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Dead ringers: globalization and the paradoxes of development and identity

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Dead Ringers: Globalization and the Paradoxes of Development and Identity

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

by

Shehzad Nadeem

Committee in charge:

Professor John Skrentny, Chair
Professor Paul Frymer
Professor Martha Lampland
Professor Michael Schudson
Professor Gershon Shafir
Professor Harley Shaiken

2008
The dissertation of Shehzad Nadeem is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2008
Society is not a disease, it is a disaster. What a stupid miracle that one can live in it.

E.M. Cioran
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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>FULL FORM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BOSS</td>
<td>Burn Out Stress Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPO</td>
<td>Business Processing Outsourcing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIO</td>
<td>Chief Information Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COO</td>
<td>Chief Operating Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSP</td>
<td>Customer Services Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
<td>Customer Service Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY</td>
<td>Financial Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GE</td>
<td>General Electric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communication Technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITES</td>
<td>Information Technology Enabled Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPO</td>
<td>Knowledge Process Outsourcing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASSCOM</td>
<td>National Association of Software and Services Companies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNI</td>
<td>Union Network International</td>
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</table>
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VITAE

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2006-2008  President’s Fellow and Instructor, University of California-Washington Center

2008   Ph.D., University of California, San Diego, Sociology
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Journal/Publication Details</th>
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</thead>
</table>
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dead Ringers: Globalization and the Paradoxes of Development and Identity

by

Shehzad Nadeem

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, San Diego, 2008

Professor John Skrentny, Chair

This study investigates, through ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews in India and the U.S., the causes and consequences of international outsourcing. Rhetoric about the “flat” and “borderless” world notwithstanding, I argue that outsourcing is a corporate strategy to reduce labor costs and not the great leveler it is often reputed to be. The Indian outsourcing sector, for example, is a niche and hugely dependent export-based industry. While offshore workplaces may look like hotbeds of technological innovation, they are very often sites of rote service provision as mostly standardized and replicable work, such as customer service and data transcription and basic software coding, is being moved. While
long and busy hours are no strangers to Americans, their lengthening and deepened intensity in the offshore context raise the specter of “electronic sweatshops.” And although the relatively high-paying jobs result in increased mobility, Indian workers, especially women, face considerable stigma for working the nightshift and for adopting “Western” and consumerist lifestyles. The offshore workforce, I argue, constitutes a global underclass of knowledge workers.

At the theoretical level, while some argue that globalization homogenizes and others that it hybridizes, I find that globalization produces similarity and difference simultaneously. On the one hand, offshore spaces of work are constructed in the Western corporate image. On the other, existing values and organizational forms cannot be extended to new social groups without being transformed in the process. Workplace identities and relations are therefore composed of a variety of influences, not just corporate impositions on an amorphous Indian mass. Globalization is like a fugue, a technique of imitative counterpoint in musical composition. The first line announces the major subject or theme, which is followed by an “answer” in imitation, but in a different key and often distinct enough to form a counterpoint. Likewise, the mimicry of modes of work, consumption, and being does not result in a one-to-one correspondence; it is a practice of emulation, which necessarily takes on distinctive characteristics. I elaborate a notion of imitative counterpoint to conceptualize this difference-in-similarity.
INTRODUCTION

The cover illustration of the February 3, 2003 issue of Business Week was of a white man in a business suit dangling from a pallet of cargo that is being hoisted into a clouded, pale-yellow sky. The juxtaposition of sartorial elegance and emblems of manual labor (the ship and crane are out of view but their presence can easily be inferred) suggested that white collar jobs were now vulnerable to the same gale-force economic winds that had spirited away the country’s manufacturing base. Moreover, the dubious coloring of the sky seemed to pose a suggestive question: Is this the twilight of American economic preeminence and the dawn of a brave new global age? In case the symbolism was lost on the casual business reader, the text read in tall white letters: “Is Your Job Next?” followed by a description of the cover story: “The next round of GLOBALIZATION is sending upscale jobs offshore. They include basic research, chip design, engineering—even financial analysis. Can America lose these jobs and still prosper? Who wins? Who loses?”

It was the first in a long series of reports documenting the offshore outsourcing of white-collar service work to the developing world. The debate over the implications and morality of what was now simply called “outsourcing” was to intensify a year later during the U.S. Presidential campaign. The chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, N. Gregory Mankiw, gave voice to the views of orthodox economists, saying, “I think that outsourcing is a growing phenomenon, but it’s something that we should realize is probably a plus for the economy in the long-run…It’s just a new way of doing international trade” (Andrews 2004; Weisman 2004). The qualifiers “probably” and “long-run” did little to allay fears and even President Bush was forced to distance himself from the young chairman’s frankness. It soon became customary for advocates of “free trade” to cry crocodile tears over
the localized pain that is the inevitable byproduct of salutary economic forces.\(^1\) But, “at the end of the day,” they argue, to make an omelet you must break a few eggs.

Such sententious hand-wringing, however, would fail to win over globalization’s “protectionist” critics. The resonant note of betrayal was sounded by Democratic presidential hopeful John Kerry who railed against “Benedict Arnold CEOs” that throw moral scruples to the wind in pursuit of greater profits. CNN anchor Lou Dobbs broadcasted a list of companies he accused of “exporting America.”\(^2\) Protestations of outrage aside, little was done at the governmental level to fetter or accelerate the trend, though worker anxiety mounts as jobs continue to be relocated offshore. The unease is palpable. A Pew survey (2006) finds that a large majority of “Americans believe that the outsourcing of U.S. jobs abroad has had a decidedly negative impact on American workers.”\(^3\)

What gave the theme of betrayal traction was the sense that a promise had somehow been broken. Were not the “creative” and “knowledge-based” jobs being sent to India and elsewhere the selfsame ones that had been sold to a restive populace in the wake of the first wave of offshoring? The tech bubble had burst; the contours of the “postindustrial” economy were shaky and uncertain.\(^4\) What would Americans be asked to re-invent themselves as this time around? And how were workers to be able to compete with their counterparts in the developing world who would work diligently for a fraction of the cost? Whereas an

\(^1\) Hence the need, in consultant Michael Corbett’s (2004: 64) clumsy terms, to “manage outsourcing’s people impacts.”

\(^2\) Not only may the list have “indirectly boosted offshoring by providing free publicity for the BPO industry” but it reads like a *Who’s Who* of corporate America (Ross 2006). Asked if clients are wary of negative publicity, the founder of a legal services outsourcing company says that “in the boardroom, behind closed doors, every CEO or executive is asking why they’re not on Lou Dobbs’ list. We’ve used that list to market ourselves; it’s a fantastic resource. Leading companies are on the list.”

\(^3\) The breakdown is as follows: “More than three-quarters of the public (77%) say it has hurt, while just 13% say it has helped. Among younger adults (65% hurt, 27% helped) and Hispanics (53% hurt, 27% helped), the ratios are less lopsided” (Pew 2006: 3).

\(^4\) Whatever the term’s ideological connotations, it did describe a certain reality. The service sector—a term so capacious that it is almost meaningless—has made continual advances. While service workers numbered around 64.9 million in 1979, they almost doubled to 113.9 million by 2006 (Dufrene and Altmann 2007).
experienced software programmer in Silicon Valley earns $77,690 a year plus benefits, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the same job pays $10,900 In India (Kirby and Shinal 2004). Other comparisons reveal similar differentials. Tables 1.1-1.3 illustrate the salaries in select countries. The first figure displays salaries in information technology (IT), which includes things like software development and IT maintenance. What is called “Business Process Outsourcing” (BPO) is broken down to show salaries for non-voice services (i.e. accounting and human resources, claims processing) and voice-based services (i.e. customer care, debt collection).

Table 1.1 Average Salaries for IT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salary in U.S. Dollars</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry Level</td>
<td>5,678</td>
<td>5,715</td>
<td>32,930</td>
<td>12,953</td>
<td>13,176</td>
<td>16,536</td>
<td>7,277</td>
<td>46,194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Lead</td>
<td>9,609</td>
<td>9,374</td>
<td>53,002</td>
<td>20,712</td>
<td>21,029</td>
<td>27,567</td>
<td>10,887</td>
<td>75,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>14,997</td>
<td>14,597</td>
<td>86,085</td>
<td>31,803</td>
<td>33,246</td>
<td>44,076</td>
<td>18,402</td>
<td>115,562</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1.2 Average Salaries for BPO (Non-voice)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salary in U.S. Dollars</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry Level</td>
<td>4,316</td>
<td>4,515</td>
<td>24,740</td>
<td>10,513</td>
<td>12,012</td>
<td>5,748</td>
<td>38,341</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Lead</td>
<td>7,495</td>
<td>7,593</td>
<td>41,871</td>
<td>16,569</td>
<td>17,244</td>
<td>9,629</td>
<td>63,891</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>11,698</td>
<td>11,823</td>
<td>68,007</td>
<td>25,442</td>
<td>27,262</td>
<td>14,906</td>
<td>98,568</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NeoIT (2006)

Table 1.3 Average Salaries for BPO (Voice)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salary in U.S. Dollars</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry Level</td>
<td>4,088</td>
<td>4,287</td>
<td>23,455</td>
<td>9,585</td>
<td>10,014</td>
<td>13,394</td>
<td>5,457</td>
<td>36,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Lead</td>
<td>7,111</td>
<td>7,218</td>
<td>39,751</td>
<td>15,741</td>
<td>16,402</td>
<td>22,881</td>
<td>9,153</td>
<td>60,884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>11,098</td>
<td>11,239</td>
<td>64,564</td>
<td>24,170</td>
<td>25,932</td>
<td>36,583</td>
<td>14,169</td>
<td>93,929</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NeoIT (2006)
Offshoring, or international outsourcing, is about reducing labor costs, as many firms are finding it cheaper to buy goods and services from suppliers abroad rather than provide them internally (Bardhan and Kroll, 2003; Haveman and Shatz 2004). The savings are largely a product of the wage differential between workers in advanced capitalist and emerging economies (Corbett 2004). The new phase of offshoring began in the late 1980s when major multinational corporations like General Electric, American Express, and British Airways began shifting portions of service work to developing countries like India. Until that happened, it was mainly manufacturing work that got offshored. But the combined effect of technological advances like the internet, the declining costs of transportation and communication, and pro-market reforms in Asia and Eastern Europe and the resulting “oversupply” of workers, is that the provision of services is increasingly being ceded to overseas subsidiaries and subcontractors (Polaski 2004: 1).

Public statements by executives have done little to soothe matters. At a meeting with members of Congress, then Hewlett-Packard CEO, Carly Fiorina, stated that “There is no job that is America's God-given right anymore” (Lockheed 2004). The CEO of a company called Autodesk put it similarly: “When you can get great talent at 20 percent of the costs, it isn’t about waving the American flag. It’s about doing what’s right to have a good company.” Or as the CEO of Symantec put it, “U.S. corporations’ first responsibility is to their shareholders. You cannot say, ‘I'm going to put national interests ahead of shareholder interests’” (San Francisco Chronicle 2004). One should call these tumbrl remarks—displays of singular class arrogance in one’s last hours—but for the fact that it is the jobs of workers not

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5 If one reads the business literature on the topic it is surprising how little discussion there is about labor costs. There is frequent comment on the “hidden costs” of offshoring—that one should not expect too much—and much is made of the potential to add value and improve quality. But as one executive put it, this is only because cost-savings are assumed.

6 According to UN UNCTAD (2004: xxv), 70-80% of companies in various studies mention lower costs as the reason for offshoring, with cost-savings ranging from 20-40%. Another survey of executives finds that “it was a given that savings on a given activity would have to be at least 40 percent to make the relocation worthwhile” (Dossani and Kenney 2003: 7).
employers that are being wheeled to the metaphorical guillotine. Indeed, the pay gap between
U.S. CEOs and U.S. and Indian call center workers is 400:1 and 3,348:1, respectively
(Anderson et al 2004: 1).\footnote{\textquotedblleft The average pay of the leading outsourcing CEOs is 3,300 times the pay of an average Indian call center employee and 1,300 times more than the pay of an average Indian computer programmer	extquotedblright (Ibid.)}

The issue turns on the relationship between national and corporate interests. For
critics, they are misaligned (c.f. Dobbs 2005: x). For free traders, they converge. Citing
Adam Smith’s famous dictum about dinner and self-interest, the authors of an outsourcing
manual write that by maximizing profits and returns to shareholders, corporations are
indirectly, even unwittingly, serving the public interest (Brown and Wilson 2005). The logic
is as follows: countries are better off when they focus on sectors in which they have a
comparative advantage, i.e. lowest opportunity costs of production. By ridding themselves of
inefficient processes (which can be done quicker and cheaper elsewhere), companies are free
to do what they do best, thereby raising productivity and freeing up resources for investment
in new products and services. This boosts economic growth. Costs are also reduced for
consumers. And the upward spiral creates more jobs than it destroys, while also allowing
firms to remain competitive in the global economy (Drezner 2004).

Discerning advantage has proved much tougher on the ground as the major news
media seem to paint a contradictory picture. On the one hand, it reported that the majority of
jobs being sent offshore were low-end, such as customer service, basic software coding, and
data entry. As economist Jagdish Bhagwati (2004: A11) wrote, there is “little evidence of a
major push by American companies to set up research operations in the developing world.”
But, at the same time, we heard that sophisticated things like engineering, software
development, and financial and medical services were being performed abroad as well. As
columnist Thomas Friedman (2005: 23), who has done more than any writer to promote
service globalization, would write: “The dirty little secret is that India is taking work from
Europe or America not simply because of low wages. It is also because Indians are ready to work harder and can do anything from answering your phone to designing your next airplane or car. They are not racing us to the bottom. They are racing us to the top.”

If tax returns could be prepared, X-rays read, cartoons colored, students tutored, and patents filed 9,000 miles away, what could not be, and what was left of the country’s competitive advantage? Worry not, wrote Friedman. Factory jobs are indeed limited but “there is no limit to the number of idea-generated jobs in the world” (Friedman 2006: 236). Some workers therefore will have to “move horizontally into new knowledge jobs” while “lower-skilled” workers “will have to move vertically, not horizontally. They will have to upgrade their education and upgrade their knowledge skills [?] so that they can occupy one of the new jobs sure to be created” (Friedman 2006: 229). That is to say, the causalities of offshoring have to re-tool and become “entrepreneurial employees” to remain competitive in a globally-integrated labor market Friedman concedes that such optimism requires a “leap of faith”; that is, one should believe without or in spite of empirical evidence.

The issue was further clouded by the fact that the federal government does not require companies to report data on offshored jobs. Thus the estimates of job losses are highly speculative. A sample: Forrester Research (2002) estimates that about 3.3 million U.S. service jobs will be shifted abroad by 2015, led by IT-related work. In 2004, Goldman Sachs estimated that offshoring accounted for roughly half a million layoffs in the prior three years (Brainard and Litan, 2004). Another study estimates that 14 million U.S. jobs are vulnerable to being outsourced. A survey by Deloitte Research found that the world’s 100 largest financial services firms expect to transfer $350 billion of their cost bases abroad by 2008 and that 2 million financial sector jobs will be outsourced by 2009 (Gentle, 2003). Further confounding matters, even the estimates were open to interpretation. Fact and value, the descriptive and normative, became conflated. While some held the projected job losses to be significant, others said that they were inconsequential when compared to the normal “churn”
in the economy by which millions of people change jobs every year (c.f. Mann 2003; Bivens 2005). Just “another business sea change,” says a venture capitalist.

In any event, executives were firm in their belief that displaced workers would find new jobs. As Robert Bailey, President and CEO, PMC-Sierra, a multinational that produces semiconductors, put it:

If you were to ask someone who had a factory jobs some years ago about unemployment – we’ve lost millions of factory jobs in this country and they’re not here anymore. 40% of imports now come from overseas subsidiaries of U.S. corporations. So no steel worker has worked for 20 years? No a lot of them moved down to Texas and other places, and that’s the beauty of our economy. It is extremely resilient. And you go to Pittsburgh now and it’s a biotech Mecca. I mean things change. Steelworkers didn’t go to school and become biotech engineers but things changed and evolved, and everybody found work (Global Services Conference 2007).

Outsourcing enthusiast and consultant Michael Corbett (2004: 54) writes similarly:

Some may not be willing or able to rise to the challenge of competition in a global market and will find themselves doing the same work for less money. But many more will find ways to compete and win. They will earn their current and higher salaries by getting better, learning new skills, and doing so ahead of the pack. Others will move away from the more technical parts of jobs entirely toward elements of their jobs where they add greater value, for example, customer-facing activities.

The problem with the latter possibility is that wages in the non-technical service sector are low when compared to “knowledge based” jobs and even manufacturing jobs, which pay 23 percent more than service-sector jobs on average (Dufrene and Altmann 2007). Moreover, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that between 2003 and 2006 over a third of displaced workers remained unemployed and many of those that found jobs took significant pay cuts. Thus while the editor of Wired magazine could muse, “It is not hard to see how outsourcing to India could lead to the next great era in American enterprise,” the public remained unconvinced (Vashishta and Vashishta 2006: 16). Furthermore, optimistic projections of job creation are simply that: projections based on historical trends. There is no guarantee that the promised high-skill, high-paying jobs will materialize or that the U.S. will enjoy an absolute advantage in these new areas, which would prevent a further round of offshoring. Others
worry about “concession” bargaining, about the denial of workers’ rights in export processing zones, and about the impact on working conditions in the U.S. (EPI 2004).

**Mutual Benefit or Zero-Sum**

Thus critics were concerned not only about job loss but also about the prospect of wage depression. Nobel Laureate Paul Samuelson upbraided fellow economists for perpetuating “the popular polemical untruth” that the U.S. economy will necessarily benefit in the long run from all forms of trade. The assumption that “the gains of the American winners are big enough to more than compensate for the losers,” Samuelson argues, is “only an innuendo” (Lohr 2004: A14). Just as offshoring is not a zero-sum game in which a job lost in the U.S. is a job gained in India neither is it necessarily one of mutual benefit to workers the world over. As Gomory and Baumol (2001: 8) write, there are “inherent conflicts in international trade” in that outcomes “that are best for one country…[can often] be disadvantageous for its trading partner.” While trade between a prosperous and a poor nation could be mutually beneficial, there is also the possibility that it can exert a downward pressure on the wages and conditions in the higher wage country. Or as the “factor-price equalization” theorem would have it, when two countries start out with similar technology and skills but different wage rates, trade between them may reduce wages in the high-paying country and increase wages in the low-paying country until, eventually, workers in both places end up earning the same amount (Cassidy 2004). But, as Polaski (2004) writes, “Until the [global] labor surplus is worked off, we can expect to see higher profits and stagnant or declining wages in the high-wage countries. These trends already have affected the manufacturing sector, which has been transformed during the past decade. Now they are beginning to affect service industries.” Such considerations led a frustrated Samuelson to comment, “If you don't
believe that changes the average wages in America, then you believe in the tooth fairy” (Lohr 2004: 14).

And while an oft-referenced study commissioned by the Information Technology Association of America predicted that offshoring will benefit the U.S. economy in the form of increased jobs and wages, media reports suggested otherwise (Global Insight 2004). Bank of America, for example, cut nearly 5,000 U.S. jobs while outsourcing up to 1,100 jobs to India in 2003. In July 2004, the firm announced that it planned to cut another 12,500 U.S. jobs in the next two years. Adding insult to injury, while the Bank continues to offload thousands of jobs to Indian subcontractors, the severance pay of many soon-to-be fired workers was made contingent on the training of replacements. (Anderson et al 2004: 1; USA Today 2004; Lazurus 2006). Even the venerated “Big Blue” succumbed to the pressure to downsize and offshore. In 2005, it was reported that while I.B.M. was in the process of laying off 13,000 U.S. and European workers, it had plans to increase its Indian workforce by than 14,000 workers. Its 53,000 Indian employees are its largest outside of the U.S. and it expects to invest $6 billion in the country over the next few years. Arguably of greater moment is its decision to contract with Indian outsourcing company HCL Technologies to design its signature Power Architecture chips (Lohr 2005; Rai 2005).

While the overall implications can be debated, two points can be established. The first is that the majority of white collar work being offshored is of the back-office and low-skill and clerical variety: i.e. processing applications, data entry, preparing invoices and payrolls, customer service, basic software coding (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Ross 2006; Aneesh 2006). While outsourcing boosters speak with much gusto about what is to come, more than half of all export-oriented FDI projects related to call centers in 2002-2003 (UNCTAD 2004: xxv). Moreover, work has been standardized and digitized, making it easier for particular tasks to be moved. According to a managing director at Lehman Brothers, “Even companies that have been outsourcing for ten years haven’t outsourced entire projects”
(Global Services Conference 2007). Asked what should and should not be offshored, Randy Altschuler, co-CEO OfficeTiger, an outsourcing company, said that core activities usually stay onshore while “non-core” and repetitious functions can be moved: “I think you look at frankly how repetitive is the process? Because if the process is repetitive, you can apply technology, process improvement and labor savings to generate efficiencies. If the process is too complicated, maybe outsourcing isn’t the best solution” (Churchill Club 2005).

The second point is that while offshoring is occurring mostly in low-skill segments, there is little stopping the gradual expansion into more complex activities as firms become more comfortable with the practice. That is, services offshoring may follow the trajectory of manufacturing from low-skill to high-skilled labor. “From a trickle to a flood” says a consultant of the increasing scope and scale of offshoring. Raman Roy—dubbed the “father of Indian BPO” for starting the outsourcing company Spectramind and for his work at GE and American Express—told an assembled crowd at an outsourcing conference that “the sky is the limit. We are only limited by the imagination” (Global Services Conference 2007) Alan Blinder (2006), a former vice chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Board and former economic adviser to President Bill Clinton, describes offshoring as the “third industrial revolution.” He writes that “we have so far barely seen the tip of the offshoring iceberg, the eventual dimensions of which may be staggering.”

Indeed, offshoring has crept into sectors that we previously thought to be un-tradable internationally. The news agency, Reuters, offshored basic coverage of some U.S. firms to an office in Bangalore. Legal services firms draft patents and contracts for multinationals from Gurgaon and Bombay. Indian radiologists read X-rays, MRIs, and CT scans for less than half their U.S. counterparts and workers process tax forms and mortgages, handle insurance claims, burnish power point presentations, and assist on special effects for movies. Faced with rising medical costs, Westerners travel to exotic locations for joint and heart-valve replacements, dental work, and botox injections—a practice known as “medical tourism.”
Even maternal surrogacy is being outsourced internationally (c.f. Gentleman 2008). While the services sector is much larger than manufacturing, only 10% is presently traded internationally, compared to 50% in the latter. Moreover, the tradability of services affects companies in all sectors and is proceeding at a quicker pace than manufacturing. As UNCTAD (2004: xxiv) write, “Services that are offshored may be more footloose than relocated manufacturing activities because of lower capital-intensity and sunk costs.” Moreover, venture capital firms are increasingly “imploring” companies to offshore as much as possible (Blustein 2004: E1).8 There is thus reason to believe that the trend will only continue.

The View from the Global South

One of the most striking features about the outsourcing of information and communication (ICT)-based work is that it upsets conventional assumptions about the international division of labor, wherein the production of certain goods and services are concentrated in some places and not others. Marx, in his time, wrote that the world was divided “into a chiefly agricultural field of production for supplying the other part which remains chiefly an industrial field” (Marx 1976). This changed, of course, and the “new international division of labor,” saw a historic shift of manufacturing from First to Third World regions. As manufacturing has become geographically dispersed, the outsourcing of information-intensive work further complicates this picture, suggesting that our theoretical frameworks are in need of adjustment (Lakha 1999; Castells 1993).

As one of the fastest growing forms of employment in the global economy and the most vulnerable to being offshored, ICT-based service work has been touted in respectable quarters as a solution to global unemployment and a shortcut to modernization, emerging as a

8 Or as an executive puts it: “Venture capitalists today require that product design be distributed across continents.”
new development paradigm (UNDP, 2001; ILO, 2001). Figure 1.4 illustrates the favored offshore destinations for various services.

Table 1.4 Where Does Your Company Offshore or Intend to Offshore the Following Activities? % Respondents (n=239)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Developed Countries*</th>
<th>Other Low-Wage Regions**</th>
<th>India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT Call Center</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Research</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance/Admin.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R&amp;D</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Developed countries: Canada, United Kingdom, Western Europe
**Other Low-Wage Regions: Africa, China, Eastern Europe and Russia, Latin America, and Asia and Pacific


On whole, the Economist (2004) estimates that India accounts for about 80% of the low-cost offshore market. Seventy percent of the exports are to the U.S (Bardhan and Kroll, 2003; NASSCOM 2003). The number of young university graduates (those with seven or less years of work experience) in India is thought to be around 14 million, which is 1.5 times that in China and nearly double that in the U.S. Furthermore, it adds 2.5 million new graduates each year. Despite rising wages and an impending “talent squeeze,” India will likely continue in its role as the “world’s back-office” for at least the near future.

9 Consultants McKinsey and Company note ruefully, however, that in India as with other low-wage countries, “only a fraction (10 to 25) of these people are suited for work in multinational companies.” Nonetheless, India “produces a higher proportion of suitable graduates than China” (Farrell et al 2005: 76).
While it is still too early to fully assess the costs and benefits of offshoring for the U.S. economy and workers, it is possible to shed light on its impacts in developing countries. Understanding how offshoring works most certainly has implications for those of us in the so-called developed world. (U.S. companies account for “two-thirds of all export-oriented information and telecommunication service projects, 60% of call centre projects and 55% of shared-service projects” (UNCTAD 2004: xxiv-xxv)). And as India is “the preferred destination for offshoring of virtually the whole range of services,” it is the most logical place to explore what happens to service work when it is moved abroad (Ibid: xxvii).
CHAPTER ONE
GLOBALIZATION AND MIMICRY

Globalization, we frequently hear, has led to the declining significance of place (Reich 1991; Friedman 2006). Ohmae (1990: 116), for example, writes that “country of origin does not matter. Location of headquarters does not matter. The products for which you are responsible and the company you serve have become denationalized” (1990: 116). While at best an exaggerated truth, such assertions make Marx and Engels’ (1998/1848: 38) proclamation that “all that is solid melts into air” as a result of capitalist modernization seem prophetic and an apt description of the current historical moment. Through the diffusion of ICTs, placed-based social relations of work are dissolved and reconfigured across vast distances. In addition to altering our experience of place, these technologies also shrink the turnover time of capital.

But while goods, services, and investment now move at a rapid clip, labor, relatively speaking, is wedded to place. Thus the book’s guiding question: What happens when white-collar work is shifted overseas? Workplace culture, structures, and identities cannot simply be exported and reproduced abroad like so much capital or technology; they must be anchored in new terrain. That is to say, while offshore spaces of work are constructed in the Western corporate image, their content is derived partly from local realities. Attention must therefore be focused on the concrete ways in which organizational, cultural, and economic forms are localized (Guillén 2001). As Yeung (1998: 299) writes, one must examine “the ways through

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10 The debate is more than academic. Ohmae was to exercise considerable influence on the Clinton administration’s trade policies via Labor Secretary Robert Reich. In a less polemical vein, Scholte (2000: 179) writes: “‘Global relations’ are social connections in which territorial location, territorial distance, and territorial borders do not have a determining influence. In global space ‘place’ is not territorially fixed, territorial distance is covered in effectively no time, and territorial frontiers present no particular impediment.”

11 This is not to downplay the massive flows of labor migration (c.f. Martin, Abella, and Kuptsch 2005). Rather the focus here is on the effects of corporate mobility.
which capital is geographically embedded in distinct national, social, or institutional structures…Geographical embeddedness of capital refers to complex and ongoing articulations of its home-country characteristics and host-country operating environments.”

This dissertation is largely a story of the attempt to reproduce these home-country characteristics in India. A most vivid example of this is where multinational companies require Indian customer service workers to adopt Western pseudonyms and accents to avert a political backlash. The idea is that low-cost Indian workers be able to pass as American or British. There comes the question: If offshoring relies on the mimicry of Western identities and workplace norms, does it not result in the Westernization of developing countries like India?

The question of globalization’s impact is usually framed in a binary form, i.e., homogenization or heterogeneity, West or East, global village or tower of Babel. I argue that globalization does not substitute the dynamism of modernity for the complacent solidity of tradition nor the West for the East. Its genius and mystery lay in the balancing of diametric modes. But while its overriding principle is hybridity, a fashionable term in academic circles of late, the intermingling does not occur at random or without purpose. It occurs according to a plan. But not all things go as planned.

Economic globalization is like a fugue, a technique of imitative counterpoint in musical composition. The first line announces the major subject or theme, which is followed by an “answer” in imitation, but in a different key and often distinct enough to form a counterpoint. Likewise, the mimicry of modes of work, consumption, and being does not result in a 1:1 correspondence; it is a practice of emulation, which necessarily takes on

12 Or as Dicken (1998: 11) puts it, “Every component in the production chain, every economic activity is, quite literally ‘grounded’ in specific locations. Such grounding is both physical, in the form of sunk costs, and less tangible in the form of localized social relationships.”
distinctive characteristics. The notion of imitative counterpoint is capacious enough to apply
to instances of resistance (i.e. using the colonizer’s language and categories to undermine
colonialism), ambivalence or pastiche (i.e. Bollywood movies), as well as acquiescence (i.e.
out-and-out mimicry). Thus mimicry is not a crude caricature of other ways of being nor is it
the unproblematic transplantation of foreign norms; it signifies their appropriation and
transformation as they are anchored in different terrain.

A word on the title. The term “dead ringer” refers to one who strongly resembles
another. In the original meaning of the term, a ringer is a fast horse that is furtively entered
into a competition in place of a slow or injured one. Here workers in the global south are
substituted for their more expensive counterparts in developed countries. (The metaphor is all
the more exact given that companies have done their level best to hide their offshoring
activities from public view). To all outward appearances, the names and neutered accents, the
workplace cultures and structures, the identities and lifestyles resemble those of their country
of origin. Upon closer inspection, however, one sees how they diverge from the mold. To
understand this difference-in-similarity it is first necessary to explore how place is being
transformed by globalization.

Whither Place?

If we at least provisionally accept the thesis that place is of diminishing importance, it
is necessary to consider what, if anything, it is being replaced by. Castells (2000: 409), for
example, contrasts the “space of place” with the “space of flows.” The latter, he writes, “is

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13 Globalization is of course a two-way street. The purpose of the present study is to illuminate the
socio-cultural effects of corporate globalization on developing countries.

14 In resisting colonialism, Indians were compelled to copy the British. As Mishra (2006: 87) writes,
anti-colonial elites “denounced British imperialism as exploitative, but even they welcomed its
redeeming modernity, and, above all, the European idea of the nation - a cohesive community with a
common history, culture, values and sense of purpose - which for many other colonized peoples
appeared a way of duplicating the success of the powerful, all-conquering west.”

15 The idea may also be profitably applied to large-scale processes like industrialization and
modernization, i.e. how they differ from and resemble processes prior and elsewhere.
becoming the dominant spatial manifestation of power and function in our societies.” We will return to the tendential organization of space later but what is important in his formulation is that place is a kind of space. As Tuan (2001: 6) writes, “The ideas of ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition.” Place has commonsense associations of security and stability, the homely and familiar. It connotes tradition and the past. Space, by contrast, is a realm of freedom and uncertainty and possibility. It is an arena of movement; when one pauses in space, they stop in a place. Place thus is space invested with meaning.16 One does not speak, for example, of a strong-felt sense of space. Space acquires shape and meaning through human activity.17 Tuan (2001: 36-37) explains: “The human being, by his mere presence, imposes a schema on space. Most of the time he is not aware of it. He notes its absence when he is lost… Cultures differ greatly in their elaboration of cultural schemata. In some cultures, they are rudimentary; in others they can become a many-splendored frame that integrates nearly all the departments of life.”

Corporations, societies, and states, too, impose schemas on space; in Lefebvre’s (1991) terms, they “produce space.” In the academic literature, the place-space dichotomy is applied in almost unmodified form to the relationship between labor and capital.18 Beynon and Hudson (1993: 192), for example, write that space is a “domain across which capital is constantly marching in pursuit of greater profits,” while place denotes the “meaningful situations established by labor.” Peck (1996: 238) argues that neo-liberal strategies “attempt to reduce place to space.”

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16 According to Entrikin (1976), place “is not a collection of empirically observable objects and events, but rather is the repository of meaning.”

17 As de Certeau (1984: 97) writes of footsteps in the city, “Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together...They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize.” He concedes that such activity can be graphed on maps, but this is of little help in capturing the felt experience of place: “These fixations constitute procedures of forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten.”

18 This may have more than a little to do with the seductiveness of the globalization rhetoric: capital advances in space while labor fights a rearguard action in place.
Capital, then, transforms the concrete realities of a particular place into the manifold possibilities of space, which is conceived of as “something usable, malleable, and therefore capable of domination through human action” (Harvey 1989: 254). The implementation of this vision of timeless time (24-hour society) and placeless space (network of flows) becomes the site of struggle and negotiation between capital, the state, and civil society. And because space is not an empty container but an arena of lived experience, which retains the impress of the past, development becomes a process of “creative destruction” by which those elements of a place that are not conducive to state consolidation or capital accumulation are effaced, “pulverized” in Lefebvre’s (1991: 334) view.  

The struggle between labor and capital can thus be seen as a struggle over the definition of space. In recent years, capital has had the better of it. The term neo-liberalism is used to signify the corporate revanchism whereby social welfare protections are undermined by programs of economic austerity involving privatization, liberalization, and downsizing (an inversion of Polanyi’s (1944) “double movement” of capitalism). The contemporary phase of global capitalism—marked as it is by the expanded use of sub-contracting, temporary and self-employment, and the geographical dispersion of production and services provision—has been characterized by Harvey (1990: 147) as “flexible accumulation”:

Flexible accumulation…is marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation. It has entrained rapid shifts in the patterning of uneven development, both between sectors

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19 As Harvey (1989: 257) writes, if place is the “site of Being” then “Becoming entails a spatial politics that renders place subservient to transformations of space.”

20 Polanyi characterized this oscillation between market self-regulation and social intervention as the “double movement” of capitalism. When the market mechanism attempts to “subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market,” Polanyi (1944: 76) argues, society acts to protect itself “against the perils of inherent in a self-regulating market system.” The resulting reforms altered free market schemes significantly and provided the foundations for the formation of modern liberalism. Neo-liberalism names the retrenchment of social welfare programs in favor of greater economic liberalization.
and between geographical regions, giving rise, for example, to a vast surge in so-called ‘service-sector’ employment as well as to entirely new industrial ensembles in hitherto underdeveloped regions…It has also entailed a new round of what I shall call ‘space-time compression’ in the capitalist world – the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space.

As with manufacturing, the standardization (and now digitization) of tasks is critical in enabling corporations to globalize their operations: “By increasing the range of possible substitutions within a given production process, capitalists can increasingly free themselves from particular geographic constraints” (Harvey 1985: 145). Offshoring entails the extreme rationalization of tasks and jobs. Only when broken down into component parts could work be exported, and executives agree that decomposed projects are rarely made whole in the offshore site. As an executive at Proctor and Gamble put it at an industry conference, offshoring is about “standardizing it and extracting value.” Says another executive: “There is a lot of compartmentalization of tasks.” Thus just as the globalization of manufacturing “brought a wave of competitive Fordist industrialization to entirely new environments,” the same could be said of the ethos of flexibility (Harvey 1990: 141). Following Lipietz’s (1987: 71) characterization of the labor process and organization in offshore factories as “peripheral Fordism,” we can describe the present phase of globalization as involving “peripheral flexibility” in that the export of these forms is mediated by local particularities and by the fact that mostly standardized work is being moved. This produces a pockmarked economy in which different modes of production (“informational,” industrial, agricultural, etc.) overlap and co-exist (Pieterse 1994).

Capital thus seems hard-wired to traipse around the world in search of surplus value, pausing in space, thus in a place, like a bee stopping to pollinate.\(^{21}\) To use Deleuze and

\(^{21}\) On this even free traders and socialists agree: capital and the market are amoral and without conscience, all nerves and instinct; genuine corporate social responsibility would suggest that this hard-wiring has frayed.
Guattari’s (1987) terminology, capital is territorialized (emplaced in a certain location), de-territorialized (capital and job flight), and re-territorialized (anchored in another area). Through each territorialization, capital in conjunction with the state produces space. This occurs in a paradoxical way. On the one hand, it involves an indifference toward if not a disdain for the specificity and stubbornness of place and past. On the other, places have specific, a priori attributes that attract capital in the first place—skill sets, cheap labor, malleable governments. As Sassen (1995: 31) writes, “there is also a space economy which reveals the need for strategic sites with vast concentrations of resources and infrastructure, sites that are situated in national territories and are far less mobile than much of the commentary on the global economy suggests.” These assets are seized upon and developed in accordance with specific short and long-term interests. In other words, capital does not confront an empty plane, but an uneven landscape. The thrust may be towards uniformity and repetition, but space is not created ex nihilo. Rather, it occurs “in a contested institutional landscape in which newly emergent ‘projected spaces’ interact conflictually with inherited regulatory arrangements” (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 66).

The state plays a pivotal role in facilitating the circulation of capital, recommending itself as a reliable partner in the production and extraction of surplus value. Yet it must still attend to variety of obligations and serve a broad range of interests. It is a vehicle for promoting the public good and the interests of particular classes and groups. It must also perpetuate itself. What makes the contemporary situation unique is that political elites in developing countries are increasingly seeing their needs as coincident with the short-term interests of foreign capital. (The paradigm shift from import-substitution to export-orientation is evidence of this). And to reap the benefits of increased employment, exports, and foreign exchange, states must first foster “good business climates.” This is often accomplished through the creation of export processing zones (EPZs) and special economic zones (SEZs). (Table 2.1 illustrates the growth of EPZs over time).
Table 2.1 Estimates of the Development of Export Processing Zones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Countries with EPZs</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of EPZs or similar zones</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>845</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>3500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment (millions)</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- of which is China</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


These zones provide not only cheap labor but a range of fiscal and policy incentives to exporting industries, such as “tax incentives, government services, and such features as ‘total or partial exemption from laws and decrees of the country concerned’” (Ong 1997: 64).

Additionally, the mobility of capital “reduces overall costs of production while it strengthens the bargaining position of corporations vis-à-vis local governments competing for foreign investments” (Ibid). This form of competitive bidding is an intranational matter as much as it is an international affair.

Yet while the global south is being increasingly populated with export processing zones, even these relatively homogenous spaces are tremendously diverse. As the International Labor Organization (2003: 2) reports:

Zones have evolved from initial assembly and simple processing activities to include high tech and science zones, finance zones, logistics centres and even tourist resorts. Their physical form now includes not only enclave-type zones but also single-industry zones (such as the jewellery zone in Thailand or the leather zone in Turkey); single-commodity zones (like coffee in Zimbabwe); and single-factory (such as the export-oriented units in India) or single-company zones (such as in the Dominican Republic).

Furthermore, one must not confuse an intention with its realization; the blueprint differs from happenings on the ground. This is because designs and schemas interact with the raw material of social life. Space is also appropriated for human needs, which is what gives a
city its distinctive local stamp. “Desire,” writes Lefebvre (1991: 395), “which preceded needs and goes beyond them, is the yeast that causes this rather lifeless dough (the homogenizing capitalist city) to rise. The resulting movement prevents stagnation and cannot help but produce differences.” In this vein, Bishop et al. (2003) argue that postcolonial urbanism has its own distinctive forms and cannot be reduced to Western urbanism. Thus economic globalization both homogenizes and produces difference.

**The Production of Space in India**

In consequence of indebtedness and a foreign exchange crisis, India partly opened its economy to global trade and investment in 1991 under the counsel of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Ross 2006; Hira 2005). Due to its large pool of educated and English-speaking labor, India fast emerged as the favored destination for business process outsourcing and information technology. The end result, writes Krugman (2006: A21), is that “India's surge into world markets hasn't followed the pattern set by other developing nations, which started their export drive in low-tech industries like clothing. Instead, India has moved directly into industries that advanced countries like the United States thought were their exclusive turf.”

