

## **International Call Centers: Consumptions capes of Urban India**

### **Papia Raj**

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
 Indian Institute of Technology Patna

**Email:** praj@iitp.ac.in

### **Aditya Raj**

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
 Indian Institute of Technology Patna

**Email:** aditya.raj@iitp.ac.in

*International call centers have emerged as major employment providers for young adults in New Delhi. To meet the expectations of the Western clients these call center employees are required to live in a time-space capsule injected with culture of some other countries. Based on the qualitative analysis of fieldwork data, we argue that such expectations and requirements have a great influence on the daily lives of employees, impacting upon their lifestyles, consumption patterns, and social relations. Hence, this paper analyses such issues and portrays the role of call centers- active agents of globalization- in causing socio-economic changes in New Delhi.*

**[Key Words:** call centers; social impacts of globalization; young adults; India; consumptionscapes]

### **Introduction**

Call centres - forms of back office employment - are high on the list of service industry jobs that have been outsourced and relocated to India. Conditions of employment in Indian call centres are unique. Principle among these is that differences in time zones require employees to work at night to cater to the needs of their European and North American customers. Employees are expected and trained to acquire an accent common to the country for which they are working, and to adopt English language pseudonyms to put their customers "at ease" (Bach 2001). In short, they are expected to develop a different identity while at work. Moreover, apart from a generous salary package (by local standards), wrapped up with various other monetary incentives, these call centers provide an office atmosphere which promotes a Western lifestyle under the garb of professionalism. The working hours, training processes and work ethic all encourage a particular way of life that is not the norm in Indian workplaces in particular, nor Indian society at large. Together, these factors have a considerable impact on the daily life of the employees triggering, in turn, a range of subtle and not so subtle socio-economic changes. Through an in-depth analysis of call center employment, this article provides a

nuanced understanding of the role of service sector workplaces— active agents in the process of globalization - as vehicles for changing consumption decisions and lifestyle choices among young adult employees in developing countries, such as India.

This article concentrates on call centers located in the environs of New Delhi- Noida and Gurgaon and is presented in three sections. Firstly, a conceptual framework for the study is developed that draws upon work on service sector outsourcing and globalization, and the social impacts of globalization among youth in Asia. Secondly, we present an analysis of the socio-economic impacts of call center jobs which we found through an in-depth fieldwork, to be occurring in New Delhi. We conclude the article by engaging in a discussion of how call centers fit within the framework of consumption capes.

### **Conceptualising Call Centers**

In the contemporary globalized economy, the service sector has assumed a crucial role. The globalization of national economies and advancements in information technology have encouraged a trade in services that has overcome the geographical barriers of distance resulting in David Harvey's (1989) 'time-space compression' of service industries (see also O'Connor and Daniels 2001; Price and Blair 1989). As well, many developing country governments are liberalizing their economies to invite Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) thus providing additional impetus for the service sector to expand. A common trend in this increasingly global economy is the outsourcing of services, with many such service industries now being outsourced to developing countries that can provide a large and appropriately skilled labour pool (James 1993; Lakha 1994; Parthasarathy 2000; Larner 2001; Monbiot 2003; Hiebert and Slater 2003; Thottam 2004).

Apart from generating employment, globalization has also stimulated substantial socio-economic changes in various Asian countries. Turning to focus on the majority of employees in outsourced service sector jobs, studies carried out in other Asian countries regarding comparable newly emerging cohorts of middle-class youth, include those in Malaysia (Kahn 1996), Indonesia (Robinson and Goodman 1996), Korea (Kim 2000), China (Farrer 2002), and Vietnam (Nguyen 2002, 2003). Such studies reveal that local social and cultural norms have undergone numerous changes as a result of globalization, and that many urban young people in such countries are found to be aspiring to achieve identities that mirror those of their counterparts in the Western world (Beng-Huat 2000; Kjeldgaard 2003; Pilkington and Johnson 2003).

