse.
four such stages of life or ashramas, each of which is 24 years long (Friedlmeier et al. 2005: 39). The first or stage is that of the student (brahmacharya), where the point is to be engaged in learning and building self-discipline. The second stage is that of the householder (grihastha) where the main duty is to provide for one’s family and society, usually through gainful employment. The third stage is retirement (vanaprastha) or withdrawal from the world, where one’s duty is to impart wisdom and devote oneself to contemplation. The final stage, sanyasa, involves completely renouncing the world, and seeking final liberation or moksha.

The second goal of life, Artha, generally has to do with the pursuit of material wealth and success in this world. This means that one has a duty to be productive and successful in one’s profession, as well as to build an honorable reputation; this is a non-negotiable for the householder. This is also evident in the commitments parents have to the material success of their children. The importance of artha in the popular religious practice of Hinduism is also manifest in the household devotions to the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. As a result of the tendency of people to focus on the other-worldly dimensions of Hinduism this very practical, materialist element of Hinduism is often neglected.109

Kama has to do with sense-pleasure, and its most popular treatment is found in the famous Kamasutra. But kama can also be seen as desire in general, or a general sense of “enjoying life” (which need not mean extravagance), or can even refer to objects of desire in general, including Heaven (Krishna 2007:104). Thus the discourse can become rather confusing, and several Hindu scholars have rightly pointed out the tremendous ambiguity contained within the notion of the purusarthas.110 Consequently, there has been no shortage of scholarly debate on this over the centuries, and even today, it is not clear how to adequately define either of these terms, or how they should be ordered (see, e.g., Crawford 1998:50-52; Krishna 2007:104-108).

If there is such an “essential ambivalence” (Krishna 2007:108) in the relationship between these terms then it shouldn’t be surprising that in practical usage, the ambiguities

---

110 Krishna (2007:103-104) describes the unresolved discussions in the great Hindu epic, The Mahabharata, where the five brothers, who are the main protagonists, argue about which of purusarthas is the highest and how they should be ordered.
are further compounded as people interpret and apply them in different ways. Indeed, the notion of Dharma itself, with its variegated meanings, while recognized as the key ordering principle, itself contains ambiguities: while one’s supreme duty is considered a function of their stage in life (i.e., a householder’s primary duty being to provide for the family), there is another sense of Dharma that transcends one’s family, and indeed, may require one to fight one’s own family (this is the central tension in the sacred Hindu text, the Bhagavad Gita).

I should note that in the call centre discourse, as in day-to-day life in India, these terms ‘dharma,’ ‘artha’ or ‘kama’ are rarely used. However, the values they refer to— one’s supreme duty to the family as a householder; the obligation to be successful and productive; the importance (or unimportance) of sense-pleasure and ‘enjoying life’—are prominent in people’s accounts, and are of important to Hindus and non-Hindus alike.

In light of everything we have seen so far, especially our analysis using the Economies of Worth model, it is reasonable to say that call centre workers might find the developments of modernity as ‘legitimately’ worth pursuing because they allow them to accomplish dharma in the sense of their responsibility to take care of their families, and also artha in the sense of having an accomplished career—“becoming somebody,” as one of my respondents put it. Even Christian respondents use a similar logic to argue that God’s Will for their lives practically means working responsibly in such a profession, and taking care of one’s family, while being careful at all times not to go astray and ‘lose their values.’ As further defence, they insist that their job has not negatively affected their faith, and that their practices (prayer, devotions, Bible-reading, youth group) remain steady.

While another researcher (Nadeem 2007) has argued that dharma and kama that are central to the BPO call centre phenomenon, implying a clash between duty and pleasure, in my analysis it is artha—which is missing completely from Nadeem’s analysis—that features more prominently. (None of my respondents attempt to defend their actions in the name of a duty to enjoy pleasure in itself; the emphasis, rather, seems to be on enjoying one’s work, in their desire for a ‘fun’ work environment, and a balanced lifestyle of work and play). Yet the importance of success in life—a stable career, a good reputation, and the material flourishing of one’s family—is inextricably
intertwined with a householder’s primary dharma. This duty to family, however, can in practice serve as an excuse for various forms of corruption. This is evident when some respondents say that they find the behaviour of corrupt managers “understandable” because they, too, have to support their families somehow; but at the same time, they recognize such actions to be unjustifiable.

6.3. Debased forms of ideals

We have looked so far mainly at how Indian call centre workers justify their pursuit of these careers in ways that that can make appeal to ‘legitimate’ pursuits of traditional goals of life. However, the developments of modernity or globalization are also pursued in ways that can be considered ‘illegitimate’. What I want to argue often comes into play here is that what is pursued in these cases are ‘debased forms’ of certain ideals. Here I borrow from an argument made by Charles Taylor (1991) that many of our key problems with the modern condition, such as the primacy of individualism, technocratic-instrumental reason, and relativism, should be considered “debased forms” (p.12) of other legitimate ideals (e.g., freedom, authenticity). This aspect of the dynamic emerges in at least a couple of different ways within the call centre discourse:

1. The first is the criticism of how call centre workers are getting ‘spoiled’ because of their newfound freedom. Since these younger workers are no longer dependent on their parents for income, they are no longer bound to traditional constraints on behaviour, lifestyle, etc. But in light of Taylor’s (1991) argument, it should be possible to recognize that hedonism, materialism, consumerism, and so on, that are the target of these criticisms, are simply distortions of more legitimate values, e.g. sense-pleasure and prosperity. In addition, there is nothing exclusively ‘western’ about them as values. Even as practices, they can easily be seen as debased forms of kama, i.e., the pursuit of pleasure without regard to one’s responsibilities and duties.\footnote{We should note that the forms of materialism and hedonism that are adopted look identical to Western forms, and some respondents themselves express concerns with the imitation and mimicking of the west. While this may be accurate, my point here is that it is not a ‘western value’ as such that is being aspired to, as critics often claim.} Varma (2004:7),
for example, issues a scathing polemic against the tendency of Indians to think of ourselves as non-materialistic: 112

Indians have never been, and will never be, ‘other-worldly’. They hanker for the material goods that this world has to offer, and look up to the wealthy. They pursue profit more tenaciously than most. They make shrewd traders and resourceful, even ingenious, entrepreneurs. Their feet are firmly on the ground, and their eyes fixed on the balance sheet[...] Most Indians are ‘other-worldly’ only in their indifference to anything in the external milieu that is not of direct benefit to their immediate and personal world.

2. A second way in which the structures of modernity fosters behaviours that are criticized as illegitimate is found in call centre workers’ complaints against their local Indian managers. These complaints of power-abuse, corruption and sycophancy can be considered debased forms of certain ideals of Indian tradition (see Figure 6.2). This contention is made not only by my respondents, but also by several contemporary Indian social critics (e.g. Varma 2004; Raghunathan 2006).