The discovery of India as a source of high tech labor was made in the 1990s by General Electric, which established a joint venture in the country and contracted out software development and maintenance and back-office work to Indian suppliers, such as Wipro and Tata (Lynn 2005). Other multinationals, such as Microsoft, Cisco, Xerox, and Honeywell, soon followed suit. A managing director at Lehman Brothers puts the rationale plainly: “The country offered us cheap labor and skilled people.” Additionally, many expatriate Indians who had set up “bodysops” in Silicon Valley, which imported high tech workers on H1-B and L-1...
visas, established service operations in India (Xiang 2006). As an executive put it, “Immigrants become knowledge workers except they enter through portals rather than ports.”

Table 2.2. provides a non-exhaustive list of companies presently offshoring services to India.
Table 2.2 Companies that Offshore Services to India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Call Center</th>
<th>Engineering &amp; R&amp;D</th>
<th>Finance &amp; Accounting</th>
<th>Human Resources</th>
<th>IT Development</th>
<th>Loans &amp; Claim Processing</th>
<th>IT Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accenture</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adobe</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazon.com</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Express</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>AT&amp;T</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank of America</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barclays</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Source: Vashista and Vashishta (2006) and various news reports.
India’s export revenues in IT-ITES grew from less than $0.5 billion in 1994 to $23.6 billion in 2006, 70% of which are to the U.S. (UN UNCTAD xxvi; Nasscom 2007; Bardhan and Kroll 2003). (Table 2.3). The number of IT-ITES workers employed in India grew from 830,000 in FY 2004 to well over one million in FY 2005 and is expected to reach 1.6 million in FY07. (See Table 2.3).

Table 2.3 IT and ITES/BPO Sector Performance in India in U.S. dollars (in billions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>FY 2004</th>
<th>FY 2005</th>
<th>FY 2006</th>
<th>FY 2007E</th>
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<td>13.5</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>23.7</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
<td>10.0</td>
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<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITES-BPO</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Exports</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Domestic</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Exports</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Domestic</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Exports</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>31.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Domestic</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>8.4</td>
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*Other: Engineering Services and R&D, Software Products

Table 2.4. Employment Figures in the IT and ITES/BPO Sector

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT Services</td>
<td>215,000</td>
<td>297,000</td>
<td>398,000</td>
<td>562,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITES-BPO</td>
<td>216,000</td>
<td>316,000</td>
<td>415,000</td>
<td>545,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering Services, R&amp;D, and Software</td>
<td>81,000</td>
<td>93,000</td>
<td>115,000</td>
<td>144,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic Market (including user orgs.)</td>
<td>318000</td>
<td>352000</td>
<td>365000</td>
<td>378,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL*</td>
<td>830,000</td>
<td>1,058,000</td>
<td>1,293,000</td>
<td>1,630,000</td>
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</table>

*Figures do not include employees in the hardware sector


While no large-scale survey of the workforce has been attempted, the following can be said of its demographic makeup. It is young (largely under 30), well-educated, and urban,
as English and computer literacy are necessary conditions for employment. The majority of workers are Hindu and upper-caste. They also tend to have been educated at English-medium and often private schools (Krishna and Brihmandesam 2006; Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Fuller and Narasimhan 2006; Oommen. U. and A. Meenakshisundararajan 2005). Generally speaking, software and IT workers tend to be better educated and earn more than BPO/ITES workers though the latter still do well by national standards. The ratio of men to women is reported to be 69:31 in IT and reversed in favor of women in BPO/ITES, according to the industry group, Nasscom (2004). Most surveys, however, suggest a more balanced gender ratio in the latter (Ramesh 2004; Krishna and Brihmandesam 2006).

All told, the outsourcing workforce constitutes less than a percent of the overall population. Its upper-middle class status can be seen in the fact that some 74% of households in India earned less than $2,000 in 2002, while these workers earn over double that sum (Economist 2005).

There is little natural about India’s relative advantage in services. The industry’s rapid growth is due in no small part to the state’s promotion of scientific and technological development over time. This can be seen in the international reputation of its seven Indian Institutes of Technology as well as through its National IT Action Plan of 1998, which created software technology parks throughout the country. Yet it is common to hear that the Indian outsourcing industry has succeeded in spite of rather than because of state policies. As Vivek Paul, former CEO of the BPO Wipro and now a venture capitalist, put it: “The reason for the success of IT companies was that they were never regulated. Once things took off, there were all sorts of ministers asking what else they could do. They wanted a stake in things. We would say, ‘Please, nothing.’”

Nonetheless, the state has taken an active role in attracting foreign investment. A newly-minted Ministry of Information Technology has been tasked with converting the

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23 The latter also recruits heavily from the liberal arts background, while IT relies on the sciences. Software exports generate more revenue but employ less people than BPO/ITES.
country’s notorious “red tape into a red carpet” for multinationals. Export production in special economic zones and software technology parks “is organized on an internationally competitive basis with requisite infrastructure, tax holidays, subsidized land, dependable power supplies, and duty free imports, among other things” (Aneesh 2006: 160-161). Deeply linked to major nodes in the global economy, these spaces have an ambiguous relationship to their immediate environs: companies pay little to no taxes and are largely removed from the domestic market. The BPO Policy of the state of Karnataka (2002), whose capital is Bangalore (India’s “Silicon Valley”) describes some of the features of SEZs:

BPO units set up in SEZs are specifically delineated duty-free enclaves treated as a foreign territory for the purpose of industrial, service and trade operations, with exemption from customs duties and a more liberal regime in respect of other levies. To promote foreign investment and other transactions, domestic regulations, restrictions and infrastructure inadequacies are sought to be eliminated in the SEZs for creating a hassle-free environment…The State is committed to simplify all the relevant enactments for the BPO sector. The barriers including employment of women at night, flexi working hours, mandatory weekly off have all been removed by necessary amendments to the relevant Acts to create an optimal environment for the growth of the BPO sector in the state.

Even the government of West Bengal, which has been led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front for over three decades, has tried to erase its image as a land of refractory labor by offering similar concessions and reforms. The state’s IT Policy (2003), which is also serves as a marketing device, states that its incentive package is “significantly more competitive than that offered by other states” and is “the best of the breed in the country.” It quotes Pramod Bhasin, President of GE Capital, offering the following accolades to the West Bengal government: “This is a very detailed proposal and addresses every concern raised by us. In fact, we have not been able to keep pace with that of your government.” Likewise, Vivek Paul says that labor laws are “pretty flexible” for the industry: “When we went to Calcutta, we met with the Chief Minister. West Bengal is the only state to declare IT essential services alongside the fire brigade and police, which outlaws strikes in a place where there are a lot of strikes.” (Paul, however, is incorrect; various states have since designated the
industry a “public utility”). The Government of Haryana (2006) explains the implications of the “simplification” of labor laws:

The IT-ITES industries have also been added to the First Schedule of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 for the purpose of declaring the sectors as "Public Utility Services," which will prevent the occurrence of strikes as well as lockouts without due notice. This provision is expected to go a long way in preventing industrial unrest in Haryana's IT-ITES sectors…In order to encourage the IT-ITES sectors, the Haryana Government has adopted a liberal policy in granting the players in this segment, exemption from the provisions of the Punjab Shops and Commercial Establishment Act, 1958, regarding opening and closing hours under Section 9 and 10 of the Act…The Government has also taken a policy decision to allow the employment of women workers during night shifts, to encourage employment of women while ensuring the sufficient protection of their rights.

In consequence of this increased flexibility, the outsourcing industry is characterized by an extensive use of temporary and contract labor, individualized employment relations, and high turnover (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006; Focus on the Global South 2006). Companies are also freed of the usual constraints on hiring and firing workers. As Robert Bailey, President and CEO of PMC-Sierra, remarks of the company’s Indian operation, “There’s a scalability factor, where you can dramatically increase headcount very, very quickly. There’s also flexibility: you can bring it down very quickly as well, without the inertia, the internal inertia you usually have.” It is not all hire-and-fire policies and economic insecurity however. Flexibility works both ways: labor demand presently exceeds supply, resulting in pay raises and various perks, job-hopping, and decent working conditions.
Reification and Mimicry

“Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a role” (Benjamin 1979/1933: 65).

Economic globalization thus proceeds by producing spaces, such as quasi-national special economic zones, that are relatively homogenous in form and yet qualitatively distinct in content. In this section, we look at how this plays out at the level of practice. Globalization works, first, by obfuscation, by masking its operations (dead ringers). And second, through the imitation and repetition of certain social and cultural forms (imitative counterpoint). The notion of reification is helpful here. First, reification can be understood as “the effacement of the traces of production” (Jameson 1991: 314). This is intensified by globalization. As Willis (1991: 52) writes, “If as Marx defined them, commodities are the containers of hidden social relationships, certainly these social relationships are all the more concealed by the movement of production to the Third World.” (The danger is that if and when these traces become evident, the consuming public would feel guilty, angry, or anxious). That India is referred to as the “world’s back-office” implies that these activities were already out of view to begin with. Very few workers interact directly with customers. (“We don’t allow anybody from India to talk to clients in the US or anywhere,” says an Indian executive). In those activities where interaction is unavoidable, such as customer service, smokescreens are deployed to obscure the identities, accents, and location of workers. (This can even apply to intrafirm technical support, such as at General Electric). The combined effect is that the geographic signature—“Made in India”—is occluded. Globalization makes the social relations of production more opaque.
The second sense of reification—the “transformation of social relations into things”—is equally important (Jameson 1991: 314). Once objectified, they can be exported and copied. Thus accompanying the physical and material flows and transfers across space is a whole train of representations or reified social relations.\footnote{As Lefebvre (1991: 230) writes, “Pre-existing space underpins not only durable spatial arrangements but also representational spaces and their attendant imagery and mythic narratives—i.e. what are often called ‘cultural models.’”} As I will argue, in the execution of work previously performed in the West, offshoring is mimetic in a number of senses. Yet mimesis would seem an odd concept to use in discussing contemporary economic affairs. The faculty to copy, the impulse to become like another, is thought to be pre-modern and “beyond reason” (Alford 1985: 186). For Habermas (1984: 382, 453) the concept “appears to be a placeholder for primordial reason,” which “recalls to mind the model of an exchange of the subject with nature that is free of violence.” As applied to social relations, it denotes a sympathetic and accommodating attitude:

Imitation designates a relation between persons in which the one accommodates to the other. There is an allusion here to a relation in which the surrender of the one to the other does not mean a loss of self but a gain and an enrichment. Because the mimetic capacity escapes the conceptual framework of cognitive-instrumentality determined subject-object relations, it counts as the sheer opposite of reason, as impulse (Ibid: 390).

But as Benjamin (1979: 65) writes this “powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else” is deeply involved in our “higher functions.” How is this so? Whereas for Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 187), mimesis once denoted a relationship to nature in which the “outside world [serves] a model which the inner world must try to conform to” for purposes of survival, it was later subjected to conscious control through magic (by which “shamens warded off danger by means of images imitating that danger”) and has finally (and tragically) been appropriated by instrumental rationality. What we are getting at is not the demise of mimesis but its transformation:

Civilization has replaced the organic adaptation to others and mimetic behavior proper, by organized control of mimesis, in the magical phase; and,
finally, by rational practice, by work, in the historical phase. Uncontrolled mimesis is outlawed...The ego has been formed in resistance to mimicry. In the constitution of the ego reflective mimesis becomes controlled reflection...In the bourgeois mode of production, the indelible mimetic heritage of all practical experience is consigned to oblivion...Science is repetition, refined into observable regularity, and preserved in stereotypes. The mathematical formula is regression handled consciously, just as the magic ritual used to be; it the most sublimated manifestation of mimicry. Technology no longer completes the approximation to death for the sake of survival by physical imitation of external nature, as was the case with magic, but by automation of the mental processes, by converting them into blind cycles. With its triumph human statements become both controllable and inevitable...The pitiless prohibition becomes mere fate; the denial is now so complete that it is no longer conscious (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 180-181).

Offshoring can be seen a highly “sublimated manifestation of mimicry”; it is mimicry subject to rational control and the rules of capital accumulation. Work processes are standardized, replicable, and predictable, one task following the other in serial progression. Call center personalities involve a form of emotional mechanization as well as the carefully choreographed mimicry of Westerners. Even in some aspects of IT work, where employers try to construct professional work identities, the reformed personality is to be based on a stereotype of the Western professional and is another form of rationalized copying. For those working the permanent night shift, this also means living as if they were in the same time zone and imaginative space as American and British consumers.

That the offshore workspace is constructed in a Western-corporate image should not be taken to mean that it is a facsimile or a “faithful copy” of those in the home country. Given that offshoring relies on blueprints and plans abstracted from concrete reality, the offshore workplace is both a copy and a “copy that is not a copy,” to borrow Taussig’s (1993: 52) expression. This latter point registers the way that things resemble each other yet take on a life of their own; how things are “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994: 6). As Sontag (1969: 261) writes, “The life of an institution cannot be appreciated by examining a blueprint of its structure; run under the auspices of different feelings, similar structures can have a different quality.” In Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987: 11) terms, one could say that
offshore sites “form a rhizome” with onshore offices, a relationship marked by “an aparen
evolution.” The notion of imitative counterpoint captures this difference-in-similarity.

Mimed forms are transposed into a different key. While offshore workplaces look
like centers of innovation, for example, they are very often sites of rote service provision.
And while these spaces seem to glow with the prospects of development, they are outposts of
Western economy hegemony: the industry is a dependent export-based service industry.
Moreover, the “flexible” professional or entrepreneurial employee means something
altogether different in the Indian context where it is a complex mixture of different
sensibilities: servant, bureaucratic, and professional. While long and busy hours are no
strangers to Americans, their lengthening and deepened intensity combined with high levels of
managerial surveillance have raised the specter of “electronic sweatshops.” It is thus not the
case that mimicry is “consigned to oblivion” by instrumental rationality; rather, capitalism has
arrogated the mimetic faculty to itself and transformed it into something more organized and
less intuitive.

**Modernity and Mimicry**

“If not all people exist in the same Now. They do so externally, by virtue of
the fact that they may all be seen today. But that does not mean that they are
living at the same time with others. Rather, they carry earlier things with
them, things which are intricately involved…In general, different years
resound in the one that has just been recorded and prevails.”—Ernst Bloch
(1977/1935: 22)

If Bloch could write so insistently about “the non-synchronicity of synchronicity” and
the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” in the 1930s, then we cannot conclude that the
radical juxtaposition of “outmoded” and “modern” forms and ways of being is nonpareil or
unique to the present period. It may be characteristic of all periods of rapid social change
whether it occurs at a societal level or within a particular economic or social stratum.
Offshoring is a provocateur in this sense. It unsettles the sense of spatial and temporal continuity by combining elements and experiences and values of different times and climes.

In offshore workspaces, for example, managerial power is simultaneously personalized-arbitrary and rational-technocratic, an imbrication of progressive and regressive modes. Workers, for their part, can be both servile and aggressive. The reason is that economic globalization gives rise to contradictory forms without reconciling them. On the one hand, we see “motives and reserves from precapitalist times and structures” and the “surmounted remnants of older economic being and consciousness” (Bloch 1977: 29) manifest themselves in the docility of workers and the high-handedness of management. On the other, the individualism unleashed by the comparatively open workplace atmosphere takes on an unexpected character in a context of high labor demand. Rather than translating into increased responsibility and a sense of “ownership” of work, as managers and employers intend, it takes the form of possessive individualism and skittish job-hopping. Another example is the clashing temporal orientations of global capitalism and Indian work and social life. The ghost of history is also apparent in the reactionary provincialism—the reinvented “tradition”—that ranges itself against the materialism and relativism of the “new” middle-class. These antithetic romanticisms of past and future shape the cultural politics of outsourcing in India.

It makes little sense in the case of the Indian “middle-class” to speak of a transition from tradition to modernity; it is already a “modern” socio-economic formation. In this connection, Dirlik (2004: 142) suggests that we have moved from a “temporalization of difference (modern versus primitive, backward, pre-modern or traditional, etc.) into a re-spatialization of difference, creating different spaces of modernity that generate conflicting cultural claims to modernity.” It follows that there are multiple modernities, not a universal global modernity. That a plethora of social forms co-exist in the present, however, does not solve the problem of the lingering past as Bloch posed it. As Thrift (2000: 222) writes, “nearly all spaces bear the freight of their past.”
Rather than seeing modernization as a linear process or as an ahistorical collection of modernities, it is best understood as a dialectic of modernity and tradition, of space and place, of rationality and a-rationality, of maturity and immaturity, of regressive and flexible forms of labor organization, of servility and professionalism. In other words, it would be wrong to speak of nonsynchronicity in terms of a lingering residue that will soon be washed away like so much flotsam by the high tide of modernity. Rather, modernity provides the conditions of possibility for the resurgence of the “primitive,” for the “return of the repressed,” and for the appearance of “living and newly revived nonsynchronisms” (Taussig 1993: 19; Bloch 1977: 27). De Certeau (1984: 25), for example, writes that “popular practices” that have resurfaced “within industrial and scientific modernity…cannot be confined to the past, the countryside, or primitive peoples. They exist in the heart of the strongholds of the contemporary economy.” This is because modernization entails the “perpetual disruption of temporal and spatial rhythms” (Harvey 1990: 214). If tradition did not exist, modernity would have to invent it. It must range itself against something, which it invariably portrays as stolid and slow and obsolete.26

Dirlik (2004: 139) poses an important question: “Does the recognition of heterogeneity necessitate the repudiation of the existence of structural forces globally?” Clearly characterizations of globalization as a “hybridization which gives rise to a global mélange” are too descriptive and lacking in structural context (Pieterse 1994: 161). Economic globalization is not aleatory but is shaped by the needs and demands of multinational corporations. Thus while capital’s various destinations all put their own distinctive stamp on the production process, mimicry generally does not work both ways. (A “flat world” would

25 As Taussig (1993: 20) writes, “Benjamin’s notion regarding the importance of the mimetic faculty in modernity is fully congruent with his orienting sensibility toward the (Euroamerican) culture of modernity as a sudden rejuxtaposition of the very old and the very new. This is not an appeal to historical continuity. Instead modernity provides the cause, context, means, and needs, for the resurgence—not the continuity—of the mimetic faculty.”
26 The same applies to the West and its colonial civilizing process in the East as Said (1979) has shown.
imply a situation of relative economic parity between countries). While acknowledging
difference, then, it is important not to fall into a sort of culturalist hybridity fetishism that
celebrates difference, fragmentation, dislocation, etc. and glosses over historically- and
structurally-determined inequalities. Offshoring, and by extension economic globalization, is
largely a corporate strategy and not a reconfiguration of political and economic relations,
however rapidly the international division of labor seems to change.

The Seductions of the West

Power relations are always implicated in the practice of mimicry. If, as Taussig
(1993: xiv) writes, the history of mimesis is profoundly tied to “Euro-American colonialism,”
then today’s variant is deeply linked to corporate globalization. (The major difference is that
it works in a much more diffuse way). Colonialism pitted “civilization” against “savagery”;
economic globalization pits the “modern” against the “traditional” or incompletely modern.
Both produce the compulsion to imitate, particularly on the part of privileged strata in the
developing world. With the waning appeal of postcolonial nationalism, consumer-oriented
mimicry has emerged as an integral component of class identity.

Parvati has lost favor to Laxmi. Post-reform India has done away with moral
squeamishness about open displays of wealth. As Mehta (1997: 85) writes, “In the old days, if
you had it, you hid it. We were a poor country and self-denial was solidarity.” Individualism
is the order of the day and is expressed in things like the consumption of high-end goods,
drinking, lavish celebrations, Western-style “love marriages,” a preference for English, and
the patronage of multinational fast food chains like McDonalds, Pizza Hut and KFC whose
clientele is generally well-to-do. “All devotion,” write Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 181),
“has a touch of mimicry about it.”

27 One may only find a McAloo Tikka Burger with Cheese or a Chicken Maharajah Mac in India, but it is still McDonald’s.
By a kind of Hegelian ruse of history, what seems at first blush a modernist impulse to produce oneself can be interpreted as its opposite; namely, the sensual, pre-rational and childlike tendency to copy. If mimesis, as Alford (1985: 186) writes of its original sense as a relationship between people and nature, “appears to be an impulse without an appropriate object,” the mimetic aspirations and commodity lust of workers and employers, too, appear dreamlike and without an appropriate object. The second sense of reification—the transformation of social relations into things—also applies to the seductions of the West. People develop sympathetic relationships to its figurations whether as commodities, lifestyles, or in other forms of popular culture. Through its reification and global diffusion, the West, if not the U.S. specifically, is a cathetic object, which invested with emotional energy.28 As in “children’s games,” which are “everywhere interlaced with mimetic modes of behavior,” identity-shifting at call centers is seen as a space of “play” by some workers (Benjamin 1979: 65). Ironically, the practice is pushed on them as job requirements at multinationals, the primary forces of “modernization.”

Thus while Adorno’s point about the rationalization of mimicry is well taken, it is perhaps overstated. In Benjamin’s view, this “regressive” and subconscious capacity is reinvented by modern means. As Buck-Morss (1989: 267) writes of his views on film and photography:

He noted…that the camera arrests the flow of perception and captures the most subtle physical gestures. “Through it we experience an optical unconscious as in psychoanalysis we first experience the instinctual unconscious.” Film provides a new schooling for our mimetic powers: “Within the enlargement space is stretched out; within slow motion, movement expands,” revealing “entirely new structural formations of matter.

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28 Others develop emotionally charged and acrimonious attitudes toward the West, but as Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 183) write of anti-Semites, “They cannot stand the Jews, but they imitate them.” Such hatred is the “morbid expression of a repressed mimesis” based on “false projection” where impulses the subject will not admit as his own even though they are most assuredly so, are attributed to the object—the prospective victim” (Ibid: 187).
In their immediacy, images have a power to unlock and open up; they elicit emotion and invite the spectator to identify with them. The intimate texture of the other is experienced up close in sensuous detail. The far is brought near. How much of the habitus of the call center worker, and the young upper-middle-class Indian for that matter, is owing to the globalization of Western imagery, television, film, and music? That these forms are copied more closely and comprehensively than before can be seen in such things as the Royal Stag Corporate Music Carnival that was held recently in the New Delhi suburb of Gurgaon. Sponsored by Seagram’s, the alcohol distiller, the event was a competition between bands formed by BPO workers who play an array of American and British hard rock and heavy metal songs, such as “Highway to Hell.”29 While they represented multinationals such as General Electric, E-funds, Wipro, EXL, and Daksh (IBM), the logos on their black t-shirts read Iron Maiden, Deep Purple, Bon Jovi and Judas Priest. The neutralized accents—which one onlooker described as the “weirdest in the whole wide world”—are courtesy of employers’ training programs, but the torn jeans, gestures, and of course songs come via the new media and communication technologies.

Thus even “pre-rational” and playful forms of mimicry can be put to profitable use. Lefebvre (1991: 48) contrasts the “abstract space” of domination and homogenization with the “absolute” space of human appropriation. Put otherwise, if space is the domain of abstract rationality, rules, bureaucracy and institutions, then place is the “politically enabling” realm of intimacy, feeling and belonging (Amin 2002: 388). But this realm of everyday life is not necessarily one of hope or resistance. Consumption and possessive individualism, for example, trouble such an easy distinction. They are “freedoms” which do not contest power

29 Speaking to the Financial Express (2004), Seagram’s marketing head explains the rationale behind the competition: “BPO executives are pretty young and they view corporate participation in such rock music and dance carnivals as a part of good HR practices. For marketers like us, the fast growing BPO segment means a lot of disposable income in the hands of young executives, who are open to new changes and influences. The employee base of these dozen firms participating in Gurgaon itself is over 50,000.”
In Lefebvre’s (2000/1971: 64-65) terms, consumer capitalism—“the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption”—aims to “cybernetize society by the indirect agency of everyday life...[T]here are powers, colossal and despicable, that swoop down on everyday life and pursue their prey in its evasions and departures, dreams and fantasies to crush it in their relentless grip.” In consumer society, power works through “seduction rather than repression” (Burkitt 2004: 224). Absent an equal and opposite response, “abstract space” and “absolute space” merge into one depressing consumer spectacle.

This can even be seen in how labor problems are dealt with. The politically-disabling conditions of work—particularly the stress of the graveyard shift, long hours, and an intense work pace—are assuaged not through collective organization but by the individualized consumption of stimulants to stay alert (caffeine, nicotine, etc.). The thin columns of cigarette smoke rising from India’s technology parks are symbols of the underside of the digital revolution, just as the black clouds of soot bellowing from factory smokestacks stood for the pernicious effects of the industrial revolution. Of course the physical and emotional hardships exacted by the latter were far greater than anything India’s ICT workforce will ever face. The irony is that rather than seeing them as necessary evils in a topsy-turvy work culture, the stimulants and junk-food of the global “24-hour society” are extolled as emblems of choice in the postmodern apotheosis of the consumer-citizen.

Globalization, then, makes other cultures more emulatable. It provides the conditions of possibility not for the declining significance of place but for the emergence of what Massey (2000) calls a “global sense of place.”

Research Methods

Much of this book is based on fieldwork conducted between March 2005 and September 2006. In total, 129 semi-structured interviews were conducted with workers,

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30 In Polanyi’s (1957:39) words, social conditions during the Industrial Revolution were “a veritable abyss of human degradation.”
managers, employers, and trade unionists in India and the United States. As offshoring is beginning to affect different segments of white collar work, the goal was to cover different steps on what is called the service value ladder. In India, most of the fieldwork took place at four outsourcing companies in India, which were selected from a list provided by the National Association of Software and Service Companies. While I do not claim that the firms are representative of the entire industry, I do try to capture the range of diversity across the service industry.

Three of the selected companies provide Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) and IT-enabled services (ITES), which includes customer support and back office and financial and legal services, while the fourth is the IT subsidiary of an investment bank. While they are often treated separately in the literature, the comparison is useful analytically in that we are able to see, for example, how time is “compressed” in one and “stretched” in the other. It also allows subtler distinctions to be made regarding class and social background—something the vague term “middle-class” obscures. The firms, moreover, are located in four of India’s outsourcing hubs—Delhi, Bangalore, Bombay, and Chennai—and this diversity provides a broader view of globalization’s effects on the social landscape than would a study restricted to a single location.

As for the subjects, the majority of workers were in their mid-twenties and the gender ratio was close to 60:40 favoring men, with the additional caveat that men were overrepresented in management. Most employees, with the exception of those at the IT subsidiary, work the permanent night shift so that they are able to communicate directly with Western customers and clients. I used snowball sampling, relying on worker and employer networks, to arrange additional interviews in order to test the general applicability of my findings. These included interviews with top-level executives and managers at outsourcing firms as well as with union organizers and industry representatives. The names of the companies and interviewees have been changed to preserve anonymity.
While the focus of the study is mainly on worker and employer subjectivity, identities are of course relational. To properly understand the process of identity formation, one must attend to a variety of factors that influence self-perceptions. In the workplace, I interviewed HR managers, supervisors, and executives. As societal and familial perceptions exercise considerable influence, I spent time with workers in a variety of social settings, from homes to malls, cafes, and nightclubs. This was also necessitated by the restrictive nature of some of the interviews, as subjects were sometimes handpicked by managers. While even these subjects could be remarkably frank about their hopes and disappointments, the workplace setting has certain inherent limitations. The transcripts and field notes were thematically coded. Individual subjects were chosen for inclusion in the interest of providing a balanced and nuanced account of the industry and its effects. The analytical approach was inductive in that I tried to keep an open mind to the ways in which everyday lives are altered by economic change.

In the U.S., I interviewed personnel at the home and client offices of companies that I visited in India. First, this allowed me to understand how offshoring works. It provided insight into the types of work being moved and how processes are managed locally and globally. It also shed light on the cultural dynamics of globalization and on the ways in which particular managerial techniques and values are exported to developing countries. I also attended four outsourcing industry conferences in New York City, which allowed me to observe candid discussions about the benefits and pitfalls of offshoring. As with the India interviews, this also allowed me to put my interview data within a broader context.

While there are inherent limits to the generalizability of field studies, the arguments presented have multiple sources of support in the secondary literature. Particularly, I draw on the literature on workplace culture, identity, labor discipline, and globalization. A short survey of 150 Indian workers was also conducted at worksites, which provided data on the demographics of the workforce.
CHAPTER TWO
MACAULAY’S (CYBER) CHILDREN

“We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”— Lord Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Education” (1835)

South Delhi is a dense settlement of middle-class homes and shopping markets, pitted with occasional slums, gardens, and Mughal landmarks. Its ethos is largely consumerist. The banner headline of a community newspaper during the Hindu festival of Diwali, asks, “Want to Get Wealthy?” The question is material but the speculations are airily religious. “What pleases Goddess Lakshmi [the goddess of wealth]? When does she bless us with all the riches and comforts of the world? Different people have different answers: some say, it is the gem that you wear, the goddess that you worship, the colour that you paint your walls in or how big is your wealth vase [sic]...”

The dance floor of an area night club is enshrouded in smoke and occupied by tight clusters of young men and women in designer clothes, all of whom, one presumes, have rather large wealth vases. Rita, a twenty-two year old call center worker, has drunk five cocktails priced at 250 rupees a piece, approximately $25 in total—a large sum in a country where 35% of the people live on less than $1 a day. Although city regulations require bars to stop serving alcohol at midnight, the club merely locked the front door and allows the intoxicating flow to continue. After a night of dancing, Rita’s head is beginning to spin. Her growing dizziness and fatigue is amplified by the kaleidoscopic whirl of strobe lights and a dance floor that undulates “boombonically” to a Bhangra re-mix of rapper 50 Cent’s “In Da Club.”

Rita is out with her team of six call center workers—an outing sponsored by their company to foster camaraderie within the group. Her long swaying hair cannot hide her pale face, which is a knot of exhaustion and sickness. Noticing her obvious discomfort, Deepak,
her junior manager, gathers the rest of the team that is gyrating to the hybrid beats. They
board a black Toyota Qualis with tinted windows, one of hundreds hired out by the company
to transport workers to and from work. When they arrive at Rita’s house, Deepak steps out of
the vehicle, walks confidently up the dimly lit driveway, and rings the door bell. He is
followed by Rita who is being assisted clumsily by another inebriated worker. Rita’s mother
answers the door.

“Hello Auntie, here is your daughter,” says Deepak, drawing out the last rolling
syllable sinisterly, barely able to contain his mirth. We may picture her, a housewife dressed
in a nightgown with a shawl draped over her frail shoulders (for it is late and a bit cool)
standing in the doorway, one hand clutching the door knob, the other on the jamb to support
her weight, gazing over Deepak’s shoulder and around his smile. What thoughts pass through
her mind as she catches sight of her only daughter, her hair bunched into a loose ball by a
supportive coworker, leaning awkwardly over an outer hedgerow thick with the first spring
growth? Is she shocked and dismayed by the sight? Is she afraid of calling out and waking the
neighbors? One thing is certain: her daughter’s behavior has proved the alarmists right. The
outsourcing industry is a den of sin and immorality, tempting the young and chaste with
refulgent, air-conditioned offices in chrome and glass towers, with therapists and de-stressing
rooms, and, of course, parties.

While outsourcing has provided needed foreign investment and employment
opportunities, the resulting cultural change is not easily reconcilable with certain aspects of
Indian social life. Though not yet fully articulated as such, as in Williams’ (1978) notion of
“structures of feeling,” what the clash supposes is two different moral worlds. The first is one
in which marriage is arranged by family, gratification is delayed, and the individual is
engulfed and defined by a dense web of family and social obligations. The second posits an
autonomous, pleasure-seeking self that no doubt derives succor from family, but is defined
more by the voluntary choices it makes. At a remove from the traditional sources and
enforcers of societal values—extended families, lifelong neighbors, religious authorities—workers construct their own, but not from scratch.

The identities and aspirations of the ICT workforce are defined increasingly with reference to the West. Outsourcing has emboldened a class of cultural emulators and made their protest visible. Radical in their rejection of old values, conspicuous in their consumption, workers construct an image of the West as a social utopia, which is used as a benchmark, a standard against which to measure India’s social progress. The infusion of new money and jobs, however, feeds popular anxieties that stretch virtue into vice: too much personal freedom, too much consumerism. Globalization does not herald an era of unprecedented personal or consumer freedom, a belated “modernity,” nor does it signify a crisis of the “traditional” Indian family. It is an Indian morality play where the pleasure principle clashes with the demands of custom and obligation, where kama (pleasure) and dharma (duty) meet in uneasy suspension.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section provides an overview of the debates about globalization and identity. The vignettes that follow explore how globalization is shaping the aspirations and identities of the Indian middle-class and in particular those employed by the outsourcing industry. The first consider how companies foster cultural change through work-based identity requirements and managerial schemes. As globalization has created an incipient rift in middle-class worldviews, the next sections explore societal perceptions of the industry and their impact on workers’ self-image. This is followed by a discussion of how globalization might undermine itself through the experiences of workers disillusioned with its promises. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the global imaginings of outsourcing executives, a new comprador class.

Globalization and the New Middle Classes
In 1841, the French writer and diplomat, François-René de Chateaubriand asked what a “universal society” would look like. “Would the fusion of societies result in a universal idiom,” he wondered, “or would there be a dialect of transactions serving daily usage, while each nation spoke its own language, or would a different language be understood by everyone?” (cited in Rothschild 1999: 106). Such questions are again apposite in an era in which “our world and our lives are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity” (Castells 1997: 1; Giddens 1991; Guillén 2001).

One school of thought on globalization understands it to be a force for the elision of cultural difference (Ritzer 2000). As modernization theory would have it, developing countries, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, are steadily moving toward the norms and cultures of the West by dint of transfers of technology and capital (Rostow 1960). “The crucial sociological question,” writes Bell (1976: li), “is whether we still may have ‘national’ cultures that set off countries from one another.” Appadurai (1996: 29) counters that if indeed “a global culture is emerging, it is filled with ironies and resistances.” In response to the seeming simplicity of the homogenization thesis, globalization is now viewed in terms of contestation, overlap, and disjuncture (Sassen 2000). Cultural fragmentation and modernist homogenization are said to be “equally constitutive” features of global reality (Friedman 1994; Escobar 2001).

It is difficult to take issue with these compromise positions for they are almost too reasonable. But while it has become fashionable to speak of postcolonial identity in terms of hybridity, the term obscures the direction of cultural change (Kraidy 2005). British colonialism in India, for example, produced not an exact copy of British English but a new variant, Indian English. Yet, one must acknowledge that it also resulted in the relative Anglicization of the subject population. Likewise with corporate globalization. However partial and contested the process, recent years have witnessed the diffusion of a relatively uniform consumerist ethos in developing societies. Terms such as “invidious distinction” and
“conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, [1899] 1994) have acquired a renewed significance among the “new middle-classes.” The elaboration of a culture of consumerism is not merely a superstructural consequence of the formation of the middle class. As Liechty (2002: 7) writes, it is one of “the most important cultural processes through which an emerging middle class actually creates itself as a sociocultural entity.” Consumption has become a “privileged site for the fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 299).

As auto-rickshaws are displaced by taxicabs, tandoori kitchens by fast food chains, and teahouses by internet cafes, the consumption of high-end goods and the emulation of Western lifestyles become a means of drawing status distinctions and markers of socioeconomic position. The new middle classes, ICT workers included, exhibit many of the cultural contradictions of modernity—the undermining of the classic work ethic by a culture of consumerism and “hedonism”—that a vexed Daniel Bell (1976) discussed in his book on postindustrial America. In the South Asian context, status distinctions based on ascribed characteristics like caste are giving way to those based on education, occupation, and wealth (Beteille 1997). Economic liberalization is further razing the walls—the traditions of sobriety and thrift, the government sinecures and stable career paths—that have hitherto kept India’s middle-class in modest comfort. In their place rise ladders of corporate ascension as well as the multiplied possibilities of freefall.

How are we to understand this growing convergence of identities and lifestyles and even structural conditions? First, globalization must be disaggregated. Insofar as the relevance of classificatory devices—First and Third World, East and West—has been undermined by new forms of communication and production, the idea of a unitary “global village” or a “flat” world is yet a fiction (Coronil, 2000). The village is traversed by historical fractures and political and economic divisions that have proved more difficult to elide than geography. Moreover, social actors are positioned differently with respect to these divisions
and they experience and interpret them accordingly. Attention must be therefore paid to the social location and concrete practices of particular groups.

Our argument about the fugue-like character of globalization is here important. While offshore spaces of work are structured according to Western conventions and norms, their content is derived partly from local realities. That is to say, existing values cannot be extended to new social groups without being transformed in the process. As Mirchandani (2004: 361) writes, “While Indian workers are taught to mimic American work norms, there is a slippage between the information they are presented about Americans and the ways in which they interpret this information. In this sense, mimicry involves not only the colonizer’s construction of the Other, but also the Other’s construction of the colonizer.” Moreover, as Jameson (1993: 34) argues, the appropriation of another culture means first “inventing the culture of the other group” as an object of prestige and “collective envy”—effectively adding another layer of mediation. Corporate globalization produces similarity and difference simultaneously.

“Women, Wine and Water”

The National Capital Region, encompassing New Delhi and the satellite industrial cities of Gurgaon and NOIDA, is host to over 30 transnational call centers. I scheduled a meeting in Gurgaon with Deepak, Rita’s junior manager, at Café Coffee Day, the largest retail café chain in the country. It is a favorite of middle class youth and most of the gossiping and whispered backstabbing takes place in a mix of Hindi and the former colonial tongue, which is ever a mark of distinction. Even if you place your order in flawless Hindi, the smiling cashier will respond in thickly-accented English.

Deepak arrives fifteen minutes late. Clad in faded jeans, leather jacket and black patent shoes that reflect the ceiling lights in bright flashes, he walks lackadaisically to the
table. The rings and creases about his tired eyes mar an otherwise clear and youthful complexion. Due to the necessity of working the night shift, BPO employees, more often than not, are exhausted, however much they are able to recalibrate their internal biological clocks to the intent rhythms of the global economy. Deepak has recently been promoted to junior manager and the small salary increase was accompanied by a haughty boost in status. Deepak the manager consorts not with other workers but with the likes of the company vice president. He has nothing but disdain for those beneath him, the poor souls like Rita that remind him of his easily duped former self.

Monetary incentives alone, he explains, are no longer effective in retaining people in an industry with extremely high turnover—on the order of 25-40% annually. “No matter how much you give them in salary and bonuses, it’s never enough. One guy uses his money to buy a dress for his girlfriend. She’s happy. But then she wants something more, like a necklace or flowers. It never ends. Now we’re trying non-monetary incentives like, you know, packets of cigarettes, taking them out drinking,” Deepak carps in the manner of an exasperated parent. Then, leaning closer, he says in a tone of conspiratorial bonhomie, “My V.P. has a philosophy [to reduce turnover]. Women…wine…and water.”

However nonsensical and off-putting the “philosophy,” it illustrates the lengths companies will go to retain (at least male) workers. Because of a labor market in which demand far outpaces supply, they must make a gesture toward indulging workers’ bacchanalian instincts. The CEO of a call center firm says that parties are a necessary “motivational tool in BPO culture. Everyone has to do it.” Even a new union that is trying to organize BPO workers initially threw large parties to attract workers. Little organizing was actually accomplished as workers were more interested in the copious supplies of alcohol than the union charter. And much to the chagrin of employers, the industry’s reputation for promiscuity has even earned it visits from the health ministry’s AIDS awareness program.
But aside from such ethically-questionable “perks,” there are other ways that companies shape the identities and behavior of the emergent ICT workforce within the workplace.

“Neutralizing” Accents and Identities

“Are you calling from India?”
“No, I’m calling from Modesto, California?”
“Well, you sound Indian.”
“I’ve only been here for two months and haven’t got the accent right.”

Thus transpired a conversation between an American customer and a 22-year old call center worker. “Sean,” like many other “telecallers,” is very insecure about his accent and was telling only a partial lie. True, he was not calling from Modesto but south Delhi. But he has only been at the call center—his virtual Modesto—for two months and has not had sufficient time to “neutralize” his Indian accent. Sean, unshaven and dressed in a red sweatshirt, white high tops, and rumpled jeans, speaks with a tortured Americanized twang. The son of an industrialist, he considers his employment to be short-term; in a few years he and his brother, who is seated at the adjacent work station, plan to join the family business.