To date however, there is a dearth of academic research analyzing the changing consumption patterns and lifestyles of young people within the expanding new middle class in India, especially with reference to call centers. Recently, a few studies have emerged that address social change in urban India (Shurmer-Smith 2000; Saldanha 2002; Verma and Sharma 2003; Mathur and Parameswaran 2004; Wessel 2004), but none refer to call centers. However,

following the outsourcing phenomenon, recently overseas researchers have been drawn to examine the working conditions as well as management strategies of international call centres in India. Studies conducted by Moynihan (2002), Chung (2003), Mirchandani (2004), Krishnamurthy (2005), Taylor and Bain (2005), Noroha and D'cruz (2006), Poster (2007) show that the labour expectations of customer service representatives in India are very demanding not only in terms of the work-schedule but also the training processes which train them to create the illusion for American and European customers that they are interacting with an employee based in their own country. Shome (2006) in her study of call centres in India theorises how the cultural politics of call centres, and global flows of information technology, manifest new and emerging frameworks of understanding diaspora. In the Indian context, most locally produced research on call centers in India deals with their economic implications for the country in terms of employment creation and revenue generation (Unni and Rani 2000; Rama 2002). This study draws upon these literatures, but focuses more directly on the socio-economic impacts for young employees of call center workplaces in India - sites where globalizing forces meet local employees head on.

### **Socio-Economic Impacts of Call Center Employment**

When analysing the socio-economic impacts of call center jobs it is important to understand the salary structure and monetary incentives involved. Salaries in call center jobs are high according to Indian standards. This increases the purchasing power parity of this group, escalating their conspicuous consumption and, in the long run, allowing them to lead lifestyles that they could not otherwise afford.

While the salaries for call center work differ significantly depending on the job profile, the minimum income is around Rs.4000 (US\$ ~ 86) a month. On top of this, various monetary incentives top up the base salary which at times equal or even outrank the basic pay scale, resulting in employees potentially earning up to twice their base salary. Or, more colloquially, as Sulagna, a call center agent, explained “as a call center agent one can make loads of money...” Though the incentive schemes differs among call centers, the main purpose of these incentives is always to motivate employees to perform better and increase their efficiency, with agents also gaining extra pay for working on certain national holidays such as *Diwali* and *Dussehra*.

When respondents were asked why they joined a call center, the financial rewards were central among 90 per cent of them. For these agents the call centers offer an opportunity to earn some extra money that would provide them with economic independence and allow them to spend on items otherwise not possible with their previous limited income, which until then had usually been in the shape of pocket money from their parents. In their discussion of young people's economic independence in Western countries, Bowlby et al (1998) note that finding one's first paid job is a step of great significance to most young people. It offers an independent source of income and provides

their first taste of independence from parental financial control. As a result, such youth often feel free to spend on items of their choice without being questioned. An analysis of my field information suggests that for almost all of the young adults working as call center agents in New Delhi, this was their first experience of paid work and, the economic gains in the call centers provide a lot of disposable income enabling these employees to engage in very high levels of conspicuous consumption, to which we turn next.

### **Conspicuous consumption**

With such relatively high income packages, call center agents have surfaced as central urban consumers of goods and services in a number of Indian cities. After joining call center drastic changes occurred in their expenditure preferences and patterns. Given their age group, they are relatively free from familial responsibilities which allow them to spend freely on themselves. Indeed, as Beng-Huat (2000, 14) states, this age bracket is a period in one's life which is "a window for unlimited consumption, constrained only by financial circumstances". More specifically, it is evident that agents who continue to live with their families have in fact their entire income to spend on self-gratification since they do not pay any rent. Nonetheless, the first few months' salary is often spent on buying gifts for family members and thus trying to highlight economic independence while portraying an adult identity in the household.

It was noted that this cohort represents consumers ready to spend on items that could ascribe to them a specific social class. While spending primarily on consumer goods, this often equated to extravagant purchases, as well as the promotion of a certain lifestyle. Impulse buys appeared to occur frequently. Common lists of expenditures ranged from buying sophisticated expensive cell phones to fashionable, brand labeled clothes. Almost two-thirds of agents interviewed sported the latest model cell phone, replete with internet connection and camera, and reported that their maximum expenditure was cell phone related- be it changing the model, or paying high bills.