**Figure 6.2: Debased forms of Tradition in Indian Management Practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Illegitimate’ Practices</th>
<th>Corruption</th>
<th>Power-Abuse</th>
<th>Sycophancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Traditional Roots</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link between material success and God’s blessing; Communal / ethnic loyalty; “excessive” love of family; Tolerance for sins</td>
<td>“Lala / Marwari” company mindset: Elders’ unquestionable authority in families; Guru-shishya relationship (master-disciple)</td>
<td>Incessant need to please people / superiors; Reliance on underlings to do ‘lowly’ tasks; sneh-sradha relationship (affection – deference)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We saw how respondents noted that their Indian managers were usually former colleagues in the company who, upon promotion, and started to take advantage of their authority to boss people around. Respondents felt that it was typical in Indian organizations to find autocratic and capricious leaders with a master-slave mentality—what Tarun called a “Lala company” mentality. I have described the theme of power abuse in detail in section 5.1.1.4.a. Part of what perpetuates this behaviour is that

---

leadership is traditionally assumed through a process of apprenticeship, where the subordinate works closely with and imitates the superior. This is one reason why, as employees complain, there is no formal ‘management training’ when these employees rise in ranks to assume management positions. Certain authors (Sinha 2004:95; Kumar and Sethi 2005:69) recognize in such cases the influence of the guru-shisya or master-disciple relationship, where the disciple unquestioningly follows and imitates the master. Consequently, those who see their bosses humiliating and insulting their subordinates usually go on to perpetuate the same behaviour themselves.

Once such managers are in power, they impose the draconian labour practices which have rightly been denounced by the various studies we saw in Chapter 2. According to my respondents, these managers use the power-structures afforded them by these modern developments to further oppress and exploit those below them, often for personal advantage. This is often done by drawing on the rhetoric of modern values such as efficiency, productivity and cost-cutting, in order to justify their actions.

The privileges of power and unquestioned authority also allow some of these managers to get away with various forms of corruption. Several respondents complained that their managers were pocketing money that was rightly owed to the employees. Many expressed their frustration at unexplained cuts to their benefits, commissions and sometimes salaries. Some narrated incidents of managers who were caught and terminated for pocketing sizeable bonuses that were meant for the employees, over-reporting the number of employees on the payroll (and pocketing their salaries), and other forms of managerial corruption. What further facilitates this corruption is that employees in third-party companies are forbidden to contact the client company about their problems, often at the threat of termination. This lack of transparency is exacerbated by the fact that most call centres are not unionized (the reluctance to unionize itself indicative of the pervasive mistrust of coworkers, and of a self-preservationist attitude resulting from the primacy of duty to one’s own family). Any attempt to oppose management, employees felt, would lead to termination. Consequently when many of them suspected that their managers were engaging in corrupt behaviour, they would either put up with it, hoping that the manager would eventually get caught—since many actually did—or they would just quit and go to another company.
While these new work forms may facilitate corruption, the latter is by no means unique to the industry, nor is it novel to India. Several respondents felt that corruption in India can be supported by all sorts of traditional motives. Sally, for example, criticized a traditional assumption that a person who is wealthy is necessarily being blessed by God.\textsuperscript{113} This echoes perhaps with Kumar and Sethi’s (2005:79) attempt to examine roots of corruption in Hindu scriptures. In looking at the Brahmanas, a text which contains “the ritualistic and ceremonial parts of the Vedas”, they note that these teachings often get disconnected from the original metaphysics, and lend themselves to “highly materialistic interpretations [which] bring about major aberrations particularly with regard to worship for ostentation, social recognition, and even a form of ‘proxy worship’ by giving money and riches to priests.” They add that the Brahmanas contain “many hymns extolling material ‘well-being,’ in the form of gold, silver, produce and other riches.” This can make it appear that the aim of life is ‘material prosperity and the pleasures of the body and senses’” (2005:79). It is not difficult to note here the ambiguity which comes into play with the importance of the traditional goal of artha, which we saw earlier (see also Crawford 1998:52; Krishna 2007:103). Indeed, in contemporary India, the traditional attitude of economic conservatism (frugality, savings, etc.) sits in uncomfortable tension with billboards and TV ads proposing an extravagant lifestyle as the ideal (see Mazzarella (2003) for a discussion of advertising and globalization in India).

Nagarajan Vittal, India’s former Chief Vigilance Officer, has expressed the difficulty with fighting organizational corruption in India since these behaviours find their roots in Indian traditions (Vittal 2001, 2002, 2003). The notions of tolerance and rebirth in Hinduism, he argues, in practice encourages a great deal of toleration for corruption (2002:4-5). Indian society, he believes, encourages “extreme attachment of people to their families” (2002:6), where individuals’ primary concern is for the welfare of their immediate family and generations of descendents, even to the detriment of neighbors and society. This, he argues, fosters several problems, such as nepotism and a general lack of civic responsibility. Raghunathan (2006:27), arguing along these lines, attributes the horrible sense of public hygiene in the country to this narrow preoccupation

\textsuperscript{113} It is curious that Sally, being Pentecostal, criticizes Hinduism for this prosperity-focused mindset; observers of global Pentecostalism criticize this religious movement for the same reason! Evidently Sally seems to adhere to a more ascetic strand.
with self and family. Das (2000:81) similarly notes that "the social life of Indians revolves around the family or caste. It does not encompass the whole community. Perhaps this is why our streets are dirty when our homes are spotlessly clean. Mahatma Gandhi understood this, and he tried to instill civil sense in his fellow citizens, but he failed." Mines (1992) sheds some light on why typical discussions of India in occidental works neglect this dimension of self-concern. He contends that the role of individuality in India has been underrated, particularly because India's cultural ideas are treated as separate from actual behaviour of its people; hence the emphasis is put on subordination of the individual to the caste or kin), which gives us a false impression of civic collectivism when in reality one's commitment is mainly to family or kin.

Other traditional elements such as the dowry system, as well as the casteist and commmunalist struggles for power, Vittal believes, leads people to engage in various forms of corruption (2002:6-7). As another eminent Indian political scientist has noted: "[i]n a society that does not often acknowledge the worth and value of individuals, where the visible means of proving one's worth through substantial achievement are open only to a few, corruption is a way of saying you are somebody." (Mehta 2003:115).

While this is not meant to neglect structural factors which encourage corruption, e.g. economic scarcity, bureaucracy, absence of transparency, and judicial supports for the corrupt (Vittal 2002:9), the structures of modernity can be used, through these debased forms of traditional ideals, to support 'illegitimate' practices. Thus, both tradition and modernity collude here to aid this "roadblock to national prosperity" (Vittal 2003). One could similarly argue that certain aspects of tradition not only serve to perpetuate such debased forms of ideals, but also serve as inhibitors to change:

Centuries of hierarchic regimentation have mentally enslaved most Indians. It has emasculated their ability to question and conditioned them to obey rather than to innovate. Their energies are directed towards the possibilities of upward mobility within a preordained hierarchical order, not to look beyond these possibilities [...] They are easily satisfied by the visible signs of success that give greater status within the traditional social order... [A] middle class technician feels he has fulfilled his svadharma [proper dharma according to one's stage in life] when he gets a good job.

---

114 "Why sacrifice one's self-interest for the sake of the community when one can throw away the trash without any fear of retribution? Selfishness seems to tell each and every Indian that it is entirely rational for us to chuck our trash all around. This results in the huge garbage heap of a country of over one billion people." (Raghunathan 2006:27)
and nothing more needs to be expected from him. The result is a nation of stunted aspirations, full of well-behaved job applicants" (Varma 2004, pp.129-130).