As he introduces himself to me, I ask him if Sean is his real or work name. He affirms both: “Sean is my work name but I go by it now.” “Meaning your family and friends call you Sean as well?” I, the pop-eyed interviewer, inquire. “Yes,” he replies calmly. “Everyone calls me that now.” I look over to his brother who has since removed his headset and is listening in. He nods slowly in confirmation. In what can be construed as either a remarkable instance of cultural self-alienation or youthful insouciance, Akhil is Sean in and out of the workplace.

A communication-based industry, Indian call centers frequently require their employees to don Western identities in providing in-bound (customer service) and out-bound (telemarketing) service. Workers also undergo training in Western accents and popular culture and are discouraged from disclosing their geographical location on the phone. The rationale for these practices, according to managers, is that they allow agents to serve the customer
better. But another reason, less discussed, is to mute the political backlash in the West about the morality of outsourcing. Initially, workers were trained in specifically American and British accents but the preference is increasingly toward a “neutral,” global accent as it allows workers to be shifted around to serve various markets without additional training (Mirchandani 2003; Ross 2006). At best, the resulting speech is not so much neutral as measured and devoid of the local inflections that would conspicuously mark it as “Indian.” At worst, it is a mélange of British, American, and Indian English. In either case, it serves the purpose of obfuscation.

The demand for globalized speech has led to the creation of specialized institutes for accent “neutralization.” “Those with extremely good skills don’t want BPO,” says Kiran Desai, a veteran accent trainer. “What you get is a lot of people that don’t speak very well and aren’t from the best schools in Bombay. Lots of drop outs from college,” she adds in a crisp British-Indian accent. Schools do not concentrate on phonetics enough “and so they pick up sounds from their mother tongue. We teach them to get rid of mother tongue influence.” To sensitize trainees to the subtleties of American culture, they sit for viewings of popular movies, such as American Pie, Independence Day, and J.F.K. The serial “Friends,” Desai says, is “a soap that works. It provides insight into American culture through the jokes they crack.” They even show trainees videos of pet shows to convey Americans’ intense fondness for pets—so that they understand that to an American, “a cat is like his baby.” For Desai, these are purely technical issues, mere business requirements; she is adamant that these practices do not lead to a “loss of culture.”31 Yet, she says uncomprehendingly that there is sometimes “resistance” to training: “They say, ‘I’m an Indian and I speak fairly well. Why do I need to change?’ I don’t know why [they object]. Maybe it’s a fashion.”

31 Conversely, one call center manager describes his workers disparagingly as neither Indian nor American, but “half-baked.”
There is thus more at stake than phony identities and neutered accents. As opposed to physical labor, service work involves “emotional labor,” wherein workers are called on to amiably display a particular emotional repertoire (Leidner, 1999; Hochschild, 1983). In call centers, these management technologies penetrate to the very core of one’s identity. During training sessions, employees are told that the customer can see their smile and sense their mood through their voice. Workers must be able to “pass” as American or British. Maintaining one’s composure in the face of sometimes racist abuse by an irate customer is simply part of the job. “What is of importance,” writes Aneesh (2006: 93-94), “is the very endeavor to erase from view the disjuncture of different worlds, different time zones, different subjectivities, languages and accents.”

In describing the problematic aspects of labor practices in call centers, the question that often goes unconsidered is why workers are mostly indifferent, sometimes exultant, about their apparent cultural alienation (c.f. Mirchandani 2004; Taylor and Bain 2005; Poster 2007). Where some see tight control over emotions and personality and “dramaturgical stress,” many workers see the freedom to create an identity. Even when companies try to relinquish the practice of using pseudonyms, workers are often reluctant to let their fictive personas go. One small company in Bangalore, for example, reached a compromise with its employees. They may take a Western first name but they must keep their given surname. “Thus we now have Britney Gupta,” says an executive.

The term “cyber-coolie,” however polemical in intent, is thus perspicacious (BBC 2003). It conjoins the technologies and freedoms of globalization with traditional modes of subjection. (India is not a global leader in high-tech innovation, but in rote, back-office services). Yet, workers do not view themselves as ground-down or subservient. Rather, as trade unionists learned during organizing drives, they are resentful of such characterizations. The reason is that mimicry is foremost a privilege, the product of a negative liberty. In order to separate oneself from the common rabble, to meaningfully identify with an outside culture,
one must be able to afford its trappings. And just as the status of the colonial mimic men was
dependant upon the structures of British colonialism, today, the social position of workers is
contingent upon the continued patronage of Western corporations.

“The Sweatshop Has Become the Boudoir”

After five years of managing an Indian workforce, John, a young American BPO
executive, has come no closer to cracking what has become a nagging question: “Why does
everyone want to be American?” That American culture exercises an irresistible fascination on
the minds of ICT workers is undeniable. Western popular culture gives form and implicit
coherence to their desires, which are both vague and soaring. They are chasing dreams.
Dreams that lead them into casual affairs, binge drinking, and hard rock music competitions
sponsored by whiskey companies. By relaxing familial and pecuniary constraints, high-
paying outsourced jobs give workers the ability to act on their wishes.

In the beginning, Indian society was not very kind to BPO workers. Despite their
comparatively high salaries, the transgressive combination of graveyard shifts, competitive
consumption, and partying cast workers in a dubious light. Reports flourished in the press
suggesting that workers were not only adopting Western accents but promiscuous lifestyles as
well. An article in the *Times of India* titled, “Sex in the City,” described the call center
demimonde, causing many a middle-class tongue to click in consternation:

“There is a newer, freer workplace, a lot less inhibited and radically different
from the one that the self-styled censors would have you believe. This is a
part of India where freedom knows no bounds, love is a favourite pastime
and sex is recreation. The sweatshop has become the boudoir: this new
workspace is redefining the man-woman relationship (Chakravarty, 2004).

Mohandas is the owner of a domestic telecom company. He wears square gold-
rimmed spectacles, a neat moustache, and a dress shirt unbuttoned just so, exposing a
masculine tuft of chest hair. I ask him about call center workers’ supposed penchant for
drinking and partying. Perched perilously near the edge of his seat—eyes wide, brow
arched—he says excitedly, lifting an index finger, “And you know, there was an article in the
paper, the Economic Times, that mentioned an HR manager who was giving out condoms to
her workers! It’s terrible.” The HR manager did no such thing. But the actual text is
irrelevant. The larger point is how easily rumors of the lasciviousness of workers, of condom-
choked sinks in call centers, spread, which is in part due to the overrepresentation of urban
middle-class issues in the mainstream press (Chopra 2003). The outsourcing debate is now
the subject of a best-selling novel (One Night at the Call Centre) and even a television series
(“India Calling”). It is not an issue of promiscuity per se; the often sensationalistic stories of
romance and rebellion are symptomatic of a gradual shift in gender relationships wherein
women have increased mobility. Nightshifts and BPO lifestyles are allegorized as struggles
between purity (knowing one’s place in the family and social structure) and contamination
(dating and drinking) or freedom and constraint, depending on one’s ideological leanings.

For women, the night shift is a source of considerable stigma. Risha, a secretary at a
call center, says that initially people in the community used to look down on her. “You were
no longer seen as marriageable,” she says softly. “Nobody directly questioned you, but you
could tell what they were thinking…by the look in their eyes,” remarks Usma, an assistant
manager at a BPO, who is dressed conservatively in a red shalwar kameez, her hair pulled
back tightly in a pony-tail. “When I first joined five years ago, there was no boom. I had no
clue what a BPO was. All I knew was that they paid more than the standard. The shift job
wasn’t famous in India. This is something new,” she says. It is not seen as “respectable,
especially for women. If a girl wants to get married, the first thing they ask is, does she work
at night? They don’t like it.” Wilson, a 23 year-old call center agent emphasizes that the
stigma applies to male workers as well: “Nowadays you can’t get married because you work

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32 As one executive says, “even the Economic Times, a business paper,” is obsessed with “these culture
issues.”
in a call center. The name BPO shouldn’t be written anywhere in your offer letter. Arranged marriages are complicated. Prestige, money, and property all matter. Love marriages by comparison are simple.”

According to workers and managers, the freedom and mobility provided by the jobs fostered amorous relationships between workers. When parents found out about the clandestine romances, they often pressed marriage upon their children. Inevitably, the charm faded and many unions were dissolved. But not all call center romances end in divorce. “Tracy” met her husband at a call center and feels that they are “the best place for females to work.” “It’s cushy. For a guy it’s not a great career, but it is good for people like housewives,” she says confidently. But because of “the weird timings, the girls are getting western.” For example: “Girls smoking in the open wasn’t common before but this is normal at a call center. Here you’ll see every girl smoking. They tend to stay away from the family. Society’s changing.”

For parents, the outsourcing media hype has shed little light on what actually takes place at work. As an HR manager explains:

It wasn’t only that older parents did not understand the rationale for outsourcing, though that too was the case. BPO is relatively new and still hasn’t gotten social recognition. Parents have given up trying to figure out. Some company pays their son or daughter a hell of a lot. It’s mysterious. They don’t understand the mechanics. If someone in India is answering an Americans call, they say “but why would they make an STD [long-distance] call to India?

The fear is that outsourcing, to quote a senior police officer, is causing a “breakdown in the fabric of Indian family life” (Nelson 2006). What is threatening about globalization is its emphasis on individualism, the sense that personal skills and achievement, not family, caste, or class, are what make a person. As Sennett (1998: 139) writes, “The social bond arises most elementally from a sense of mutual dependence.” Economic independence can therefore mean freedom from family. Statements like “I’m my own boss” exemplify the more egoistic aspects of the new ethos. Female workers often find the loosening of family bonds especially
bracing, particularly as it leads to a recasting of gender roles and control over one’s sexuality. Gainful employment is not synonymous with “empowerment,” but in a social setting where women are often considered repositories of family honor, being able to work at night with men is no small matter. (While 118 out of 133 workers surveyed gave “housewife” as their mother’s profession, 40-50% of BPO employees are women). That they may use this freedom in ways that middle-class moralists disapprove of is somewhat inevitable. The domination of the patriarchal family is replaced by the burden of public disapproval.

The rumors are not all apocryphal, however. Workers do indeed express relaxed attitudes towards sex, alcohol, and club drugs. One study finds that four out of five workers interviewed have “had a workplace affair and that the majority of those were married. In another recent poll one in four call centre staff said they regularly had casual affairs” (Nelson 2006). BPO workers talk openly about pre-marital “flings,” which more than once were described perplexingly as “emotionless.” It is hard to imagine a relationship, even one that is purely platonic, that provokes no emotion, suggesting that even in their minds such narrowly personal affairs rank lower in value than those sanctioned by family and confirmed in matrimony.

One must view the disclosure of such intimate details with caution, however, as the young workers seem almost too willing to boast of their rebellion. Take Vikash, a 23-year old call center worker with pomaded hair. When asked what he does in the small hours of the morning after returning from work, one might expect him to say that he has breakfast, takes a nap, or watches television, something that would suggest an attempt to connect with the normal course of things. But his conversation is strictly limited to the rebellious transgression of social mores. “Me and my friends, we go back to one of our apartments and we take shots of vodka,” he says, savoring the last word as if it were a final sip of the real stuff. “What on earth are you talking about? At 9 a.m.?” I ask. “Of course,” he replies with a sly grin. Moreover, he says he likes working at the call center as he is able to flirt with female
employees without rebuke. But even if one takes Vikash at his word, it remains an open question whether this transvaluation of values is an instance of youthful exuberance, a generational dynamic, or a serious reappraisal of Indian culture.

“If a Cat Tries to Bark It Doesn’t Become a Dog”

To understand the extent of the stigma attached to workers, one need look no further than Krishna, a portly and vigorous executive at an IT company in Chennai. Krishna is of the upper-middle class and has spent most of his working life in the U.S.—something many BPO workers would like to do often but lack the means. Returning after such a long absence, his alive to his native culture’s faults and is vocal about the vices of the BPO parvenus, mostly their tendency to imitate fantasy Americans. He casts a worried eye to the future:

India’s middle class is definitely bulging. But then I’m not sure people are being prudent. Overnight richness doesn’t really do good to people. They don’t know to handle it. I think the culture is not going in the right direction. Just because they work for a U.S. company, I don’t see why they should lose their culture. Just because they work for a U.S. company, McDonalds doesn’t become the life. It’s not the life in the U.S., right? You also go to McDonalds and you also watch MTV once in a while but that doesn’t drive you. Here this newfound money drives. There is a call center here in the building. The guy, you look at him, he looks like a junkie to me. He has a goatee… He walks into the lift and I don’t know, he looks dirty. Downright dirty. He works in a call center so obviously they taught him how to speak with an American accent. Looking at him you say this fellow is shabby, probably came out of a shabby area. He’s talking with an American accent as if he’s lived all of his life in the U.S. When I walked out, a colleague said ‘Krishna, how long did you live in the U.S.?’ I said quite a few years. ‘But you don’t speak with an accent.’ I said why? Why do I need to? Do you understand me without an accent? If you do then that’s good enough. Just because they do this they don’t become something. If a cat tries to bark it doesn’t become a dog. This is exactly the way they’re behaving. It’s bad! I mean, it’s pathetic! Personally, I feel very, very disgusted with this because you’re getting the very worst of both Indian and American culture.

Told of Vikash’s matutinal habits—hearty draughts of vodka at 9 a.m.—he is driven to distraction. “Can you think of a responsible American doing it? Probably somebody does that when they’re in the university. Those are junkies, you think. Here these people earn
good money and that’s their behavior. It’s disgusting. Really disgusting,” he mutters, shaking his head this way and that. “Anyway, they make in one month what their parents earned in a year.”

Ten thousand rupees a month will not buy one a car or house, but it can keep one in drink and designer clothes. As the *Washington Post* observes, “Because many BPO workers spend their days dealing with Americans and their credit cards, they have a comfort level with debt that other Indians might not” (Kalita 2005). ATMs are placed in company canteens, restaurants and all-night bars operate outside workplaces, and workers are given corporate credit cards. A report on the BPO industry accuses credit card companies of “working in tandem with call centre employers to give huge credit limits to young people working in call centres, in order to make them too indebted to leave their jobs” (Focus 2006). A labor lawyer working on the case of a call center worker says that the “industry should take some responsibility for the lifestyle it promotes.”

But not all outsourcing is the same. Societal perceptions distinguish between the IT and BPO industries. Whereas the social rank of BPO and call center workers is uncertain, particularly because of the night shift and the perception that the work is low-end, IT and software workers are publicly admired. Employment in BPO can endanger one’s marital prospects but has the opposite effect in IT, because of higher pay and the possibility of emigrating to the West. BPO workers occupy an inferior position in a privileged social universe. The “positional suffering” that results is no less real because it occurs among a relatively well-off group in class terms (Bourdieu et al. 1999: 4).

Conspicuous consumption invites invidious distinction; workers are acutely class conscious. They differentiate between small and large companies. The former are referred to as “garibon ke call centres” (‘poor people’s call centers”) as they pay less and supposedly have a deficit in “pretty faces.” What makes for the “pretty faces” is more spending cash, the ability to exteriorize one’s superior class position through brand-name clothing, expensive
haircuts, and cosmetics. Workers at smaller centers, for their part, construct salacious images of other workers—alcoholic, profligate, loose—as a means of self-validation. More generally, BPO workers tend to take their aggression out on people in respectable but less lucrative occupations like the civil service rather than cast aspersions on the software workers above.

With the growing familiarity of outsourcing, the night shift has become more acceptable. According to one manager, “Sometimes we have more of the girls working here than the boys. You feel proud of that. Slowly and steadily, India is also becoming Westernized.” Risha, the call center secretary, notes with a slight smile that the sons and daughters of those who used to glare at her are now “all working in call centers.” As Jayesh, a BPO worker, says:

A fresh commerce grad will make Rs. 3-4,000 [$75-100/monthly] as a junior accountant. He’s lucky if he makes Rs. 7,000 [$175]. Here, the starting salary is Rs. 8-10,000 [$200-250]. People have more spending power. Initially, the industry was for those who couldn’t get jobs elsewhere. Now, engineers, doctors, chartered accountants, law graduates are joining. Initially, they felt ashamed. They thought it was a mindless job, ‘You can’t get a job anywhere else that’s why you’re in that industry.’

Despite the growing acceptability, Jayesh says his friends in finance and accounting ask him why he is still at a BPO. According to Wilson, a call center worker, such perceptions reflect “government thinking” wherein,

You work fifty years and then you quit. They don’t understand that as you grow, you don’t have to do the nightshift. But how to explain this to people? When you tell them this, they ask how long? But those that say it earn ten times lesser salaries. They work like dogs, we don’t work like dogs. We work in an air conditioned facility.

For Wilson, money is a means of status compensation; it makes up for his precarious standing on the middle-class social scale. But the victory is bittersweet. Even relatively high pay and modern facilities do not change the nature of the work. As the Indian-American CEO of an IT-services company put it, U.S. employees perform the analytic and creative work while those in India do the “dog work.”
Power Words and Bonded Labor

Seated on the veranda of a bungalow overlooking the thinly-populated Aksa beach in northern Bombay, Archana and Anil discuss their experiences as call center workers at one of the city’s larger call centers. In the warm twilight, they describe how an exciting opportunity to earn a respectable income in a decent work environment turned sour. Anil quit the job because of poor management; Archana, an anomaly in the industry at forty years of age, has filed a lawsuit against their employer for wrongful termination. Nonetheless, they show a passionate fondness for their work as booking agents for the British rail system.

“Oh, I absolutely loved it,” says Anil, leaping up spontaneously from a garden chair with every sign of genuine pleasure. “How may I help you Mr. Brimsley?” he exclaims in a British accent, theatrically describing an arc in the air with his right arm. Then tracing a crescent with his left arm and twisting his features into childish pout, he says with mock concern, “What seems to be the matter, Mrs. Grant?” While the daily rigors of emotion management can be very taxing, it also has its rewards. A successful booking, the proper handling of an inquiry, can be intensely satisfying.

There were proud moments. Archana’s company received an appreciative call from a British customer in which she was described as a “treasure.” She also won accolades for achieving the highest sales in a week: 53.85%. “It was great fun for a time. But there were problems,” Archana says. “If you haven’t taken the person’s name, you haven’t taken ‘ownership’ of the call,” she says with heavy irony. “We were told to use ‘power words.’ You’re going from Leeds to London – fantastic! Oh, you’re going with your family – great! Going to a funeral – fantastic! For six to seven hours you’re expected to talk like this,” Anil interjects, slapping at the bothersome mosquitoes as if they were so many niggling middle-managers.
Pedantic company decrees, overweening management, and dispiriting pre-scripted dialogues cut at their sense of professionalism and self-respect. “We were conditioned to say certain sentences. Otherwise, you’re marked down on quality. On top of this, an agent never gets seven or eight hours of undisturbed sleep. But when they come into work tired they have to be on in terms of accent, quality, and timing. You just can’t be ‘on’ every day,” Almas remarks. The nightly negotiation of accents and language is particularly difficult. “Indians don’t speak English very well. We know Hindi, Marathi, and other languages but agents make grammatical errors and translate into English very literally. It’s impossible to keep this up for seven hours a day,” says Anil, who seems to smile inwardly as he firmly crushes a mosquito that had alighted on his forearm.

Just as the contradictions inherent in colonialism turned agreeable subjects into nationalists, Archana and Anil’s enthusiasm for globalization has been irreparably diminished by their perceived maltreatment. “We’re treated as a bonded labor,” Archana says with a catch in her voice, referring to the high levels of surveillance in the workplace. One of her “lapses” was returning from the toilet one minute and fifty seconds late. “Today we are given into the slavery of the foreign powers,” she says, “And this in India, a country that achieved freedom without violence.”

“The Road of Our Dreams is Under Construction”

While the West represents the highest pinnacle of individualism and consumer choice, India is at a crossroads. Should it choose the right path, it too will have its day in the sun. Such were Nila’s sentiments, a female IT worker in Chennai, a teeming city of five million on the Bay of Bengal. Unlike Bangalore, where IT advertisements line the neatly paved streets, Chennai is still a work in progress, a “second-tier” ICT city. While outsourcing-generated
wealth has dramatically altered its topography and complexion, it remains a modernizing city with a conservative outlook.

“Before I wasn’t using pants, I used to wear saris,” says Nila who is wearing a floral-patterned blouse and black dress pants. “Right now, I’m using everything. My parents weren’t accepting to all these things, but now they’re OK with it.” She adds that women are increasingly choosing to work in the IT sector, in contrast to engineering where women are not treated with respect. “It’s different with IT, which is secure and safe. Take Bangalore, it’s like the US. This city is changing, too. Three or four years back it wasn’t like this. There are malls everywhere. Chennai is booming like anything,” she says with a sparkle in her eyes.

Chennai’s “road to prosperity” is a state-funded six lane “world-class expressway” being constructed 200 feet behind the international airport. Once completed, one will be able to approach the multiplying technology parks and offshore software development centers directly from the airport, thus bypassing the dirt and smog-choked city center. Land prices in the area have risen dramatically. Homes and shopping arcades along the route have been demolished and squatters have set up residence in abandoned buildings. At one congested intersection by the corridor, which seems in a perpetual state of disrepair, a small metal sign reads: “The Road of Our Dreams is Under Construction. Thank you for bearing with us.” Delays notwithstanding, the corridor is an example of the Chennai to come. “It’s supposed to be like in the U.S. On either side you’ll have IT companies. Once they complete the freeway, it will be just like in America. Earlier there were very few supermarkets. Now there are supermarkets and restaurants. Cars used to be a big deal. Now IT guys, everyone is buying. Chennai is going to be luxurious!” Nila gushes.

While they are quick to point out the country’s long-term economic potential, even Indian executives aspire towards something other than India. Narayan Murthy, the founder of Infosys, a leading IT firm, was reported as saying, “we live in a make believe world…Right now, when you come to our campus, you are leaving India behind” (Landler 2001). One is
leaving India behind and going where? The Infosys campus, situated in the aptly named Electronics City in Bangalore, features a UN-style conference hall (which can supposedly host the largest video conference call in the world), a pool hall, gym, and many other perks. India, however, is not far away. The company’s large canteen, a senior executive warns, does not serve “continental food”; rather, two buffet lines offer “north” and “south” Indian cuisine for well under a dollar.

More poignantly, only 100 yards from the polished marble floor of the Infosys lobby and the gleaming pyramidal theatre opposite the putting green is Shikaripalya, a slum village composed of corrugated iron, cement blocks, mud bricks, gunny sacks, and other flotsam. But the globalized sleekness of the modern office excludes the reality outside. An Oxford-trained economist working at the World Bank’s office in Chennai, which handles payroll and accounting functions for the headquarters in Washington, keeps his office window unshuttered to remind him that he is in India. “Otherwise, it’s very easy to forget,” he says with a smirk, looking out on a hazy vista of crumbling storefronts, doddering mendicants, and passing traffic. Or take Mindspace, an ICT complex spanning 5 million sq ft. in the suburbs of Bombay. It hosts a high concentration of firms as well as residences, restaurants, and shops. Social and class distinctions are physically instantiated walls and security that exclude the hoi polloi. The sense of separateness is also reinforced symbolically: the 17-storey apartment towers go by pacific and awkward names like Quiescent, Whispering, Serenity, and Celestial Heights. Residents dine at Ruby Tuesday and Pizza Hut.

Escapist middle-class desires have raised the ire of many prominent Indian social critics. Varma (1998: xii), for instance, writes that “For all the achievements of the Indian State in the last fifty years, there is, for its middle and elite classes, a crippling ideological bareness which threatens to convert India into a vastly unethical and insensitive aggregation of wants.” Middle-class Indians, in their preening self-regard, desire to secede from the “other” India that exists outside “their narrow little worlds” (Ibid).
The idea of the middle-class carries immense symbolic and historical weight in India, however elusive it may be as a definable sociological entity. The class has played a pivotal role in recent history, whether in its incarnation as the nationalist vanguard that won independence through self-sacrifice or later as sober civil servants powering Nehruvian state-led modernization. As opposed to these images of civically-minded discipline and frugality, the “new Indian middle-class” has few of the moral scruples of its predecessors. Following the program of economic liberalization in the 1990s was a redefinition of national progress. Concerns about class and caste stratification gave way to a focus on wealth and consumption as indicators of progress. Consumerism fills the vacuum left by the lost sense of civic duty (Fernandez, 2000).

The outsourcing-related strand of the Indian middle-class is something of a comprador bourgeoisie (c.f. Poulantzas 1976). Like the compradors in the colonial period, their livelihood and economic well-being are directly dependent upon Western business. Regarding executives and managers, there is an obvious resonance in their roles as intermediaries between foreign capital—overwhelmingly American and British—and Indian labor. The new compradors act single-mindedly in their class interest and, some would say, to the neglect of national considerations. As Mazzerella (2005) writes, the middle classes’ desire to consume is “at one” with its “political impatience,” which often takes the form of longings for authoritarian rule.

Atul has spent the majority of his professional life in the U.S. He recently returned to India to manage the subsidiary of an American bank and is now its COO. Seated in a leather office chair, the grey light of dusk gives an ashen pallor to already solemn features. For most of our interview he seems distracted, but when asked his opinion about the sustainability of the offshoring industry, he leans forward with interest. The country’s overtaxed infrastructure, particularly the poor roads and power outages, he says, could spell disaster. Looking carefully to his right and left, Atul confides in a hushed tone, “You know what we need in this country?
We need a dictatorship for twelve years. Then…back to democracy.” No more power outages, strikes, and work delays. What is needed is an IT leviathan. While India’s entrepreneurs and their political allies have been successful in pushing an agenda of economic reform—entailing the liberalization of trade and investment, deregulation, and a weakening of the “license permit Raj”—nothing is more vexing than the bureaucratic inefficiencies of democratic governance.

**Conclusion**

Lord Macaulay’s image of a class of pliable intermediaries adopting the culture and language of the colonial power has left an enduring imprint on the collective psyche. So much so that it is common to discuss colonial and post-colonial subjectivity in terms of neurosis. Fanon (1952) explored the inferiority complex of the colonized in *Black Skin, White Masks*; Naipaul (1967), colonialism and cultural displacement in *The Mimic Men*; and the theme later resurfaced in the academic vocabulary of postcolonial studies (Bhabha, 1995). The anguished oscillation between modernity and tradition, and the reach for cultural mimicry as a way of solidifying one’s social status and identity, has been given a new twist by economic globalization, and in particular, by international outsourcing.

Thus come the questions: Is globalization akin to colonialism in some of its cultural effects? Can middle-class Indians be meaningfully described as today’s “mimic men”? To ask these questions is to answer them. In their accents, speech (“bucks”), and dress, in their comportment and aspirations, they bear the imprint of Macaulay’s vision. While these aspirations do not have a clearly-defined object, they cluster around an idea of the West as the locus of modernity. The West’s mystique derives, no doubt as it did in the colonial period, from the fact that it is the author of dramatic change. But this also prompts a certain anxiety among the middle-class that such change is somehow corrupting.
Yet the paradoxical aspect of colonial Anglicism was that the social class it ushered into being eventually used the language of British liberalism—self-determination, constitutionalism—to question and undermine colonial rule. To what extent will the tools of corporate globalization be used to sabotage its machinery? The tentative answer is that any such stirrings are incredibly faint at the moment. While Appadurai’s (1997) point about the contested nature of globalization is well-taken, one finds little resistance to Western hegemony in the Indian ICT industry. There is scattered disenchantment but it is far from coalescing into a movement that could challenge the rules of globalization. Even the rare worker that delights with schadenfreude at the prospect of “stealing” jobs from developed countries often conceives of the matter in terms of “beating the West at its own game,” consistent with the theme of imitative counterpoint. And, as Atul’s comments suggest, the Indian middle class and its political allies are willing to do whatever necessary to play the game better.

It is easy to see why the debate over outsourcing has so enraptured urban middle-class India. It has all the dramatic elements of a Bollywood movie: the struggle between instant and delayed gratification, arranged marriages and romantic love, consumerist and ascetic religious values, and the ominous prospect of generational rupture. It is in this sense that workers, managers, and employers exert a cultural influence that extends beyond their small numbers (as a percentage of the population). In the cases here described, austere family values are buffeted by the open celebration of relative affluence. That workers sometimes earn more than their parents shifts household dynamics, and this reversal can unsettle parental authority. As India continues to liberalize, the cultural changes occurring among workers prefigure those which will likely take place among the broader middle class. But it remains an open question whether the clash between the values of “modernity”—as exemplified by worker fantasies of a Western-style utopia or executives desires for something other than India—and “tradition”
will grow more acute, or whether it will eventually find the neat resolution of a Bollywood film.
CHAPTER THREE

THE USES AND ABUSES OF TIME

“Without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of the industrial man; and whether this discipline comes in the form of Methodism, or of Stalinism, or of nationalism, it will come to the developing world.”—E.P. Thompson (1967: 93)

On any given night, from the empty parking lot behind Kalkaji post office and across a pitted road, one can discern a narrow band of light emanating from beneath a propped door. Behind the door and down the concrete steps are about forty call center workers and their boss, Ajay, a young entrepreneur who has started over twenty outbound call centers throughout northwest India. In contrast to the steel and glass modernism of the India’s burgeoning technology companies, Ajay’s center is run out of a large basement in South Delhi. Whereas the interiors of many multinational call centers are painted bright infantile shades of blue, orange and canary to create an atmosphere of fun and play, the walls here wear a somber gray. And instead of centralized air conditioning, small fans are mounted on the walls. There are no windows on the work floor, which matters little as the daylight has long expired when workers arrive.

As is the case in the industry at large, most of Ajay’s employees are recent college graduates, though he just hired someone who had only completed his 12th standard. As one manager remarked, “The less educated, the cheaper. Freshers accept lesser pay.” The workers have a sharp handle of English, which is a necessary condition of employment as the calls being placed are to American and British consumers. Their speech, however, is laced with a North Indian lilt as Ajay cannot afford to offer extensive “accent neutralization” training, which is intended to obliterate “mother tongue influences.” The employees dress down in sweatshirts, sneakers and jeans; all but the manager who is dressed in a purple shalwar
kameez, high heels, and matching lipstick and lords over the staff as a matron does her charges.

One worker, Anita, is a 22-year old Christian from Manipur in northeast India. The daughter of a pastor, she works the full-time night shift, which is around nine hours, six days a week, including national holidays. She lives in a joint family of eight and the combined monthly income of her family is below 20,000 rupees ($445). Anita herself makes 7,000 rupees ($158) a month, which translates to about 30 rupees or $0.67 an hour. (Most call center workers make approximately double this sum).

Working the graveyard shift, Anita said, is a health hazard. Asked of any job-related health issues, she mentions backache, eyestrain, earache, reduced appetite, insomnia, and stomach cramps. She has no time for domestic activities; her only leisure time is on Sunday, which she spends sleeping rather than attending church. Anita’s voice is small yet confident. She feels that call center jobs are “good for women. Otherwise, I’d be home.” When asked if she considers her employment to be a career option she replies ruefully but with a look of shy defiance: “I want to live a long life. If I live like this, I won’t live long.”

Anita’s case is not untypical of the nearly two million people working in India’s growing outsourcing industry (Nasscom 2008). Even in cases where the night shift exacts an appreciable toll on their health, workers are willing to give it a go, viewing their employment more as a lucrative stop-gap arrangement than a career. It is thus important not to overdramatize their plight. At times, they are equally as happy. Especially so when they indulge in consumption binges at shopping malls or arrange romantic trysts at suburban night clubs or cafés. Such are the consolations of a relatively hefty paycheck. A fair assessment would be that workers are reaping the benefits and bearing the burdens of globalization. Their experiences speak eloquently of the cyclical joys and humiliations of life under the new dispensation.
The central concept driving offshoring is labor arbitrage, which one company defines as the “ability to pay one labor pool less than another pool for accomplishing the same work, typically by substituting labor in one geography for labor in a different locale” (Simonson 2002). In addition to cost-savings, multinationals doing business in India also benefit from a strategic use of time. Consequently, I argue that transnational companies make use of time arbitrage. Time arbitrage can be defined as the exploitation of time discrepancies between geographical labor markets to make a profit. This operates on two scales. At the geographical scale, many companies exploit time zone differences to achieve a 24-hour business cycle. At the labor process scale, time arbitrage can mean the extension of work hours or the acceleration of the labor process. As one executive says of his Indian employees, “You can get more out of them.” To be sure, the raison d’être of offshoring remains the reduction of labor costs. Time arbitrage is simply the endeavor to put time to profitable use.

There is, however, a tension between the network time of corporate globalization and the prosaic rhythms of everyday life. While flexibility is heralded in developed countries as a means of recalibrating the work-life balance, it means something entirely different to the Indian software programmer who stays late into the evening for a conference call with New York or for the call center worker on the permanent night shift. Workplace flexibility entails a restructuring of time (Sennett 1998). The temporal displacement resulting from employment in the ICT industry has serious implications for the mental and physical health of Indian workers. Due to long hours and/or the permanent night shift, workers report various health problems and complain of growing alienation from family and friends.

The argument is that in the Indian case, time arbitrage has resulted in long work hours, an intense work pace, and temporal displacement. Given that 73% of Fortune 2000 companies say offshoring is an integral part of their overall growth strategy, it is increasingly possible to speak of a trend in global time arbitrage (Economist 2004; Overby 2006). Drawing on extensive fieldwork in India, this chapter asks the following questions: How are companies
using time to their advantage, to reap the full benefits of a globally dispersed labor pool?

What impacts are these temporal changes having on the health and social lives of workers?

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first focuses on how time arbitrage plays out in the workplace, through the stretching of work time and the speeding up of the labor process. The second section deals with temporal displacement: namely, the adverse impacts of time arbitrage on worker health, safety, and social life. The chapter closes with a discussion of time as it relates to the balance of forces between capital and labor.

1. TIME ARBITRAGE

A. The View From Above

Harvey (1989: 240) writes that “the history of capitalism has been characterized by a speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world seems to collapse inwards upon us.” Globalization and the spread of ICTs have engendered a new temporality, what has been variously called “real time,” “timeless time,” and “network time.” Simultaneity and instantaneity replace succession and duration, compressing time and space. The local and seasonal rhythms of everyday life stand opposed to the forward march of network time, whose parameters are defined by the imperatives of transnational corporations (Adam 2003; Castells 1996; Hassan 2003). The space of “flows” supplants that of “place” (Castells 2000: 101).

Heeks et al (2000) argue that global IT relationships must either “synch or swim,” underlining the importance of aligning management and organizational culture. Being in synch temporally is equally important. As urban centers in the global south are integrated into global production and service networks, they must adapt to network timings (Sassen 2000). Global software parks, such as TIDEL Park, the largest of its kind in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, are in accord with the ceaseless rhythms of the global economy. Its promotional
material proudly proclaims that “TIDEL Park understands that the IT world has its own clock.” Timeless time cannot afford to stop.

Due to favorable economic policies and its large pool of educated and cheap labor, India has fast emerged as the favored outsourcing destination for a variety of ICT-related business processes. But as one IT worker whose company supports an investment bank explains, India also has certain locational advantages:

Geographically, India is located in a pretty good position to support the needs of the East and West. In the morning, around 7 a.m., you can talk to clients in Singapore, Australia, and Hong Kong. Between 12-4 p.m., you can cover the Middle East, Luxembourg, and the U.K. And between 5-8 p.m., you can talk to the U.S. guys. India is geographically positioned to cover most of the global markets.

There are chiefly two ways in which offshoring companies deal with the 9.5-12.5 hour time zone difference between the United States and India. ICT globalization allows the offshoring of business functions that require synchronous and/or asynchronous coordination. A call center worker in Delhi receives and places calls somewhere from 10 p.m. to 9 a.m. Indian Standard Time, while a junior lawyer in Bombay working for an American client works during the Indian day. Companies see opportunity in both of these possibilities: having employees work the night shift allows them to talk directly to customers; having an Indian lawyer prepare a draft patent during the day means that it will be in the client’s inbox first thing in the morning.

With the offshoring of synchronous work, such as customer service queries, Western business timings are exported across the globe. In migrating asynchronous work, such as IT maintenance, national timings are preferable as they allow firms to root out unproductive times and to approach a 24-hour work cycle. Where there has to be synchronous coordination in the latter, such as with conference calls between the “onsite” and “offshore” offices, Western timings trump national timings; workers and managers are required to stay late.
There are thus multiple ways to exploit time differences and many companies employ both night and day workers.

The global reorganization of service work marks the confluence of the business ideals of “flexible capitalism” and the “24-hour society.” Outsourcing signals the hollowing out of the vertically-integrated corporation. Offshoring, in a manner that recalls Wallerstein’s (1974) world-systems typology of core and peripheral economies, allows corporations to farm out peripheral and repetitive tasks to contracted Third World labor, while the home office is left to busily contemplate its core business functions. Through the fashioning of a globally-dispersed network of suppliers, businesses can function longer, if not continuously. The global marketplace, however, despite Thomas Friedman’s (2006) rhetoric about the “flatness” of the world, is still dominated by the large transnational corporation. Power is not evenly distributed throughout the far-flung business network; control operates according the principle of “centralization without concentration” (Harrison 1997: 47; Lynn 2005).

Moreover, corporate flexibility has come of age in an era of labor casualization and downsizing. Whereas scientific and technological advancements were supposed to increase both productivity and leisure time, working hours remained static or became longer and often more intense (Basso 2003; Schor 1991). The advanced technologies of the new economy coexist with “temporally regressive” methods of labor control—the former tightening the screws of the latter—leading some critics to speak of “electronic sweatshops” and “assembly lines in the head” (Ong 2006; Taylor and Bain 1999; Bain et al. 2002). “Lean” production methods are applied to service work. The goal is maximum productivity and the elimination of dead time.

There are a number of means to achieve a compression of time. It can be realized by intensifying the work process; by re-ordering the sequence of tasks and processes; by flexible timings; and by reducing unproductive times, as in just-in-time production (Adam 2003; Harvey 1989). The merit of a comparative lens is that we are able to see how different types
of employees are affected by various methods. Whereas the workday of an IT worker is built around a series of tasks, that of a BPO worker is built around a designated number of hours or numerical targets. This translates into a difference in the method of time-discipline. In IT, time is stretched (overtime), while in the BPO it is condensed (quickened pace). This does not mean that call center workers do not have to work overtime or that IT workers work at a relaxed pace. Rather task-orientation and time-orientation correspond loosely to the distinction between professionals (often salaried, who have to work longer hours without being paid overtime) and workers (where time is closely monitored). In IT, while workers do have to log in hours, time-schedules are relatively elastic and breaks irregular. In BPO, breaks are fixed and even the time elapsed during bathroom visits is noted. Incentive schemes are also structured to take this difference into account. In fact, workers actually billed a project for idle hours at one IT firm—time they spent waiting for work from the U.S. office—something almost unheard of at BPOs.

B. Work Speed-Up: Compressing Time

While offshoring is motivated by the prospect of significant cost-savings, many companies have reported substantial productivity gains, ranging from 15-25% (Mattoo and Wunsch, 2004). Consultants McKinsey report that one “British bank’s call-center agents in India not only process 20% more transactions than their counterparts in the United Kingdom but also do so 3% more accurately” (Bailey and Farrell, 2004). Gains can be accounted for by the fact that wages are lower and thus companies are able to spend more on supervision and training. Workers may also be more highly motivated as the jobs have higher prestige in India than in the U.S. and U.K. An executive says that Indian employees are more productive
because “they’re better qualified, they’re better educated, they’re younger.” Additionally, managers often give cultural explanations, arguing that Indian industriousness is a product of the culture’s emphasis on education. One manager speaks admiringly of the “Indian psyche.”

