Chapter 17

Call Centers, India, and a New Politics:
Cultural Interpretations

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ABSTRACT

The establishment of myriad Customer service Centers, or as colloquially known, Call Centers have become a much accepted reality now in India. The country known for its assimilative nature has also painfully adopted it, though not quite got adapted to its demands. This much appreciated system by the parents of young students leaves them agape at the amount of salary it promises in comparison to their children's educational qualifications. Call Centers have become a major hub for any intermediate passed out youngster, with dreamy eyes, full of ambitions, and passions to win the world at any cost. In the present chapter an attempt is made to interrogate the relative benefits and weigh them with the demerits that it has accumulated on the loyal workers. The key theme of the chapter is the analysis of subtle politics in the engagement of these young souls which steals their youthful charisma, vivacious spirit, zeal and vigor in return of some rupees which neither the beneficiary can enjoy nor utilize. A cultural interpretation of modernization, progress and development with a focus on the sustained core-periphery relation in a theoretically imagined world economy finds its place into the rubric of chapter. It interrogates the motives of western countries (or at least the cause behind such accusation) to sustain their monopolistic cultural imperialism through multifarious means, as evidenced in the case of Call centers in India.

INTRODUCTION

Call centers have become an inevitable aspect of service delivery in today's business world, and are becoming increasingly popular with organiza-

tions as their preferred mode of interaction with their customers (Mukherjee & Malhotra, 2008). Call centers are supposed to be a major customer interface for many organizations, and are often characterized by their role of providing the first, if not the only, point of contact for the customers to engage with their service provider (Dean,

2004). There has been an enormous growth in the interest of researchers to conduct research in the area with the advent and growth of services of off-shoring (Penfold, 2009). Several studies have been conducted on off-shored work from diverse perspectives like the globalization of labor (Farrell et al. (eds) 2005), decent work (Sasikumar and Varma 2004; Penfold 2008), human resource management (Chatterjee 2007), and trade union participation (Penfold 2007; Taylor et al. 2007). Most of the work has been focused on call centres within this sector (Taylor and Bain 1999, 2000, 2005; Ramesh 2004; Batt et al. 2005; Pradhan 2005; Nornoho and d'Cruz 2006, 2007). Here, we shall take a political perspective for constructing the base of the discussion.

The present chapter focuses on the burgeoning Business Process Outsourcing sector and the leading host country i.e. India, and how a new occupation for unemployed youth has simultaneously created avenues for life and vigor, while depleting it. For few years, India has been chosen by many countries, especially U.S.A. and Europe, like many other countries who have felt compelled to outsource their major portions of processes from this country. India has won its spurs as the world's outsourcing destination of choice and currently has a commanding share of the global outsourcing market. The union Communications and Information Technology Ministry in India states that the India IT-BPO sector is likely to achieve a target of USD 60 billion in export revenues by 2010.

Global organizations have always preferred outsourcing call center services from India, in comparison to other countries like China, Philippines, Malaysia and other Asian countries (www.outsource2india.com; Abraham & Manning, 2007). India has always been the sweetheart of MNCs as an outsourcing location, because call centers in India offer a wide variety of advantages that other countries can't afford to offer. This is reflected in the increase of clientele base and the mushrooming BPO sector in India, and several reports like the McKinsey Report do illustrate the

veracity of this claim. Today, having call centers in India has become the norm for several global companies, considering the cheap availability of a large and skilled workforce. In recent years, India has been able to effectively meet the growing international demand for call center outsourcing services by providing cost-effective services and customer-oriented call centers. This seems to be supported by the increasing desire among many international organizations to setup call centers in India to leverage upon the easily available large qualified workforce and provision of cost-effective call center outsourcing services.

Upon investigation, we find that the reason why western world has shown sufficient interest to establish BPO units in India lies with India's ability to provide the largest number of qualified, tech-savvy, IT literate, trained, skilled and experienced professionals. India has the largest English-speaking population after the USA. India's large and well-educated workforce has been one of its main advantages over other countries. The irony of the situation is that India's large manpower is willing to work for a lesser price due to heavy unemployment. Generally, in a call center operation, manpower typically accounts for 55% to 60% of the total cost, whereas in India, manpower is available at a fraction of the cost overseas. The relative advantage of a large, well-educated, English-speaking work force has enabled India to be the recipient of much of assignments from countries such as the USA, the UK, and Australia (Penfold, 2009). India's services exports rose by over 30 per cent per year during the five years 2001 to 2006, during which time they rose from 29% to 38% of total exports (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2008).

The call center industry is well situated within India's global leadership; with its offshore information technology and business process outsourcing industries increasing at an annual rate greater than 25% and generating export revenues of $60 billion by 2010 (NASSCOM, National Association of Software and Service Companies, 2005,

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