6.4. Modernity as perceived reform

Curiously, as a solution to this problem, my respondents saw the importance of certain modern values which they aspire to, chief among which was "professionalism"—a word which seemed to encompass a host of values, including an intolerance for corruption/nepotism/sycophancy, a respect for subordinates, the dignity of labour, and the value of rewarding merit. I want to argue that Indian employees aspire to such 'professionalism' precisely because it is seen as offering a corrective to the debased forms of ideals. In this way, it can be seen as 'liberating' as we saw earlier, i.e., it allows the 'legitimate' fulfilment of traditional goals. This becomes apparent in their discourse when they speak highly of their western managers who encouraged and respected them, rewarded them fairly, and stood by codes of conduct rather than dismissing them whimsically (see Chapter 5, section 5.1.1.4.b.). For many of these respondents, 'professionalism' therefore takes on an ethical connotation. While they are reluctant to organize into unions, they insist that they should be paid their due wages, not be made to work overtime without pay (as they currently are), not be subject to communalist discrimination, be treated with dignity by superiors, and be paid for their performance rather than according to whims and preferences of their managers. Such changes in managerial values, structures and practices would supports (and remove obstacles from) their goal of fulfilling traditional duties to support the family and to be successful in one's profession.

While it may be tempting to think, in postcolonialist vein, that the above desire for 'professionalism' is simply a victory for western capitalist imperialism, we should keep in mind the following:

1. One reason why these employees aspire so strongly to this value is because they experience real oppression and power-abuse from their local superiors. In the absence of a reliable legal infrastructure (i.e., mistrust of regulatory authorities such as the police, lawyers, and politicians), the hope expressed by employees as well as social
commentators such as Raghunathan (2006) is for a change in attitudes and values, and a reform of some of these ‘debased’ versions of ideals;\textsuperscript{115}

2. When we read these employees’ statements about ‘western management’, we should keep in mind that the western managers whom these employees speak so highly of were probably carefully selected and highly trained for this sort of cross-cultural interaction (i.e., the ‘ordinary’ western manager might turn out to be very different in this context);

3. An important part of this story is that a fair bit of the new appeal for neo-liberal capitalism in India arises in a situation of general frustration with the many undesirable consequences of Nehruvian socialism (e.g., the so-called ‘Hindu rate of growth’ which crippled the economy for several decades; the reign of bureaucrats or the License-Raj, and the general widespread corruption in politics and administration). A more detailed treatment of this political-economic context would be important for our understanding of this issue, but it is beyond the scope of this study (helpful accounts are found in Das 2000; Kumar and Sethi 2005; Luce 2006; Sinha 2004). Part of this shift, curiously, is evident even in popular culture, where today’s heroes are no longer idealist politicians but entrepreneurial successes (e.g., Bill Gates, Tata, Birla, Ambani); even the Bollywood film industry, which a couple of decades ago focused on the struggles of unionized labourers against capitalist tycoons, now try to idolize the heroism of business giants such as Ambani. We need to recognize that employees who aspire to the ideals of meritocracy and professionalism are speaking within this context. While in the West we might be well aware of the debased elements and even dangers of meritocracy (see Sennett 2006), we can hardly expect such considerations to be a matter of concern for these employees, who still consider themselves very much at the mercy of capricious bureaucrats in both the public and private sectors;

4. It is also important to note that the sort of ‘professionalism’ and meritocracy that Indian employees aspire to reflects an ideal closer to Sinha’s (1980) notion of ‘nurturant’ leadership than the forms of depersonalized atomism prevalent in the west

\textsuperscript{115}Raghunathan (2006) argues, using a Game-Theoretic framework, that the strategy of mistrust and self-preservation typically adopted by Indians in their societal interactions is detrimental to society. What he proposes, despite not being particularly religious himself, is the need to return to Dharma as (deontological) duty to what is ‘right,’ rather than its typical (consequentialist) interpretation of loyalty to one’s own, no matter what.
that Sennett (2006) criticises. It is highly unlikely that these latter forms will survive intact in an Indian environment, regardless of the fact that some respondents actively want such aspects of so-called American management to be “imposed” in Indian companies. The rationale provided by my respondents is primarily a desire for respect and an end to exploitation, rather than functional efficiency.

Although we can find evidence of top-down implementations of such professionalism in some modern Indian companies—e.g., Wipro, where the CEO refused to employ his own sons because of a strict ‘no-nepotism’ policy and encouraged a culture of debate and dissent (Hamm 2007)—these too, I would argue, are hybrid forms where Indian traditions coexist in peculiar ways with modernity, rather than a simple convergence.

6.5. Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to present a plausible causal mechanism for how certain structures and values of tradition and modernity interact so as to sustain the various tensions and paradoxes characteristic of the BPO call centre phenomenon (figure 6.1):

1. Employees who pursue offshore call centre jobs aspire here to a kind of liberation from certain traditional limitations or obstacles (lack of opportunities and qualifications; new opportunities for cultural interaction and social status improvement; career opportunities for women; opportunities for older workers).

2. Additionally, this pursuit is often justified as being for the sake of important traditional goals (particularly, one’s duty to family, and to be successful and accomplished in one’s profession). Thus modernity, in the form of these structures of globalization, is seen as ‘legitimate’; indeed, employees appeal to these traditional goals to justify themselves against criticisms of those who decry these developments as being opposed to tradition.

3. However, not all these ways in which modernity supports tradition are considered legitimate. Firstly, many in Indian society criticize call centre workers for having become ‘westernized’ (adopting ‘western values’ such as materialism, and habits such as smoking, drinking, excessive spending, drugs, etc.). I argue that these should not
be considered 'western values,' as they frequently are in the discourse, but at best, 'debased forms' of certain ideals which are not necessarily western. Indian social critics point out how materialism and the pursuit of pleasure (kama) to the detriment of responsibility (dharma) are quite evident even in Indian tradition, which means we cannot say that the debased forms are only of western ideals.

Secondly, some of these new structures of modernity (e.g., the draconian labor process) also support other debased forms of Indian tradition (viz., the tolerance of corruption, sycophancy, and the abuse of power), which are seen in exploitative superior-subordinate relationships in these call centers.

4. Yet here, values of modernity, such as 'professionalism'—understood by these respondents as intolerance for corruption/sycophancy/communalism, respect for subordinates, and rewarding merit—is seen as an antidote to some of these debased forms.

I would argue that these four elements are not simply unique to a handful of Indian call centre workers, or to the BPO call centre context in India, but are instances of plausible mechanisms which sustain the developments (and the concomitant tensions and paradoxes) of globalization in some other contexts as well. Some of the work of Philippe d'Iribarne resonates with this argument, e.g., his case study of how organizational corruption in an Argentinean factory finds cultural supports in a debased form of the virtue of loyalty, and is consequently curbed by the development of a clear code of conduct embodied in a superior who serves as an 'ethical referent' and source of allegiance (2003:133-170).