In call centers, at least, gains in productivity may have less to do with age, motivation, or cultural inheritance than with an accelerated work pace and technologically-induced efficiency. Larger call centers use automated dialing technology, through which numbers are dialed automatically and workers are fed only live calls. According to one manager, the rate of calls is variable: on average an American worker might have 45 seconds to one minute between calls whereas an Indian worker would have only 5 to 10 seconds. By eliminating “idle time,” nominal working hours remain the same but real working hours are lengthened (Basso 2003). One worker, Adnan, says that in a day they handle about 200-250 calls, of which 80-90 last a minute and 50-60 last between three and five minutes. “It’s a source of stress. You don’t have a long gap after every call,” Adnan says. His co-worker, Preethi, adds, “It’s seconds. There isn’t a break after every call, though I would rather do an eight hour than ten hour shift with longer breaks.” Busy hours do not preclude an extension of the workday when necessary. One former worker complained that her shifts occasionally extended from the required eight to ten hours and that she handled hundreds of calls daily.

Workers also complain that they do not receive their promised salaries. Managers respond that this is because a large portion of one’s “salary” comes in the form of incentives, which are based on performance and adherence to pre-defined parameters. Two major components relevant to our argument are talk time (the quicker you can dispatch a customer the better) and the intervals between calls (a matter of seconds). The result is an internalization of time-discipline manifested in a psychological pressure to perform. As Preethi remarks, “If I can’t achieve target, it leads to an in-built stress. We know what we

33 As the CEO of a legal outsourcing firm comments, “A very well-trained paralegal or first through third year attorney might perform this sort of work. In many cases, we have people who are much more qualified than in the U.S. There no one would do it.”
have to do every day. It’s our own mind telling us, ‘You have to do it.’ The only thing we do is talk, talk, talk. We have about two seconds for the next call. Sometimes, though, you do have a long break. Those are the times we party.”

Yet even breaks are a matter of dispute. Despite the bright furnishings and the game rooms, the conditions of work can be very strict. Breaks (including dinner, which might take place at two in the morning) are strictly monitored, and one worker complains that they “are not given on time, if at all.” One worker said that they are denied weekly offs and that “sometimes we aren’t even getting breaks if call flow is high.” Leave policies are another matter of contention. Said one BPO worker in Bombay:

You can’t fall sick. You have to plan your sick leave in advance. It’s almost like having to say ‘I’m planning to be sick in three weeks.’ They don’t have a real sick leave policy. Someone had a bad fall once and they wouldn’t sanction the leave at first. She came to work in intense pain and only then was told that she could go. They want you to come in first. Also, if one is sick then they don’t get incentives because the sick days are construed as leaves, unless planned.

Another worker says that he cannot attend out of town gatherings because of work timings. Leaves, he claims, are hardly an option: “If we take more than one leave then we will have to pay from our salary. And without money we cannot fulfill our social and family requirement.”

At the same company, workers have to ask permission from a superior to use the bathroom—the visits of which are strictly timed. In one case, Neeta was dealing with a particularly cumbersome inbound call. Thirty minutes in, she requested permission from her team leader (TL) to use the restroom, the normal protocol being that another worker or superior would handle the call from there. But the TL did not allow her to get off the line, and twenty minutes later when the call was completed, he congratulated her with a paternalistic smile and said, “I knew you could be a good rep if you put yourself to it.” For the company, the end result was an uninterrupted and successfully handled call. After writing a letter to management itemizing this and other abuses, Neeta’s services were suspended, officially for
“dropping calls.” Another of her “lapses” was returning late from the bathroom. She claims that she vomited after her meal and had to be assisted back to her seat. As another worker at the firm carped, “The food is not good. They contract service out to different caterers who prepare meals on a cost-cutting basis. This causes health problems and some have had food poisoning.”

The authors of a recent study of the call center industry by the Indian Labour Ministry-funded V.V. Giri Labor Institute, argue that the constant surveillance in firms create an atmosphere similar to that in “19th-century prisons or Roman slave ships” (Sharma 2005). My observations suggest that while surveillance is indeed tight and can be a major source of stress, most employees would not make such comparisons. Many describe their work environments positively. However, poor management and excessive monitoring can create a hostile atmosphere. Says one worker: “Everything is monitored. They record every damn thing.” Additionally, workers are often expected to work six days a week, forego national holidays, and often complain of unpaid mandatory overtime.

C. Long Hours: Stretching Time

Executives, often Indians trained in the West, lament their compatriots’ lackadaisical attitude toward time. They claim that Indians take more breaks and have difficulty dealing with deadlines. And, indeed, an intense focus on family and social life does not mesh well with the rigidity of organization time and clock discipline (Hareven 1982). Very commonly, I.S.T.—Indian standard time—is jokingly referred to as Indian “stretchable” time. The rigid status distinctions prevalent in Indian society and the often servile attitude of workers toward their superiors (exemplified in the common Hindi word for job, naukri, which comes from the term, naukar, meaning servant), however, ensure that when workers are called on to put in longer hours they do.
While productivity and quality are said to be at least as good as they are in the U.S., Indian workers in IT firms regularly work longer hours than their American counterparts. This expectation on the part of employers, especially at the elite IT services firms, is rationalized by the notion that the company is a global business that works on a 24-hour cycle. The compensations for workers are high salaries, comfortable facilities, the status boost of working for a multinational firm, and occasional opportunities to work “onsite” in the U.S. where they are paid in dollars rather than rupees. But as employees of a company with a “24-hour work culture,” they are expected to be available at all hours. And while some managers say there is a longer learning curve for Indian workers, they are able to condense a good deal of training into a short period of time. One worker at an IT firm said that her team of trainees had to stay in the office for over twenty-four hours twice during their three month training.

Even on his day off, Amir, an employee of an IT firm, received constant messages on his Blackberry. The device rarely left his person. His company maintains IT infrastructure for a variety of transnational companies, one of which is Wal-Mart. The longest he has had to spend in the office was two continuous days. “I took meals at my desk. Afterwards, I could barely walk. I just collapsed there at my desk and went to sleep,” Amir remarks wearily, as if reliving the exhaustion. He is also required to travel extensively and says that Western workers feel threatened by his work ethic. He quit twice because he felt that his services were underappreciated only to be lured back by pay raises.

Erran Carmel (2006: 46), who is no enemy of capitalism, writes that offshoring involves various hidden costs and time delays. These hurdles, however, can be cleared. “If Infosys has an elixir for the time zone gap,” writes Carmel, “it is its organizational culture that expects a heightened commitment from employees.” He continues:

This commitment is to work longer hours and work off-hours. In short, it is a culture that expects heroics...India-based engineering staff members are also expected to perform heroics by being time-zone flexible. They work longer hours and sometimes they time-shift. Managers are used to staying late to overlap with U.S. time. For example, one delivery manager said that he
works 9-to-9 many days. The Infosys campuses in India are 24-hour campuses (Ibid).

Despite a culture that exacts “life style sacrifices” and expects “heroics” of its employees, Infosys is highly selective in its hiring, accepting less than 1% of its million applicants each year. “Infoscions,” as they are called, earn very good salaries and benefits by Indian standards. “In return for being hired, employees know they are expected to contribute more than just their talent,” Carmel concludes (Ibid: 50-51). Given that Infosys has a blue chip client base and was named “India’s best managed company” by consultants A.T. Kearney, this is a telling admission. But long hours are not unique to particular companies; they are generalized across the Indian ICT landscape.

The IT magazine *Dataquest* (2004) released a study on the ICT industry in which they conclude that long hours are the leading cause of stress for workers, followed by work timing. As it surveyed workers at some of the largest ICT employers in India and is largely pro-industry in outlook, the findings are worth quoting at length: “Any average agent works for 11-12 hours per day—the number goes up to 14 in case of companies that encourage overtime. The plight of the operational heads is worse—they regularly clock 17-18 hours per day working their shift besides staying back for customer conference calls.” In her comparative study of three software firms in China, Hungary, and India, Perlow (2001) finds that Indian employees work the longest. The “mandatory” workday is from 9:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., but workers regularly end at 7:00 p.m. and sometimes as late as 11:00 p.m. Saturday is also a full workday. Likewise, many workers I interviewed spoke of frequent 12-14 hour workdays. Seeing long hours as a positive thing, one executive mused, “Here people are much more willing to sacrifice their time and do things.”

Workers at small to mid-sized companies fare no better. Manoj, a manager at a mid-sized firm contrasts Infosys (a “good paymaster”) with smaller companies “that exploit their workers too much.” Employees routinely work over 60 hours a week, he says, and “too much
pressure is given to the developer to complete work.” There are also occasional power shortages. When they occur, “developers have to stay longer and work through the outage. Sometimes people have to work 18-20 hours continuously. It makes me feel like I should leave the industry, but there is satisfaction when I complete the work.”

Given these issues, one might wonder about the policy options available to limit the adverse impacts of long and irregular working hours. Mindful of the social consequences of the “24-hour society,” the European Union released its Working Time Directive (2004), wherein it lays out guidelines on the scheduling of shifts, rest periods, and work hours. It is unlikely that such a Directive will ever apply to the offshore partners of EU companies. Nor is it likely that Indian companies will welcome the imposition of “foreign” labor standards. The CFO of one of India’s largest ICT companies puts the issue of long and busy hours in comparative perspective:

People work very hard. And why do people work hard? They do so because they’re a poor country. They’re growing up. India’s a poor country. So every country has worked hard. Koreans have worked hard; the Japanese have worked hard; the Germans have worked hard. To grow your national economy, a couple generations work extremely hard. People in the U.S. worked hard; people in the U.K. worked hard. Once you become wealthy, you work less, right. A wealthy country cannot dictate to an emerging country and say, ‘You work less.’ It’s not going to happen because everybody’s at a different state of development.

Thus in addition to cost, part of the attractiveness of Indian labor to corporations is its willingness and ability to “work hard.” Software developers who visited their U.S. parent office for training said that American employees generally stick to a nine-to-five schedule. They, on the other hand, frequently have to stay into the evening to attend conference calls with “onsite” personnel. They then stay on to fix software glitches, which leads to “more than eight hours of working a day.” As an employee who has made frequent visits to the New York office remarked, “People tend to work more here. We work later hours…We accelerate the pace in the evening.” A manager in the U.S. office says that the extended hours were unintentional: they simply were not mindful of the time in India. “We have a big clock now
that’s set to Chennai time on the wall. It’s not that big, perhaps it should be bigger, but we are much better about it now,” he says.

A BPO worker who previously worked at Reuters’ offshore office in Bangalore, says that in the U.S. people are better at meeting deadlines. Indians, by contrast, “are not all that cool with it. We work longer hours to meet their timelines. We’re having to raise the working level.” She adds that her parents are not very comfortable with her working late. Moreover, commutes to suburban worksites can take up to two hours in company vans and taxis—as workers are picked and dropped in groups—which can extend the “work day” considerably. Says one call center worker of his nightly commute: “It’s sightseeing in Bangalore. They should provide a greater number of cabs but they think to cut costs first. Service is not up to the mark. They put all of Bangalore in one cab.”

Long hours and overtime can also negatively impact health. A growing body of research indicates that overtime and extended work schedules increase the risk of hypertension, cardiovascular disease, fatigue, stress, depression, musculoskeletal disorders, chronic infections, and diabetes, among other things (ILO 1998; Jamal 2004). In sum, Indian ICT employees work long hours and are often squeezed on overtime pay. Moreover, simply looking at the length of work hours masks their qualitative density, revealed in infrequent breaks and heightened intensity.
2. TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT

A. The Night Shift and Health Problems

“For hundreds of decades we have been sleeping in the dark and waking in the light. When we attempt to do the opposite of this set body program, we are fighting against generations of programming…However, it is not impossible to reset the internal biological clock—all it requires is little effort from our side to consciously regulate the biological clock so that it depends on us and not on daylight or darkness for its functioning…And all along a ‘mantra’ that you should keep in mind is: ‘My 2 a.m. is the rest of the world’s 9 a.m.’”

--“Surviving Night Shifts,” a flier distributed to workers at a Bangalore call center (see Appendix 1)

As the flier suggests, what is fairly unique to the ITES industry is the permanent night shift. For Indian firms, as one manager puts it, “working the client’s hours at night is often preferable as the client is easier to coordinate with. We can provide real-time updates. Development is available in the same time zone.” However preferable the night shift is for businesses, it exacts a social and physical toll on workers and gives rise to serious safety concerns. Coping with this temporal inversion, however, is a necessary condition of employment.

According to the International Labour Organisation (1998), “The night shift is the most disruptive of all shifts in terms of physiological adjustment, sleep and well-being.” It disturbs socio-temporal patterns and circadian rhythms, leading to stress and sleep disturbances, all of which increase susceptibility to disease. Night shifts have been linked to gastrointestinal disorders, such as constipation and diarrhea, peptic ulcers, and there is growing evidence tying shift work with coronary heart disease and breast cancer (Davis et al. 2001). They may also contribute to miscarriages and low weight and pre-term births among pregnant workers (Knutsson 2003; Alfredsson et al. 1991; Knauth and Härmä 1992).

Of 103 night shift workers I surveyed, 63 respondents report experiencing job-related health problems. These include but are not limited to loss of appetite, insomnia, eyestrain,
fatigue, stomach cramps, acidity and constipation, headaches, and backaches. One worker
complains of “acute health loss in 2003 leading to hospitalization.” Another says he feels “his
memory power reducing.” The figures above may underestimate the actual number of people
with health problems as many workers, especially male workers, were reluctant to disclose
ailments but later admitted to experiencing problems. A handful of workers say that they
acclimate to night shift after an initial period of adjustment, and research suggests that a
permanent night shift may be better than erratic shifts as it permits some degree of circadian
adaptation. However, even this adjustment is ephemeral (Barton et al. 1993). Any benefits
are lost when workers revert to standard routines, which is inevitable on weekends and days
off as workers struggle to make up for lost time with their friends and families. Thus, the ILO
(1998) concludes, “the body rhythms of permanent nightworkers are constantly in a state of
disruption.”

The night shift is also linked with behavioral changes such as smoking and poor diet.
According to one worker, “it’s working against the nature. It really impacts the health. It’s
more of a chip and coke culture and I’ve seen a lot of people falling ill. This industry’s
helping the tobacco industry a lot.” One former call center worker recalls “falling ill and
having headaches, migraines. Intakes of medicine were very high and I started losing weight.”
Others say that they have gained weight because of the sedentary lifestyle the job promotes—
working at night and sleeping by day with little exercise in between (c.f. Al-Naimi et al.
2004). The New York Times reports on the startlingly high incidence of Type-2 diabetes
among India’s middle class and suggests that junk food-eating, keyboard tapping software
workers are particularly easy prey for the disease (Kleinfeld 2006).

Rupa, a 22-year old call center worker, says that her firm is a “very nice place to
work. But your whole routine changes because of the night shift. If I get a day off I can’t
sleep until 4 or 5 in the morning. But you get used to it.” Wilson, a 24-year old commerce
graduate, interrupts: “But it is difficult,” he says, “You compromise a lot. You have only
Sundays to see family. You lose appetite as you can’t eat breakfast at one in the afternoon. For those staying alone, it’s very difficult.” He added that making calls is “a major angle of stress. When you start, OK, it’s just a new thing. [As] with any new toy, it’s easy to play with. But then it becomes very monotonous.” Outside their 26-year old team leader clenches a plastic cup of coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Asked her how many hours she sleeps each day, she says “five or six maximum,” and tosses her cigarette butt on the ground in haste.

The prolonged combination of stress and fatigue at BPOs now goes by the acronym BOSS—“Burn Out Stress Syndrome.” A worker tells of its symptoms: “Since I will have to work the night shift hours it severely affects our daily lives. I missed most of my family affairs. But the most important thing is that I have suffered a number of diseases like sleeplessness, eyestrain, continuous headache. I couldn't find any time to brace my mind or to take care of my health.” Consequently, one manager says that workers cannot stay on the job for more than two or three years. After that, “they burn out. It’s very hard on the body and not natural.” A former forty-year old worker says that the combined pressure of health problems and managerial pressure was too much to handle. More than once she had high blood pressure and fell ill. “They said I was dropping my calls. I said I’m dropping the job,” she says.

As the major factor that sets the body clock is bright light, offices are bathed in artificial light and blinds are closed to keep the darkness from view. “We can’t tell what time of day it is when we’re at office,” one worker says brightly. Caffeine is another weapon against drowsiness. Workers, however, often find it difficult to sleep after the shift as they return home in broad daylight. “Wearing dark glasses on the way home if we are working the night shift prevents the morning sunlight from activating our internal biological clock,” suggests a company flier. A few workers mention using sleeping pills and drinking alcohol to help them fall asleep. Sleep restriction, even at moderate levels, results in increased levels of
stress hormones can and “seriously impair waking neurobehavioral functions in healthy adults” (Van Dongen et al 2003: 117). Over time, the body’s ability to compensate for this sleep deficit wanes, perhaps permanently (Meerlo et al 2002). Importantly, this “neurobiological ‘cost’ which accumulates over time” applies to extended shifts as well as night shifts (Van Dongen et al 2003: 117). Yet as job tenure for BPO employees is very short, the health impacts are not as severe as they would be over time. High turnover, somewhat perversely, is good for workers’ health.

B. Social and Family Problems: “We Are Like Owls”

Amartya, 27, is an employee of an ITES firm in New Delhi. Born in Calcutta, he is fluent in Hindi, Bengali, and English and holds a bachelors degree in commerce. He works between 10-12 hours a day, six days a week. He travels to work between eight and nine at night through a soft landscape of unfocused forms, dull wind, and intermittent street lamps that produce a crepuscular gloom. In contrast, the morning light is sharp and the air crisp when he returns home, whereupon he breakfasts on a glass of water and two or three glucose biscuits. He then sleeps heavily into the afternoon and takes lunch at the “Hotel Kerala,” a tiny restaurant tucked into an unpaved alley a short bus ride away. The fare there is “simple and safe.” After lunch he takes another nap until evening and then goes back to work. “Eat, sleep, work. Eat, sleep, work. I have become too dull,” he says with a laugh.

The second of three children and the son of a retired civil servant, Amartya is the only male child and this entails a certain financial responsibility. His dilemma is like that of many other workers in the industry. The job has uprooted him socially, distancing him from friends and family, but it is comparatively well-paying. As he explains, “I’m the lone earner for my family and…I can support my family fully with my present job. But socially it’s hampered me
as we are in night shift and I can’t visit Calcutta for receptions and marriages. But I don’t have any option because someone has to compromise somewhere.”

Of those workers who say that outsourced jobs have improved their lives, their reasons are chiefly economic and secondarily social. One worker joins these two strands: “It has increased my social status, a little bit better than being unemployed. Now, I have very limited time for family, but the positive effect is that the job has given an economic stability and a little more security.” Another employee describes his growing professionalism: “The job has brought discipline in my life. I have learnt to appreciate perfection in everything.” But even these workers are not likely to stay on for long. Whatever adjustments workers make, job tenure in the call center and related industries is extremely short, and vertical mobility is limited. As one manager puts it, “Not everyone can be a team leader.”

In comparison with other shift systems, fixed night shifts impair personal relationships and mental well-being (Portela et al 2004; ILO 1998). One worker at Amartya’s firm puts it bluntly: “I feel that my organization's work timings are very odd and that affects my social and family life…which demolishes my happiness.” Being conditioned to live as if one is in a foreign time-zone while remaining fixed within one’s geographic space can lead to a measure of disorientation. Workers complain that their time with family and friends is curtailed (“My girlfriend has left me since I could not give her enough time.”); that they are unable to participate in religious festivals (“I can’t celebrate festivals, as I have to work on those days and that too in shift”); and that they feel cut off from the larger society (“I’m not updated with the current world scenarios”). Nearly half of the overall survey respondents report social or family problems (58 out of 120; 20 non-responses), and the large majority of them work the nightshift. As Mirchandi notes (2004: 365), workers are at a remove “from the spaces of social life such as markets, households, and transportation links, which occur only during the day.”
“We are like owls,” said one former call center employee who now works at an IT startup. “We’re awake when family is asleep. We can’t socialize because of night work and this leads to depression. [Workers] are willing to spend whatever they can on boozing, shopping, whatever.” A shift lead at a BPO who works twelve hours a day, seven days a week remarks, “My social life has gone for a toss. People at work expect more from you. I desperately need a break.” In some cases this hypertrophied sense of displacement is both cultural and temporal as in the case of a call center worker who boasted of taking shots of vodka at 9 a.m. All told, the jobs produce (relatively) high incomes and social estrangement in equal measure.

C. Safety Issues

That time is so critical to global business operations is evident in the fact that the main changes to Indian labor law introduced for the benefit of the industry have had to do specifically with time. These include amendments that allow flexible work timings and shift work, including provisions for work on national holidays and on overtime pay (Shops and Establishments Act, 1947); that allow women to work the night shift (Factories Act, 1948); and the designation of ITES and IT companies as “essential services,” (Industrial Disputes Act, 1947), which makes strikes very difficult. These changes have the cumulative effect of allowing businesses to function 24 hours a day, 365 days a week. Firms are also exempted from mandatory power outages and are provided with dedicated satellites and power supplies so that their time-sensitive operations are not affected by overtaxed municipal infrastructure. Businesses argue that such changes are necessary to attract foreign investment. And in this they are correct: if offices in the West and India cannot be synched temporally without major disruptions, foreign investment would likely not come. Such concessions, however, are not without their costs.
On the night of December 13, 2005, Pratibha Srikant Murthy, a 24-year old Hewlett Packard (HP) call center worker in Bangalore, boarded a cab that was to take her to work. The following morning, her bloodied body was found in a roadside ditch in the outskirts of the city and the driver was charged with rape and murder. Although HP has denied responsibility—the driver worked for a company to which HP had outsourced its transportation—the Karnataka government has filed a suit against the company under Section 25 of the state's Shops and Commercial Establishments Act (1961), which mandates that employers provide for the safety and security of their employees. (If convicted, the company’s then-managing director would face a token fine of 1,000 rupees ($25) (BBC News 2008)). The act and another at the central level were previously amended to allow women to work night shifts in special economic zones.

Were it only an isolated incident. Were it only an isolated incident. In November 2007, Jyoti Kumari Choudhari, an employee of a Wipro call center, was found raped and murdered on the Mumbai-Pune Express Highway. In Gurgaon, call center workers have been molested by drivers. Acid was thrown on a female call center employee in Pune by a former driver when she refused his advances (Sharma 2006). During a short visit to a call center in Bombay, two employees told me of an attempted abduction of their co-worker by a driver. Such episodes prompted labor ministries to issue guidelines on transportation safety to ICT firms. A senior executive at one of India’s largest IT firms, however, disputes the significance of these events:

Nightshifts are part of a choice that you make, right. You can always get a different job. This is all being blown up for nothing. Yes, it’s a heinous crime. It’s a chance occurrence that could have happened to anybody. Many people work in the nightshifts. It is sad, it shouldn’t happen but it happened. It’s not the end of the world, it’s not like the industry is evil. The industry has taken care so much. How many industries drop people home in the night? How many people are well-paid? How many people have used technology? This is, you know, going overboard.
NASSCOM, the ICT industry association, claims that the industry “is the most responsible employer of women in India.” Likewise, a female call center worker in Bangalore says with a heavy sigh that “these things are blown out of proportion.” But while it is true that offshoring has generated employment for women, the abovementioned cases suggest that these are not one-off episodes. There are aspects of the BPO industry that make it unique in respect to women’s safety, as traveling to worksites by outsourced transportation has proved occasionally hazardous.

Moreover, according to a former outsourcing consultant turned human rights activist, the industry’s service workers “are getting a raw deal.” This is especially the case for drivers who convey night employees. “Rash driving by contracted drivers has led to a lot of accidents,” he says. “There is lots of pressure on time as they have the same timings as BPO employees. They make around 4,500 rupees ($100) a month, they have nice uniforms and haircuts but at the end of the day they’re the worst hit. But on the other hand, they might not have a job otherwise.” In Bangalore, frustrated locals refer to the Dell cabs that speed through the streets of India’s Silicon Valley as “hell cabs.” Not only does night work lead to poorer performance, but it also leads to sleepiness, which, more than alcohol or drugs, is “the greatest identifiable and preventable cause of accidents in all modes of transport” (Rajaratnam and Arendt 2001: 999; Folklard et al. 2005; Akerstedt et al. 2005).

3. Exit and Choice

The logic of globalization is unremitting and unforgiving, a point made plain in the preceding discussion on the duration and density of work. But to focus solely on these categories is to overlook time’s internal texture, its rhythm. As Thompson (1967) argues, what paved the groundwork for the expansion of industrial capitalism was not the length of the working day per se but the very acceptance by workers of the clock as a means of
regulating work. Lefebvre (2004), moreover, writes that the linear, serial, and exogenous rhythms of capitalism and the diverse, cyclical, and irregular rhythms of ordinary life are always in perpetual interaction, producing a struggle over the definition of working time. This section explores the concepts of time imposed by companies and how they are dealt with by workers. It also assesses the means available to workers to carve out a space for the emergence of collective rhythms that could counteract the atomizing pressures of a desocialized work environment.

To begin, the mandatory night shift results in the wholesale inversion of night and day. Time, as we will discuss later (Ch. 5), is closely regulated and minutely supervised. For non-shift workers, the elasticity of the working day—which expands and contracts like bellows at the whims of the home office—signifies a collapse of the work-life boundary. While the absence of a strong demarcation between work and life could be seen as welcomingly reminiscent of pre-industrial work patterns, in the present case, they are not so much intermingled as life is subsumed by work. These tensions are exacerbated by the rote nature of the work and, consequently, workers complain about the unrelieved monotony of task and pace (Ch. 4).

The struggle over working conditions, then, is increasingly about time (Fischer et al 2004). Temporal autonomy could mean shortened work hours and rotating shifts; lighter work loads, reduced pressure, and more relaxed working pace; increased frequency and duration of breaks; a greater appreciation of the unique time-bind faced by Indian workers; and time for unsupervised interaction between workers, thus injecting a social dynamic into the workplace. Only then could workers be said to exercise any meaningful degree of ownership over the labor process. It is thus not merely a fight of securing more “leisure time” but of integrating collective rhythms into the workplace setting.

The balance of forces between capital and labor in the offshore ICT industry is reflected in the extent to which workers are able to wrest concessions from employers (job
mobility, breaks, pay raises, etc.) and vice versa (temporal inversion, long hours, flexibility, etc.). Hirschman (1970) argues that there are two main ways of expressing one’s discontent in an organization. One can voice their complaints through the appropriate channel and hope that the grievance will be addressed. Or one can exit from the organization and go elsewhere. Importantly, for the latter to be a meaningful option, one must have a measure of social and economic security: either the skills to acquire another job or some private or family wealth to fall back on. Otherwise, even voice becomes a perilous option. The issue becomes one of worker bargaining power.

Wright (2000: 962) distinguishes between the associational and structural power of workers. The former concerns the power created by the formation of collective organizations like unions and political parties. Structural power, by contrast, accrues to workers “simply from their location…in the economic system” and can be broken down into two parts. What Silver (2003: 13) calls marketplace bargaining power “results directly from tight labor markets.” Workplace bargaining power, by contrast, results “from the strategic location of a particular group of workers within a key industrial sector.” Marketplace bargaining power could mean possessing scarce skills that are in high demand. It could also refer to a situation of low unemployment or to the workers’ ability to withdraw from the “labor market entirely and survive on nonwage sources of income.” Workplace bargaining power refers to occupying a critical node in a complex, tightly-integrated production network, where a work stoppage in one place could bring the entire network to a halt (Silver 2003).

Indian ICT workers have very little associational power. The major unions have expressed interest in organizing workers but have made no real effort. In terms of marketplace bargaining power, workers seemingly have it in abundance. They know English as well as specialized skills generally only available to the middle-class. Furthermore, demand is fast outpacing supply such that companies have to raise salaries significantly each
Another critical thing workers have in their favor is that many are middle-class and can depend on the family if they want to quit.

As far as workplace bargaining power, being a link in the global service chain gives workers the ability to disrupt the network through a work stoppage. As offshoring has matured, companies have developed deep linkages between their various offices around the world. Many large corporations have become directly dependent on their offshore subsidiaries. A senior executive makes this point plain:

We operate in the extended team model. Almost 100%, 99% of the development process happens here…Only the requirements, business problem definition, and the production support is done in the U.S. As far as the development at [the financial services firm], it’s happening here. If [the subsidiary] is not operational or cannot deliver, [the parent] will have to stop. As far as [the parent], we are the heart, or the brains…We drive it.

A work disruption, he says, could prove disastrous for the U.S. operation. Events in the outside world, such as social unrest, can also have ramifications. A strike in Bangalore following the death of the celebrated South Indian actor Rajkumar disrupted work for two days. As companies like Microsoft and Sun refused to shut down operations—legally they are considered “public utilities” and thus do not have to honor strikes—they were directly attacked by mourners and were not able to keep production online. While such difficulties may lead companies to reconsider their offshoring plans, the competitive nature of the global economy ensures that when a few major players make the transition, such as General Electric or IBM, others have to follow suit. As a U.S.-based manager puts it, “We have to make it work. We have little choice.”

To recapitulate, the main factors that alleviate the pressures of long work hours, stressful work pace, and the nightshift are (1) the demand-supply imbalance (2) the possession of scarce skills and (3) workers’ ability to withdraw from the labor market. This power has

34 The figures companies give are somewhat inflated. While experienced personnel are indeed receiving large salary increases and bonuses, entry-level and junior workers are somewhat expendable and have not seen major increases. Nevertheless, Nasscom claims that by 2010 the Indian IT industry will face a shortage of 500,000 professionals.
enabled workers to exercise voice in seemingly trivial matters such as meal catering. More importantly, the fluidity of the labor market has allowed many to move from company to company in search of the best compensation package. As an official of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, which is affiliated with the Congress Party, put it:

There have been some attempts to organize but they have been met with resistance by employers and the workers themselves. Employment opportunities are shrinking. Educated people are increasingly unemployed. BPO and IT are offering good opportunities. In a bank, you make 6-7,000 rupees starting. In IT/BPO you make 14-15,000 rupees to start with…You may say anything about health hazards and long work hours to which workers are exposed. But considering the compensation package, these are not hazards. Promotions are quick. They have sort of an open door policy. In a factory, you can’t meet the proprietor. [In BPO/IT] you can send an email to your employer. Interaction is more free. Grievances are addressed through companies.

In comparison with other sectors of the Indian economy, the union official argues, ICT workers do quite well. Although the pressures on them may be intense, they can work two years make a large sum and then quit. For the CFO of a major IT company, the main criterion in determining the morality of the night shift is that of choice and the possibility of exit.

You must remember that this industry is resource-constrained; you can’t force people to do anything you want. If you force people to do something, they walk away. It’s a hot market for employees. Look, you unionize people when workers are exploited, they’re surplus labor and…the pay is less. You have a situation where the pay goes up 15-20% a year. It is a sellers market, so what is the need? People are making choices. Today you don’t have to work in a call center, you’ve got other jobs. You choose to work in a call center, you get money. We are a democracy, let the people decide. If it’s that there are no jobs and call centers are the only work, there’s a point. There are so many jobs available. Attrition in call centers is 45%. Forty-five percent that join leave within a year, so what are we talking about.

It is indeed difficult to argue that workers are “trapped” in these positions. However, withdrawing from the industry deprives people of a means to improve their life-chances. As Castells (1999: 6) writes: “Be in the network, and you can share and, over time, increase your chances. Be out of the network, or become switched off, and your chances vanish since everything that counts is organized around a world wide web of interacting networks.”
many, exit becomes difficult because of the accumulating possibilities they are passing up. The compensation packet is so attractive, says one worker, that few leave the industry for good.

There are other sources of worker insecurity that reduce their leverage. Worker complaints of managerial favoritism are often ignored. As one worker comments, “If you speak up, you’ll become a bad person. People are very scared to go and speak.” Labor laws provide little protection and the lack of collective representation through a union is also a restriction on worker voice and capacity for collective action. In a changed labor market, an atmosphere of generalized insecurity could develop and be used to bargain down wages and working conditions.

**Coda**

On the heels of the 1929 stock market crash, John Maynard Keynes (1932: 131-32) sought to allay the “economic pessimism” of the day. “We are suffering, not from the rheumatics of old age,” he wrote, “but from the growing pains of over-rapid changes, from the painful adjustment between one economic period and another.” Scientific and technological advances would “within a hundred years” usher in an “age of leisure and abundance” and “economic bliss.” Later technological optimists envisioned such a reduction of toil in the transition to “post-industrialism.” As the prevailing work pattern prior to the industrial revolution, according to Thompson (1967: 73), “was one of alternate bouts of intense labor and of idleness, whenever men were control of their working lives” one is tempted to ask whether the irregular working rhythm of the pre-industrial era been recaptured in the flexibility of post-industrial period?

Such dreams have not come to fruition. In fact, the trend is in the other direction, toward longer and busier hours. The workplaces of “new economy” are traversed by novel and retrograde modes of work pace, rhythm, and time-discipline. What is at stake, Basso
(2003: 163) writes, “is a return to the past, to hours that are not only long but extremely intense and variable, autocratically established by companies and by the state.” Time should therefore be brought to the forefront of discussions about working conditions. And as the livelihoods of workers in global North and global South are inextricably linked through international trade, a transnational perspective is increasingly important.

Some forty years ago, Thompson (1967: 93) observed (rather belatedly) that “Without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of the industrial man; and whether this discipline comes in the form of Methodism, or of Stalinism, or of nationalism, it will come to the developing world.” Not only has time-discipline come to the third world, but work-time pressures have been intensified by globalization. As offshoring gains momentum, not only may costs be driven down, but so may working conditions, particularly as they relate to time. While firms do not go offshore for the benefits of time arbitrage alone, it can become an element of concession-bargaining: “work longer or faster or we can go offshore where workers are more willing.” Globalization therefore does not entail the loosening of temporal chains, but their reconfiguration: a combination both rigid and flexible that binds even as it liberates.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE RULES OF THE GAME

In 2005, Ravi Aron, a professor at the Wharton School of Business, interviewed Vivek Paul, then Vice Chairman and CEO of Wipro Technologies, one of India’s most successful service companies. Paul had been named by Business Week, Barron’s, and Time/CNN as one of the best respected managers and CEOs in the world and during the public debate on outsourcing he was its amiable Indian face. (“I was brave to take the arrows on my chest,” he says). He exudes confidence and calm and speaks soothingly about the merits of offshoring for sending and receiving country alike. In addition to a cozy, knowing smile and a breezy, tie-less informality, Paul has all the right credentials. He was recruited by and reported directly to Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, as head of a joint venture in India. Welch at the time had drawn his share of praise and criticism for his stance on mass layoffs, winning him the dubious sobriquet, “Neutron Jack.” In an email to GE employees, Welch announced his “70:70:70” rule whereby 70% of the business had to be outsourced, 70% of the outsourced business had to offshored and 70% of the offshored business had to be in India (Paul 2005; IndustryWeek 2005). The company’s core activities were to remain at home.35

A former water polo captain at the University of Massachusetts where he earned his B.A. and M.B.A., Paul, in a sense, embodies Welch’s rule. He is of Indian extraction and his speech retains a subcontinental lilt (Welch’s 30%), but his basic outlook and core beliefs are those of a global executive. He says that Indians are “great individual contributors, not great managers”; that Indian managers “have grown up in a cocooned world” and that “this has to change.” He is credited not only with boosting efficiency and profits at Wipro, but with taking

35 The result of Welch’s downsizing and outsourcing was that more than a hundred thousand workers were pushed off the GE payroll (Lardner 2007).
a company that was Indian “to the bone” and making its employees “think big and global” (Paul 2005; Singh and Sengupta 2005; Thottom 2004). He prefers the term “global collaboration” to outsourcing and says that the backlash is “gone, it’s over.” While Paul had always been rather candid, when asked whether there is “a profitable and robust revenue stream” for Indian service companies, his answer came as a slight shock:

If you look at the service business, absolutely. But if you look at that service business as leading to innovation and product outcomes, the answer is absolutely not. Frankly, I feel that when people work in a service business like ours, it's almost like we give them a lobotomy. I don't think, and I hope I'm wrong, you will see a single successful product startup coming out of people who were working at Wipro or any other similar companies…Why that is, God knows. But I truly believe that there is some sort of inadvertent lobotomy that we give people (Aron 2005).

While he maintained that “it's not just ‘brainless’ blue-collar workers who are working for you, they have to be adept at some pretty advanced skills,” the matter hinges on a distinction between intuitively knowing what to do and being told what to do. As he told me, “There is an incredible amount of innovation going on in India. In terms of R&D, we had 7,000 engineers innovating for U.S. engineers. We were the fourth most prolific chip designer in the world. The problem is that engineers don’t know what to do. They have to be told what to do next. If you’re asking about leaps of knowledge, that knowledge resides here.” He put it similarly to Aron:

The stuff that's been done in India is staggering in terms of range and depth. I don’t think that anyone can say that the work we're doing is trivial. But the work we're doing is under somebody else's direction….For an engineer, there's a big difference between discovering something, versus discovering something that you know somebody else says can be done…And there's a second quality I didn't mention: knowing what you want, or what the market wants, versus being told what to do... A service business is really individuals working for someone else… So unless you have a very clear view of your corporation's value added, you have no entitlement to an enterprise value” (Ibid).

There are two points to be taken from Paul’s remarks. The first is that little innovation is occurring in the Indian services industry. The second is that Indian workers are innocent of the knowledge of what to do and must therefore be told. One might conclude, as
many managers are wont to, that certain (Indian) character traits inhibit innovation and
discovery. But while the much lamented “culture of deference” in Indian workplaces may
have something to do with this, workers do not take “ownership” of their work for a variety of
reasons, not simply a lack of initiative. As will be explained, the international division of IT-
based service labor is such that “creative” work is concentrated mostly in the global north and
low-skill, replicable tasks in the global south.

Individual responsibility becomes a fuzzy notion where skill development is limited,
career paths inertial, and work fragmented and piecemeal. Furthermore, Indian companies
rely heavily on standardized processes, making it difficult for workers to invest themselves in
the rote task at hand. Even where workers receive considerable on-the-job-training, there
remains a skills ceiling in place. Workers know that there are only so many team leader posts
open, only so much room for growth within any one company. Yet the aspiration lingers. The
task for managers is to get them to lower their sights, to bow their heads ever so slightly.

Technology, Skills, and Globalization

Thinkers as far back as at least Adam Smith and Marx have written about the
psychologically and physiologically destructive effects that too fine a division of labor can
have on people, whatever the gains in productivity and efficiency. In modern parlance, such
an extreme rationalization of tasks results in “deskilling” where the worker becomes little
more than an unthinking automaton. This line of thought enjoyed a recrudescence in the late
1970s when the offshoring of labor-intensive manufacturing jobs to developing countries was
accompanied by a focus on the prospects of information-based service work in the developed
world. Scholars were divided about whether the march of technological modernization would
be liberatory, leading to overall improvements in job quality and an upskilling of the
workforce, or the opposite, degrading skills by relegating workers to mundane tasks as well as
subjecting them to greater managerial control (Attewell 1987; Noble, 1977; Braverman, 1975; Blau and Schoenherr, 1971; Bell, 1979; Wood, 1982; Ray, 1989). In any event, “creative” work, which involves the manipulation of symbols and not the production of things, was to be concentrated in the global north, while labor-intensive work was to slowly trickle south. Then, all of a sudden, as it were, global corporations began looking to the Third World for the provision of seemingly complex services.

On the one hand, technological advancements have made it possible to automate some of the more rote aspects of service work. On the other, the globalization of services means that those banal tasks that cannot be automated can at least be sent offshore. Given that the majority of IT-based work being offshored is of the service variety, Paul’s distinction between intuition and command then has implications for both worker morale and the niche that developing countries occupy in the international division of labor. Offshoring has created an underclass of knowledge workers—they work with information technologies yet perform the rote work, or as one executive put it, the “dog work.” The condition of this class fragment is paradoxical. In India, they are arrivistes, but globally, the workers are the cyber scriveners of the information age, and the managers and employers, the new compradors. The same could be said for the Indian ICT industry writ large: it is a matter of considerable esteem and pride nationally (“Shining India”), but is a low-cost, often low-skill center from the vantage of global corporations. To all outward appearances, these sleek offshore workplaces look like hotbeds of high-tech innovation. But, like plastic fruit or trompe-l’oeil, they are imitations of the real thing.

Prasad (1998: 429) argues that Taylorist production dynamics have resurfaced in the Indian computer industry and that an “invisible de-skilling” stymies career development.