Other than cell phones, these employees also spend a lot on clothes. Indeed buying clothes appears to be something of an obsession among these agents. Preeti, a 22 year old female call center agent, commented passionately that "almost half my salary is spent every month buying clothes and shoes. I love to wear the latest style." Yet it is not the focus on clothes alone, but the need for these to be *branded* clothes that is striking. The office atmosphere at the call centers where they work is fundamental in instigating this consumption pattern among call center employees. Role models to replicate are abundant, from higher officials to frequent visitors from abroad, all working in Western branded clothes. Shopping then is clearly one of the preferred pastimes of call center agents. Their shopping patterns portray an affinity towards conspicuous consumption, with goods bought not so much for their utility than for their social value (Mason 1983). Following Giddens (1991), consumption can play a central role in constructing a new sense of identity based on and around the

possession and ownership of status-conferring goods. People thus create, mould and alter personal identities through consumption. Call center employees' choices of shopping sites provide an interesting angle to this discussion. Their most favourite shopping places include the upmarket shopping malls in the city. These multi-storied malls closely resemble North American and European malls and house stores displaying expensive items, many imported. These agents frequent such malls not only for shopping purposes but because they are perceived as ideal places to 'hangout', even for dating. Such locations are preferable to traditional market places because of the ambience, complete with Western music and air conditioning that attracts a young and vibrant fashionable crowd. It is with such Western, upmarket locations that call center employees want to identify.

Clubbing and partying also form an important aspect of these young adults' conspicuous consumption basket. Their motto is "work hard and party harder" (Kalyan, call center trainer). The most desired sites for such activities are stylish clubs and discotheques located in various parts of Delhi, including *Mo Joes*, *Budha Lounge*, *Take Your Chances*, *Sahara* and *Floats*. The odd working hours contribute to their frequent visits to these locales. The agents explained that after a stressful period at work, a few hours of dancing with friends acted as a relaxing mechanism. Thus, as Malbon (1998) notes, with regards to UK nightclubs, dancing can provide a release from many of the accepted norms and customs of the social spaces of everyday life, such as social distance, conformity, and reserve or inattention. In clubbing the young call center agents find a unique blend of pleasures and an escape route from the rigors and stresses of the 'real world', which provides very few opportunities for releasing such stresses.

In addition to all these conspicuous consumption activities, the call center agents also spend a lot on eating out. Indeed, dining out has become quite 'a fad' among this cohort. Dining out twice a week is quite normal, at times even exceeding five times a week. Though there are no fixed preferences for any particular restaurants, favourite locations for fast food include *McDonald's*, *Pizza Hut*, *Subway*, *Domino's Pizza*, and *Nirulas*. Alternatively, for more refined dining their preferences "depend on the mood" (Priya, an agent). All these restaurants – both fast food and more refined - are expensive compared with the regular Indian standard, attracting upwardly mobile and wealthy clients.

The call center agents are also great movie lovers. Although they love to watch the latest 'homemade' Bollywood hits, their inclination is more towards Hollywood movies. The influences of their jobs are even apparent in more subtle ways as one of my respondents noted that after joining a call center job he is able to better understand Hollywood movies, especially in terms of the accents and specific word usage, not to mention some of the locations that the agents have to learn about. Even their choice of movie theatres reflects a specific trend of consumption. Most of them prefer to watch movies in any of

the *Priya Village Roadshow* (PVR) theatres. The price of tickets at these theatres is almost ten times that of other theatres in the city. Thus, from the above discussion I infer that call center agents are not only consumers of goods and services, but additionally - to use Massey's (1998) words - they are also consumers of space. Their preferences of specific upmarket shopping malls, nightclubs, restaurants, and even movie theatres reflect this line of reasoning. Thus, based on this analysis we would agree with Crompton (2003) who notes that consumption practices and related lifestyles serve to differentiate between social groupings and help to reinforce and reproduce social hierarchies. These agents, through their consumption decisions are certainly working to differentiate themselves from the masses and identify with the global (read Western) community at large. Ultimately such consumption decisions promote changes in their lifestyle practices, which we discuss next.