This argument can thus be instructive to our understanding of the tradition-modernity relationship. Typical accounts of this dichotomy, as Gusfield (1967) noted, tend to make several false assumptions about these categories, implicitly supposing that 1. traditional societies are static over time; 2. norms and values in traditional culture are consistent; 3. traditions are homogeneous; 4. traditions are displaced by modernity; 5. tradition and modernity are essentially conflicting; 6. tradition and modernity are mutually exclusive; or that 7. modernity always weakens tradition. Despite Gusfield's own significant work to refute such assumptions, many of them are still prevalent in the contemporary discourse about modernity and globalization, and especially in the
discussion of the BPO phenomenon. My hope is that the present study is able to
demonstrate the considerable ambiguity that is inherent within the notion of tradition
itself, and how structures and values of tradition and modernity support as well as
challenge each other in this context, thus serving to sustain the various tensions and
paradoxes in the BPO phenomenon. The results of this study also echo Milton Singer’s
observation that “Indian modernization is not simply an ‘aping’ of the west that destroys
the traditional way of life, but rather, a highly selective process of borrowing and
invention” (1980:366). Indeed, in light of such processes of hybridization, it makes more
sense to speak of Multiple Modernities.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The present study was motivated at least in part by a sense of dissatisfaction with the general treatment of the burgeoning phenomenon of Business Process Outsourcing and offshore call centres in India. The predominant perspectives seemed to rest on a ‘convergence’ assumption of evolutionary progression, where tradition simply disappears in the wake of modernity. Lurking in the background of debates between “boosters” and “knockers” (Taylor 1991:11) of globalization are the “classical” theories of modernization, which proposed “that the cultural program of modernity as it developed in modern Europe and the basic institutional constellations that emerged there would ultimately take over in all modernizing and modern societies” (Eisenstadt 2000:1). Alternatively, however, opponents of such ‘end of history’ accounts would assume an intrinsic opposition between tradition and modernity, where the two inevitably clash (e.g., Huntington 2002). A version of this conflictual account assumes that ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ values are fundamentally incommensurable; globalization, consequently, is seen as an extension of the homogenizing steamroller of western imperialism.

Admittedly these are caricatures. But they do, in effect, seem to be the sorts of polarities around which the issue of transnational outsourcing is debated, and my contention from the get-go has been that these accounts are inadequate and flawed.

We saw some of these tendencies in the literature on Indian call centres, where certain perspectives either extol the ‘flattening’ of the global playing field as a great thing for India, while others denounce the imperialist spread of the dual process of rationalization and flexibilization (i.e., the Taylorized, highly controlled and standardized work, coupled with the often-superficial ‘participatory management’ rhetoric). Understandably, the effects on Indian employees of night-work, accent- and culture-training, and interaction with often-abusive foreign customers are denounced, in scholarly studies, as new forms of colonization. While some of these authors (Mirchandani 2004; McMillin 2006) are mindful of the fact that call centre workers are not merely passive victims, the denunciatory nature of these studies inspired by critical organizational theory and postcolonial theory ignores what Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) call the “critical capacity” of these agents to make their own judgments on the phenomenon. Furthermore,
since these since approaches are narrowly focused on the workplace, and neglect broader cultural and contextual factors (such as internal contradictions within Indian culture and tradition that might drive and sustain this phenomenon), they are unable to tell us much about why Indian call centre workers are drawn to and persevere in these jobs, despite the evidently negative consequences. In order to address these gaps in the literature, I set out to investigate how Indian employees evaluate their experience of working in offshore call centres and its impact on their lives.

The emphasis on the notion of evaluations derives from Charles Taylor's (1985a, 1985b, 1989, 1994) contention that things that are 'significant' or that 'matter' to people are often expressed in qualitative judgments of worth. Such 'strong evaluations' are always made against a shared cultural horizon of meaning, and are constitutive elements of our personal narratives. In order to assess the significance of the BPO / call centre phenomenon in the lives of individual employees, a Narrative Research approach was used for this study, specifically, the 'narratives of practices' (récits de pratiques) methodology (Bertaux 1997; Rouleau 2003). Repeated in-depth interviews over a three-month period were conducted with a snowball sample of 20 call centre employees in Bangalore, India, in order to compose biographical accounts centered around their work experience. In addition, informal interviews with an additional 25 informants, comprising friends and parents of call centre workers; journalists; academics; social workers; activists and religious leaders helped provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the restrictions of time and resources, the difficulty in gaining corporate permissions to conduct confidential interviews, the nonrandom sampling method consequently chosen, and the small number of respondents, this study suffers from limitations of generalizability and replicability. Additionally, since the study was focused on one city, Bangalore, we cannot say to what extent some of the discoveries here may apply to other cities in India. However, since our research interest is in the meanings and significance of the phenomenon for individuals in their personal narratives and evaluations, we are able to glean significant insights from this approach, and make contributions at this level to the literature. Furthermore, it is arguable that even such modest data can uncover some of the important causal mechanisms which interact to sustain the larger phenomenon of offshoring.
In Chapter 4, five representative narrative cases were presented in detail, in order to give us an in-depth sense, from these employees’ own points-of-view, of their experience of work, as well as to help us see how they assess the impact of these jobs on their lives and society. Some of these differences can be attributed to a function of the respondent’s age, gender, social class, previous work experience, and the type of process and company. We then examined in detail the main themes which emerged from the accounts of respondents, and highlighted key similarities and differences. Many of these themes which emerged from their stories confirm observations made by previous studies on the labour process—the difficulty with night-shifts; the monotonous, scripted work; insufficient breaks; health problems; the constant surveillance; difficult and sometimes abusive customers; attempts to create ‘fun’ workplaces; and the reluctance to unionize. Some elements highlighted in these studies, such as the insidious nature of accent-mimicking and ‘locational masking’ (Mirchandani 2003, 2004) were not concerns for many of my respondents, who gave me the impression that these elements are no longer pervasive in many companies.

However, there were also some discoveries in my study which seem to have gone unnoticed by others: 1. a growing concern about the future of the BPO industry in the wake of emerging outsourcing markets; 2. employees’ preference for captive rather than third-party companies, usually because of ‘professionalism’ and status/reputation; 3. the sense of usefulness and indispensability some employees claim to find in helping foreign customers (which is seemingly more enthralling for those of lower-middle class backgrounds); 4. Indian call centre workers are sometimes left to deal with customer problems beyond their scope of influence (e.g., product delivery failures in the home country); 5. employees’ criticism of local Indian management due to power-abuse, corruption, sycophancy, negligence, and lack of training; 6. the high regard held for foreign managers and a ‘western’ style of management, consisting primarily of ‘professionalism’ (discouraging sycophancy/communalism, respecting subordinates, and the value of labour and merit); 7. pervasive mistrust of colleagues in an environment of competitiveness and self-preservation; 8. duty to family as a common rationale for the pursuit of call centre jobs (which can ironically result in relational problems); 9. the possibility of an ‘upgraded’ lifestyle can lead some into consumerism and unmanageable
debt; 10. widespread claims of positive ‘personality improvements,’ particularly, in “self-confidence” and “assertiveness”; 11. the construction of ‘East’ and ‘West,’ where Indian family values and industriousness are extolled, while aspiring to the professionalism and ‘thoroughness’ of the West. Upon analyzing the various logics of evaluation underlying respondents’ narratives through the lens of Boltanski and Thévenot’s ‘Economies of Worth’ model, we saw the predominance of a traditional Domestic logic, centered on hierarchical relationships and the primacy of duty, as well as the importance of the logic of Opinion (the importance of others’ approval and of social status). While elements of the Industrial, Market, Inspirational and Civic logics were also present, it was the Civic logic that seemed to be the weakest, reflecting a lack of interest in collective organization, owing at least in part to the pervasive mistrust of colleagues. While this model shows us how traditional as well as modern principles and logics interact within peoples’ narrative accounts, it is, however, in itself unable to shed much light on the sources of these logics in the broader sociocultural context.