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36 By Indian standards, these workers are privileged (only 10% of Indians get any kind of post-secondary education). But educational standards at reputable institutions are lagging. Of India’s 300 plus universities, only two are ranked in the top 300 in the world, and as a result, in the global labor market, workers enter with what corporations consider to be a relatively low level of skills (Surowiecki 2007).
Likewise, Aneesh (2005), describes software development in India in terms of high and low “skill saturation,” and argues that, by and large, outsourcing tends toward the latter. While there are few technological barriers preventing the offshoring of highly sophisticated work, the skills ceiling is determined largely by the particular role played by developing countries in the global service supply chain. As Taylor and Bain (2005: 277) argue, this is a consequence of the way that companies have made their offshoring decisions:

Organizational restructuring and strategic review in UK companies tends to precede the horizontal segmentation of services, leading to the most standardized and least risk-laden processes being sliced-off and offshored. Fundamentally, then, and expressing the importance of the cost-reduction logic, India largely hosts an extreme version of the mass production model.

This tropism toward cost-reduction has consequences for worker satisfaction. Call center workers, for example, are roused by expectations of “stimulating work and prestigious career promised by employers” but “the mundane nature of incessant call-handling can cause disenchantment and disengagement from job and organization” (Ibid). The IT magazine *Dataquest* (2004) sounds a similar note:

When a fun loving city graduate joins a call center in India, in addition to commendable command over the English language, the employer sees a lot of enthusiasm and positive attitude in him or her while hiring. However, the new call center employee's zeal dies in the first few weeks. Despair and disillusion set in and the final outcome is that he or she quits the job. Little do these call center employees realize while they are being hired that, instead of fun, what lies ahead of them is much hard work and long, stressful days. The unrelieved monotony of their jobs and the repeated rejections from sometimes abusive clients ensures that their cup of woes brimmeth all night long.

The unlikely combination of stress *and* monotony is particularly grating on the nerves, especially where it occurs during the graveyard shift and in a context of unstable employment. Indeed, the strains resulting from this temporal dislocation are one of the leading causes of the industry’s high turnover. But companies are not motivated by malevolent intentions; routinization has certain undeniable benefits. For one, it renders outcomes more predictable and frees firms from dependence on the skills of particular workers (Leidner 1993; Braverman
1974). Standardization also helps reduce socio-cultural differences as companies rely on fixed standards for governing and overseeing quality, such as CMM-I. This, Aneesh (2006) argues, reduces the space for “play” and consequently innovation and creative thinking. Executives foresee continued employment growth in the industry, but they admit that it will likely be concentrated at the bottom of the company pyramid. Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO), the appellation for complex, “judgment-dependent” services, can be a risky gambit and does not supply as dependable a revenue stream as its duller, dumber, older brother, BPO. It would be better if they should employ an army of industrious automata. And to some extent this is what is occurring with the prevailing emphasis on standardized process and commoditization (i.e. Paul’s “inadvertent lobotomy”). As Mills (1951: 233) once wrote, “human relations” is largely about increasing the “morale of cheerful robots.”

According to a BPO executive, the best way to reduce costs is not offshoring, but automation, a goal which can only be approximated in service work. But if easily replicable work cannot be automated the next best solution is to send it offshore where it can be performed for less. One study argues that for developed countries, “IT offshoring risks are limited to low-end occupations (such as programmers, coders and support specialists) that are labor intensive, easy to codify, or require little face-to-face contact” (Leonard 2006: 3). Moreover, the industry magazine Global Services reports that “the traditional cost centers such as HR, finance and accounting and some low-value, high-volume customer-facing functions have been the most frequently outsourced activities. In such services, reducing cost has been the objective” (Shyamanuja 2006). According to a survey by the consultancy EquaTerra, although increasingly complex work is slowly percolating abroad, “most companies are not looking for transformational outsourcing. Only one in five respondents said it was a priority to transform or optimize service.” The result is that offshore processes are simple and transactional in scope. A venture capitalist says that Indian suppliers “are
heavily dependent on process. This takes away individual responsibility and thoughtfulness. It’s a double-edged sword because process level guarantees are also what enable them to get the work.” And even offshored work is vulnerable to automation. According to one BPO executive, “what threatens the low end is automation, definitely transactions.”

The uncertain trajectory of the ICT industry and workforce is well-illustrated by Manoj Khanna, the COO of a leading KPO, a term which he says he coined. Khanna is well-groomed and equally well-spoken and wears his hair in a subdued pompadour. He says that the importance of offshoring lay in the fact that “…over a very short period of time, Indians have realized they can be a world leader in something. It’s a booster to confidence and pride. We’re not just following but actually leading. The younger generation is extremely confident. Our generation, we had a high level of nervousness and fear.” Nonetheless, he says that when he first used the term KPO he was under no illusions about India’s place in the global services market. The neologism was in many ways aspirational; it suggested a possibility. “I’m not saying that we’re doing things that are absolutely critical,” he says. While offshoring involves a spatial shift of capital to the developing world, “American companies own intellectual property” and thus call the shots in the “flat” world.

During the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign Khanna was at a meeting with members of NASSCOM, the Indian industry group, and a number of Western executives who were vexed by the backlash over offshoring. To allay their fears, Khanna made a facetious proposal, “OK. We don’t want any more of your jobs. We’re fine with that. But in exchange, let’s have the ownership of intellectual property revert to Indian companies. How many of you would go for that? Everyone in the room was silent,” he says with a self-satisfied smile.

37 A BPO trainer says that “BPO caters to lower-skilled labor.” They sometimes hire high school graduates between 19-20 years of age, without any college education. Before the BPO market “it was hard to find jobs. The starting age for earning was 23 to 24, now its 18 to 19. People are less mature; you need to give guidance. Education is taking a backdrop. I have a feeling that BPO might undermine the importance of education.” A self-proclaimed skeptic, he believes the industry “will grow at the base.”
Intellectual property is warp and woof of the home office, while “commodity technology” can be subcontracted. Offshoring-related growth, in other words, cannot widen beyond frontiers determined by multinationals.

An executive at a BPO specializing in legal services says that the quality of work “is often better in India because Indian employees are more qualified than their U.S. counterparts.” Ph.D.s, for example, perform the work of American paralegals. (While salaries are comparable to a mid-size law firm in India, the pay rate is 10-15% that of U.S. lawyers). “You are putting a higher skill level to the task,” he explains. While the life of a junior Indian law clerk is hardly to be envied, the reality is that an M.B.A. at a legal outsourcing firm in India performs work an M.B.A. in the U.S. “would never do.”

Moreover, there is a structural disincentive to moving up the value chain. An executive explains that sophisticated work has lower margins:

In terms of value, you can look at it two ways: one is high profitability and the other is a higher dollar value. For high profitability, you’ll want to do stuff that is lower in terms of intellectual value. Higher dollar value would be something like consulting. For BPO you’re maybe making $16 and your paying $8. For consulting services, it’s $120 to $100. Margins, in other words, shrink as you go up the chain.

Higher-value projects are risky. Moreover, “KPO has a potential downside. If companies mess up then there are fees and penalties that can go into the millions,” says a venture capitalist. These are not unalterable laws; indeed, major multinationals like Microsoft and Cisco are now investing considerable sums in research and development in India and firms like Infosys make it a point to invest in the skills of its workforce. But for the large majority of Indians employed by the industry, and for the service industry in general, the

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38 Or as the CEO of Motorola puts it, “You have to draw a line…Core intellectual property is above it, and commodity technology is below” (Engardio and Einhorn 2005).

39 The dissatisfaction that goes with performing work for which one is overqualified, however, is much mitigated by higher salaries. There is also considerable prestige owing to their employment by a multinational firm.
geography of service work is such that standardized work will continue to be concentrated in developing countries.

Employers and managers are locked in a contradiction. On the one hand, they want workers to mature into responsible professionals who take initiative and “ownership.” On the other, the structural conditions of the global market favor the migration of easily replicable tasks and their standardization is critical in generating a revenue stream for Indian suppliers. The relationship between turnover and standardization, however, is cyclical: high turnover and absenteeism produce a need for a standardized process so that operations can continue undisturbed when workers do not turn up. Standardization in turn results in dissatisfaction and more attrition. Managers are left with the delicate task of intimating upward career paths where they do not necessarily exist. The following case study illustrates this paradox as well as illuminates the delicate relationship between onshore and offshore worksites.

“Client First”

The lobby of Praxis, the Chennai-based subsidiary of an American investment bank, is tiled in multi-colored marble. To one side of the reception desk, behind which sit a gentle mustachioed man and a well-dressed woman who is always in a huff, is a track-lit Kandinsky-esque painting. To the other is a 50” flat screen television. Today’s feature is a two-minute promotional video in which executives and managers from the U.S and Europe comfortably extol the bank’s virtues. It is shown continuously, day and night. (Today’s feature was also yesterday’s; the same video was playing when I visited ten months earlier and, on a conservative estimate, it has been screened at least 100,000 times). What is remarkable about the video is that no Indian faces appear. Nor is any mention made in its hushed soundtrack of the subsidiary’s existence, which, according to one executive, is the infrastructural backbone of the home office’s operations. It is a none-too-subtle reminder to employees of their place
Praxis got its start in 2001 as an affiliate of Synergy, a financial services subsidiary of a large investment bank. In the late 1990s, Synergy had sought to cut labor costs by moving some of their work upstate from New York City. Additionally, 150 consultants were hired on contract. While they were based as far apart as Ireland, Ohio, New Jersey, Phoenix, and Bangalore and received few of the benefits of full-time employees, the consultants were soon tightly integrated into Synergy’s daily operations. In 1999, for example, the workers in Phoenix covered daytime production support, while those in Bangalore worked the second and third shifts.

As competitive pressures increased (they are always increasing), it was decided that the company needed to be made still “leaner,” and the first fat to be trimmed was the ring of contractors. “People were very nervous. I was crushed. I built this from nothing,” says Paul, a heavy-set and bearded manager in shirt sleeves who worked closely with the contractors. The contractors, he says nostalgically as if recalling a set of high school chums, were a “very diverse group”—variously, Scottish, Mexican, Hawaiian, Iraqi and Irani—with whom they had developed a special rapport. (Due to their lack of job security, they could be ingratiating. “They were a lot friendlier than working with in-house employees,” he says). Whereas Paul’s team “talked to India” once a month, they spoke with the contractors in Phoenix once a day. When the latter were let go, a few more were hired in Bangalore. From there the dominos fell quickly. Next in line were the contractors in New Jersey and Ohio, then Ireland and last, following the logic of cost-cutting, were those in Bangalore. It should be noted that, as with temporary workers, consultants who are let go, even after several years with the same

40 In more abstract terms, it began as a subsidiary of a subsidiary, which serves as an outsourcing provider for other companies. In this, Sandhu (2006) is correct in describing international outsourcing as “Russian doll capitalism.”
company, are not recorded in government statistics as layoffs, which is “a classification reserved for normal employees who lose their jobs” (Uchitelle 2006: 143).

Short of automation, however, one cannot just keep cutting. After hiring and then eliminating contractors, Synergy went forward with a plan to incrementally offload its IT functions to an Indian subsidiary in the coastal city of Chennai. The immediacy of the contrast did not sit well with its U.S. employees, especially when management inflicted the added insult of slashing a small percentage of its own workforce. Dave, a U.S.-based manager who works on the company’s mutual fund trading system, says of the layoffs:

When we started building up India, we had three rounds of layoffs. We lost programmers who were making $80,000. Now they’re Indian. I lost friends I used to work with. I’ve been laid off. I know what it’s like. I have a sensitivity. They have families, mortgages to worry about. It was tense for everyone. I never feel secure. But it’s just the way companies do it. All Wall Street cares about is that you cut payroll by 10%.

While the staff in India expanded exponentially from an initial workforce of fifty to fifteen hundred today, Synergy instituted a hiring freeze in its IT department in the U.S. This strategy of “natural attrition,” in contrast to mass layoffs, relieved the company of the burden and guilt of firing its own, while at the same signaling its intention not to hire high-priced U.S. workers in the future.41 “Even before 9-11 things were tightening. Within contracts they had the ability to cut X amount of people. I understood why they did it but it killed me. These were my friends. Why upset the apple cart? There was tension in room. It wasn’t animosity but unfamiliarity,” recalls Paul.

Moreover, offshoring suggested to U.S. employees their impending professional obsolescence. “From the tech perspective,” Paul says, “people are afraid of job loss.” If there colleagues’ jobs could be moved 8,000 miles away because of the plenitude of inexpensive labor, their own position seemed all the more precarious, their own skills that much less

41 And these future non-hires, of course, will find no way into the job loss estimates. The counter-argument is that if Synergy did not go offshore, the firm itself would tank because of the ominous “competitive pressures.”
valued. Dave discusses what Sennett (2006: 90) refers to as “skills extinction”: “Indians are the new minority. They have smelly food, dark skin, accents, and so on. The reality is that some skills may be outdated. You basically become overpaid and price yourself out of the market. You can’t expect to spend the next ten years as a programmer, it’ll go offshore. You have to move to a manager, to analytical work.” As is the case with professional identity in general, the structural shifts in the economy are understood in terms of individual responsibility.42

“Too Many Chiefs and Not Enough Indians”

Misgivings aside, offshoring had achieved a certain momentum. As the work moved to India grew in scope from basic IT maintenance to software development, the U.S. office became more managerial in complexion. That is, while U.S. employees in were not promoted or given pay raises, they essentially filled the role of managers, coordinating with the Indian workforce by phone, email, and blackberry. The idea was to maintain a relative parity in employees between the two offices.43 It was essentially a core-periphery model, which mirrored the geography of developed and developing countries. And, what is more, it posited a distinction between planning and execution, which was based on a division of labor between manager and worker.

Synergy envisioned a “50:50 model” whereby the New Jersey office would be replicated in Chennai. Aspirations aside, this does not mean that the offices are mirror images

42 As Sennett (2006: 90) writes of the American worker in the context of global job migration, “The specter of uselessness here intersects with the fear of foreigners, which, beneath its crust of simple ethnic or race prejudice, is inflected with the anxiety that foreigners may be better armed for the tasks of survival…Globalization names, among other things, a perception that the sources of human energy are shifting, and that those in the already developed world may be left out as a result.”

43 Many multinationals are aiming higher for something like a 70:30 or even an 80:20 ratio in favor of offshore. Aneesh (2006: 74) describes the geography of the business model used by Indian services providers: “To avoid the problem of coordination, Indian firms developed what was known as a 75-25 model. While 75 percent of their workforce remained in India, they established a small office in the United States, comprising the remaining 25 percent of the work force, to coordinate and mediate between the Indian team and the American client.”
of each other. Form must be distinguished from content. An Indian worker explains: “Our role is developing and maintaining software. The business group is in the U.S. It’s a mirroring of what we have in the U.S. We don’t have a business team here, just a replica.” Dave puts it more directly: “It breaks down as programming and low level work on the Indian end; business analysis, system design and management on the U.S.-end.”

Syed Qamer, a U.S.-based manager, says that the organization is becoming older and “top heavy. If there are 500 here and 500 there, there they have younger, newer people.” Dave says that no one has left at the U.S. office, but they have not hired anyone either: “We used to hire computer graduates locally, but we haven’t done that in six or seven years.” He says that the average age is twenty-six at Praxis, while it is at least ten years higher in the U.S. “There are too many chiefs and not enough Indians,” Qamer says with a small laugh.44

Many U.S. workers remained deeply skeptical about offshoring. This took two forms, neither of which was very disruptive as the generalized anxiety that had been created within the company left workers insecure about their own jobs. The first was buried resentment toward management for letting perfectly capable people go. The second response was a passive aggressive posture in which they would do the least possible to advance the process without undermining it. This meant that undesirable work was moved over and that U.S. managers would invest precious little by way of training in the Indian staff. (The lack of trust would not go unrequited. Indian workers, for their part, returned the favor by jumping ship when they received a better job offer). According to Dave,

There was a lot of resistance, just kind of an ‘us-them’ mentality. U.S. managers weren’t sending them work. We had to add a category on the time sheet called ‘waiting for work.’ Someone spent twenty hours one week waiting for work. People were trying to keep everything close to their chests. It was a step-by-step progression. They [Indians] were spoon fed. First, you have business requirements; second, tech design; and third, low level specs and pseudo-code. They were giving these guys almost pre-written code!

44 According to one consultant, the emphasis shifts in such situations from managing process delivery to managing deliverables as it is difficult to micromanage a process 9,000 miles away.
They should give them work from the lowest level and have them work through it. Otherwise, they won’t come up in skill level.

The disparity in work experience also rankled. Paul explains that “the main problem was that you lost six people who had five years of experience and their seven replacements would have less than six months of experience. You won’t find a lot of people there with ten years experience. We lost people with good experience and now we get trainees.” In the beginning, only a few (around 5%) were “laterals” [i.e. from other companies], while ninety-five percent were “freshers.” These young workers, he says, “don’t know anything about what Synergy does.” Nor do they “have as much dedication because everything is already in place, like the IT architecture.” And, finally, words that seem to echo throughout every offshore office: “The majority of people are not taking responsibility and ownership of the project.”

At the same time, Paul says, the Indian workers was only getting portions of work, discrete tasks, so in a sense, there is no project for them to own. One Indian worker reflects warmly on the days when things were catch as catch can:

Initially, we didn’t have many managers, only one or two. We struggled, took ownership. We did it. Now project architecture is there. Before if there was problem, something’s going down…Oh no, they worried about it. Now people don’t care. Intuition is missing. It’s a human tendency. If we don’t have any information, we’ll struggle to get it. If we do, we take it for granted.”

And another expresses his frustrations:

Sometimes the jobs are monotonous. You’re working for the same team for a long time. The product is in place and we are just maintaining it. We don’t have the opportunity to design. Most of the high level development happens in the U.S. We only get to do the low level design. We also don’t get the chance to talk to customers. This goes through on-site clients. Most of the work starts from low-level design and then coding.45

Importantly, this restricts their skill development. “The only way we can grow is by doing high-level design. For any issue, we have to call so many people,” says an Indian

45 As an American IT worker observes: “The real decision making positions are still held by the American IT worker, where jobs like coding are done by the Indians” (Overby 2003).
manager. Workers find this particularly frustrating given that they have an expertise in design and development and have even obtained higher software certifications than the U.S. office. With a degree of pride one worker says, “They haven’t reached the same level. They are more a bank than a software company, so we can’t expect them to.”

**Grunt Work**

The word job, in its Middle English origins, meant “lump” (gobbe) or “piece” (jobbe) (Gini 2000: 18). In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson (1963: 22) defined job “as petty, piddling work; a piece of chance work.” Flexibility, Sennett (1998: 9) writes, restores the “arcane sense of the job, as people do lumps of labor, pieces of work, over the course of a lifetime.” Global sourcing accelerates these trends, fragmenting and dispersing work across electronic channels. A recent article on IT outsourcing in business magazine, CIO, reports that “Today, IT services companies take work, break it down into pieces, and perform each piece in the location that offers the best combination of skill, cost, quality and manageability…‘This is the future,’ says [Infosys CEO] Nilekani. ‘IT is being disaggregated. Slice by slice, the whole model is changing’” (Worthen 2007). The article advises CIO’s to break “down the work into the most granular pieces possible… into discrete processes, and each process into tasks,” and to analyze “which ones you can or should do and which ones” should be sent offshore. They do, however, caution that if tasks are spread out too broadly, workers become “less motivated because they feel as though they have less invested in the final product.”

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46 In this regard, consider Kundera’s (1996: 112-113) description of bureaucratic alienation. “The functionary,” he writes, “performs a small part of a large administrative activity whose aims and horizons he cannot see: it is the world where actions have become mechanical and people do not know the meaning of what they do.” Moreover, “the functionary deals with unknown persons and with files: it the world of the abstract.” To the last point, we may add that the offshore worker deals with vaguely known individuals who are a world away and with symbols and codes (software) or pre-scripted dialogue (call center). It is a world of the abstract as companies have offloaded essentially bureaucratic functions like human resources, payroll and accounting, and IT maintenance.
Yet the banality of the work is in striking contrast to its importance. One Indian worker reflects on the volume of work that has been moved to Chennai. He says that earlier everything was done in the U.S., but slowly, work was moved to India. “In Chennai, things are cheap. You get bits and pieces of work. We were on the learning curve. In 2001, we reached a stage where they were really doing things, adding value.” The Indian office is now vital to the daily operations of Synergy. One Indian executive went so far as to describe Praxis as the “heart” or the “brains” of the Synergy, adding that “if Praxis is not operational or cannot deliver, Synergy will have to stop.” He says that 99% of the “development process”—which is used internally in such things as financial trading applications—takes place in Chennai. But, critically, Praxis has reached its apex. Says the executive,

What we are doing is about the optimum. Because given that all of our hardware and users are in the U.S., real-time production support cannot be done from here. We can only do part of it. If you have to meet the users on a regular basis and get the requirements, it has to be done onsite. What we are doing today is about what we can do…What can’t really chip any more out of what they do. We can’t carve out anymore.

When asked about the quality of work in India, Paul says, “Oh, it was excellent. They did work no one wanted to do.” Even before Praxis was founded, “Bangalore was doing the grunt work all along.” The rub is the lack of business knowledge. What happens is that a “bright, fresh Indian recruit goes out on the floor straight from one of the best engineering schools. We kind of expect the knowledge to filter in.” This proves unrealistic:

You can’t expect someone with six months experience to write a business report as thorough as someone with ten years experience. You can’t expect them to assimilate this information. You need to give them help. You’re taking someone who’s done this for twenty years and replace him with two new people from India without much experience. The industry itself is younger than 12 years there.

To Dave, the quality of work is only “acceptable.” U.S employees, he says, carp about bugs and kinks in the code, about having to redo work. But the fault is not only India’s. In an exasperated tone, he rehearses conversations he has had with employees: “They complain that the Indians don’t know how to test. I tell them, ‘it’s because you didn’t give
them the business requirement. I need to test against my requirement, not the code. What
stage are you giving them? ‘Specs?’ ‘At that level you can’t write a test plan. Did you teach
them how to test it?’” The regimented and piecemeal nature of the work precludes a proper
understanding of what it is to be done. In other words, there is a structural reason for Indians’
not “knowing what to do next.”

The partitioning of knowledge, moreover, is critical in legitimating of organizational
hierarchies. The notion of expertise is used to exclude workers from knowledge of the
production process (Poulantzas 1973). Educational attainment and what is called the
“achievement principle” also help determine who makes the decisions and who is left to carry
them out (Zuboff 1988: 236; Offe 1977). Such educational sorting of course applies here as
well, but there is another means of determining the division of labor within offshore
workplaces like Praxis. What can be called the “Western principle” justifies the chain of
command between offices, provides informal sanction to the distinctions between
management and labor, and helps determine one’s position in the organization. As Chopra
(2003: 437) observes, “An overseas education in independent India promises a kind of cultural
capital that an education from even a top-quality Indian institute cannot provide.” Familiarity
with Western business justifies differences in rank and salary. Only certain people occupy
positions of authority. Only certain people are given access to the company’s remote and
secure servers. Only certain people deal directly with onshore managers. What these people
have in common is that they were trained or have studied in Western Europe or the U.S.

The result is that workers complain repeatedly about not understanding the company’s
business plan, of performing piecemeal work whose importance in the overall scheme of
things is elusive. The best way to get a sense of the broader business picture, incidentally, is
to visit the U.S. office. After only a three month visit to the onshore office, one Indian worker
says she developed a better understanding of the company’s operations than in her two years
in Chennai. Those fortunate enough to be selected for these treks, moreover, find them not only intriguing but lucrative as they are remunerated in dollars.

Paul reflects on the discrepancies between work visits to Chennai and New York. He says that when they go to India, they are put up in five star hotels. They have cell phones handed to them as soon as they walk through the office door. There is also a car and driver on call. When Praxis workers visit the U.S., however,

They get a $150 stipend a day. You take care of your own lodging. They don’t even pick them up at the airport. It’s disgusting, really. They rent out room, a private room. A guy lives with his wife and kid and rents out one room. The Indians eat meals with the family. They have drop and pick-ups [to and from the office]. They pay $700 month [in rent], which we might say, hey that’s a lot, but they’re getting $150 a day. It’s big money. That’s a lot of rupees. It’s a financial windfall.

According to the human resources manager, one of the major reasons employees leave Praxis is that they do not provide enough opportunities for U.S. visits. Even the U.S. staff is reluctant to let Indian workers leave as it is impossible to reproduce the intimate texture of personal interaction through email, phone calls, and instant messages. As one consultant argues, offshoring involves the substitution of “process for personality.” Paul explains: “When Indians come here [the U.S. staff] doesn’t want them to go back. You can’t replicate that overseas.”

Mr. 25/8

The institutions of work, to borrow Mills’ terms (1951: 233), are shaped by “drift—many little schemes adding up to unexpected results—and by plan—efforts paying off as expected.” While the transition to India was carefully planned, its implementation required discrete and drifting steps taken in a hectically competitive atmosphere. In addition to discrepancies in age and experience, what the Synergy brass did not count on was an

47 Moreover, global communications even alter social interaction within the U.S. office. One manager says that he sometimes finds himself sending emails to someone in the office 50 feet away rather than walking over to speak with him.
overheated labor market. According to Dave, the transition “was such a challenge because turnover was so bad. You can’t keep throwing money at it.” When two of the more senior staff left for more lucrative jobs, Paul says, “It really got to me,” pressing his hand over his heart. “I called them the core.” But as Dave explains, the attitude of U.S. employees exacerbates the situation: “Across the whole spectrum, people were holding back. They don’t want to teach them because they’ll leave in six months. Training is an investment.”

According to Qamer, who makes frequent visits to Chennai, there is a lack of informal trust between offices. U.S. employees “feel like they’re training people who are then leaving. Why bother if they’re just going to leave? Managers in the U.S. still don’t trust them. The majority, I should say, don’t trust. They feel like they’re doing double work. When there are split teams, Chennai gets the grunt work.” But whatever the difficulties, they have little choice: “It’s $100 million in cost-savings. Even if we’re only getting 80% correct, at high quality, at 1/5 the cost, it’s worth it. Even if not 100% accurate, it’s worth it.”

Despite such ministrations, junior employees at Synergy persisted in failing to understand the “business side,” that is, the “benefits of offshoring.” “They feel like they’re getting less than their money’s worth. They’ll give requirements to Chennai office and say, ‘what came back wasn’t what we wanted,’” almost hoping the work does not pass muster. In response, Dave appealed to their self-interest. As he asked one bothersome employee, “Do you want to get a call in the middle of the night [for maintenance problems]?” The person responded quickly, “No, no, they can do it.” For those who manage to keep their jobs, offshoring can make things easier.

Moreover, the resentment was also manifested in the cavalier, if not hostile, attitude of U.S. employees toward their Indian counterparts. Dave, who served as a “relationship manager” during the migration, says that some of the staff had a “sweatshop mentality”:

If someone doesn’t work or perform, they thought just thrown them back. People here are coming in at 9:00-9:30 and want a meeting with the Indian office. It shows a real insensitivity. There are so many morale problems,
turnover. I basically had to tell them that these people are people, that they have families. Let’s use it to our advantage. Let’s have 16 hours where work can be done rather than doubling up on eight. It’s been corrected, but it’s hard to let go of the eight hour mentality. I talked to them about doing your work, going home, and that, the next morning, an email will be on desktop. However, the lack of response on the Indian end complicated things. I told managers in India that you have to respond.

They would ask too much of Indian workers, he says. And what the Indian staff lacked in business knowledge they made up for by working late. “I asked them, when are they going to sleep? It’s grunt work. It’s not fun. It’s technical,” Dave says. He mentioned one especially industrious worker named Girish. Girish works very hard and “can sleep standing up. We may be 24/7 but he’s 25/8. Mr. 25/8 is what we call him. He liked working at night and didn’t stop working at breaks.”

Paul says that by and large the U.S. staff has overcome their “biases” and that resistance to offshoring has started to wane. (As Uchitelle writes (2006: 3), “The permanent separation of people from their jobs, abruptly and against their wishes has become standard management practice”). Dave, for example, went from closet protectionist to free trade advocate:

I was one of those people that was against it. I’d like to see jobs stay here. I’m very conservative but I have a protectionist streak. Now I’ve become a proponent. It’s very ironic that I was chosen to be relationship manager. There’s a place in my heart for a nationalist view: keep jobs in America, an American view. Once you take a global view, my faith...God bless America, but it’s not God’s country. People have it much worse than we do. In India, tech has really given an opportunity to the country. Really they’re people like us. It’s not like it is here. I don’t know if there was anything else before IT. Here we can find a living. I think they need the jobs more than we do.

While the idea of offshoring may be objectionable to U.S. workers, the practice of working with Indians is less so. Workers at the World Bank office in Chennai, for example, were trained by the very personnel they would soon be replacing. Yet the novitiates claim that their U.S. counterparts were not bitter about losing their jobs. In fact, they often worked
overtime and the shift of 100 or so jobs was punctuated with an exchange of gifts between both sets of workers.  

The War for Talent: Between Scarcity and Plenty

The Indian outsourcing story as told by its boosters has a certain heartwarming appeal: a former colony rising to global eminence by dint of hard work and comparative advantage. Moreover, like the East Asian Tigers, the Indian elephant has become the “world’s back office” by collaborating with rather than turning its back on the West. So promising is its future that India “could drive down the global costs in services, just as China drove down global costs in manufacturing,” the authors of a World Bank report conclude (Dalhman and Utz 2005). Another Bank report limns an optimistic scenario:

Given the enormous size and rapid growth of the BPO market, the economic implications for developing countries could be enormous. For example, if half of India’s 50 million English-speakers were to eventually earn $10,000 per year in IT-related services, this would more than double India’s current GDP of $450 billion. Given that IT-enabled exports tend to be associated with high levels of foreign direct investments, human capital formation, demonstration effects, and knowledge-spillovers, the indirect benefits might also be substantial (Mattoo and Wunsch, 2004: 6-7).

But there is to be no fairy tale ending just yet. Such rosy prognoses must be tempered by the reality that there is no guarantee the Indian industry will continue to grow at the current pace. Nor is it certain that companies will continue to leverage the Indian option in the long-term. The Deccan Herald sounds the alarm: “The spectre of a severe shortage of knowledge workers in the IT/ITES sectors by 2010, is hanging over the country like the sword of Damocles. While demographics clearly weigh in the country’s favour, quality of the workforce does not” (Chengappa 2006). The problem is that while some companies would

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48 The acquiescence in one’s own displacement may have something to do with the internalization of corporate ideology. Morality applies to persons not corporations. “While you fancy yourself victims of structural economic forces,” they seem to tell themselves, “you are partly to blame for your professional obsolescence.”

49 The reference is to A. Sheshabalaya’s Rising Elephant (2004), which uncritically and with a touch of jingoism plays up India’s IT-related development prospects.
like to scale up their operations in India, they find that it does not have the capacity. “There is a shortage of employable people,” says an executive, “Only a handful is actually worth taking on.” Likewise, NASSCOM claims that the ICT industry will face a shortage of 500,000 “knowledge workers” by 2010, and the head of Infosys warns of “an acute shortage of manpower” (Surowiecki 2007).

Nonetheless, India presently remains the most viable option. As a panelist at an industry conference in New York City explains:

Right now, we are frustrated in India. We have high attrition, a lot of things going on, and we are looking at Latin America and others. But at the end of the day, we do not have a choice. The scale at which we need people, the only country that can provide it is India. I can’t go to Austria and hire the amount of people I need, looking at my ten year expansion plan. And when I put the marketing opportunities that we have to tap in India, we don’t have a choice. The issue is how do we address the issue of shortage in the short-run? In the short-run, it’s really a war for talent. In the long run, I think there’s a lot of work at the governmental level, interventions required and structural changes.

“Fifty million English-speakers” may sound enticing to the cost-minded executive, but many have already learned the hard lesson that only a narrow segment is readily employable. For both low and high-skill work, English facility is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition of employment. As one executive explains, “The issue is not the availability of highly-skilled workers. It’s training.” The head of a firm that screens call center applicants for multinational companies says that out of every ten people that apply only three to four have the language and conversational skills necessary to get placed. As another executive says,

The shortage of talent in the service provider community, it’s not the actual numbers. You can if you want a thousand people with a college degree, you can get a thousand people. The question is: what is the level of investment you need to do in those people to make them into productive resources for your client? And that right now, is a huge challenge.

So severe was the talent squeeze for engineers that a major IT services company began hiring people with masters in other disciplines and then gave them six months of
training, plus on-the-job and night training. As the former CEO says proudly, “We were the first to do that. In three years, this would give them [an equivalent of] an M.A. in engineering. I would say that they are at least as productive as others, and they don’t come in with a sense of entitlement.” But even if the talent problem is solved in the near term, the Irish CEO of a Bombay-based BPO firm muses, “What will happen when the upper layer, the cream of the crop, is picked clean, when the middle-class tranche is exhausted?” And what will the state do for those Indians “currently not employable by the offshoring industry?” The longevity of the industry depends, in other words, on the depth and scale of Indian talent. The two major consequences of the talent scarcity are high turnover and rising wages.  

### Dysphoria and “The Curse of the Industry”

There is a shared jargon among HR managers and, perhaps second only to “skill set,” the term bandied about most frequently is “attrition.” While they may have a shaky grasp on its pronunciation (“i-tration”), there is no mistaking the anxiety it provokes. This “curse of the industry”—which can reach 45-50% in voice-based processes such as customer care and 15-20% in non-voice processes—is analyzed from every possible angle, its causes dissected, its consequences monetized (neoIT 2006). It is the product of a labor market where demand outpaces supply and the cause of poaching among rival firms.  

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50 This is not to say that English is not important. It is a major differentiator in the Indian labor market: “Salary differences between equally qualified (non-professional/technical) candidates can be as high as 400 to 500%. In fact, the more fancied jobs in airlines, hotels, media, banks and financial services only to those who know English, the rest are forced into less fancied assignments…”The best jobs with the upmarket shopping malls, multinational fast-food chains and tony restaurants go to those who can speak English along with the mandatory fluency in local languages” (Dalal 2005). As the language of commerce and of instruction in elite education institutes “fluency in English is an essential prerequisite for obtaining a quality higher education in India” (Chopra, 2003: 436).

51 Note that the situation was similar in Silicon Valley in 2001: “In the high-tech sector in Silicon Valley, California, the average length of employment is now about eight months. People constantly change their working associates: modern management theory has it that the "shelf life" of a team ought to be at most a year” (Sennett 2001).

52 A recent case found one company guilty of poaching. According to an associate at the law firm Baker and McKenzie, in Wipro Ltd. v. Beckman Coulter International, the Delhi High Court “upheld
are no ethics in the industry. It’s based on stealing employees, on poaching”). It makes the work of management tiresome and, what is more, it spoils relations with the “home office” as the Indian workers they come to depend on leave with little prior notice. At Praxis, for example, turnover was a major reason why U.S. managers did not invest much time in the training of Indian staff or give them larger projects to work on.

The attrition rate at Praxis hovers around 17-20% annually and is subject to an intricate dissection. As the HR manager explains, “We do various drilling down. Right from the overall to department-wise, band-wise, manager-wise, which is project-wise, almost. We do it experience-wise. We do it reason why. It’s a very detailed analysis that we do.” Almost thirty percent of the people, he says, state compensation as the reason for leaving. Similarly, a survey of the major players in the industry finds that salary is the “chief reason for leaving and one out of every two employees cite is as their reason for making that jump” (DataQuest 2004). The COO of a high-paying KPO in Gurgaon says that while a small percentage of workers are fired and an even smaller percentage leave to pursue education, most of the turnover is “undesired.” Of these latter, half have been with the company for less than a year. They provide benefits like stock options to retain people, but it not always enough. As one call center manager reflects:

People come and they work for two months, you give them the training and just for 500 bucks or 1,000 bucks, they want to change their job. In that case, you feel that, oh my God, now we have given full training, now he’s an agent that can take out the good number of results for the company, now he wants to leave the job. In that case, you become very helpless...Again, we have to

the validity of post-termination non-solicitation provisions in contracts...The court held that the defendant had breached the non-solicitation provision by publishing a recruitment advertisement specifically targeted at the plaintiff’s employees.”

53 Asked his thoughts on unionization, the executive of a KPO remarked surprisingly, “Truthfully, I’d love a union contract,” he said. The large demand-supply gap enables employees to move from company to company for better opportunities. The job security that unions bring also brings with it restrictions like a notice period. “Every time you use your three days sick leave, fine. Unions have order. It might actually place restrictions on employees like a notice period,” he says.

54 Another reason for high turnover is the graveyard shift. An executive explains: “You may be able to train, indoctrinate ten people when they come over, but what happens when they leave because they don’t want to work the night shift? Attrition is a fact of life in our industry. It’s a nascent industry.”
take the interviews, again we have to train agents. People come they complete their three months, they find another job, a little bit of a higher salary. Then there is no stability actually.

A worker will tell you that he likes his job and is grateful to have it. He will also tell you he likes his co-workers and even his manager. He may even ride to work with his supervisor. Then, without notice, he will switch jobs. Because it pays better. Because the facilities are nicer. Because the manager seems nicer. In a social world in which prestige is highly unstable, status competition and panic are often the result (Mills 1951; Wolf 2007). This fixation is only amplified by the aura of uncertainty that surrounds the new industry. Unsure that they are receiving the highest salary their labor can command, they move frenetically move from job to job. Paradoxically, underlying this status insecurity is a new confidence in personal worth, for one cannot feel that they are being taken advantage of unless one possesses something worth having, namely scarce and coveted “skill sets.” Outsourced jobs, then, fulfill social as well as pecuniary needs. When workers feel they are not getting their fair share they therefore display a deep sense of aggrievement, i.e., “What about my false hopes!”

Ashok, an HR manager at a call center specializing in debt collection, comments on how the labor market “imbalance” affects workplace relations. He says that in Indian companies “the feudal relationship still involved” and that people think that “you can treat employees any way. But suddenly, this changes. Now you have to make an effort to keep them. This is the first time in India that there are more jobs than workers. There’s a reluctance to admit this is a reality.” Solipsism and servility are not the most compatible of attitudes. Once the culture of deference and conspicuous hierarchy was shaken, the rational pursuit of material advantage was given free reign. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of

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55 Firms that offer the lucrative possibility of traveling to the home office in the West are particularly attractive. As regards call centers, the only companies able to retain employees with any degree of regularity are multinationals that offer salaries that are high by industry standard, which cuts heavily into the very cost-savings that are the raison d'être of offshoring.
vertical mobility and by the fact that “it’s not possible for everyone to become a team leader.” Ashok’s ideal employee, therefore, is someone who is “singularly unambitious.” Someone who “sticks around for three years” and does not “jump” to another company. “The problem,” however, “is that you can’t find a singularly unambitious person.”

Likewise, the COO of a call center says that he wants “people who are bright to an extent, not distinction holders. In the last three years, the labor queue is tightening. I never worked in this sort of environment when I started my career.” Attrition is a “continuous challenge.” Profile matters, so they do “psychometric tests” and “nine out of ten times” this works fine as a vetting process. Nonetheless, even the undistinguished worker wants to “see some movement in his career path, though it may not be in the same company…If someone stays two years, I’m happy.” (The technology used in the center, he says proudly, allows “zero downtime.” This may have more than a little to do with turnover).

While many in the media and business are impressed by the large number of students issuing from Indian universities each year, Ashok directs attention to the quality of education.\textsuperscript{56} Government schools, he says, are “pathetic.” Betraying a touch of class privilege he says that “a college education means nothing. Educational norms are not strong.” Inside the company, English skills “determine where employees go.” Those with weaker skills are put on non-voice processes and draw a lower salary. There is a “lower talent pool with good English skills; the availability is lesser.” For these workers, “salaries get pushed upwards.” Narrowing his eyes as if to say, “how silly, this talk of attrition,” Ashok says people are still waiting expectantly for “that eureka moment.” They engage in wishful thinking. “The job candidate has been with three companies in the last two years,” Ashok says an HR manager

\textsuperscript{56} For engineering, the quality of education is often lower in India than the West. As a result, one study found, that “if you define 'engineer’ by U.S. standards, India produces just a hundred and seventy thousand engineers a year, not four hundred thousand. Infosys says that, of 1.3 million applicants for jobs last year, it found only two per cent acceptable” (Surowiecki 2007). Moreover, the large figures of Indian and Chinese engineering graduates include not only four-year degrees, but also three-year training programs and diploma holders (Wadwa et. al. 2007).
might muse, “This would be his forth job in the industry. He may make a good employee because he is now probably ready to settle down.” And they must pay heed to workers’ concerns, however trivial they seem.