### **Changing lifestyles**

"Ever since I joined [call center] my lifestyle has changed completely", explained Tapas, a male call center agent. Lifestyles of call center agents are influenced by a variety of factors. Most notable are the office atmosphere, changing consumption patterns, and as a result, employees' shifting views of the world. As noted above their consumption practices are directed towards leading a specific lifestyle- one that represents, particularly, the lifestyle of upper middle class and the new rich in India and which is also strongly guided by Western influences. This is often in direct contrast to the lifestyles of these employees' parents and older generations in India.

Agents explained how they started to develop various Western hobbies and practice certain habits which are not common in mainstream Indian culture but are considered to be increasingly fashionable. Nearly three-fourth of the agents noted that their ultimate aim is to enjoy life, their concept of enjoyment lying in pursuing certain habits, some of the prominent ones being regular consumption of alcoholic drinks and cigarette smoking; having relationships with colleagues and engaging in pre- and also extra-marital sexual activities. All such behaviours are acceptable in the call center industry, as Sawant stated "in call center *sab kuchh chalta hai* [everything is justified]", but are certainly not in conformity with usual Indian society norms.

Often to overcome stress at work and to cope with odd working hours agents started cigarette smoking. Though smoking is more common among men (70 per cent), a notable percentage (20 per cent) of women compared to Indian norms working at call centers also develops this habit. The women we interviewed who smoked argued that it is a trait of modernization and it also negates gender differences. However, in India, smoking habits of middle class women are not viewed in positive light. Consuming alcohol regularly has also become very common among call center agents. Again, these habits are considered marks of being 'modern' and a characteristic of belonging to the upwardly mobile middle class (call center agents, pers. comm; Key informant). In call centers partying take place regularly as part of the motivational efforts to



overcome the monotony of the job. Such parties are held in upmarket discotheques or pubs and the food and alcoholic drinks at them, are paid for by the call centers. These office organized parties offer avenues for these young people to experiment and indulge in such drinking. Some (nearly 62 per cent) develop a habit of over-indulging on a regular basis consequently hampering their health. About four-fifths of my participants responded that before they joined the call center they were not in the habit of consuming alcohol, and after initially joining the call center they would avoid alcoholic drinks at work parties. Peer pressure also plays an important role, since among call center employees alcoholic drinks are considered to be an essential part of 'enjoyment'. Such drinking practices are not limited to pubs and clubs. If the shift is over at or a little after midnight, then it is quite common for call center agents to visit the nearby *dhabas* for drinking. These are convenient for call center employees as they are on their way from work. Over half the employees utilize alcohol and tobacco products to overcome the strain of being awake the whole night. After such a shift, they are partial to sitting at such *dhabas*, eating and drinking with friends rather than going directly back home. Thus the 'bar culture' promoted by the call centers and actively pursued by the agents, along with odd working hours, legitimizes the habits of smoking and consuming alcoholic drinks.

Moreover, the odd working shifts also act as an alibi to foster a particular lifestyle, which otherwise would not have been so easy for this cohort to follow. The agents, mainly who are from Delhi, reported that even when they have holidays, sometimes they tell their parents they have to go to work, so that they can spend the night either at a pub or at their partner's place. They explained that since the agents are not allowed to take calls on their cell phones while on duty, therefore, on such occasions when they lie to their parents, there is no way to trace them as they would not answer the calls. Such activities lead these agents to be involved in pre-marital sexual activities, not traditionally accepted in Indian society. Moreover, the agents did not consider it improper to show physical intimacy with their partners even at the work place and sexual acts in call centers are on the rise. We would argue that such behaviour could be attributed to the fact that in the call center these agents try to imitate their myopic vision of the social life of the Western society that they gather through glimpses of viewing the various TV soaps that make up part of their training. As a result they feel what is accepted in the West could also be accepted in India. Ekta, a trainer, mentioned "their [agents'] mindset changes. They feel like they are Americans and everything like –they talk like them, they act like them."