For this reason, in Chapter 6, I attempted to draw on some of the ‘moral sources’ of these evaluations from Hindu traditions that are deeply embedded in Indian society. This allowed me to present a causal mechanism through which various elements of tradition and modernity can mutually enable as well as mutually constrain each other in different ways and under different conditions: New structures of modernity are perceived by employees as a liberation from certain traditional limitations, and often for the pursuit of traditional goals. Yet, these promises seem to fail when these structures also support certain debased forms of these ideals; and consequently, employees aspire to certain values of modernity as an avenue of reform. I have argued that this is a plausible dynamic which may extend to other cultural contexts of globalization, drawing upon different cultural sources and fostering different ‘debased forms.’ Some of the case studies of Philippe d’Iriberne (2003) in Latin America and Africa are instructive in this regard, and illustrate various curious hybrids of tradition and modernity that characterize a global landscape of ‘multiple modernities.’

Yet, this sort of hybridization does not necessarily paint a pretty picture. While I have argued that these workers see these new developments as a form of liberation, it is clear from what we have seen that, for many, it is only a tenuous sort of freedom, and one
that can turn out to be disillusioning. For these people, globalization fails to live up to its promises. Some of these hybrid companies can turn out to incarnate, as one of my respondents put it, the “worst practices” of East and West. The liberating opportunity that is initially enthralling often crumbles under the harsh reality of the draconian aspects of the labour process such as the routinization, scripting, monotony, and surveillance, exacerbated by various forms of corruption and exploitation. Managers are accused of power-abuse (verbal abuse and humiliation; forbidding workers to contact foreign client), sycophancy and communalism. Colleagues are considered opportunistic and untrustworthy; this climate of mistrust feeds the lack of interest in unionization, and employees harbour little hope that any public policy decisions will ever be effectively executed, given the prevalence of nationwide corruption. The lack of transparency with the parent company leaves many Indian employees without a means to voice their concerns and suspicions.

The problems extend beyond the workplace. Some who see an avenue for a better lifestyle (promoted by other forms of globalization such as pervasive advertisements for internationally-branded consumer goods) are, ironically, enticed by call centres of local credit card companies, and can fall victim to serious credit card debt. Others who seek to support their families are unable to spend time with them, and find their relationships suffering. Some claim to have no serious troubles leading a responsible life, while for others, the newfound income and freedom, combined with the stressful working conditions, can lead to excessive smoking, drinking and drugs. Some give up on college education entirely, since these new jobs offer higher starting salaries than conventionally-aspired to routes (e.g., engineering or medicine), but only to discover that credentials still matter a great deal when it comes to promotions and mobility. Many claim to have to contend with a pervasive criticism and negative social image of their profession. Yet, for all its problems, they are unwilling to denounce this phenomenon tout court. Many persist in these jobs, seeing them as opportunities to provide for their families and build a better life, and even those who quit seem to want to preserve these jobs in the country. Yet, in light of such concerns, many of the criticisms of this phenomenon that we have seen are surely not unwarranted.
These are all various pieces of the puzzle that come together from the literature on the phenomenon as well as the present study. There is still a good deal more work to be done. While we have listed various patterns and tendencies above, we simply do not know to what extent these are generalizable to the entire population of Indian call centre workers. We do not yet have nationally or even regionally representative data—again it is important to note that given the diversity of India, comparisons between different regions would be helpful—and a big part of the problem seems to be the difficulty in gaining access to some companies (as, e.g., Upadhya and Vasavi 2006 have noted). An important implication of the present study, for example, would be to assess to what extent the various forms of managerial corruption voiced by my respondents are pervasive in these companies. It is unlikely that simple survey questionnaires administered in the workplace will gain us such sensitive information.

However, given the state of our knowledge on the phenomenon, at this point, representative studies on any of the various topics that we have been examining thus far would be extremely helpful. Ideas here might include a study of whether (and how) gender and social class influence the attractiveness of call centre jobs for individuals; event-history analyses of the rate at which people enter and leave call centre jobs; investigations of relationships with colleagues; how employees spend their time and money; and what factors and conditions might foster the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Additionally, a longitudinal study (not necessarily with a representative sample) that can track the impact of call centre work on individuals and their families over an extended period of time would be an ideal way to extend the investigations we have pursued here.

Certain implications from this study can be drawn for managers as well as social activists. The concerns that many of my respondents have voiced with managerial corruption and exploitation need to be taken seriously, and perhaps structures can be put into place to foster more transparency, or at least, to allow the possibility of anonymous whistle-blowing. Management training would be another important issue, and is a concern for employees who feel humiliated and disrespected by some of their Indian managers. Whether or not such skills can be taught, and whether or not such transparency can be effectively enforced, remain open questions. For social activists who are concerned with the well-being of young people working in these environments, some
suggestions that emerged from a 3-day conference on the BPO phenomenon\textsuperscript{116} include forming networks among activists as well as with parents and important professionals (e.g., psychiatrists, doctors, media, managers); developing blogs and online forums; raising public awareness lifestyle problems associated with BPO jobs; providing workshops for call centre workers on how to handle their finances better and how to lead a healthy and responsible lifestyle; and promoting the need for higher education.

All in all, there still remains a great need for further serious research and study of this phenomenon, and the potential for future investigation is rich.

\textsuperscript{116} Seminar on Media-BPO/Call Centers: Issues and Challenges, Bangalore, March 16-18 2007
Appendices

Appendix 1: Pertinent Studies of Culture and Management

The concern with dimensions of ‘culture’ and ‘meaning’ in the study of management and organizations is by no means new. A growing amount of research over the last few decades has tried to establish that despite the development of similar organizational structures across countries, there are considerable cultural differences that persist nonetheless. While a convergence theorist (of a critical bent) might argue that IBM has spread its tentacles around the globe and is producing clones, others such as Geert Hofstede ([1980] 2001) have tried to present evidence for cultural ‘divergence’ by demonstrating that even across the same multinational corporation, there are differences owing to national cultures. Based on a cross-national survey of IBM subsidiaries in over 40 countries, Hofstede constructed a comparative tool which ranks countries along five factors,\textsuperscript{117} which shows striking differences across national cultures.