Many companies provide meals and snacks for their employees, especially for those on the night shift. And as if they are unable to find a substantive reason for leaving, many workers mention poor food. Nonetheless, a manager at a call center in Chennai takes the complaint very seriously, so much so that she switches caterers every three months. “The only food one doesn’t get sick of his mother’s. We do a round robin…Teeerrrack!” she says in a loud baritone, taking an imaginary disc in her hands and turning it clockwise. It is a matter of business sense and culinary aesthetics: “We’ve been strategic about it. It starts from the plate, the infrastructure of the plate. Whether its round, rectangle, etcetera, we try different things. We provide banana leaves for every plate.” (These concerns, however, are not trivial. At three different companies I visited, workers complained that they had gotten sick after eating in the company canteen).

Ashok believes that neither food nor stress is the underlying cause of turnover. For one, most employees are between 23 and 27 years of age, a time when “you have maximum ambition and the most confidence in yourself.” A second more pivotal factor has to do with management. Ashok says that when the Vice President of the company visits from the U.S.,…he asks the uncomfortable questions like ‘Are they really leaving because of the food? Would it really reduceattrition if they changed caterers?’ You see, the internal pulls have to be stronger than external pulls in the market…If you ask people the top reason for attrition, they’ll say stress, a hiring defect, or a profile mismatch. But what they won’t list is the boss-subordinate relationship. They’re not satisfied with the way the boss operates and they leave.

As the BPO industry is still in its infancy, Ashok says its “HR infrastructure is lacking.” To fill this lacuna the best performers are often promoted to team leader, a position for which they are unprepared. “Just because he performs well on calls doesn’t mean he’ll make a good manager,” he says. “He doesn’t know anything about management.” According
to a former American employee of Infosys, there is a “dearth of managerial talent” and as a consequence India is “lacking a culture of mentoring.” Consultants McKinsey & Co. (Farrell et al. 2005: 78-79) elaborate:

In the country as a whole, middle managers are also becoming scarce. Although India has more of them than other offshoring destinations do, the country also has higher demand because the offshoring sector has grown so fast: over the past decade, the number of middle managers it employs has expanded by more than 20 percent a year, and even more briskly in some cities. New entrants often lure qualified managers from existing businesses instead of training their own. Sometimes they poach across borders as well—Russian entrepreneurs, for example, have hired middle managers from India. Rapidly rising remuneration is evidence of their scarcity. Annual wages for project managers in India’s export-oriented IT sector, for instance, have increased, on average, by 23 percent annually over the past four years, while the salaries of programmers have risen by 13 percent.

Apropos of this dearth the COO of an IT company remarks, “In U.S., you generally have good management structure. You have all the developers and engineers working, then you have middle level management. In India, I think there’s still a big gap in middle level management.” This also reflected in exit interviews where he says workers frequently complain that “I didn’t have the proper training, there was too much pressure on me, my manager wasn’t empathetic, all those. It goes back to the shortage of management talent that you see when any economy rapidly grows.”

**Wage Inflation**

The end result is that workers’ commitment to companies is often superficial, like a passing, neighborly acquaintance. But the companies, too, play a role. Hire-and-fire policies in a demand saturated market produce reciprocal mistrust between workers and employers. Yet, in the absence of a binding social contract, the labor market situation provides a modicum of job security. One can say that the supply-demand gap is a source of

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57 This frenetic job-hopping is not unique to India; Ross (2006) documents it in China.
58 To the mass of inexperienced entry-level workers, those who do not see their salaries double each year, this commitment is also lacking in terms of investment in personal and skill training
structural featherbedding, forcing employers to hire extra employees to make up for high turnover and absenteeism, to offer bonuses and pay raises, and to throw parties and indulge the emotional needs of workers. It prevents employers from hiring and firing indiscriminately. (Although employees do complain about unfair labor practices, arbitrary promotions and dismissals). It also allows employees, especially experienced personnel, to call their employer’s bluff, so to speak, to move from job to job with relative ease.

Yet there are limits to these concessions. Things also look much different at the bottom of the employment pyramid, which, incidentally, is where future employment growth is expected to be concentrated. Here mobility is limited and liberal labor policies prevent employees from asserting themselves for fear of being dismissed. This can dampen wage pressures, as there is always a fresh recruit around the corner. Workers make no unified demands and there is little collective resistance to a regime of long and busy hours. (The threat of one worker quitting is much different than an organized slowdown or strike). Moreover, the workers, like their U.S. counterparts, measure their performance in terms of personal mistakes and achievements.

The fear that wage inflation will undermine India’s cost advantage, I shall argue, is exaggerated. Much is made of average salary increases each year, on the order of 10% for BPO and 15% for IT.\(^\text{59}\) (Still, India offers a wage differential of around 85% to the U.S. (neoIT 2006)).\(^\text{60}\) But when one looks at how the increases are distributed among different positions, the picture that emerges is much more complicated. In 2004, for example, salaries for those in IT with less than 2 years dropped 12%; individuals with 2-5 years of experience

\(^{59}\) According to a survey by global human resources consultants, Hewitt Associates, India experienced the highest average salary increase in the Asia-Pacific region in 2004, beating China, Korea and Japan. It predicts that salaries for skilled workers will rise 14.5% in the next year, a clear indicator of supply is lagging behind demand.

\(^{60}\) Nonetheless employers still carp about increasing labor costs. An executive of a KPO company at an industry conference says that a few years ago “People making $250,000 to $300,000 in the U.S. were replaced by workers in Bangalore making $25,000. “Now,” he says ruefully, “the latter is going up.” Others at the conference voiced concerns about having to pay more for work once it is labeled KPO.
increased 11%; those with 5-10 years increased 24%; while the few with over 10 years rose 26%. Additionally, the same survey finds that the top IT companies increased headcount by 35% in 2004, but “a large part this recruitment happened for entry-level positions” (DataQuest 2004).

Attrition is most pronounced at the mid-management level and up the hierarchy. A union official disputes the claim of across-the-board pay raises:

I would strongly refute the 10% to 15% increase because overall the industry has not seen a major change in entry level salary for the last three years going. By the Nasscom logic, if in 2003 an entry level CSR [customer service representative] got Rs. 8,000/month ($182), now for the same post a new joinee should get Rs 10,000 ($228) but it has not happened. So that means the spiraling effect...has not been felt [at the entry level]. Yes, the top performers or those who want quit an ITES firm are given these kinds of raise, so this applies only to particular individuals and thus cannot be generalized across the sector. I would love to call for an investigation on how these random numbers are generated by Nasscom, which are sold to all and sundry.

Employers can afford to be somewhat discriminating in hiring for junior positions. Vivek Paul, for example, refers to call center workers as “replaceable” in contrast to someone with experience who is “immediate fodder for somebody else. Every unit of experience drags along five units of inexperience.” And, moreover, offshoring to India stands to be cost-effective for the foreseeable future, though this does not mean that companies will not move to even cheaper shores. As an industry magazine reports,

Wage inflation will seriously challenge the economics of offshoring: India’s attrition level and rising wages were corporate America’s problem for a good part of 2005. But as recent studies — like that from Everest — have shown, it will take offshore destinations like India close to 25 years to reach America’s wage levels. Even if you add other costs that come with offshoring, even a serious debate on whether the costs are comparable is still a decade and a half away (Das 2007).

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61 As one venture capitalist with work experience at Infosys says, “there is an increasing variable percent of people’s salaries. 60% will be fixed and 40% is variable and depends on things like the company’s overall performance. On paper wages go up 17% but not in reality. They give you much less. The pay was so low at Infosys...that’s why people were upset about wages.”
While HR managers are hard pressed to find workers with scarce “skill sets,” employers are generally optimistic about wage levels and labor supply. According to the executive Khanna, who employs MBAs and lawyers, “We don’t see any problems for ten years. As we keep scaling, we add more to the bottom of the pyramid. That’s how a growing business works.” Another says that while there was a dip in engineering enrollment following the “tech wreck” between 2001 and 2003, the situation has steadied:

A lot of people—parents who had heard stories of someone who had bad experience in engineering—looked at [computer] engineering as not a future career. Enrollments dropped. But in 2004 the market was back and in 2005 it’s really back. In India, we have a privatized academic infrastructure. There is scaling in engineering, but there’s a latency period: it takes four years to make an engineer. As we see it, by 2008, the supply and demand gap gets fixed.

What emerges is then an employment hierarchy where the base is growing exponentially and where those at the bottom are viewed as more or less expendable. According to one former Indian executive, “Indian companies have been able to retain profit margins despite having to pay higher wage rates. They’ve done this by flattening the pyramid. But the center of gravity has stayed the same.” The government-funded V.V. Giri Labor Institute describes this as a “dual labor regime” (Ramesh 2005). In this model, there is a core group of permanent employees—managers and team leaders—and a peripheral group which consists of lower-level workers who are replaceable. Additionally, because of the high levels of turnover, companies routinely overstaff. Such practices are a drag on employee morale and increase the sense of insecurity. At the lower rungs, surveillance is also tighter. Slacken labor demand or increase supply and the reigns tighten.62

One senior BPO employee remarks on the climate of insecurity. He says there is “lots of competition” within companies and that “one bad phase can pull you down. One bad client

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62 As Marx (1976/1867: 799) wrote of the ‘equilibrium’ condition of labor supply and demand: “Finally, the law which always holds the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army in equilibrium with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock.”
feedback and you’re under scrutiny. There are no protections.” The company has a number of clients, he says, some of whom “pressurize you”:

They say you should do it, not knowing the situation here. There are times they have done a double shift during peaks: 10, 14, 16 hours. 12 hours is regular, very often. If the client wants something by a certain time, we have no choice. They can go to someone else to get it done. They may go to another vendor. Internally, you don’t get much positive feedback.

The burden weighs heavily on managers as well: “We’re not used to having to have the pink slip in India. Sometimes it’s your duty to tell them that they’re no more.”

Conclusion: The Social Contract and Informal Trust

While there is considerable literature on the erosion or reshaping of the social contract in the developed world, little work has been done on the social contract in these emergent spaces of work. If labor markets “are deeply rooted in local institutions and practices,” as Collins (2003: 12) writes, what happens to the moral economy of the workplace when these markets are globalized? While job-hopping can be seen as positive from labor’s perspective, the unstable work environment that results has consequences for worker morale, self-esteem, and identity. The wage competition and anxiety that colors relations between workers, the constantly changing workforce, and the high pressure associated with having to meet deadlines and productivity and quality targets, each pose specific problems. But taken together, they undermine the quality of social relationships and informal trust that are the foundation a stable and secure workplace setting (Layard 2005). For their part, HR managers are left vainly clutching at straws.

There is no easy solution to the problem of worker dissatisfaction. The emphasis on replicable process is in part an attempt to deal with a situation in which there is high turnover, so that if someone leaves, work will not grind to a halt. But it also becomes a cause of

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63 In effort to exert greater control over workers, Nasscom, the industry association, has started a National Skills Registry—the first-ever centralized database of employees of IT services and BPO companies (Business Line 2006).
turnover, as workers become frustrated with rote work and inertial career paths. To keep Indian workers happy, it would seem, companies should invest more confidence in them and entrust them with more complex work and processes. However, this also means that more responsibility and work then migrates to supplier countries—more offshoring, in other words—creating problems in the U.S.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE INFANTILIZING GAZE

“The office is not a stupid institution, it belongs more to the realm of the fantastical than the stupid.”—Franz Kafka

“Flexible professionalism” is a favored managerial trope of what is called the global knowledge economy. A professional, in contrast to a worker who indolently waits for orders, knows what to do and moves quickly and discretely from task to task. Yet, as was discussed in the previous chapter, there are inherent difficulties in enjoining workers to take ownership of work that is banal and fragmented. This chapter explores the contradiction of commanding responsibility itself, which in the present case takes the form of subtle techniques intended to instil professional values. As Schneider (1999: 281) writes, “How can you command someone to be independent or to take initiative? The very act of saying it undoes it.” While this attempt to professionalize workers by infantilizing them is present in the workplaces of advanced capitalist countries, it is especially prevalent in developing countries where the “moral economy” of workplaces is nascent (Collins 2003: 16). Ross (2006: 157), for example, registers frustrations with the “Chinese mind,” which employers and managers say is too “process-driven and lacking in creativity.” The situation is similar in India, where they carp about worker servility and immaturity, but is rendered more acute by the youth of the workforce. According to one estimate over 90% of BPO employees are under thirty and with scant labor market experience (Dataquest 2004). (In the eyes of many managers, employees are children). Moreover, offshoring to India primarily involves services rather than manufacturing and the push for character development is particularly strong in the former.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, is a review of the literature on the balance of control and consent in the contemporary workplace. The discussion then moves to employer

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and managerial views of Indian workers, laying out what I call the infantilizing gaze. This is followed by an analysis of how professionalism plays out in the Indian context. Next, we look at some of the less than salutary effects of this push for moral reform in the workplace. The chapter concludes with some suggestions as to how the situation can be improved.

Consent and Control

To bring professionalism into intelligible focus it is necessary to consider the balance of consent and control in the workplace, the relational parameters in which the ethos is manifested. As the rhetoric and organizational forms of contemporary capitalism attest, autocratic management styles have long gone out of fashion (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006). Burawoy (1979), for example, observed that coercion alone is not enough and that workers must be granted a measure of discretion to secure their consent. Yet this is merely to displace the problem, which is that the unwieldy elements of personality must somehow be checked. Berger et al (1973: 32) write that the

…production process necessitates ‘human engineering,’ that is, the technological management of social relations. Although this management may involve attention to highly personal idiosyncrasies of individual workers and may even contain a positively therapeutic dimension, its fundamental purpose is to control the unfortunate intrusions of concrete humanity into the anonymous work process.

Mills (1952: 233) put it similarly in White Collar: “For in so far as human factors are involved in efficient and untroubled production, the managerial demiurge must bring them under control.” Thus the use of human labor in production and services involves an seemingly irreconcilable difficulty. Castoriadis (1987: 16) states the aporia of human relations plainly:

A factory in which the workers were really and totally mere cogs in the machine, blindly executing the orders of management, would come to a stop in a quarter of an hour. Capitalism can function only by drawing upon the genuinely human activity of those subject to it, while at the same time trying to level and dehumanize them as much as possible.
That is to say, production and service processes depend on intelligence and resourcefulness and ingenuity, on conscious human activity. But at the same time they are stalled by certain stubbornly inefficient human qualities. The voice and quick thinking of the call center worker, for example, is necessary to handle an inquiry successfully. But certain markers of Indian identity are considered problematic, such as accents, names, idioms, and tacit understandings. The same holds true for the IT worker. She is valued as the embodiment of skills that can be put to a particular task but is criticized for not showing conspicuous signs of spontaneity and intuition. Nor do workers have the indefatigability or regularity of machines. They require rest and leisure as well as motivation and incentive. How then do managers attempt to maximize the desirable and minimize the disruptive qualities?

In addition to surveillance, management applies a softer moral pressure to inculcate notions of responsibility and accountability. Workplace studies since at least Foucault (1977; 1980; 1982; 1991), who conceived of power as something exercised rather than something possessed, have focused increasingly on the latter—the ideological and normative methods of control that supplement more traditional modes—and on the subtle negotiation between “empowerment and entrapment” forced upon workers (Macdonald and Sirriani, 1996; Rosenthal et al., 1997; Sturdy, 1998; Rosenthal 2004; Grugulis and Willmott 2001; McKay 2004; Sennett 2006; Attewell, 1987; Rui and Brantley 2002). Mir and Mir (2005), for example, describe the “empowerment” techniques that go into “producing the governable employee.” To summarize these views crudely: Empowerment is basically a ruse but there are rare instances within this framework where workers can find some measure of autonomy.

This hardly means that strict surveillance is somehow passé. Computer technologies represented a considerable advance on barrack-room discipline, making the Benthamite panopticon—where authority is everywhere present, but nowhere visible—a very real possibility. As Zuboff (1989: 322-323) writes:
Information systems that translate, record, and display human behavior can provide the computer age version of universal transparency with a degree of illumination that would have exceeded even Bentham’s most outlandish fantasies…Information systems can automatically and continuously record almost anything their designers want to capture…They can transmit the presence of the omniscient observer and so induce compliance without the messy conflict-prone exertions of reciprocal relations.\footnote{Freeman’s (2003: 199) description of data processing in the Caribbean is also relevant: “Through the computer…informatics lends itself to a level of worker control and surveillance far exceeding that found in other manufacturing industries and in traditional office settings. By monitoring workers’ error rates, speed, quantity of items processed, lapses in keying and length and frequency of breaks, these computer systems can calculate and compare worker productivity and discipline precisely and systematically.”}

There are therefore two levels of surveillance: “the deep layer of computer monitoring and the surface, and more quixotic layer of human supervision” (Freeman 2003: 199). The relationship is symbiotic. As Noronha and de la Cruz (2006) argue, “socioideological forms of control, demonstrated…through the notion of being professional, paves the way for the acceptance of strict technocratic forms of control.” Together, the internalized self-discipline of the electronic panopticon and the moralizing pressure of the manager penetrate into the domains of the self.\footnote{As Foucault (1980: 98) argues, the individual is not merely affected by disciplinary power but is, in part, its creation, “one of its prime effects.”} The worker is both the subject and object of professionalism: the active agent of change and the site upon which such designs are exercised.\footnote{Though probably not quite what Berman (1983: 16) had in mind, professionalism is one the many contemporary “visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them.”}

Offshoring complicates matters. Information and communication technologies allow for action-at-a-distance, but production and service networks must still be situated in concrete locations and integrated into local terrain (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994). (Hence McKay’s (2004: 173) call for a “place-sensitive notion of production politics”). For the companies themselves, offshoring is said to involve such a large transformation, the gulf in work culture so vast, that it resembles a merger and acquisition. Management practices are imported from abroad and redefined locally. Workplace conventions and tacit expectations between employer and worker are actively constructed. The Indian outsourcing industry is young and
so are its workers. There is also a crucial socio-cultural component: Indian society and its workplace structures are said to be more rigidly hierarchical than in the West (Roland 1988).

I argue that the managerial gaze in the Indian outsourcing industry is fundamentally infantilizing. Indian workers are constructed as professionally and culturally underdeveloped by managers and employers. Development, in this view, is conceived of as a teleology proceeding along Western lines, while offshoring is a motor of change, a fillip on the well-traveled but pitted path from tradition to modernity. Yet so long as the modern is understood as “as a known history, something which has already happened elsewhere, and which is to be reproduced, mechanically or otherwise, with a local content,” post-colonial societies will always been seen as incomplete and of secondary importance (Morris 1990: 10). Chakrabarty (1992: 339-340) writes that historically in this “transition narrative,” “the ‘Indian’ was always a figure of lack. There was always, in other words, room in this story for characters who embodied, on behalf of the native, the theme of ‘inadequacy’ or ‘failure.’”

Likewise in the minds of executives and managers. The Western *homo economicus* is juxtaposed with the Indian *homo hierarchicus*—a contrast rendered more acute by the post-Fordist emphasis on team work and flexibility. Sennett (1998; 2006), Ong (2006), Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) and others have sketched the contours of the new personality type demanded by globalization. My contribution is to show it how it is created on the ground and how it diverges from the mold. In its Indian instantiation the defining poles of professional life are brio and timidity, impetuosity and meekness. The result is a subject that oscillates between an obedient servant-bureaucrat and a self-policing professional. This chapter illustrates how the infantilizing gaze, the ethos of professionalism, and structural flexibility are mutually supportive. What troubles this constellation is a tight labor market, the structural condition that allows professionalism to be interpreted as individualism by employees.

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68 The term was popularized by Louis Dumont (1981).
69 Both, of course, are ideal-types, stylized representations of how people think and act.
“You Have to Push Them Sometimes”

“Nothing in India is identifiable, the mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else.”—E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1940: 86).

For companies moving work to India in the late 1990s, the first major surprise they encountered was a difference in work culture. Western or Western-trained executives and managers noticed that, in their speech and bearing, Indian workers observed a different propriety, a meekness of disposition. In addition to “language barriers,” says Gary, an American manager, there are “just different ways of doing business.” “Culturally, they’re very into hierarchy” and this “culture of deference” arises from a fear of displeasing superiors. Divining why workers appear diffident, just this side of servile, is an exercise in cultural diagnostics. The Hindi term for job, *naukri*, derives from *naukar*, a Persian loanword meaning “servant, attendant, retainer,” and as an HR manager at a call center observes, “the feudal relation is still involved.” As an executive put it:

They certainly need to learn some communication, etiquette. One of the problems, most people here don’t like it when I say this. The Indians by nature are kind of submissive, right. Particularly when people travel there, right. You can hardly hear them when they talk. It’s not that they cannot talk it’s just that out of respect that’s how they talk. You don’t raise your voice in front of adults, elders, teacher. So this gets into there system right from the beginning. In school, never say anything against teacher. At home, don’t talk to your parents like that, don’t talk to your grandmother…just do it, right. They’ve always been taught to be submissive. So that also shows up here.

In the New Jersey offices of Synergy, the manager-worker distinction between U.S. and Indian employees was reinforced by cultural traits suggestive of the frozen legacy of feudalism. Thomas, a U.S.-based manager, says that “they have an inability to say no. I’ve been to India twice and met with leads and asked for feedback and complaints. You have to push them sometimes.” Prior to offshoring, “work could be very stressful, but they always
knew where they stood with me. Guys out there appreciated it. Phoenix tended to push back a little, Bangalore and Chennai tended not to. Sometimes I needed it, the pushing back.”

Feedback is given only when pressed and even then the answers are ambiguous, as if any response will do. Indians are “vague” and as a consequence he would tell them to just “say something, anything, even ‘I don’t know I’ll get back to you.’” “It’s very hard for them to admit and say, ‘I don’t understand this requirement.’ They’re working twelve to sixteen hours a day because they can’t say no,” he says. Anything to maintain harmony, to leave feathers unruffled. Gary found the matter so problematic that on a visit to the Indian office he presented a group of managers with a blank sheet of paper upon which he had written “NO” in large black letters. Moreover, their disinclination to “give bad news can put one in a very bad position” and result in mistakes and missed deadlines. “They’ll say, yeah I’m working on it,” remarks another manager, “Yeah, it’s done. I’ll send it to you right now. And then the right now will come three days later. So as I tell them, these maybe OK here but these are not OK generally in professional environment, where you’re expected to say as it is.” There was “never this urgency over there,” Thomas says. His “jaw would drop sometimes on realizing that the culture thing was still there.”

Themes of immaturity recur in discussions of workers’ character. The subject triggered a sudden volubility in Atul Gupta, the COO of the IT subsidiary, Praxis:

The way I look at it, the maturity level is slightly lower here than in U.S. Maturity could mean taking your work seriously, taking ownership; it could mean how you work with others in a team; it could mean how you respect others. So all those are slightly lower here than there. Yeah, in terms of respect, no one will beat people here, you’ll always be respectful to anybody. Even the guy who wants to kill you, you’ll be respectful, you know. But overall, the professionalism and that maturity of being able to do what you need to do, I think it still needs to improve.

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70 Thomas himself was in the habit of pushing too hard, resulting in the resignation of a particularly valuable employee. He was eventually convinced to stay on but only after Thomas “changed the way he says things.”

71 On a four week project, for example, all is said to be well during the first few weeks, but “when the project is due tomorrow, they say it’s not going to be done for another two weeks. Or they won’t respond to email until it’s done or will just say everything’s fine.”
Additionally, the grievances of Indian workers can be petty. Small issues become big problems, as workers are unable to put things in proper perspective. Says Gupta:

In the U.S., when you manage people mostly you deal with real issues, real problems, you know at a higher level. Where in India, there are still lot of little, little problems. People’s needs are small, people’s problems are small. So the little things become problems. Like, ‘hey, do I get this snack in the evening or this benefit?’ A lot of these little, little things you don’t care about in the U.S. anymore because they don’t matter. But here a lot those things still matter to people. So they have lot more small concerns that you work with.

This competition over salaries and perks, this “narcissism of minor differences” (Freud 1989/1930: 72), betrays workers’ childishness. Immaturity means one is not fit for the responsibility of making large decisions, and according to one executive, it signifies the lack of an ethical compass:

If you screw up, just say I screwed up rather than making somebody else go in circles. No company always penalizes people for screwing up unless you do it every day. They need to be a little bit more mature in terms of being able to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong in terms of behavior, in terms of ethics. People are still so worried about little things that sometimes they are driven by money. So the bar – what is right and what is wrong – is not that high here; it’s very blurry. I actually sometimes give people an example that you need to be honest and integrity is very important. I tell them that if you’re going to reach here only in forty-five minutes, don’t say two.

Responsibility is an index of maturity and the beginning of all virtue. Indian social structure is culpable for workers’ underdevelopment as it diffuses responsibility throughout the extended family. “There’s a lack of ownership culture,” Gupta says dryly, “and that maybe because of cultural and social reasons. In the family at the home life, the culture is still more like a united family, joint families. There are very few opportunities where people have to hold themselves accountable. There are always your father, your grandfather, your mother, your grandmother, they’re always around to make those decisions.” The rational self is yet unable to shatter the integument of familial dependence. The individual is not given “the exposure to being able to take that ownership. Saying, hey this is my problem. Take simple
things. There’s a problem in plumbing at home. Generally, somebody at home will get it done. Because there are so many people around that you don’t really care about it. I do find that gap, the accountability and ownership culture is still not there.” He gave a long sigh.

Adopting a tone of fatherly tolerance, he went on:

I’m constantly telling them to take the ownership. If you have a problem and you say it’s my problem, take the ownership. Even during the inductions, when new joinees come, I tell them that one of the most important quality for you to succeed is for you to take ownership of what you do…Don’t just think, I have to do this and I’m done. Make sure it actually gets done, it actually works. It’s changing slowly. But you really need to be very patient…Having been exposed to [the Western] work environment, you don’t have that much patience. You say, I told you to get this done, but now you want to talk about it. So come and talk, what are you waiting for?

In an interlinked world of firm and snap decisions, Indian work norms are inefficient. Workers’ patience as well as their stutters and missteps and equivocations make Gupta impatient. The need for self-discipline and self-direction is all the more pressing as workplace flexibility entails a loosening of direct surveillance. He continues, now speaking a drone:

We have a very free working environment where we don’t restrict people to certain hours. You work late, you come late the next day, that’s okay. But then sometimes people make it a habit to just show up late every day. Or if you’re going to be late, it’s ok to say you know what I’m going to be late today, don’t hide it. You see in the West if someone’s going to be late, they’ll say it, they don’t feel shy about it. Here, they’ll hide it. They’ll try to quietly sneak into the workplace, which is not necessary.

The professional occupies an uncertain place in the historical arc of Indian occupational character types. Even when India embarked upon a path of state-led modernization after independence, the personalized obedience of the naukar (servant) was merely supplanted by the impersonal obedience of the bureaucratic functionary to rules and orders.\footnote{Sahay and Walsham (1997: 420) write that in Indian bureaucracy the “rigid adherence to procedure combines with a ready susceptibility to personal pressure and intervention.”} The chain remained unbroken:

In India, historically, most of the jobs were government jobs. And in government jobs you never had any accountability. You can just do whatever, you never get fired. You always get your raises, every four years
you get promotions. You know, there was no driver for people to excel or to take the responsibility.

Submissiveness, lack of ownership, an inability to express one’s opinion. Unkinder things have been said. But while such frustrations would be expected of any manager, what is remarkable is how probing the criticisms are. Many of these managers and executives began their careers in an environment of hierarchy and sinecure and social connections. But now these children of bureaucracy and extended family are themselves passing into middle-age and the old values that held the society together sting like a rebuke from an accountable superior. And although accustomed to the deference of servants, the sight of a worker idly waiting for marching orders chafes like a request for money by a dissolute and farouche cousin. They deplore the workforce’s lack of professional and individualistic qualities.\(^{73}\)

\(^{73}\) It is a ponderous search for faults as criticism of Indian culture is at least indirectly a criticism of the innumerable traces that makeup one’s self. It is also worth noting that I cannot find one manager or executive who cannot readily supply a catalog of such worker shortcomings. Their aversion to the features of their own culture, indeed, to their own pasts, recalls Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1986: 181-182) description of the overly-rationalized person’s discomfort in the presence of childlike, non-instrumental elements of social life: “Those blinded by civilization experience their own tabooed mimetic features only in certain gestures and behavior patterns which they encounter in others and which strike them as isolated remnants, as embarrassing rudimentary elements that survive in the rationalized environment. What seems repellently alien is in fact all too familiar: the infectious gestures of direct contacts suppressed by civilization, for instance, touch, soothing, snuggling up, coaxing.”
Re-acculturation

Mark Scheyer, the founder of an outsourcing company that specializes in legal services, is seated behind a mahogany desk. He is the very image of connectivity. A cell phone is clipped to his pants. On his desk sits a landline telephone and a PDA. He is also wearing a wireless headset and his email inbox is open. Adept a multi-tasking, he types furiously while responding to my questions and occasionally interrupts our conversation to take calls. He says that Indians communicate differently than Americans. I say I know what he means.

“They’re bright and articulate, but, sorry if this sounds racist, they have a tendency to say yes a lot, which can mean ‘yes, I understand’ or ‘no, but I acknowledge.’ It’s a culture of inappropriately saying yes which manifests itself as lying,” he says. He thinks that this meekness stems from a fear of looking bad, of making a mistake. This is a problem because the key to business is the “absolute elimination of ambiguity” and as a lawyer, he knows to be very specific. Indians are far less confrontational and try to avoid conflict and in this they need to be “re-acculturated.” “Some of it entails changing out behaviour but some of it has to be re-acculturation. It’s all in here,” he says, holding up a worn copy of a book by management guru Peter Drucker.

Yet while they shy away from friction, Mark says that workers are “always defensive,” and that they tend to have a “condescending because direct tone.” As an example of this lack of tact he shows me an email from an employee to a client that was “too blunt and direct,” that “wasn’t soft enough.” Moreover, according to another executive at the firm, Vikram, “timeliness” and “promptness” are “completely foreign concepts in India.” But while it “takes a while” to teach employees how to deliver services to clients, it “ultimately it gets ingrained in the organization. If you tell someone that you’ve sent something to them ten minutes ago, you better have sent it.” Or what? Or you will be asked to leave, and that very
politely. Workers are “asked to resign, they’re not terminated” because, if they fire a few workers, “the others tend to think the ship is sinking and that the next day the windows will be boarded up.” Beneath the new confidence is an anxious feeling that the promise is somehow precarious.

While Gupta emphasizes ownership, Scheyer tries to foster a “culture of empowerment.” This is achieved in part by not over or under-working employees and by providing incentives and benefits like stock options. He also encourages workers to “get dirty and mess it up.” If they make a mistake and admit it, his response is to say, “Good, tell me. What do you think we should do to remedy this?” In recruiting, they look for someone “who’s self-starting, inquisitive, someone who asks questions. Someone that’s not looking to be an employee.”

One such person is Anil, a twenty-six year old at the firm who describes himself as an “entrepreneur and professional,” laying heavy stress on the conjunction, as if to say two is better than one. Anil admires Michael Dell and Thomas Friedman’s hyperbolic The World Is Flat is one of his favorite books. Whatever his aspirations, however, Anil is a trainee and is treated as such by his tetchy manager Vikram. “I’m not pissed that you didn’t know. I’m pissed that you didn’t ask. The next time you come across something you don’t understand, ask someone. This is how addresses are written in the U.S…There are commas after every three numbers. No lakhs,” Vikram says to Anil with rehearsed frustration. And like a naughty child who has been caught scrawling on the bedroom wall, Anil flashes me a guilty smile when the boss is not looking.

Across the hall sits Deepa, a wan woman from Himalchal Pradesh with heavy, kohl-lined eyes, a silver nose ring, and short black hair. Her voice is soft and low; she speaks almost in a whisper. She lives by herself in a women’s hostel but her thoughts are of her family back home to the point of making joint decisions about her income. Thirty-one years
of age, Deepa describes herself as a “fresher,” a term normally applied to “fresh” college graduates. Although she holds a doctorate in engineering, what counts in her diminutive estimation of self is not what she has accomplished but what she lacks. With little work experience she is a professional manqué. But for every demure Deepa there is a boisterous Bhuvan who craves celebrity. What she lacks in confidence is amply compensated for by the élan of a prospective employee who during an interview announced that he did not want to be an employee. Asked what he did want, the young man responded with vim, “Fame!”

There are two kinds of Indians, according to Scheyer, those with an “ownership mentality” and those with an “employee mentality.” If the latter predominate, he says with gravity, “it will be the death of many companies.” Similarly, an American venture capitalist says that the maturity of Indian workforce is “way down” and that it “wouldn’t be a stretch to compare an early twenty year old in India with a fourteen or sixteen year old in the U.S.” The workforce is primarily Indian and so too the work culture. “They aren’t adopting business culture fast enough,” he says, plainly identifying Indian culture as an impediment to business success.

There is a large map of India on the wall and a miniature statue of Ganesh on the window sill of Scheyer’s Manhattan office. He says he has a “love-hate” relationship with the subcontinent and describes the widespread poverty in India as “appalling,” so much so that he returned to the U.S. once in tears. Although most of his employees hold professional degrees, Scheyer is alert to the philanthropic potential of offshoring. “We’re hiring people for fifty bucks a month. They’re dying for that job. We treat them with more dignity than they’ve been treated with before,” he says with emotion. But there can be no question of saving them from poverty or indignity; if his workers knew the term bourgeois they would no doubt use it to describe their condition. More than the employees needing the jobs, Scheyer needs them to need the jobs. When asked about the impact of job migration on U.S. workers, he goes
apoplectic: “I don’t give a shit if Americans lose jobs! These people need jobs and they often
do it better.” Indian employees are constructed in the image of an industrious and skilful
beggar despite their relative class privilege.

Work environments

Workplace environments also illustrate the infantilizing gaze. While architecturally of
the modern institutional style, BPO environments often resemble nurseries more than spaces
of serious work. Walls are painted bright colors. Some companies have appointed “employee
care executives.” One company has a contingent of “fun officers.” Workers are rewarded for
good performance with monetary incentives, but also with certificates and awards.\(^7\) Larger
companies have on-site gyms, nutrition experts, game rooms with carom boards, darts,
punching bags, and table tennis tables, and internet kiosks (as web traffic at workstations is
controlled by management). On the ground floor of one call center is a 10,000 square foot
cafeteria, where you can get dishes like chicken hariyali and butter chicken “for only 15
bucks” (meaning 15 rupees). Bunk beds and bean bags are available “where you can crash
after working overtime.” Why go home at all? The charm fades, however; the machinery
shows signs of wear. Some companies do not provide internet access because of “security
issues.” The e-kiosks at one company “never work at any given time.” Employees stop
patronizing canteens for a variety of reasons: because they “saw rats,” because of the
“tasteless food,” because “the sweet dishes leave a sour taste.”

In one call center I visited, the manager introduces me to the employees en masse.
“He’s a researcher from America. You will answer any questions he asks you,” she
commands flatly. A hush follows. Though unintimidated, the workers seem to shrink in her

\(^7\) One motivational strategy is based on the sport of cricket. If one does very well their name is
broadcast on a large screen with a score of six-runs—the tally awarded for the cricket equivalent of a
home run.
presence. Like students desultorily scanning pages in study hall to give the impression of activity, the workers swivel around and face their desks, pick up headsets and stare vaguely at their computer screens. “This younger generation, they lack patience,” the manager says, “So you have to be quite mature to understand things with them. Thanks to God all my agents are very nice, very cooperative. Whatever I tell them they take that as an order and ‘OK ma’am, we will do that.’” Given that coordination in the center has been delegated to shift leads and that workers know how to perform their jobs, the manager’s supervisory function is hard to discern. Her watchful eye is a lingering accusation of guilt: if workers were not naturally wayward or lazy she would not be necessary.

Moreover, the freedom and individualism enshrined in the absence of a dress code was taken away at one call center where workers came to work with scraggly hair, bead necklaces, torn jeans, plunging necklines, and tight skirts. An employee manual illustrates the shift in company thinking:

*We would like to showcase professionalism in our behavior and in the way we dress….Casuals may be worn ONLY on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Closed shoes at all times through the week. Sandals, Slippers/Floaters, round neck t-shirts NOT permitted. Ladies to avoid skirts with deep slits, deep necked tops, transparent material, tight fitting/skin hugging outfits, skirts above knee length…Remember how we look is how people outside will perceive of ____ BPO.*

*Whereas as the BPO environment screams child, Praxis, the IT subsidiary, politely enunciates professional. While the offshoring of jobs is veiled by a smokescreen of corporate-speak and confidentiality agreements, transparency **within** the workplace is one of the principal attractions of offshored jobs. The sunlit “coffee corridor” commands a fine view of a truncated but lushly verdant scrub forest. The uncluttered offices and conference rooms are fronted with glass walls and doors, an architectural accent on the company’s ethos of transparency. The walls are traversed by a horizontal band of frosted glass bearing the names of prominent scientists, intellectuals, inventors, and other luminaries. “Make a right at the Homi Bhabha room, then a sharp left at Marie Curie, and you will see us seated in Benjamin*
Franklin,” an employee might direct a visitor. Franklin was a founding father, an inventor, and diplomat; Curie was a Polish chemist who discovered radium and polonium; Bhabha was the father of India’s nuclear power program. Thus BPO architecture panders to and indulges workers’ perceived instincts for fun, while IT their desire for professional probity. The latter sees them as capable of growth, while the other consigns them to a state of perpetual adolescence. But behind these surface differences is a common attitude. It is a matter of extent and degree rather than a difference of kind.  

### Service and Servility

The notion of domestic service, where one tends to the needs of others, is not very amenable to modern ideas of democratic equality. In a household, the scope of service is often unbounded: the servant must be at the beck and call of the employer. As Muirhead (2004: 72-73) writes, “Employers felt that they were worthy of service even at the cost of displacing the independent needs of those performing the service.” No one willingly devotes their lives to the service of others, we tend to think, unless under some form of compulsion. But while an individual may be forced to knuckle under, she may also do so of her own accord; that is, she may choose to submit to someone else’s authority however far-reaching or intrusive. Servitude, as Berlin (1997: 98) writes, is being at the mercy of forces beyond one’s control, whether they be physical or psychological. One may freely choose a life “composed entirely of service to others” if they think it right or proper or their duty (Muirhead 2004: 72). Indian culture and social structure are said to supply such a rationale through mutually binding relationships of paternalism and deference.

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75 For example, even at an IT office one worker says that the employees at his old job were “oldies”; that is, they were in their thirties and forties. The “atmosphere here is lively. We have office parties, an annual day were teams are nominated for best hub. We celebrate birthdays and we have social group in the hub itself.”

76 This condition might be characterized as partial servitude; partial, because of the element of volition: a freedom-in-obedience to superiors, customs, and/or religious duty.
In a charged atmosphere of cellular forms of enterprise, of equality and flat organizations, a shadow is cast by the past: status distinctions of an earlier era are said to persist and to intrude upon relations of the present day. The naukar (servant) does not transpose well to the corporate work environment nor does it square well with the contractual and voluntaristic norms upon which it is predicated. As Roland (1988: 32) writes of cultural differences:

In contrast to Western hierarchical relationships—which tend to be based on a fixed status and power relationship, governed by contractual agreements and an ideology of essential equality—Indian hierarchical relationships are oriented toward firmly internalized expectations in both superior and subordinate for reciprocity and mutual obligations in a more closely emotionally connected relationship. Where traditionally there are few if any contractual agreements, the superior in particular is profoundly assumed to be concerned, giving, and responsible for his or her subordinates, and the subordinate to be loyal and deferential to the superior.