Due to long working hours most employees develop close relationships with their colleagues and it is not unusual for some of the agents to change partners with changing shifts and processes. Despite having a boyfriend/girlfriend outside work, they also end up having a partner at the call center as well, primarily due to lack of time they are able to spend with their outside partners. Other forms of relationships also develop in call centers as

these young agents practice 'speed dating', a new concept in India (and different from the North American version), where people meet at a pub or disco and exchange phone numbers and start to date each other. Very often such dating practices lead to sexual relationships and are usually very sporadic and do not materialize into long-term relationships.

In sum, the call center agents are leading a lifestyle which is neither common nor traditional in India. These individuals are thus often considered 'fast' by their parents as well as the society in general. Saswati, mother of a call center agent commented: "They [call center agents] lead a very fast life. You tell them anything, they will say you are old-fashioned you don't know...." Though their changing lifestyle has become one of the most discussed topics in the media, both in India and abroad, it has painted a tainted view of call centers, stigmatizing these jobs. Many Indian parents are becoming aware of these issues and are not very positive about the idea of their children joining this industry (parents of call center agents, pers .comm.).

### **Conclusions**

#### Call Centers as Engines of Social Change

An examination of the micro-dynamics of call center employment in New Delhi reveals that these call centers act as catalysts of socio-economic and cultural change. They have profound impacts on the daily lives of the agents and in a variety of ways encourage them to live a particular lifestyle increasingly guided by principles of consumerism and Western values. The habits and characteristics that employees learn or adopt at the call centers as a part of their employment become reflected and even accentuated in their everyday life. Through rigorous training the call centers socialise their agents in accordance with the culture of the country for which they are working. The call centers also encourage a Western culture at work which is not in compliance with mainstream traditional Indian culture, and as a result, the social ambience legitimizes certain social behaviours which otherwise would not be accepted in the Indian society at large. Due to such factors and despite the comparatively high salaries, call center jobs have failed to gain the recognition of being a prestigious job in India. On the contrary, these forms of employment come with certain social stigma. Many times parents from Delhi do not like to disclose to their friends and extended family if their children are in call centers (pers. comm.). Also it is not very easy for agents from elsewhere to find housing in Delhi if their landlords come to know that they are call center employees. This is mainly due to the lifestyle associated with call center jobs - odd hours of work and partying - both somewhere else and at home. Landlords believe that such habits will have a bad influence on their own children and bring disrepute to themselves.

Despite the fact that call center jobs are not recognised as prestigious in India, it is evident from this analysis that call center agents have emerged as major urban consumers. Based on their consumption decisions and lifestyle practices we argue that this cohort can be categorised as part of the 'new rich' in



India. Studies conducted in different Asian countries (including Bocock 1993; Robinson and Goodman 1996; Lett 1998; Chan 2000; Talib 2000; Embong 2002; Clammer 2003; Schuman 2003) explain that this class is characterised by a lifestyle which places great importance on conspicuous consumption. This phenomenon is on the rise in Asian countries undergoing economic transformations and becoming more integrated into globalized consumerism. Nevertheless, these scholars also argue that the trend of conspicuous consumption that is so apparent among the new rich in Asia is not only because of easy accessibility of commodities, but also due to the availability of the means to buy them. Our study of call center agents clearly demonstrates that the disposable income available to these employees enables them to spend freely on everything from fashion to food, entertainment to electronics and labels them as world-class consumers (c.f. Schuman 2003, *Enroute* 2004).

The recognition of such aspects leads me to argue that call centers in India have produced a new 'consumptionscape' - a concept proposed by Gerr and Belk (1996). They have added the term 'consumptionscape' to Appadurai's (2003) initial five scapes (ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes) to explain recent global flows of consumption. Gerr and Belk (1996) state that the global consumptionscape adds to the resources available and reflects how consumers draw from all available global and local, new and old sources as they use products to (re) position themselves in local age, gender, social class, religion and ethnic hierarchies. Based on my analysis we would conclude that call centers in India form consumptionscapes that provide resources - monetary as well as lifestyle options - to the young adults employed in them that enable and encourage constructions of Westernised consumption behaviour among this cohort. What is yet to be determined is how these multiple changes in behaviours and lifestyles will impact on Indian society as a whole, producing perhaps even more diverse consumptionscapes.

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