The sheer magnitude of Hofstede’s work is commendable, and it has also given us a useful comparative tool which clearly reveals to us the significant influence of national cultural factors. However, his work has also come under a tremendous amount of criticism, on various levels: his methodology, the validity of the studies, the ignorance of the influence of professional and organizational culture, his assumptions about the existence of a stable ‘national culture’ itself, his unwillingness to adequately respond to these criticisms, and so on.\textsuperscript{118} For our purposes here, it should suffice to focus on one prominent criticism: Philippe d’Iribarne (1997) has shown that the ranking of countries along Hofstede’s various dimensions is subject to a great deal of ambiguity. For example,

\textsuperscript{117} Hofstede’s factors are: 1. Power Distance, which is the degree of equality/inequality in the country with respect to wealth or power, and opportunities for upward mobility; 2. Uncertainty Avoidance, or the need for structure and rules vs. the tolerance of ambiguity and risk; 3. Masculinity/Femininity, which has to do with gender differentiation and the degree to which traditional male roles of power and achievement are enforced; 4. Individualism/Collectivism, which examines the degree of importance accorded to individual rights and achievement, and 5. Long-term/Short-term orientation, or the degree to which a society is committed to tradition and long-term rewards, vs. immediate gratification and adaptability (Hofstede, 2001).

\textsuperscript{118} See Baskerville-Morley (2005) for an excellent summary of many of the criticisms raised against Hofstede. Also see McSweeney (2002a, 2002b); also see Yoo and Donthu, 2002.
we may have before us the ‘Power Distance’ rankings of India, Italy, and France and we would be unable to tell if what we have before us refers to the actual ‘power’ a superior has over subordinates, or merely ‘symbolic distance’; nor can we say anything about why these differences exist (d’Iribarne 1997:46). Similarly, a notion such as “individualism” may look very different in different cultures.

Also, Hofstede’s writings have the air of a certain cultural determinism, which on one hand leaves him unable to account for diversity within a national culture, and on the other hand, leave us wondering how he himself (or anyone else for that matter) is able to rise above this determinism and actually come to understand other cultures. In addition, the attempt to capture the enduring, unchanging ‘core’ of a culture may be a futile pursuit altogether. While it is possible that certain cultural values, practices, traditions, and beliefs may endure for centuries, we should keep in mind that these are not static, and are constantly subject to change, and to influence from external as well as internal forces.

It is ironic that while Hofstede’s insistence is on the distinctiveness of cultural significations and values, it is precisely on the question of cultural meaning or significance that typological studies such as his own fall short. Jacob (2005) has similarly criticized the work of Fons Trompenaars (1993) for presenting cultural differences without being able to tell us anything about the ‘meaning’ of these differing elements:

[For example, a]ccording to Trompenaars, both Malaysian managers and South African managers strongly prefer relationship-oriented styles to task-oriented styles. However, there is no evidence to suggest that identical relationship-oriented styles can be deployed in both Malaysia and South Africa. If entirely different types of relationship-oriented styles are to be adopted in these two countries, then Trompenaars’ typology has little practical value (2005:516).

To move beyond the limits of such approaches, other authors suggest a more ethnographic tack which could allow for a more precise and adequate understanding of national cultures. Notable here is the work of Philippe d’Iribarne, who also attempts trans-cultural comparisons of organizations, but using a more interpretivist method with in-depth interviews, trying to understand how individuals make sense of their actions and their organizational reality. One of the central aspects of his work is the attempt to draw out the internal ‘logic’ characteristic of a national culture, which structures their mode of organization. While his earlier work ([1989] 1993) focused on the notion of national distinctiveness or ‘divergence’, his more recent work (2003) focuses on the dynamic
between local cultures and globalization, which is similar to what some call a ‘crossvergence’ approach (Ralston et al, 1993, 1995, 1997; Jacob, 2005),\(^{119}\) which resonates very much with the idea of Multiple Modernities that we looked at in the Introduction.\(^{120}\)

One of the strengths of d’Iribarne’s approach is that it allows us to take into consideration the strong evaluations of actors. For example, a subordinate in an organization in France who is disgruntled at his supervisor might do his task because not fulfilling it would be beneath the dignity of his professional honour. An American in a similar position might fulfil this obligation primarily because he has made a deal, even if it only an implicit contract, and not living up to it would be unfair. d’Iribarne’s point seems to be that while we might see the same sort of action going on, the way the actors understand what they are doing has important cultural specificities. But d’Iribarne’s work has problems of its own that Dupuis (2004) has pointed out: For one, his terminology seems to be inconsistent: for example, the value of ‘honour’ in France is sometimes referred to as a ‘logic,’ sometimes as the ‘ultimate referent,’ sometimes ‘stable core’ (noyau dur). Holland has no such logic but a ‘spirit’ of consensus. Yet, since similar ideals seem to be found in all societies, the specificity of an ideal in a particular culture becomes hard to define. d’Iribarne’s main weakness, similar to Hofstede, is his attempt to find a single ordering or characteristic principle, and an inability to account for a plurality of evaluative structures. For example, as Dupuis (2004:28) points out, his emphasis on ‘contract’ more than ‘community’ in the US leaves him unable to explain charismatic leadership and ‘strong cultures’ in American firms.\(^{121}\)

The notion of a single structuring category characterize a culture does not withstand scrutiny. This is relevant to our concern with the Indian context. Here, the caste-system, which is often considered such a defining element, can be shown under

---

\(^{119}\) Oddly enough, the notion of crossvergence too has come under criticism for focusing only on a hybrid ‘middle ground’ of older ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ structures; what is proposed instead is “transvergence” (Gupta and Wang 2004) which involves reinterceptions of history and creation of entirely new forms altogether. But this seems unnecessary; rather than adding to the growing repertoire of neologisms, it should be reasonable to include this notion under the crossvergence umbrella.

\(^{120}\) d’Iribarne’s (2003) case-studies on how management practices from certain cultures find cultural supports in other national contexts (e.g., the success of Japanese TQM in Morocco because it was seen as supportive of Islamic values) resonate with this idea.

\(^{121}\) See also Allali’s (2002) criticisms of d’Iribarne’s work.
historical analysis to be a highly politicized and dynamic phenomenon, not until quite recently having taken on the Brahmin-dominated static hierarchy (Brimnes 2002:250). For a country such as India which has never homogenously shared a common language, history, customs or institutions, most attempts at defining an essence of any sort (even religion) have been inadequate constructions. Especially in the face of globalization and the complex global-local interactions, it is unlikely that any one ‘value’ can stake claim to being the key structuring principle or logic or spirit. Rather, it seems reasonable to propose, as Dupuis (2004) does, a pluralistic dynamic of interaction of values. This resonates very much with the initial arguments I laid out in the Introduction for why we need to recognize both ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ as comprising a plurality of values. I have tried to argue in this study that Boltanski and Thévenot’s Economies of Worth model allows us such a pluralistic framework, which also resonates well with the Multiple Modernities approach.

---

122 Brimnes (2002) is strongly critical of Louis Dumont’s (1966) famous analysis of Indian society as being fundamentally or essentially hierarchy-based, as is Ganguly (2005).