Nicholson and Sahay (2001) argue that because of the prevalence of hierarchy in other spheres of life, Indians expect the same at work. Consequently, they tend to be more “submissive” and evince a desire to please. Despite the sleek interiors, an air of antiquity pervades workplaces. (At one company, tunes from Bollywood’s golden era wafted softly in the background, literally lingering in the air). One HR manager says that Indian culture is “a culture that respects authority.” It is “slightly feudalistic.” But the flipside of obsequious manners is broad employer prerogative. Former Proctor & Gamble India CEO, Gurcharan Das, a booster of the new, liberalized India, argues that a central reason why young Indians prefer to work at foreign firms...

…is that the Indian business world is still largely feudal with the owner centralizing decisions. Some owners treat their employees no better than they treat domestics. In fact, once I heard an industrialist refer to his finance manager as a ‘servant’ within earshot of his foreign collaborator. Employees feel more respected in the professional environment of a foreign company. Therefore, even when Indian companies are able to hire a good manager, they are not able to retain him.77

77 What bothers Das is that feudal relations are bad for business. He does not question the treatment of the domestic qua domestic, but only says that the professional deserves something better.
Das then quotes Amiya Kumar Bagchi, director of the Centre for Studies in Social Science, Calcutta, on the same point:

‘As a result, the owners are arrogant and the managers are servile…In East Asia, the owner will happily sit down with an employee for a meal. It is this attitude which has helped them to succeed, create universal education, and wipe out poverty. India, in contrast, is like the Philippines, which is a relative failure in East Asia because it shares our social structure’ (Das, 2000: 274).

This does not prevent companies from taking advantage of a culture in which the worker is duty-bound to be tireless and obedient. As one executive remarks, they have may “not reached the stage of being accomplished like a lot of people in U.S.,” but they are “much more willing to sacrifice their time and do things.” To an extent, firms stand to gain by a work ethic that counsels quiet diligence, a willingness and expectation to work long hours. After all, Hinduism is a religion in which occupational stratification is divinely ordained. It supplied transcendental supports for work and rendered the intolerable tolerable. As the Bhagavad Gita (2003: 20) counsels: “And do thy duty, even if it be humble, rather than another’s, even if it be great. To die in one’s duty is life: to live in another’s is death.” While this influence has certainly waned, it is surely not altogether absent. Sahay and Walsham (1997: 421) argue that “the presence of caste is still felt in virtually all domains of Indian economic activity.” In any event, it is generally agreed that the inability of workers to take ownership of projects and responsibility for their actions is ultimately inefficient and bad for business.

Interpretations of Professionalism

78 Das accuses Indian companies of “a lack of attention to human capital.” They do not invest enough in worker training, “and just throw” the employee into her job, in contrast with “the detailed training plans” at multinationals. Josh, an American who worked at an IT company for two years in Bangalore said that despite his repeated requests, he was never assigned a mentor, which he said bodes ill for the development of human capital and leadership skills in the industry.
The stage was set for the creation of cultural norms more in keeping with the demands of the new economy. As we have seen, executives and managers argue that workers are unachieved, submissive, and immature. Americans, by contrast, are the opposite but they are also spoiled. What is needed is a substitute ethic, one that empowers the individual within the framework of the organization. Professionalism bridges the distance and is a premonitory sign of the country’s development. Whereas as the duty-bound naukar would ask “Ought I to do x?”, the professional asks ‘Shall I do x?’ The ethos, built on the idea of individual moral responsibility, converts the old blind deference toward authority into a sparkling reverence of it. Positions of authority are awarded on the basis of achievement rather than social connections. As great oaks from little acorns grow, IT executives are admired for their self-made success and regarded with wondering esteem by their employees. The young professionals, in turn, are rewarded for taking responsibility, even risks within certain limits, and having the courage of their mistakes.

Thus companies committed themselves to depose the servant and exalt the professional, with managers seeking to fashion employees in their own image. But the progenitor’s wish must remain unfulfilled. The worker is still a subordinate, a manager-in-training. Superiors must be regarded with the respect due to an equal and muted deference. This is the meaning of professionalism: a worker that thinks like a manager but knows her place. (As we will see later what troubles managers is that workers are increasingly unmindful of the latter).

Professionalism is more than a posture (bolt upright) or a matter of sartorial choice (ironed slacks and dress shirt). For many, it is a way of being. Take Kumar, for example. Kumar has a slight build, a thick head of hair set off by a thin moustache, and a mild disposition. (His appearance and demeanor are very much that of the stereotypical Indian

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79 The distinction is predicated on the degree to which one makes decisions on the basis of reason or on the basis of obligation or duty.
“techie”). His posture is impeccable as is his English, which is marked by a precise economy of words and colorless tones. He graduated from the Bengal campus of the famed Indian Institute of Technology, has eight years of work experience, and has thrice traveled to the U.S. on business. At Praxis, he helps maintain an online cash management application, which allows banks and financial institutions to transfer money to different countries. He is unmarried and lives with his parents—the father, a retired Hindu priest, the mother, a homemaker. At the time he got his start in the industry, his family’s combined monthly income was well under Rs. 20,000 ($450). “That’s Indian rupees,” he stresses. Now he is the “breadwinner” of his family. Unlike in America, where one leaves home after college, he says that in India, the “dependency’s there.” This is his first time working for an American multinational and he is proud of the fact.

Kumar’s voice is impersonal and detached, his gaze steady but oddly vacant. A commodity, his value can appreciate or fall. “This job has increased my value both personally and officially,” Kumar declares, enunciating. “People I’ve been working with have gotten a good impression of me. It has improved my image and my reputation. I’ve been more cooperative with everyone. The company is taking care of employees, so the employees can take care of the company,” he continues in a spirit of goodwill, a statement fit for the company’s website. He says generously that “everyone is a professional,” not a worker or “cyber-coolie” as critics allege. As if giving a speech at a self-help seminar or, conversely, as if a student reciting a lesson or dutifully answering a question, he tells me that the “key to a high-performance team is personal accountability.” It is this mixture of contrary qualities—of self-help and docility, of consent and control—that is most baffling. He is giving me an interview because his boss told him to. “We work for the person also and ask for requirements. For me, I can say you’re also a client. I need to understand your requirements.”

Among employees, there is a slight, if unconsidered antipathy to trade unions. They look instead to the handful of IT billionaires, the folk heroes of “Shining India.” Not content
with mere professional status many harbor entrepreneurial desires. Vijay, a former General Electric-India employee, acted on this impulse and founded a number of small call centers. I had arranged to meet him at Barista, an upscale coffee shop in Delhi’s Defence Colony. Ten minutes before we were scheduled to meet, I received a call on my mobile from Vijay. His first words were an apology. “I’m very sorry. I will be about ten to fifteen minutes late,” he said in a restrained but agitated voice. He asked me to hold but the piped music that filled the intervening moments was not the gentle if banal pop instrumentals one normally hears on the line but the jarring, plangent strains of car horns. Someone had rear-ended him in traffic and had badly dented his new car, the now blighted fruit of offshored labor. As if his discomfort were a sign of immaturity, he explained that car insurance is not the same in India as in the U.S. and that, although he was not to blame, he would have to pay for the repairs out of pocket. He apologized again and then hung up. When Vijay walked into the café some fifteen minutes later, he immediately proffered a rationale for the courtesy call. “If I was a typical businessman in India, I would not have called. I would have apologized for the delay only when I got here, thirty or forty minutes later,” he said, his voice now as unruffled as his crisply-ironed imperial purple shirt. His experience in the outsourcing industry has altered his business sense and endowed him with a new way of looking at life: “I called because in America you call as a courtesy if something happens. You have to be punctual. I have to think like an American businessman.”

A few themes predominate in workers’ definitions of professionalism. A professional is diligent and time-conscious, yet works at an unhurried pace. She is serious yet amiable, has a core specialty but is flexible, and excels in a competitive environment. “Everyone likes professionals,” says a BPO employee. “They’re the ones that get things done on time. They interact with various people in the right way in the right manner. You give them something to do and they do it quickly.” Another says that “Everybody here is professional. Everyone wants to be the best.” For one BPO trainer it means that “you don’t drop an appointment, even
in going to the movies. You stick by your word.” Professionals are “more of a specialized kind of people. They are not many, only very few.” When asked what skills they had acquired on the job, a few workers mentioned “personality development.”

Just as the workplace identities and relations are composed of a variety of influences—not just corporate impositions on an amorphous Indian mass, as terms such as Westernization imply—the labor process is a mixture of assembly line and flexible modes of production. Of such incongruous elements is the donnée of the offshore workplace composed. The flexible worker is therefore compounded of professional probity and standardized parts. In interactive work, this can amount to a form of emotional mechanization. The Washington Post reports on a pretty call center secretary named Musa who, like a Stepford Wife, says via televised conference call that “a smile can be heard” and that “posture can make a difference. A dress code makes a difference” (Kalita 2005: A01). Tight monitoring and adherence to a thicket of quality parameters also make a difference (See Appendix 2). As Noronha and Cruz (2006: 354) explain in painstaking detail:

The parameters used to judge a call were those mentioned in the service-level agreement. The agents were marked on phone etiquette, average handling time, adherence to the script, documentation, knowledge of the process and product, display of cordiality or warmth, clarity in the message transmitted, fluency in the English language, mother tongue influence, errors in speaking, pacification of irate customers, opening and closing, apologies, and other parameters specified by the client. They were also required to take notes of updates. The breaks were monitored, and insufficient login hours on outbound calls required working on holidays. Monitoring was essential to decide on the continuation of the services of employees. Inability to perform resulted in the employee being sent for retraining, which essentially meant notice before dismissal.

Somewhat surprisingly, workers often rationalize call monitoring, seeing it as a necessary condition for high service quality and even as a chance to improve one’s performance. As Noronha and Cruz (Ibid) observe, “Agents accepted monitoring because it made possible to distinguish between good performers and average ones. Monitoring made

\[80\] As Freeman (2003: 200) writes, “The open office is, at one and the same time, factorylike in its labor process and officelike in its muffled quiet ambience.”
comparison of individual performance possible.” It is a means of separating the wheat from the chaff. The ambivalence is well illustrated by a call center worker who fumed that management records every call, “every damn thing,” and in the next breath said that such vigilance is necessary as it prevents workers from “playing around” and shirking their duties.

This oscillation between cursing your boss and whistling while you work is evidence of consciousness of oneself as a worker and as a professional. The worker likes to “play around” when pressures are relaxed, while the professional accepts strict oversight as a means of keeping such fun and respite at bay. Neither modality is necessarily “false” in the Marxian sense. Worker consciousness allows the worker to slip out from under the control of management, while professional consciousness allows one to get ahead by playing by the rules. The former is generic and collective, whereas the latter is individualized and personal.
The Servant, the Bureaucrat, and the Professional

Indians are expert at role-playing, at hiding the private self behind a nondescript public face. Workers played the respectful *naukar* (servant) in a context in which it had little use, much as Don Quixote’s romantic ethic of chivalry seemed absurd in a world that had fundamentally changed. Thus they re-tooled and learned new lines and, with the help of management, became professionals and knowledge workers like Kumar and Ajay. In traditional modernizing narratives, runaway specialization and a complex division of labor introduce a disjuncture between one’s work identity and one’s “real” private self, what Berger et al (1973: 31) describe as “double consciousness.” The work-defined self can be reluctantly accepted as a necessity, coolly managed from without, or hotly embraced. Crucially, it is objectified, looked upon from the outside, as the individual tries to maintain a distance between the two identities; the core of identity remaining in the private realm. There is thus sometimes an impersonal and benumbed quality to the way employees describe their working lives.

But while managerial designs did hit the mark, they penetrated too closely to the core of identity. The public self and private self became conflated. The worker adopted the role

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81 While the unfortunate terminology might seem to imply that the modern worker is split down the middle like a schizoid, the main idea is that there is separation and distance between different conceptions of the self.

82 Some workers are able to achieve a neat resolution between the contending pressures of work and personal identity. While the industry employs mainly recent college graduates, one small call center experimented with a small outbound “senior shift.” Predictably, the work was too erratic and stressful for most and the idea had ended badly. The main exception was Dipesh, a bleary-eyed 49-year old who had been with the company for almost a year. His monthly income of 6,000 rupees ($150) for thirty hours of work each week was in the control of his ailing, widowed mother who subsisted mainly off a government pension. The lenses of Dipesh’s spectacles were covered with a film of dust blurring his already hyperopic eyes from view. While in regular conversation he spoke softly, on the phone his voice rose to a rapid crescendo, almost to a breathless yell. He would boom his opening lines in such a loud, Anglicized voice—“Is this Mr. Leahy!”—that the entire room seemed to shake. (One week of communication training had done little to smooth out the rough edges). He says his greatest surprise about Americans is that wives fear their husbands: “They’ll say, ‘No, I don’t think he’ll want to talk to you.’ It’s like they’re afraid.” While his co-workers are either enthusiastic or indifferent about having to adopt Western pseudonyms, Dipesh’s position was more considered. “I don’t care, as long they don’t call me by it,” he said firmly. At the end of his shift he stood at attention and begged his leave, “Excuse me sir, but I must be leaving,” and with a soldier’s salute, he marched out into the night. The critical
Once the needs of the interiorized private self are acknowledged by management through teachings about accountability and responsibility, they are transformed by employees into the demands of the “professional.” The result is a professional of a sort. While employees are now speaking up and taking “ownership,” they also act singularly out of self-interest when the prospect of improving one’s lot arrives.

In describing the microsocial practices that generate professionalism—the exhortation, the training, the surveillance—one distinction is critical. Whereas the naukar depends on an outside power to govern her conduct, the professional must internalize that power, police herself, and deliberate on courses of action. And it is precisely in the protean, open-ended, and creative nature of this power that it differs from that which exacts the obeisance of the bureaucratic functionary who exists in a world where “there is no initiative, no invention, no freedom of action; there are only orders and rules: it is the world of obedience” (Kundera 1996: 112). In flexible capitalism, the individual plays an active role in shaping its operations. Individual initiative and freedom and the responsibility that necessarily underpins their exercise are the hallmarks of the new ethos. It is very literally a “culture of empowerment.”

Children are by nature impetuous; servants follow orders, not reason; bureaucratic time-servers cannot help but be lazy. It is difficult to assign blame as it is presumed that they cannot act otherwise. We may chastise a wayward child, but we do so as a means of teaching a lesson, recognizing all along that they are not entirely at fault. Similarly, a servant may make a mistake but they are not normally fired unless their actions undermine the informal

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81 One possible reason is that in India that the “private self” is less inward and has a decidedly social character. As Chakrabarty (2000: 35) writes, even “our autobiographies are remarkably “public”... when written by men and tell the story of the extended family when written by women. In any case, autobiographies in the confessional mode are notable for their absence.” By this I do not mean to imply that Indian individualism is somehow stunted or incomplete, but simply that the self and community are conceived of differently.
trust and the normative principles upon which employment relationship is built.

Professionalism is the instillation of individual moral responsibility, the maturation of the adolescent into adult. It also means that blame can be assigned more readily as the professional is reputedly free to choose between different courses of action: to take risks or play it safe, to be diligent or lazy, to follow orders or take initiative. And one can be promoted or fired based on their performance and the consequences of their actions. The structural analogue to this character-type is the flexible labor regime where labor laws are weakened or are not enforced, and where it is both easier to hire and to fire. But where labor demand outpaces supply, blame and responsibility work both ways: if an employee feels that they are not being respected or that there merit goes unrewarded and their potential unrecognized, they are free to move to another company. A power that individualizes therefore gives vent to individualism.\(^4\)

Once management introduced individualism into in the workplace the term’s various connotations came crowding in like frenzied passengers boarding a Bombay train. It supplants the former sense of duty. Workers are becoming more assertive and mindful of the salary their skills can command in the market. Personal initiative may be critical for success but it does not preclude stubbornness or even impudence. Workers are very status-conscious and want promotions frequently; they are mindful of each others’ salaries and titles; development projects are coveted and maintenance projects seen as a sign of mediocrity and their apportioning becomes a matter of dispute; they have little loyalty to their employer of the day. The ambitions of the previous generations appear claustral by contrast and suggestive of

\(^4\) “They think of themselves as individuals first and members of teams second,” says an American venture capitalist who worked at the Indian company Infosys.
a closed horizon. It is hardly one’s duty to get rich but it is not proscribed either. (That is to say, religious justifications are replaced by secular motivations of lucre and status).  

Big name companies, like brand name clothing, are status symbols. Just as a green card can improve one’s marital prospects dramatically, making one a person of consequence, so too can working for a well-known company (Van der Veer 2005). As one executive remarks, “In India today, brand name is of value. If you ask a twenty-five year old man, he probably needs a brand name job so that his father is able to pressurize to get him the right kind of bride.” Ever mindful of familial and societal perceptions, for many workers, work becomes a means to a social end. As one worker comments, “I am at a start of career and I feel proud to work in such company which gives to lot of exposure of various technologies and business. I am from a higher middle class of India and working in such environment is graded highly in Indian society.”

Status concerns can take many forms. Even religious hierarchy—seemingly antithetical to modern pursuits—is symbolically grafted onto occupational stratification. At one firm an experienced Indian software developer had been asked at the last minute to perform quality assessment on a project. The proud worker refused on the grounds that the work was beneath him. “He said he was from the priestly caste and that he couldn’t do that kind of work,” his American employer remarks. Just as handling leather is deemed unfit for an upper caste Hindu, quality assessment is somehow polluting, poisonous to one’s self-image.

The coding of ICT work as white-collar and knowledge-based by virtue of the instruments by which it is performed gives it a certain prestige. Contractual equality, nominal

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85 As Sundeep and Walsham (1997: 420) write “The Hindu virtues of contentment, absence of desire and stability oppose the dynamic striving for success and unlimited consumption that capitalist systems emphasize.”

86 To be sure, the jobs also relate to self-approval. As one worker puts it, “The job has affected my social and family life positively. It has helped me enhance my job and personal skills which enhances my confidence and abilities overall.”
promotions, and glorified jobs titles, however, can mask very real inequalities in social status. For example, when call center agents are given titles like “customer care executives,” the name obscures the reality of the role. As one former call center worker complains, only after becoming a “team leader” does one have “the complete freedom to take a leak when you want and for however long you want.” Moreover, two legal cases in the Bombay Industrial Court have established that a call center employee is actually a “workman” rather than professional and is entitled to labor protections as the role entails no managerial or supervisory duties. (In both cases, the companies contended that the employees were supervisors so as to put them outside the ambit of labor laws).

Moreover, they lay great stress on dignity of being, for they are “from the upper middle classes of India,” as a worker from a legal services firm puts it. One BPO worker who says she has progressed from being a worker to a knowledge worker to a professional explains why she prefers working for a multinational firm:

It’s great to work here, much better than an Indian company. The BPO environment is better. You can wear jeans on Saturdays. It’s better than normal private firms. There are good incentives: cash, certificates. The BPO work environment is good. You get to meet a lot of young people and work on a team. Everywhere else you’re on your own. Over here it’s complete teamwork. It’s like a family.87

Nevertheless, the professional sense of fraternity rests on a mostly cultural and altruistic basis. It has no social or economic character. Since workers are competing for a limited number of lead positions and incentives and since performance is evaluated on an individual basis it makes little sense to assist a co-worker. While distrust between management and workers is often mutual (hire and fire policies and job-hopping are flip sides of the same coin), the tendency among workers is toward invidious distinction. In the absence of a strong esprit de corps, workers tend to identify with superiors. That is, they aspire

87 This is consonant with the Indian preference for “personalized, family-oriented relationships” (Sahay and Walsham 1997: 423). It will be interesting to see whether companies make increasing use of the family metaphor in India in the coming years, as it restores an element of obligation that is now lacking.
towards upward mobility rather than a collective solidarity of workers. (In a survey of 150 ICT workers, 109 self-identified as “professional,” fifteen as “knowledge worker” and only three as “worker,” with the remainder undecided). Resistance would thus seem more likely to take place where supervision is tight, such as at call centers. A recent effort by the Union Network International to organize workers also targets this sector, the blue collar strand of the digital workforce rather than IT. To date, the union’s success has been limited.

The youth of the workforce is also supportive of the new ethos. For many workers, this is their first labor market experience and they have scant memory of the modern social contract. Nestled in the IT-equivalents of free trade zones, the industry is an example of Ong’s (2006) notion of “exceptional” spaces of neoliberalism that stand apart from other sectors of the economy. Brenner and Theodore (2002: 364) write that unionization and collective bargaining give way to the “atomistic renegotiation of wage levels and working conditions combined with expanded managerial discretion.” The infantilizing gaze is thus conjoined to “reformed” labor laws. A labor lawyer remarks on the uncertainty surrounding the industry: “They can’t carry on with this hire-and-fire policy much longer. Either they should abide by the existing labour laws, or evolve new Model Standing Orders for them. They can’t carry on treating them like school kids under the monitor’s watchful eye.” But to young workers, the environment seems as natural or inevitable as anything else.
Taking Privileges

“We must be aware of the dangers which lie in our most generous wishes. Some paradox of our nature leads us, when once we have made our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then of our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion”—Lionel Trilling (2001/1950: 118).

That the new managerial ethos can shade into an excruciating didactism should not obscure the fact that it is animated at least in part by goodwill: a sense that they are instilling values that will help the company and its employees succeed. And the emphasis on ownership undoubtedly has certain merits when compared to the condescension that went before it. The infantilizing gaze conjoined with a reformist impulse, however, can be far from edificatory in certain circumstances. This is especially so where there is a lack of expertise at the middle-management level and where labor laws offer few protections. In these cases, the seemingly anachronistic elements of workplace relations—deferent naikar, autocratic manager—linger like scattered clouds on a sunny day: barely visible to the casual observer but present nonetheless.

It is important to distinguish between what Boltanski and Chappelle (1999) call the “spirit of capitalism,” its guiding ideology and normative supports, from its substance and practice. While the new capitalism privileges things like transparency and flexibility, residues from the earlier modes of workplace relations still exist. Paternalism, in contrast also to impersonal bureaucratic authority, has not been abolished; rather, it is transmuted into a project of moral reform. The idea is to get workers to own their responsibilities. (The unavoidable contradiction is that managers want their workers to mature but they also expect them to pay obeisance to them and the client). Recall, for instance, the female call center worker who was not allowed to transfer an exceedingly long call despite needing to visit the bathroom. It was a matter of forming her professional character. “I knew you could be a good

88 This even applies to the cab drivers who ferry workers to and from work: “I don't have to be servile, saying, ‘Yes, sir’ and ‘Yes, madam’ all day and carry my boss’s briefcase everywhere,” one driver says. “In this job, I just focus on the time and the road” (Lakshmi 2007: A12).
rep if you put yourself to it,” she recalls her team leader saying afterwards. Employers and managers seem to think that they have an ex cathedra privilege to mold workers’ characters for their own good, which at times can mean bending rules and playing favorites.

Recall Deepak the junior call center manager who mentioned his V.P.’s “philosophy” (“women, wine and water”) for reducing attrition. Another means of slowing down turnover that his company has been experimenting with is supporting workers’ higher education. This came as a response to worker dissatisfaction with career immobility. But even something so undeniably good as subsidized education can have a perplexing underside. The real intention, according to Deepak, is to give employees the illusion of upward mobility, an intimation of a stable career path. “It’s a trap,” he said glibly. “They do encourage them to take correspondence courses but they don’t allow them time off to complete them, to finish the exams. It’s a trap,” he repeated with a sardonic grin. (I have heard repeatedly from managers that such courses are quite worthless educationally and only marginally less so professionally). But Deepak did not view this as deceitful, as a wrong being committed by management. He was contemptuous of peers and it was just the way things worked. He had fully absorbed the managerial thinking: the obsession with high attrition as an ill so grave that it had to be extirpated by any means necessary. As Jackall (1988: 193) writes of managerial motivations: “The principal goal of each group is its own survival, of each person his own advancement.”

Some employers attempt to have open door policies with their employees. Consequently, workers have a high regard for them. In less positive cases, there is a tendency to treat workers as children in need of reform and discipline, and this is seen as being in the interests of the company and their own careers. And like all projects uplift and engineering, it can end badly. What makes such things possible are authority relationships in which managerial prerogative is unchecked, allowing superiors to operate in a sort of ethical
suspension. The following cases that occurred at the Bombay call center division of one of the largest BPOs in the world provide grim evidence of managerial license.

A young female call center worker has performed well and is awarded a bonus. Naturally of generous disposition, she uses part of it to buy chocolates for her co-workers. Weaving through the company canteen, she happens upon a bounderish manager who she knows has taken a fancy to her. When she asks him politely, “Would you like a Cadbury or a Toblerone?” he responds lasciviously, “Treats aren’t just taken in the canteen, you know.” Embarrassed, she walks away hoping the matter would subside. The manager, however, persists. Seeing her alone one day at work, he walks up to her and asks if she is free the coming Sunday. He parries the inevitable excuse—that she is working—with a show of managerial bravado, “Don’t worry, I can always schedule an off.” Reluctant but tired of his continual advances, she relents. Displaying an awful lack of romantic tact, he then asks, “How about we go to a guest house?”

When she brings the incident to the attention of her superiors, she sits through a series of interviews. She is questioned by the human resource manager and the head of operations and another manager, all of whom are men. They ask suggestive her questions—“How did you feel in his presence? Where did he touch you? What did you feel?”—and embarrassment shades into humiliation. Not wanting to “be the source of these cheap thrills,” she feels that she has no choice but to resign, if only to preserve her dignity. In the words of a sympathetic co-worker, “She didn’t want to rehearse her humiliation over and over again.”

At the same call center, a female worker had been harassed repeatedly by a prurient team leader. In a comment that should be noted for its vulgarity if nothing else, he tells her that she looks pretty, and when she flashes him a disgusted look, he retorts: “Come and lick my ass and tell me what flavor it is.” Though an employee relations “executive” overheard the offensive comment, little disciplinary action was taken; the team leader, mildly rebuked, was moved to another project. Insulted by this weak pretence of accountability, she quit a week
later, after three years of call center experience, officially for “health reasons.” “I don’t want to work in a call center again,” she remarks tersely.

Four workers consequently wrote a letter to their employer titled, “Matters of Conscience,” which details managerial mischievousness. The charges cluster around four themes: unprofessionalism, partiality, ineptitude, and fraud. Regarding the first, they accuse managers of using “foul” and “abusive” language, of disrespecting employees, and of being “loud, indecent and crude” in their behavior. One senior manager, they write, is “blatantly aggressive and intimidates CSPs [call center professionals] so that they would not go to the higher authorities.” Another “sexually harassed a teenager to the point of her resignation.” They are “unprofessional on the floor” and one manager “does not follow the dress code and cannot curb her romantic desires while on duty…She must understand that each employee works for [the company] not for her.”

With respect to favoritism, the workers say that management employed a divide and rule policy and created a “mafia” of select team leaders. Among other things, favored employees would be allowed favorites to drop calls and Quality Assurance would be told to ignore them. Certain workers were told when they were being monitored so that they would be extra careful in those handling calls. This had consequences for bonuses, pay raises, and promotions. The favoritism of one manager “extends to the limit of letting personal relationships interfere with her duties.” Of another manager they write, “Favourtism and partiality is his outstanding quality”; another is “partial to the core and forever seeking attention.” They send “favourite team members on aux admin for long hours” and chat with them “while on duty.” They cover up “unethical practices by some of the CSPs” and allow “some to earn their laurels by unfair means.” One “always sides with the TLs [team leaders],” another uses “her official position to settle personal scores.” As for ineptitude, managers are unprepared and lacking in “product,” “job” and “working knowledge.” They also lack “skills
of motivation,” have “very poor language skills,” and “can survive only in an unethical atmosphere.”

As for fraud, managers are “scheming, coercive, unscrupulous and unethical” and “illegal unethical practices are a habit.” Managers are accused of not paying workers “their rightful emoluments on time.” One is accused of covering up for food contractors after workers fell sick from the cafeteria food. Another allegedly fines her team monetarily for not “achieving quality parameters” and then “pockets these fines that she arbitrarily levys on CSPs.” One “builds false reports against the honest and principled workers.” Another “illegally entered conversions to his favourite CSPs account thus depriving the honest CSPs of his rightful rewards.”

Higher up the ladder, the most senior manager mentioned is said to be insensitive to worker concerns. He “never interacts with CSPs…avoids understanding their problems…is totally inhuman…[and] only believes in getting the figures balanced by the end of the day (any which way)…Due to his ineptitude, lack of analytical discernment and negligence he has put the process at stake and threatened the employment of over a 100 CSPs.” Overall, the workers write that “management is selectively open to issues which could affect them but conveniently closed to matters which are detrimental to the reputation and image of the company and could lead to huge losses. They join hands in character assassination and slandering an honest worker’s name.”

Worthy of note is the articulation of a collective identity: “On behalf of the loyal workers of this organization we the undersigned have gone forward with voicing what we are compelled to do…follow our conscience.” The workers “threaten to take up the issue outside of the organization” if the letter “goes unheeded.” Against “we,” stands “they”: “erring officials” they want “brought to book.” In access of Jacobin vengefulness (or perhaps something was merely lost in the cultural translation), they recommend that the “senior corrupt management should be eradicated [my italics] in time to save the company from
losing valuable business and be replaced by honest and efficient personnel. Such persons can be found within the same organization on whose good work the organization will progress.”

Finally, the workers tactfully identify with the company: “This letter is written with utmost sincerity and loyalty towards the company with the belief that necessary action will be taken.”

Despite evidence of partiality provided by workers, the company’s management denies many of these charges. The four workers have either since quit or been fired. One worker made good on the threat to settle the matter outside of the organization and her case is currently pending in court.

While one cannot generalize from these examples, complaints about managerial favoritism and disputes over pay are fairly commonplace. Such practices exemplify what Jackall (1988: 5) calls “patrimonial bureaucracy,” where success is less contingent upon hard work or merit than personal loyalty. Thus while companies may be equal opportunity employers, managers show little contrition for their transgressions of professional decorum.

Comes the question: What are the causes of these lapses in managerial propriety? Certainly, a dearth of middle management expertise, a discrete lack of scruples and accountability, and a climate of disrespect where employees are treated as expendable, and in some cases, as sex objects. How then can the industry claim that its labor practices are among the best in the country? This returns us to the paradox of the electronic sweatshop. Like inexpensive suits tailored to look like those from Savile Row and which can be used to obscure one’s class background, these workplaces in all their high-tech finery are beginning to fray. At bottom, outsourcing is about labor costs, about doing certain things on the cheap. This does not mean that services are necessarily of poor quality but simply that in some cases ethical problems are let to slide so long as the balance sheet remains untroubled.

\textbf{Fixing Broken Windows}
Management’s infantilizing gaze, its project of moral reform, and the structural context of a “flexible” labor regime, then, are mutually supportive. What immediately troubles this constellation is the tight labor market. This allows certain workers to give vent to their individualistic aspirations as well as produces a mutual disregard between worker and employer. The jobs are high-paying and there is a palpable excitement about working for a multinational company, but mobility is limited and the work is often rote. But if the young industry’s workers are in a state of protracted adolescence, then so too are many of its managers. In addition to abusing their authority, they poach workers from rival firms, a practice which they know is mutually disadvantageous in the long-run, but they continue to go at it like stubborn children.

Over the past few years there has been a spate of security violations and fraud committed by Indian BPO workers, which threatens India’s reputation as the ideal place to relocate back-office services. Additionally, some workers have been caught fabricating their résumés and others have forged positive customer feedback to win promotions and bonuses. While I do not mean to condone such behavior, there are a few mitigating factors. Call it a broken windows theory of management. With lax ethical standards at the managerial level, it is no wonder workers act in a morally dubious manner themselves. In fact, such behavior is somewhat predictable. They are young, sharp, and bored; the work they do is often tedious, mind-numbing and stressful. Managers, on the other hand, are charged with the responsibility of upholding the moral and social order of the workplace. Their supposed impartiality and fairness is what legitimates their authority. They set expectations for proper behavior. If managers continually flout the rules, workers will likely do the same. What is more, they will see it as unjust when they are caught and punished. Managers are role models and figures of authority to young workers. Their _amour propre_ does not forbid their indulging in partiality and favoritism, their subsidizing trips to nightclubs, their contravention of hourly limits on work, their creation a climate hostile to female employees. In this light, workers cheating on
feedback scores, drinking and sleeping around, and stealing and selling credit card data seems in retrospect like the inevitable denouement to which every other plot development was leading.

More generally, rule-bending and favoritism undermine the meritocratic aspirations of the modern workplace. As Jackall (1988: 3) asks, “What rules do people fashion to interact with one another when they feel that, instead of ability, talent, and dedicated service to an organization, politics, adroit talk, luck, connections, and self-promotion are the real sorters of people into sheep and goats?” While the relative inexpensiveness of Indian labor made offshoring viable in the first place, poor managerial practices may ensure that labor is not only cut-rate but also catchpenny. And, as we saw in the case of Deepak and his VP, the same could be said for those workers who are later promoted to management. An ethically challenged management propagates itself as superiors tend to promote the very people who think and act like they do. There is a simple test to this broken windows theory: If management behavior is cleaned up, worker behavior should follow a similar upward ethical trajectory.

Positive examples are the British banks HSBC and Barclays, which are cooperating with the global union, Union Network International (UNI). They have maintained transparency in moving work from the U.K. to India and have made provisions for job security, including re-training and redeployment policies. Globally, they have agreed to respect international labor and “human rights” standards, including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. (“Barclays work does not exploit labour abroad and adheres to freedom of association,” reads a press release). While such agreements do not solve the structural problems posed by offshoring—such as the downward pressure on wages and job losses—cooperating with unions such as UNI goes a long way to ensuring that living wages are paid, working hours are not excessive, and that favoritism and discrimination are checked in “onshore” and “offshore” offices alike.
I spoke with an HSBC call center employee at the UNI office in Bangalore. With four years of experience in the call center industry he describes the different working conditions. HSBC, he says, “cares about employees and has their own values.” In “99% of companies,” by contrast, “there are only problems. Each and everything is a problem. You don’t get proper breaks. You don’t get welcome from HR. There are politics in the team you’re working for. There are a lots of restrictions.” He says that at HSBC “you can take a break,” while at other companies, “if you’re on call when break time comes, you lose your break.” He believes that the union’s code of conduct and the company’s “ten core values” produce an open atmosphere. While he has some complaints—his contract is temporary when I spoke with him and he still had to work on national holidays—he makes Rs. 22,000 ($550) a month, more than double the sum at many other companies. “I’ve struggled for that,” he says sternly with averted gaze. The company also provides good benefits and overtime pay. “It all depends on salary structure and whether you’re satisfied at the end of the day. You motivate yourself to go to job and work toward future,” he says.
CHAPTER SIX

THE JUGGERNAUT OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM

What is it like for an American to manage Indian workers? After five years with the company he co-founded, Tyler Pfeifer, a serious man in his early thirties with gimlet eyes, closely-cropped blonde hair, and some ability as a pop psychologist, has decided to quit. “The business world is depressing. That’s why I’m leaving,” he says moodily. Tyler plans to return to school and study mental health. He is particularly interested in the question of happiness. “Happy people are less likely to hurt others and be destructive,” he says by way of explanation, as the cold rays of the declining sun glitter on the Arabian Sea. We are seated at a café on the upscale Juhu Beach in Bombay and I cannot help thinking that the moment is both touching and cloying in its sentimentality, as if out of a Bollywood script.

Offshoring has many merits for the receiving country. In a narrowly economic sense, it provides employment and contributes to rising living standards and economic growth. It also increases women’s mobility and bargaining power and contributes to worker self-confidence and a growing sense of the country’s potential. Of course, there are also demerits. The lack of mobility, investment in skills, and stimulating work frustrates workers. They complain of managerial favouritism, health problems, and difficulties in striking a work-life balance. Culturally, workers become individualistic, often crudely materialistic.

Tyler Pfeifer had come to India believing firmly in the promises of globalization, and found uncertainty and a hopelessly complex reality instead. This chapter traces his movement from intense optimism about offshoring to searching doubt—an arc that is echoed in the enthusiasm and disappointment of workers and managers, the hope and scepticism of the media, and the official optimism and pragmatism of the state. In so doing, the case study provides valuable a glimpse into how globalization is experienced by one of its former
proselytizers. Today, he is hardly an apostate, but neither is he a firm believer. (As with his Mennonite faith, he is now something of an agnostic).

The Indian Option

Tyler’s passage to India, to use the time-worn phrase, was a unique one. In the late 1990s, he had spent some time working as a “power point production associate,” a job as titillating as the exalted title implies. As these were the heady days of the dot-com boom, of exuberant ideas and instant if illusory success, he and an Indian-American friend, then a secretary at an investment bank, quit their jobs and set up shop as a vendor in Manhattan providing production graphics. While they were able to gain clients through word of mouth, they needed a larger business plan. As Tyler’s former employer had an office in Chennai he decided to approach venture capitalists (VCs) to explore the “Indian option.” “I guess we were a bit overconfident. We had the graphics knowledge. Those days it was relatively easy to get funded. We were the first to do this sort of stuff,” Tyler says somewhat self-critically. A VC fund provided $2 million and bought half the company. “Their idea was that we would just set it up, transfer knowledge, move out and the customers would line up. They thought we would be able to deliver services easily as it was just stupid, easy work. VCs are arrogant,” he says.

Tyler and his business partner arrived in Bombay in 1999 with only the name and address of a real estate agent. But however stupid the work, the initial years were not without their mishaps. Soon after operations were up and running, Tyler called the Los Angeles-based CEO, Ryan O’Shea, to tell him that operations had to be shut down for the day. A gaggle of hired goons had congregated outside their building and were demanding protection money or else they would smash up the new company’s computers. Tyler was crouched under an office
“Capital does not flow to where things are easy,” O’Shea explains, laughing. “It just doesn’t happen.”

Despite having to navigate some choppy waters, Tyler got his sea legs in a hurry. The company’s initial clientele consisted of a bevy of medium-sized firms and one large company. They moved over the work with the slowest turnaround first, that which required overnight delivery. Business picked up in a hurry when the company began providing EDGAR (Electronic Data-Gathering, Analysis, and Retrieval system) services, the portal through which companies file documents and reports with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Five years in, Dynamix had expanded from a staff of fifty to well over a thousand and in industry jargon was moving up from the relatively low-skilled business process outsourcing to the judgment-dependent knowledge process outsourcing. Its customers now included global investment banks, blue chip law firms, and management-consulting and publishing companies.

**Impunity and Deference**

Despite their seeming remoteness, the northern suburbs of Bombay are where the activity and life of the metastasizing city is reputed to be. They are where the young rent “flats,” where ICT companies cluster, and increasingly where the rich reside. Dynamix is located near the international airport and a few long miles from the train station. For some employees, it can take up to two hours to reach the office. The area is congested, noisy, and heavily polluted. When crossing the street one has to just go; there is no let up in the general flow of auto-rickshaws, cars, scooters, bicycles, and trucks. The sun is scalding; dust and dirt swirl in the air prompting people to cover their faces with handkerchiefs and scarves. But inside, on the sixth floor, a different social order obtains. Six sheepish young people are quietly seated on cramped leather couches in the lobby filling out job applications. Security
guards at the front desk check bags for screwdrivers, cameras, recorders, and computer
hardware. Passage into individual offices is restricted as the company has confidentiality
agreements with its clients, such that visitors should not be allowed to catch site of a client’s
name on letterhead or a computer screen. It is as if their work is somehow illicit and
precarious; that, if found out, the game would be up.

The atmosphere was hardly this cold or formal in the initial days when Tyler tried to
foster a “culture of openness and ownership in the company.” He spent his first two weeks
interviewing 150 people of which they hired 35. With the fondness of a school teacher for her
students, Tyler attached passport photos of each new recruit to their application, the better to
associate names and faces. In time, he knew most everyone’s names, including the service
and security workers. But what is proper in one environment can be a solecism in another.
While Tyler encouraged employees to address him by his first name, only two had the
confidence to do so. This attempt at egalitarian transparency was in stark contrast to the often
rigid hierarchies in Indian firms and was met by incredulous and embarrassed smiles.
“Workers were blown away. They had certain expectations as to how you should be treated
by an MD [managing director],” Tyler says.