123 This is evident in the significant amount of debate that went into the creation of the Indian constitution—the forced creation of a national identity, which was clearly a project of modernity (Brimnes 2002:252-256).
Appendix 2: Elements of the ‘Economies of Worth’ model

1. Cities

These are Weberian ‘ideal-types’ or theoretical constructs, each of which represents a certain hypergood or common superior principle. Their existence is only at an abstract, theoretical level. They are “metaphysical political entities” comprised of individual entities (persons and objects) as well as conventions that are more universal, “which, by the same token as cultures or languages, have a historical existence, and can therefore be situated in time and space” (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005: 520). In defining these cities, the authors drew from two sources: 1. data from empirical fieldwork on situations of disagreement, justification and the resolution of conflict, and 2. sources of political philosophy where such argumentative structures have already been developed with logical coherence. This is because the different forms of the common good that we make reference to in western society have been developed in the classics of political philosophy; in fact, “the constructions of political philosophy are today inscribed in institutions and mechanisms (for example, polling stations, workshops, the media or concerts, family gatherings, etc.), which are constantly informing actors as to what they must do in order to behave normally” (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005: 20n55)

So the six cities and their sources are: 1. The inspirational city (based on the principle of inspiration, creativity, authenticity etc.) drawn from Augustine’s Civitate Dei; 2. The domestic city (based on seniority and tradition), from Bossuet’s La Politique tirée des propres paroles de l’écriture sainte; 3. The reputational city (based on honour, or high opinion of others) from Hobbes’ Leviathan; 4. The civic/collective city (focused on the collective, ‘the general will’ of the community) from Rousseau; 5. The commercial city (based on market performance) from Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations; and 6. the industrial city (based on efficiency) from Saint-Simon’s work. Boltanski and

124 There are inconsistencies in the English translations of their works; Boltanski & Chiapello’s (2002) paper calls them ‘regimes of justification,’ whereas the 2005 English translation of Le Nouvel Esprit uses ‘cities’.

125 Though such a model is synchronic, frozen in time, as it were, they add a qualification that these cities still “bear the trace of the period when the form of existence that each of them takes... was autonomized and prioritized as such” (ibid.).
Chiapello’s (1999) work proposes in addition a seventh city, the ‘project-oriented’ or ‘projective’ city (based on being ‘networked’), and the evidence here is drawn from management texts.

2. Worlds

Contrasted with the aforementioned cities, which exist only at a theoretical level, worlds are the observable dimension which we can grasp in people’s argumentation itself (and plausibly also in the telling of their narratives). They represent a coherent set of elements that form a normative argumentative structure based around a Common Superior Principle or Hypergood. They are the precursors to cities, embodied and lived out, and only later on theorized; in other words, “worlds precede cities” (2005: 520). A world has a coherent structure or ‘grammar’ of a world which can be categorized along several dimensions: a certain ideal (we can say hypergood) that is shared in common (in order to make claims to legitimacy), certain implications at the level of identity (e.g., what ‘greatness’ consists of, i.e., what a person ought to aspire to, and on the contrary, what ‘smallness’ would mean), and so on. Thus, these worlds can be compared along some basic dimensions:

1. Common Superior principle (or Hypergood): The ideal or standard that is aspired to and provides the reference-point for judgment
2. Relations between beings: The basis or mode of relationship with others which coheres best with the standard
3. State of greatness: What one should admire, or aspire to be, in light of the ideal
4. State of littleness: What one could ‘strongly evaluate’ as deplorable
5. Directory of Subjects in the world: Typical categories of persons involved
6. Directory of Objects in the world: Typical objects or processes relevant to the ideal
7. Relation of Greatness: Relationship of those who are ‘great’ to those who are small
8. Formula of Investment: What may have to be renounced for the sake of the ideal
9. Model test: What demonstrates success according to this logic
10. Forms of evidence: What shows that this ideal is actually serving the common good
11. Dignity of persons: Key human need which is fulfilled in the ideal
12. Harmonious figure of natural order: What image or concept best symbolizes this ideal

---

126 This is the translation used in their 2002 article
127 In their 2005 translation of the book. However, the use of the term ‘projective’ seems inaccurate; the previous translation is preferable.
128 I follow their translations and definitions for most of these from Boltanski & Chiapello (2002: 8-9)
### Table A.1. The Economies of Worth Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common superior principle (general standard)</th>
<th>Inspiration</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>Civic</th>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Market</th>
<th>Industrial</th>
<th>Connectionist / Project-based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relations between beings</td>
<td>Passion, communicating dreams, vision</td>
<td>Trust, education, reproduction</td>
<td>Solidarity, gathering for collective action</td>
<td>Recognition (fame); Persuasion</td>
<td>Exchange; business relations</td>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>To connect, coordinate, adjust with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State of greatness</td>
<td>Spontaneity, creativity</td>
<td>Kindness, benevolence, wisdom</td>
<td>Representative, Official</td>
<td>Reputed, renowned</td>
<td>Desirable, Valuable</td>
<td>Functional, high performance</td>
<td>Flexible, adaptable, tolerant, autonomous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State of littleness</td>
<td>Routine, everyday, &quot;normal&quot;</td>
<td>Shameless</td>
<td>Divided, isolated, disengaged</td>
<td>Unknown, banal</td>
<td>Loser</td>
<td>Inefficient, non-functional</td>
<td>Inadaptable, authoritarian, rigid, intolerant, rooted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directory of subjects</td>
<td>Artists, 'creative' people, children (?)</td>
<td>Family members, ancestors, elders, minors</td>
<td>Collective groups</td>
<td>Celebrities,</td>
<td>Competitors, clients</td>
<td>Professionals, workers</td>
<td>Coach, Expert, Client, Innovator, Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directory of objects</td>
<td>Emotionally invested objects, Gifts, patrimony, specific assets</td>
<td>Regulations, rights, laws</td>
<td>Names, brands, signs</td>
<td>Forms of wealth: market goods and services</td>
<td>Techniques, methods</td>
<td>New Technologies, informal relations, partnerships, alliances, outsourcing, network organizations, projects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation of greatness</td>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
<td>Honour, subordination</td>
<td>Adhesion, delegation</td>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>Possession</td>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Add to network, Makes employable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formula of investment (price to pay)</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>Duty</td>
<td>Solidarity; renunciation of particular for universal</td>
<td>Publicized (renunciation of privacy)</td>
<td>Opportunism</td>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>Flexibility, tolerance, location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model test</td>
<td>Interior adventure</td>
<td>Familial ceremony</td>
<td>Demonstrations for just causes</td>
<td>Presentation of the event</td>
<td>Business, market close</td>
<td>Functional tests</td>
<td>Accomplishing a project and beginning another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of judgment and forms of evidence</td>
<td>Flash of genius; certitude of intuition</td>
<td>Appreciation and trust; Setting example</td>
<td>Verdict of scrutiny; Legal text (bill, code, etc.)</td>
<td>Judgment of opinion; Success, renown</td>
<td>Money, profit</td>
<td>Measures, Performance</td>
<td>Insert into network, make participate, consult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dignity of persons</td>
<td>Passion, creation</td>
<td>Relational harmony; wisdom</td>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>The need to be connected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmonious figure of natural order</td>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>Family environment</td>
<td>Republic</td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Market</td>
<td>System</td>
<td>The network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Adapted and compiled from Amblad et al. (1996:88); Boltanski & Chiapello (1999:165-190); Eymard-Duverney et al. (2005)
Appendix 3: Summaries of Respondents

1. Summary of Narratives

In Chapter 4, I presented narratives of six respondents in detail. Below is a brief summary of the other respondents, as well as which of the cases from Chapter 4 their stories and judgments resonate most with.

AS: is in his late 20s. After acquiring an engineering degree, he worked 3 years in the technical support call centre of a captive PC manufacturer. While he greatly appreciated the company’s reputation for integrity, its code of ethics, and the example of its founder, he saw various forms of corruption and negligence creep in over the years. He still admires the global company and says he would be willing to work for them “anywhere in the world but never in India,” where the standards are so readily ignored. He now works in a software engineering firm.

Similar to: Ajay, Julie, Tarun

CA: is in her late-40s, and a mother of two. Once her kids moved out of home to take up jobs overseas, she wanted to do something useful with her time, and so decided to work in a captive call centre. Although she enjoyed being around young people, she found it disturbing that the managers—who were “kids” themselves—behaved in inappropriate ways with each other. She also found that they treated their subordinates, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds, very badly. A couple of young employees who had migrated from the north-eastern part of the country\(^{129}\) committed suicide. Soon after this incident, she decided to quit.

Similar to: Sally, Julie

CH: is in his early 20s, and had worked together with Girish and Nikhila for 4 years in some of the same call centres. He shares their frustration at the industry, having

\(^{129}\) Many of the north-eastern states in India are rife with armed conflict and unemployment. As a consequence, several of the younger generations migrate to big urban centres such as Bangalore in the hope of finding employment to sustain their families back home. According to one of my respondents, CA, since these workers often lack educational qualifications and language skills, they are often exploited.
himself suffered several of the negative lifestyle consequences on his health, education and family relationships. He has now managed to find a job as a software programmer.

Similar to: Girish and Nikhila

CS: is in his late-20s, and works as a voice-and-accent trainer for a training firm which conducts external training for various captive and third-party companies. He joined the BPO industry with a master’s degree in software engineering. After working as a technical support agent and then a process trainer for a couple of years, decided to move into voice training. He has been in the industry for 5 years, and finds a great sense of purpose in motivating agents to develop a positive attitude and outlook on life.

Similar to: Julie

DE: is in her mid-20s, and is a medical student. In the middle of her second year at university she decided to take a break from her studies and earn some money. Along with some of her college friends, she worked for a summer in a third-party call centre. Though the task of answering phones was monotonous, she insists that her experience was a lot of fun; she got to spend time with good friends, as well as make some good spending money. At the end of the summer she returned to college, and said she wouldn’t be opposed to working the job again later, though only as a short-term job.

Similar to: Julie, Nikhila

FR: is in her mid-20s, and was just promoted to the position of process-manager. She has been with a captive call centre company for 3.5 years. She started out as an agent, and was soon promoted to team-leader. Although she initially struggled with office politics, this is no longer a problem. Her main challenge now has become managing her subordinates.

Similar to: Julie, Tarun

KU: is in his early-20s, and is in his final year of a hotel management degree. At one point in his studies he decided to take a break from school, and worked 6 months in a third-party call centre. The company was desperate for workers when he joined, so he
didn’t even have to go through training. He had already dealt with night-work before he joined, so he didn’t find the experience too demanding. His main problem at work was with the monotony, but he found the job to be a good experience overall.

Similar to: Julie

KR: is in his mid-20s, and has been working for the past year in a third-party call centre. In his view, just about every aspect of this company “sucks,” from draconian policies to arrogant managers to opportunistic colleagues. However, he is glad that his ability to speak and understand English has grown significantly, which he considers a necessary asset for the future. He also works part-time as a fashion model, and hopes for a ‘break’ in this industry.

Similar to: Ajay, Girish.

LA: is in her mid-20s, and worked for a year in the Human Resources department of a third-party call centre which dealt with several American banks. Her job involved interaction with both HR managers as well as employees on a daily basis. While most of her work involved standard processes such as payroll and compensation, she was frequently involved in conflict-resolution between managers and employees as well as between employees.

Similar to: Julie

MA: is in her early-50s, and has been working as an in-house soft-skills trainer for a third party call centre over the past year. She had recently returned to India after living in the US for 30 years, where she taught and then served as principal at a high-school. She is glad be in an environment where she can continue to teach young people. However, she finds her students here less respectful than she had imagined. Additionally, she is disturbed by the fact that in order to gain rankings, trainers resort to games that she considered lewd and crass, and at this rate, she is not sure if she will be able to stay on with the company.

Similar to: Sally, Tarun.
NG: is in his early 50s, and took up a call centre job after his family business failed. He worked for a year and a half as a call centre agent in a third-party company, and for another year there as a trainer. He has now decided to start his own call centre company, but one which caters only to Indian customers. He shares many of Sally’s concerns about the moral corruption of the young, and felt demeaned by his (younger) managers. Yet, he enjoyed training, and tried to help young people who lacked the skills and confidence to enter the industry.

Similar to: Sally, Tarun.

OF: is in his early 20s. He has a background in electronics engineering, and moved to Bangalore a year ago to work in a third-party call centre because it paid about 3 times more than his previous job. Coming from a very traditional background, and has found the culture of cities, and especially call centres, difficult to adapt to. In addition to feeling ostracised by his colleagues because he refuses to partake in many of their activities (smoking, drinking, parties), he is upset that his managers have been “eating up” his commissions. He hopes to move into a captive call centre soon.

Similar to: Ajay, Sally

PJ: is in his mid-20s, and has been working with a captive call centre for 3 years now. While he didn’t care much for call-centre work, he was promoted to process trainer a year ago, and very much enjoys the experience of training and speaking in public. He sees good potential for his career in the industry, and is glad that his parents have been very supportive throughout.

Similar to: Julie, Ajay

TE: is in her mid-20s, and has been working for a captive insurance company for over 3 years. She had started out as an agent, and found the initial transition into night-work very difficult. However, the growth in the company was encouraging, and the company paid for her to train in the UK, and then to do her MBA. She is on her way to becoming a training manager in the company.

Similar to: Julie, Nikhila
2. Summary of Respondents’ Perceptions

The table below presents a summary of respondents’ judgments along the lines of the basic conceptual framework of the study, using the coding categories presented earlier in Table 5.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>CH</th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>DE</th>
<th>FR</th>
<th>KR</th>
<th>KU</th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>NG</th>
<th>OF</th>
<th>PJ</th>
<th>TE</th>
<th>G.N</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW-LP.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EW</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shells</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accents</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polities</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Managers</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Managers</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third party co.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captive company</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS</td>
<td>Physical Health</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL</td>
<td>HAB</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-ACT</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-FAM</td>
<td>PCC**</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
<td>, √</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC</td>
<td>PCC**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Identity</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC-REL**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on society</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Legend**

++ Judgment: strongly positive
+ Judgment: somewhat positive
~ Judgment: ambivalent
- Judgment: somewhat negative
-- Judgment: strongly negative

** FAM-PCC: [Family’s perspective of BPO/call centres], [Respondent’s agreement (✓) or disagreement (✗)]

** SOC-PCC: [Indian society’s perspective of BPO/call centres], Respondent’s agreement (✓) or disagreement (✗)]

** SOC-REL: [Religious institutions’ perspective of BPO/call centres], [Respondent’s agreement (✓) or disagreement (✗)]

Not asked or Did not answer
Bibliography


Bhagat, Chetan. 2005. One Night @ the Call Centre. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.


Mirchandani, Kiran. 2003. “Making Americans: Transnational Call Centre Work in