Tyler ascribes the grateful attitude of prospective employees during their job
interviews to limited economic opportunities. He is sometimes regarded with a reverence
approaching adulation. Just recently Tyler was approached in the hallway by one of his first
hires who said to him politely, “Sir, when you interviewed me, the first thing you did was
stand up and shake my hand.” “And all of this…because of him,” said another employee
dreamily, waving her arm broadly in the air to indicate the sleek climate-controlled
workspace, the black modernist pile, in which we were seated.

Early on, Tyler says he could tell who would make a good worker, as “there’s
something familiar between Indians and Americans.” Personality matters. Women are better
workers and an office with 70% males in their early twenties “sucks.” Goan Christians and
dark-skinned southerners, “those who Indians call blacks,” carry themselves “like people who’ve worked in a corporation.” Despite the familiarity, he flags some critical differences. Because of certain “forms of respect and ways of working with colleagues, they won’t raise issues that might cause conflict,” Tyler says. They are reluctant to give bad news and to displease clients or superiors. This is related to the “yes” culture, wherein short-term harmony is preferred even if means trouble in the long-run. “Some say it’s to avoid conflict but they’re fearful of being chided or disappointing,” he explains. “They know that they’ll eventually have to say no but they’d prefer to do it later.”

For managers, there is mixture of impunity and deference. “Young managers offer sharp criticism and people are being hurt. If they have something to say, they just offer it bluntly,” Tyler says. In consequence, workers perceive them as “rude, duplicitous and autocratic.” Managers in their forties who join the nascent industry with a background in manufacturing “suck,” as “they don’t know to work with knowledge workers.” Tyler has had to fire one of the “traditional guys” because he was “completely ineffective.” He says that “minimizing the subjective element as much as possible [is a] big challenge for a 24 year old team leader,” and that many young managers and team leaders do not realize that they are being partial. “Their judgement is terrible,” he says wearily. The lack of experience at the middle management position cuts not only at service quality and the bottom line, through worker turnover, but also saps morale and loyalty. Worker deference and an autocratic management are mutually reinforcing.

If one believes with Muirhead (2004:7) that “our language mirrors our experience,” the much can be said of the etymology and use of the term naukar (servant), as discussed earlier. In the era of statist dirigisme, it also came to denote a government servant, while retaining certain unflattering connotations. Today, naukri.com is self-described as “India’s most popular job site.” The residuum of these semi-feudal relations is in evidence on the shop floor. Tyler says with an uncomprehending laugh that he even has a peon, a proper naukar.
There is a buzzer in his office, which when pressed sends in a sallow-faced boy with an uncertain smile and whatever little English he knows. “What do you want, sir?”

While managers and team leaders can be highhanded with subordinates, they assume a different attitude toward their superiors. Tyler says he is sometimes absurdly brazen with managers when they make mistakes. “Bad, bad. You did bad you,” he says wagging his forefinger ironically at an imaginary manager. Moreover, the work pace is by turns hurried and Chekhovian. In a country where Indian Standard Time is jokingly referred to as “Indian stretchable time,” a sharp tongue is sometimes necessary in getting managers to appreciate the urgency of deadlines.\(^89\) (He directed my attention to a stack of holiday cards that were to be mailed to the company’s American and British clients. Someone had forgotten to send them and they now sat uselessly in the corner of his spare office as the season had long since passed). Bemused and frustrated, he says that managers get a thrill out of it, that they delight in their own abasement. What is more, it creates a leadership vacuum and inhibits workers’ professional development: “You can’t get them to mentor when they’re posturing for the boss.”

By contrast, managers of a Western cultural disposition tend to the needs of employees and clients more effectively. “They understand what you’re experiencing and that your role is part of a larger picture,” he says. In the main, however, employees have “no clue about the boss’ reality.” That is, they fail to take the perspective of the others into consideration. This inability to take a broader view of the things, to empathize with others, is reflected in seemingly insignificant matters like emails where few take time to consider how the recipient will read it.\(^90\) “They don’t have self-awareness,” Tyler says and adds that they

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\(^89\) One worker notes, however, that this is not always a “cultural issue”: “It takes employees a long time to get places because of traffic, distance, and infrastructure. Many things intervene to delay like power outages.”

\(^90\) Other managers I have spoken to say similarly that they only allow select workers to speak or communicate with clients directly, and not just for reasons of poor grammar.
have a basic “incapacity” to empathize, not a mere unwillingness. He believes it “goes to the home.”

“It’s Pre-Modern Here”

“A number of porcupines huddled together for warmth on a cold day in winter; but, as they began to prick one another with their quills, they were obliged to disperse. However the cold drove them together again, when just the same thing happened…In the same way the need of society drives the human porcupines together, only to be mutually repelled by the many prickly and disagreeable qualities of their nature.”—Arthur Schopenhauer (1851/1964: 226)

Thus did Schopenhauer describe the twin and contradictory pressures of individualism and sociality, the need to be alone and the need to belong. Tyler feels that the latter pressure predominates in India and that the country is the worse for it. The subcontinent was home to the Indus Valley civilization, the birthplace of four major world religions, and the staging ground for a remarkable non-violent anti-colonial movement. Instead of exploring and enlarging the riches of this shared history, Indians today prefer the false individualism of consumer society. Remarking on his workers’ bottomless fascination with things American, he says in an exasperated voice, “This is supposed to be the civilization that explored the depths of the mind. Some say that the Christian tradition put compassion for others at the center. This may have caused a stronger awareness of the self.” A strong awareness of the self is critical in any definition of personal responsibility. It is also a necessary condition of empathy, which Tyler says, is largely inaccessible for at least middle-class Indians.

In the gloaming, the beach is a soft taupe hue. Tyler contemplates the silhouetted crowds. “When they see me at the beach alone, at first they feel sorry for me. But then they see that I have equanimity…They feel like I’m a more powerful person,” he says reflectively. Individualism seems an almost a foreign notion in India, something that filtered in from outside like ideas of nationalism and parliamentary democracy. Like the author V.S. Naipaul,
whose oeuvre served him as a guide in navigating Indian culture, Tyler is rather unforgiving of India’s faults. “It’s premodern here,” he said in a self-possessed voice. However jarring to the postmodern ear (or, for that matter, to anyone outside of Levi-Strauss or Rousseau, who found romantic nobility in savagery), Tyler had chosen his words carefully. But he did not mean to convey that he finds Indians somehow barbarous. Rather, the predilection for Indian males to hold hands and to walk with their arms round each other’s shoulders in public, for example, is evidence of a stunted individuality. This need to touch, to be close, is a “physical representation of this desire” for companionship. I ask if he thinks that the Indian ego is underdeveloped, a reference to the work of Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar. “Yes, if the continuum is individuation,” Tyler responds without hesitation.

Kakar (1978) argued that the “underdeveloped ego” in India is produced by a strong mother-child bond, particularly the mother-son bond. It is further encouraged by the extended family model which prolongs the dependence. A child’s “differentiation of himself from his mother…is structurally weaker…than in the West,” he says in an interview. Kakar suggests that the strong maternal bond is “manifested and symbolized by physical proximity” (Sharma 2000). The hand-holding Tyler observed was the extension of the weak ego into adult life. Moreover, as “the individual functions as a member of a group rather than on his own,” a lasting dependence on authority figures for guidance develops (Kakar 1978: 107). An individual with a stunted ego is submissive and unfit for the deliberative burden of responsibility. Where the bonds of family and kinship still form the basis of the social structure, the self-reflexive individual is yet to be cut loose from its moorings.91 At the sociological level, group identity and belonging are a means of allaying anxiety and personal insecurity.

91 Kakar also argues that weak ego development relies on fantasy. He stills stands by the arguments in his 1978 book, but “would not evaluate it in a typical psychoanalytic framework with the Western mature and healthy ego as the standard.” See Sharma (2000).
The dependence on authority is reflected in workers’ submissive attitudes toward managers and in managerial deference toward superiors. The lack of individualism is betrayed by worker’s reluctance to take responsibility for projects, to take risks and initiative. This pre-modern cast of mind was also reflected in managers’ endless complaints about the immaturity of workers. India, in Tyler’s view, has not been witness to as many “iterations of individualism” as the West. Yet, how does one reconcile this with the somewhat Janus-faced character of employees? On the one hand, they are tireless workers and can be counted on to put in extended hours. But on the other, they are restless with intensely personal aspirations and are willing to hop jobs at a moment’s notice. The answer may have to do with the special character of individualism in the Indian context.

In his observations of early democratic life in America, de Tocqueville (1966: 526) celebrated the citizenry’s capacity to practice “self-interest rightly understood.” What he meant was a form of individualism that was inclusive and intensely other-regarding. “An enlightened self-love continually leads them to help one another,” he writes, transported. He argued that conditions of equality are less compatible with grand gestures of self-sacrifice than with the scarcely laudable propensity to turn inward. Still, an enlightened self-interest could serve as a hedge against selfishness. This doctrine of numerous, “small” sacrifices enabled Americans to combat crass individualism in their practical affairs and to forego “some of their own well-being for the prosperity of their fellow man” (Ibid.: 528). The pressing question for Tyler is how Indians will interpret individualism. Will they interpret broadly to include shared sacrifice, or will they prefer a self-interest ill-defined and narrowly understood?

Recall, moreover, Tyler’s thoughts on the inability of Indians to empathize. Empathy, for Adam Smith, formed the basis of the morality and social order. He writes in the first sentence of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790/2004: 3): “How selfish soever man may be supposed to be, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from
it, except the pleasure of seeing it." Smith argues that we are naturally compelled by empathy to seek the approval of others, to act as if an “impartial spectator” were watching. It is “the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct” (Ibid: 152). Ultimately, Smith’s actor is self-aware and relational. Without empathy, the subject-subject relation is reduced to an instrumental encounter between subject and object.

Like so much of this country, Bombay is a place of extremes where vast inequalities in wealth and power are not just facts, but cultural norms. The city may be India’s richest and its financial capital, but it is also the world capital of slums, hosting 10 to 12 million squatters and tenement dwellers (Davis 2006). But while the poor crowd into slums like Dharavi, Asia’s largest, along the Mahim river and the elite repair to the forbidden bungalows of Malabar Hill, it is never entirely possible to extricate oneself from the human crush nor from the fact of human suffering. (Others are always bearing down upon one physically making a joke of any concept of private space). To the outsider, it makes itself most viscerally felt in the leprous body of the legless beggar, in the wizened and precocious faces of slum children, in the agonized song of the blind street musician. Yet one cannot even give charity with a clear conscience as the beggar who approaches you may be part of a racket—a network that ruthlessly exploits the most desperately poor. This at least is why Tyler refrains from giving money. As Adorno (2006: 39) once put it, “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.”

It is understandable then that people have developed an ability to distance themselves psychologically and emotionally and, as much as possible, physically from these unsightly sights. This distancing act may also have something to do with the residue of the caste system.

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92 However “original” a passion, empathy is not an automatic response. “The furious behavior of an angry man,” Smith (Ibid: 6) writes, “is more likely to exasperate us against himself than against his enemies.” For one to sympathize with the angry man, to approve of his anger, one must be able to understand its causes and judge it as an appropriate response to his situation. That is to say, one must put oneself in his shoes.
by which compassion for others is demarcated by distinctions of purity and pollution. While one might give to a beggar out of a genuine sense of charity, it is also believed that people can earn some sort of divine credit (punya) by doing so. Just as workers were not able to see things from the perspective of colleagues, so are Indians unable to empathize with the beggar. The destitute are viewed as objects and not as individuals deserving of moral sympathy in their own right. They “think thing,” Tyler says, pointing to an imaginary mendicant on the sun-dappled ground. The suffering is not real. “It doesn’t have to be like this,” he says in an agitated voice.

While Ameriphilia and materialism may be by-products of globalization and the expansion of the middle-class, Tyler says that they are not the only nor the most important consequences. Friedman (2006) argues that economic growth is correlated with more enlightened social policies and attitudes and, likewise, Tyler notices a subtle but unmistakable shift in the ways that young Indians are beginning to self-identify. He says that some of his colleagues think that India will swallow up Western white-collar jobs and are almost “gleeful” about it. Tyler believes their schadenfreude, however off-putting, to be healthy, as its implicit nationalism cuts away at the caste and class divisions that still have an undeniable relevance. “This is the first generation not to say, ‘I’m Keralite, Gujrati, or Marathi,’ but that they’re Indian first.” He adds, somewhat ruefully, that “less than half think this way.” Juhu, with its trendy shops and restaurants, five star hotels, strolling couples, and ice cream stands, he observes, was cleaned up only recently and that probably because people were embarrassed that this cannot be the shining India of Bollywood and information technology.

93 As Rousseau (1946: 246) wrote more generally about the limits of sympathy and concern: “It appears that the feeling of humanity evaporates and grows feeble in embracing all mankind...It is necessary in some degree to confine and limit our interest and compassion in order to make it active.” How else to explain the way middle-class families dote over house pets, while remaining indifferent to the plight of the poor?
Still, Tyler sees hints of a broadening of social sensibility among the young, a movement from the local identifications such as family, caste, and kin toward the city and the national polity as a primary mode of affiliation. This shift away from collective solidarities to personal freedom, and the increasing complexity of the division of labor, recalls the famous dualisms of sociology. Ferdinand Tönnies (1957) contrasted the parochialism of Gemeinschaft (community) with the cosmopolitanism of Gesellschaft (society). Durkheim (1997) observed a shift from mechanical to organic solidarity, from uniformity to diversity, from the sacred to the secular. As a result, the individual has a greater choice of occupation and looks beyond parochial groups for a sense of belonging and identity. But although Durkheim envisioned this progression as largely positive, he had misgivings about the anomie and alienation that resulted.

Similarly, while holding that modernization is a force for national unity, Tyler is mindful of the fact that rapid growth can precipitate large disparities in income and various social problems. “The U.S. is founded on this wonderful ideal of multiracial social harmony,” he says in a worried voice, “but there are all these things we have to deal with like rape, depression, suicide, and murder. What’s going to happen when they go through their 1970s New York, when everybody’s murdering each other?” The transition is already occurring to some extent in India’s major cities. The crime rate in Bangalore, India’s IT hub, climbed almost 75 percent from 16,002 in 2004 to 28,000 crime cases in 2005. Delhi had 47,404 crime cases in 2003 and 53,623 cases in 2004, a 13 per cent increase in one year (Verma 2005). IT workers, with their conspicuous identity tags, are particularly ripe candidates for petty crime. In Bangalore, they are told to keep tags hidden.

Moreover, rising incomes (and growing inequality) do not automatically enlarge the scope and depth of our sympathy. According to an editorial in the Times of India, “[T]he current wave of liberalization has deepened the tendency which the wealthy Indian already had to ignore the poor…Once it becomes legitimate to ignore poverty, the sense of community
ceases to have a place in social life” (quoted in Varma, 1998: 184). As Rousseau (1968: 90) wrote, “The more the social bond is stretched, the slacker it becomes.” Absent a socially-binding vision of the public good, an imperative to promote growth and equity, uneven development may undermine national unity by producing new divisions.

Just as some think that “parts of the Indian economy...are skipping right over the ‘second’ industrial age, and straight into the information era,” BPO workers, it would seem, are moving from pre-modernity to post-modernity without ever passing through modernity (Economist 1996: 67). Bauman (1997: 192) writes that in the postmodern context individuals experience a “…painful and sickening feeling of perpetual uncertainty in everything regarding the future.” With the fading of stable career paths, the paternalistic state, and the social contract, workers find themselves very much in a post-modern context, in its uncertainty and essential ambiguity. Class privilege and insecurity are the defining features of their professional lives.

“The idea of a job for life, like 1950s America, has been shot for this generation of BPO workers,” Tyler says. Lost is the sense of a career, which “in its English origins meant a road for carriages, and as eventually applied to labor meant a lifelong channel for one’s economic pursuits” (Sennett 1998: 9). Yet alongside this loss of continuity rise more equalized life chances. Individuals are defined more by personal achievement than accidents of birth. (Though it seems that most workers have chosen their parents wisely as the middle class are the principal beneficiaries of liberalization). With globalization, individuals may experience the lack of a moral and professional compass, but the appeal of the new shining India lies precisely in the possibilities it presents to create oneself anew, tabula rasa; the belief that privilege and pedigree matter little.

Posed the question, “Who are you?” Bell (1996: 89) writes, “…a traditional man would say ‘I am the son of my father.’” The modern person, by contrast, would reply, “I am I, I come out of myself, and in choice and action I make myself.” This distinction, Bell argues, is
the “hallmark” of modernity. An Indian call center worker might respond, and indeed did respond, that she is Britney Gupta, combining her infatuation with the celebrity Spears and her given surname. In this wrestling between anchored regional identities and the floating, astral identities of the new globalism, the ICT workforce is suspended between the poles of imagined modernity/individualism and tradition/collectivism. They are restless with desire to disencumber themselves of familial and societal constraints but reluctant to fully do so.

In age, workers are transitioning between young adulthood and maturity, to borrow Erikson’s (1959) categories. But their inchoate adulthood is marked by traces of residual adolescence: the identity problems and role-confusion; the preference for peer groups and the reverence for role models; the struggle to be and to share oneself; the fanatical embrace of the new and blind repudiation of the old. They are pressing forward and holding back, by turns self-confident and anxious, and in this respect they resemble Schopenhauer’s porcupines. They are not totally unmoored; loyalties to self and family overlap. This brand of individualism does not preclude a family orientation, such as where a young worker contributes to the family income. Moreover, the middle-class family serves as a buffer against anomie and financial insecurity, whereas the poor experience globalization’s rawer forms.

“This Juggernaut of Job Creation”

“Passage to India!
Lo, soul! seest thou not God’s purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann’d, connected by net-work,
The people to become brothers and sisters,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.

(A worship new, I sing;
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours!
You engineers! you architects, machinists, your!
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God’s name, and for thy sake, O soul)’
—“Passage to India,” Walt Whitman, 1871
Tyler was led to India by more than wanderlust. His decision to outsource, however materially-based at the outset, had an extra-rational, even ethical dimension. He went not only “for trade”; he came to view his work as a calling, as a religiously-informed vocation. As Weber (1978) wrote of the entrepreneurs of nascent capitalism, the idea of a calling provides the psychological motivation to work. Absent an overarching, powerful ethic, neither duress nor intrinsic merits of work are enough to inspire people daily and “elicit engagement” (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999: 10). One, as the saying goes, does not live by bread alone. Weber viewed the extra-mundane sources of motivation that animate temporal activities as central to the Protestant work ethic, providing otherworldly reasons for worldly economic pursuits. The fierce certainty that one is of God’s elect is reflected in the industriousness of one’s labor. It is to forget one’s mortal coil while plunging all the more deeply into the mundane world of labor.

In many cases, meaning is extrinsic to work, such as when people derive satisfaction from supporting their family. Seeking work that is intrinsically meaningful, however, is hardly to gild the lily. Tyler had been brought up a Mennonite in Pennsylvania. He went to a confessional high school and college where he was taught the “truth” about American history, such as the extermination of Native Americans and the brutalities of slavery. Tyler, however, grew tired of the student body’s dogmatism, its embarrassing moral clarity, and became “very cynical.” In this light, his decision to go into the corporate world can be seen as a minor heresy against the faith’s commitment to social justice. His own politics are hard to place. He thinks that unions are like cartels and that liberals are more hypocritical than conservatives,

94 As Boltanski and Chiapello (1999: 10) write, “In fact the systemic constraints on actors are insufficient on their own to elicit engagement. Duress must be internalized and justified; and this is the role that sociology has traditionally assigned to socialization and ideologies.’

95 As Jackall (1989: 7, 8) explains: “The term Protestant ethic refers to the set of beliefs and, more particularly, to the set of binding social rules that counseled ‘secular asceticism’—the methodical, rational subjection of human impulse and desire to God’s will through ‘restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling’. . . The enduring significance of the Protestant ethic was due to the way it linked the probation of self, work in the world, and eternal salvation.”
though his sympathies tend toward the former. His wife, a grade school teacher, is a “recovering activist.” In his view, the amoral machinations of global business, rather than the good works of a committed few, are of consequence and ultimately redound to humanity’s benefit. This Smithian understanding of capitalism infused his pursuit with a strong moral component. Business for him is a form of philanthropy continued by other means.

Tyler says Mennonites “talk a lot about sustainable development.” Some of his relatives work for Ten Thousand Villages, “one of the most respected non-profits.” By practicing “fair” trade, “it’s helping twenty to thirty villagers in Tanzania, and increased their income by 40%.” Offshoring, by contrast, provides enormous employment opportunities. This was evidenced in the grateful, almost supplicatory attitude of workers and prospective employees. Dynamix, he says, has created careers “for a thousand people. It’s a growing profit center. It’s integrated into the world economy and has doubled some people’s income.” (The vice president of human resources, he notes, makes 18 lakhs ($40,565) annually). “I’ve given three years of my life to creating employment in India,” he says forcefully.

When asked if he sees his efforts as good works, Tyler enthusiastically agrees. “The standards are pretty low here. It’s not hard to improve on them,” he adds. Western companies have a “dramatic impact” on Indian working conditions. Better jobs also bring stability and have “tremendous” spillover effects, such as the diffusion of management knowledge and professionalism. Taken together, these beliefs lend his endeavor a missionary aspect. Despite the fact that his employees are privileged enough to find jobs outside of the outsourcing industry, Tyler, like Mark Scheyer, constructs them as needy. (It is as though an employee should go to work with a begging bowl in one hand and a palm pilot in the other). Consider it an optimistic post-modern take on the “white man’s burden”: the view that under the tutelage of multinational corporations Indians can develop into mature and responsible selves; that the

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96 Of the penchant for not saying “no” and taking on too much work: “Commerce is changing this. Vendors now make a point of only committing to what they can do.”
adoption Western ways will lead to cultural development. Not one for false humility, Tyler says he has “created this juggernaut of job creation.”

The word juggernaut is a corruption of the Sanskrit Jagannatha, meaning “Lord of the universe.” More specifically, it is a title of Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu, and the presiding deity of a 12th century temple at Puri. Each year an image of the god is placed in a “chariot” so unwieldy and cumbrous that it requires the exertions of many to wheel it to the temple in the outskirts of the city. Once started, the idol-bearing cart’s momentum is such that it crushes anything in its path, including people. According to legend, devotees would throw themselves under its wheels, like so many desperate Anna Kareninas, for reasons of self-sacrifice and salvation. To missionaries, the sumptuous and fatal chariot processions came to symbolize the material and spiritual decadence, even sadomasochism, of Hinduism (Washorne 1999). The term juggernaut has thus come to mean “a belief or an institution that elicits blind and destructive devotion to which people are ruthlessly sacrificed; an overwhelming advancing force that crushes or seems to crush everything in its path.”

There is a rhetoric of inevitability that buttresses global capitalism. Its proponents refer to it with ritual frequency as an inexorable force. An Indian-American executive says with apodictic certainty that “globalization is completely irreversible. It would be foolish to try to do so.” To modern day capitalist missionaries like Tyler, the procession of jobs from West to East, is virtuous. According to O’Shea, it is a “great, great thing.” Capitalism, he

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97 American Heritage dictionary.
98 Giddens’ (1990: 139) writes of the juggernaut of modernity as “a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of control and which could rend itself asunder.”
says, is “the powerful economic engine that has generated great success stories.”

Like a juggernaut, “it is unstoppable.”

It is easy to view Tyler as a pompous and cocksure young executive. So critical is he of a culture that he does not completely understand, so readily does he congratulate himself for creating jobs and instilling professional values. But one must give him some credit for his willingness to nail his colors to the mast and to speak without embarrassment. His observations on how Indian society works are as scathing as they are perspicacious. And next to many managers Tyler is a paragon of managerial probity. Moreover, a bit like Weber’s laboring Protestants he sees himself as a vessel serving a broader purpose. He speaks impersonally of the beneficial impact of working with Americans, of the gains to be had from trade. He is animated more by a sense of noblesse oblige than by acquisitiveness or a conviction of cultural superiority.

In a sense, capitalism has always been justified not only in terms of profit and efficiency but also with reference to the common good (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). By the alchemy of the invisible hand, self-interest coincides with the general interest. Trade is also said to exert a civilizing influence, thereby balancing the more malignant passions (Hirschman 1997). In this regard, Tyler says outsourcing fosters self-confidence among workers and undermines prejudice. By way of illustration, he relates the case of a female

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99 Leyshon (1997: 143) writes that “most of the globalization discourses which emerge from within political communities tend to be far more simplistic in their general tenor, if not evangelical in tone, and display a burning faith in the ‘natural’ benevolence and ‘obvious’ utility of markets.”

100 Compare Tyler’s portrayal of the juggernaut with Marx’s (1976/1867: 799): “All means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange him from the intellectual potentialities of the labour-process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour-process to a despotism more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital.” Nonetheless, Marx did argue that British capitalism and imperialism would bring progressive change to India.

101 Moreover, by linking nations in a relationship of mutual advantage trade is also thought conducive to peace and prosperity (Hirschman 1997; Polanyi 1944).
employee. One of the most technically-skilled workers, she has met the Dynamix team in
New York City, and speaks regularly with U.S. and U.K. customers, a privilege granted to a
small minority of workers. Her manager was a Christian who speaks mainly English at home,
while she is dark-skinned and from a poor family. “I guarantee her parents don’t speak
English,” Tyler says emphatically. Somewhat shy, she “doesn’t hang out” with workers after
hours at nightclubs. Yet she commands respect and her colleagues regard her “words with
reverence.” When the young manager passed her up for a promotion, she was deeply hurt.

Dismayed by the manager’s prejudice, Tyler and upper-level management decided her
to promote her to a shift leader, which he says is like the “holy grail for an entry-level
employee.” To their surprise, she demurred: “Thank you for this honor but I can’t accept.” “In
her heart she decided she could not,” says Tyler. With eighty-percent of employees at the
associate or entry-level, there are very few shift leader jobs and thus “saying no to it is like
saying no to a whole world of possibilities, like saying goodbye to her dreams for the three
years.” Tyler had an extended conversation with her about “bias and emotions.” He tried to
“address her hurt” and to “rebuild her sense of self.” After three days of discussion and
deliberation, she eventually agreed to take the position and “she’s just radiant” every time
Tyler sees her. She does not speak badly of the manager, who was mildly reprimanded, but
simply does not want to deal with him.

**Materialism and Dashed Hopes**

Tyler wants his employees to treat the firm as a “team, as a special company.” He says
that training and skill development “never stop” and that customer requirements become
increasingly complex. Working with Americans has a “dramatic impact on how people see
themselves as individuals.” What matters is not where you are from, but what “hub that you’re
in.” Workers are happy for friends that do well and this fellow-feeling “cuts across caste.”
Early on, workers felt a palpable loyalty to the company, as only one out of fifty employees left Dynamix for other jobs. (Two others left for family reasons, and this over two years). Attrition began to rise steadily as the outsourcing industry grew. There was and remains a sentiment among workers’ families “that foreigners just using you for a few years. They feared that the jobs would move to Philippines.” Presently, the company’s annual attrition rate is around fifteen percent, which is good by industry standards. Tyler says that some workers leave for money while others, especially women, want day jobs.\(^{102}\) Turnover is highest “where managers are bad, where they’re rough with people or seen as secretive.” It also tends to be high when there is no work because “if there’s no work they know that their career is going nowhere.” Ever concerned with his employees’ well-being, he writes in a technology magazine that “lifestyle disorders, stress, unfair treatment, and the repetitive nature of the job often keep employees away from work. However, team leaders can play a vital role in curing many of these….problems by giving her challenging and accomplishable goals.”

In the beginning, employees used to say meekly, “Sir, I just want a good job.” Now they have other choices. Before they “wouldn’t give any hint of a doubt. They wouldn’t ask anything.” Now they want to know about career path progression and income prospects. For most of its BPO processes, the company has a six month training cycle but, within four months, one woman left saying she had a better offer. While Tyler laments the impact of turnover on business and morale, in the longer view, he felt it to be beneficial. “The attrition is fifteen percent; before that it was ten. That’s 100 people a year. That’s good in terms of the impact on society. It’s a function of the industry’s and the kid’s immaturity. I’ve heard of 90% attrition in call centers. I’ve heard of 60-70% pay raises at captives [i.e. corporate subsidiaries].”

\(^{102}\) Even though they provide a home drop from 10:30 at night to 4:30 in the morning, parents are concerned about their daughters riding the train at night.
O’Shea, the CEO, says that what made Dynamix a viable business proposition was first and foremost labor arbitrage. When wages rise to 20% per annum, the company’s raison d’être comes into question. Nevertheless, Tyler says the rising wages were “good,” with an unexpected certainty. Josh, an American in his mid-twenties who had worked at an IT company in Bangalore, begs to differ. “What do you become more assertive about?” he asks rhetorically and then gave a pause. “Money? If so, then the country isn’t gaining anything in terms of leadership. It doesn’t do anyone any good.” Josh also complains about the lack of loyalty and employees’ tendency to put their own interests first. They are very competitive, he says, and there are times where they do not help colleagues on a project because it might undermine their own efforts to get ahead. “They don’t recognize how helping a co-worker can also help them in the longer-run,” he says. “In India there’s no secret about wages. Everyone knows how much everyone is making. This breeds jealousy. People don’t think like a team…And some of the ancillary side effects are more materialism. People become more money-oriented.”

Indian circumspection gives way to American directness, which is evidenced in the ratcheting up of expectations and demands, in the willingness to look the gift horse in the mouth. Tyler says that there are now “a lot of grievances around compensation and promotions.” A promotion should have meaning, Tyler believes, but some feel, “Why can’t you make an exception for me?” Before workers thought it was great to have the vice president come in and see how things work, now they walk into the office impudently and raise Cain: “But sir, what about my false hopes!” cried one worker. Tyler says that she said it six times, and while he found her plaint rather absurd—she had received a 40% pay raise recently—a suggestion of falsity, about her hopes, about the job, about the entire enterprise, seemed to linger in the back of his mind.103

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103 She had been promised an annual salary of 1.8 lakhs ($4,090), but was given only 1.7 lakhs ($3,862). It is not that the difference is unimportant but that, by national standards, she is doing very well.
Migrating to India alongside jobs are liberal hire and fire policies. One employee who has been with the company’s legal services department for nine months as a “senior production associate,” says there is “lots of competition” within BPO companies and that “one bad phase can pull you down.” Asked about the relationship between Dynamix and its Western customers, he says that the “client catches the boss’ neck; the buck stops at the client’s neck,” which I take to mean that the customer is always right. “One bad client feedback,” he continues, “and you’re under scrutiny. There are no protections.” Nonetheless were it not for the BPO jobs, “we would yet be looking. The U.S. has helped in building up a third world country. The very fact that we’re surviving in the market is a sign that we have potential.”

I ask Tyler about the nature of work being outsourced, and whether the relatively low level of skill it required was a source of dissatisfaction. He noted how fascinating seemingly mundane work was for some. As Tyler’s “right-hand woman” says about the early years of the industry, “All of us were very young. The BPO market hadn’t really come into being. I had never heard of something like this. Making power point presentations was pretty exciting for me. I started understanding what the bankers wanted.” This was essentially a happy narrative of Indian workers getting high-paying, if mundane, jobs they needed and learning some valuable business lessons on the side. Tyler, for his part, was filled with the gratifying feeling that he was serving a useful social purpose.

But as the excitement born of working for a multinational waned and the drudgery dawned on people, labouring on power point slides for eighteen months ceases to be exciting. Since I am not a reporter, Tyler says he can be frank with me. In media interviews, he plays up the prospects of knowledge services, “high-end work” that “requires an MBA,” such as doing research for a company and developing a business plan. But he would not tell them “anything about the vulnerability of vendors” in a competitive global market. Nor would he
mention that so-called knowledge services constitute “only a fraction” of the company’s revenues. (Seventy percent of its revenues is from low-end EDGAR services). It is the same with their major competitors. “There is a limit to the complexity of what’s going to be done here,” Tyler says.

As one worker remarks, “We have SOPs [standard operating procedures]. We try to streamline the operation so that things don’t go wrong. Somebody else is handling quality parameters. We don’t put a lot of our knowledge input. We can’t make decisions.” Another worker with two years experience says that in SEC filings, “kids don’t know what they’re doing. For KPO, all they’re doing is getting data and generating something in Excel. For legal processing, what are they doing? Preparing petitions, filings. Will they ever be involved in the contents of the case? They don’t expect them to crack their brains and actually analyze things.”

**Full Circle**

The currents of optimism and skepticism wash back and forth. For Tyler, the problems did not crowd out but, just as effectively, began to obscure the benefits. The question of the purpose of work rose afresh, as if it had only gone into a brief remission. Once the transcendental support, the faith in the juggernaut, was removed, the edifice of daily work foundered. The result was a meaningless shambles, a desire to quit India as soon as possible. At times a kind of melancholy overwhelms Tyler. The company’s HR department, he says, is “falling apart.” He says that “we have lapses and don’t really treat people well” as if confessing a minor sin. He asks repeatedly, with doubt perceptible in his voice, whether I think that outsourcing is good for India.

Hume (1983: 48), with the Stoics, once observed that sympathy “with persons remote from us [is] much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous.” Similarly, Viner (1972:
writes that “spatial distance operates to intensify psychological distance.” When Tyler moved back to New York as the vice president of marketing, thus removing himself from the daily rigors and rewards of management, he gradually lost the sense of purpose that had previously sustained him on the job. Far from the madding crowd, an overwhelming sense of lassitude would divert him from work, would send him sauntering from his home office to the adjacent room to work on puzzles. His pay was adequate, but the job lost its meaning as a vocation. He was haunted by what Sennett (2006: 83) calls the “specter of uselessness.”

We are at a café in New York’s Soho district and Leonard Cohen croons “Suzanne” softly on the stereo and we are drinking coffee, which would cost anywhere from four cents to $1.50 some 7,800 miles away in Bombay. Tyler has left Dynamix. “I became de-energized,” he says forlornly. In offshoring, Tyler was able to reconcile the prods of an activist faith and the material need to make a living. However, as the days passed, the troubles and banalities intrinsic to the work had diminished its appeal and left him bothered and vaguely depressed. The capitalist juggernaut powered on but its spell—the sense of calling and the meaning it provided to worldly activities—had been broken. “I started dreading the days that I would have to force them to do something that they find boring. Being integrated into a multinational is exciting for them for a year. Then the cold, hard reality sets in,” he says with hard-lived wisdom. That is why the business world is depressing and that is why Tyler left.

He applied for a job counseling street children and is currently reading Piaget.

Some time later Tyler tells me that the position never came through. He has come full circle and it is hard not to see the irony: “I work at a big law firm doing the kind of work I used to outsource.”
CONCLUSION:
OF CYBER-COOLIES AND TECHNO-POPULISTS

The restructuring of space and time brought about by globalization occurs according to certain ideals. The purpose of this chapter is to explore these normative visions in greater detail. This imaginative dimension of space has been variously characterized as “symbolic,” “relational,” and “representational” (Lefebvre 1991; Cassirer 1996; Harvey 2006). This does not mean that it is “false” or any less real than empirical reality. However much they diverge from the facts on the ground, these visions animate particular processes and practices and have very real social impacts. Yet in keeping with our central motif, it is also necessary to look at how they are transformed through social practice. The notion of imitative counterpoint has been useful in this regard in understanding what happens when reality is forced and coaxed into a mold in which it only partly fits. To resolve what Wuthnow (1989: 5) calls the “problem of articulation” between ideas and social context, one needs to look at how symbols and ideologies are interpreted in the face of concrete events. Thus we will explore two broad perspectives on offshoring and globalization, that of capital and labor, and show how they are adjusted to accommodate distinct political and economic realities. As we will see, the ideology of business cosmopolitanism takes the form of techno-populism in India. For unions, their view of worker internationalism is transformed into a vision that seeks compromise rather than confrontation with capital.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First is a discussion of what can be called business or consumer cosmopolitanism, the view that we are all denizens of an expanding global marketplace rather than of parochial nation-states. Second, the realities of uneven development, poor infrastructure, and a labor shortage in India lead outsourcing executives and their political allies to espouse a vision of technological populism that is more politically viable. Third is a discussion of worker internationalism in the context of globalization. Faced
with the reality of capital flight and individualistic worker identities, labor moves from a confrontational stance to a more accommodating posture in India—somewhere between standing ramrod straight in defiance and genuflecting to capital.

**Business and Consumer Cosmopolitanism**

The exaggerated character of the globalization discourse has already been discussed. Suffice it to say, we are yet a long way from a borderless world. Yet this fiction can be remarkably persuasive as evidenced by the remarkable sales of Thomas Friedman’s paean to globalization, *The World Is Flat* (2005: 10-11, 297). It limns a world in which national boundaries are irrelevant, where “knowledge centers” are linked together “into a single global network,” and where corporations not social movements engage in social activism (“compassionate flatism”). The flat world, he predicts, will “superempower [sic] a whole new group of innovators,” ushering in “an amazing era of prosperity and innovation.” There is even a nod to multiculturalism. As opposed the stodgy days of Western hegemony, the global economy will increasingly be driven “by a much more diverse—non-Western, non-white—group of individuals.” Freed from the shackles of colonialism and also the yoke of nationalism and socialism, Fanon’s “wretched of the earth” can now simply “plug and play” in the global economy. “You are going to see every color of the human rainbow take part,” he writes, as if the developing world has finally awoken from a prolonged siesta. Friedman’s periodization of globalization is instructive. He writes that while

> the dynamic force in Globalization 1.0 was countries globalizing, and while the dynamic in Globalization 2.0 was companies globalizing, the dynamic force in Globalization 3.0—the thing that gives it its unique character—is the newfound power of individuals to collaborate and compete globally (2005: 11).

The subject and focal point is neither the nation nor the corporation; it is the individual and, more specifically, the sovereign consumer-entrepreneur. This idea of a de-
territorialized *gemeinschaft* also undergirds consultants’ Vashishta and Vashishta’s (2006) notion of the “Offshore Nation” (always in caps). (They are not referring to the Cayman Islands mind you; the term is intentionally oxymoronic). Its defining features are described thus:

> The Offshore Nation is not one country or even one region. It is a world of buyers and sellers, all linked by a desire for higher productivity, lower costs, and matching supply with demand. It is the United States, which in 2003 spent over $10 billion on outsourced software and IT services alone. It is India, which is now exporting more than $15 billion a year in IT and business process services (2006: 13).

They provide an equally breathless account of the offshoring of services:

> Services globalization is the next step in the evolution of trade and capitalism. It is progress. It is efficiency. It is the race for competitive advantage. It is not just offshore outsourcing but the wholesale elimination of borders as a means of restructuring the free flow of services (Ibid: ix).

And so on. Quite appropriately, the Vashishta brothers dedicate their book to their “Globally Conscious Families.”

In the blessed-out atmosphere of an outsourcing industry conference the ruminations are cosmic. The world, says a panelist, “feels more wide open.” “Like the wild wild west?” asks the discussant. “This really is. This is a global services conference...These are dramatic changes.” Participants can hardly keep up with the excited momentum of their emotions. Superlatives cascade from trembling lips. There is talk of “nirvana.” Attendees are advised on how to “futurize” their organizations. Insecure professionals are told how to succeed in a globally-sourced world: “Take one step out of your comfort zone...Diversify...Take some risks...The leaders will have multiple skills, multi-functions. Be able to operate, empathize, stretch...” During another panel, one participant says that outsourcing has proceeded so far that a corporation like Cisco Systems has become so disaggregated that it is little more than a brand and website. “Does this mean, are we talking about...the death of the corporation as we know it?” asks an Indian attendee who cannot contain his enthusiasm. It is as though the
world has been turned upside down, as though the meek have inherited the earth, as though “all fixed, fast frozen relations” have been “swept away” by democratized technology.

With inverted Marxism, the business class universalizes itself. Compared to such visions of a placeless space and a timeless time of human progress, domestic considerations can seem downright provincial, even irresponsible. Globalization has changed how the world works; it is a Copernican revolution for our times. As Vikram, an Indian-American BPO executive, put it:

In my experience, America generally is the most inward looking country. We get politicians like Kerry and his sidekick Lou Dobbs. They’re losing an opportunity to build jobs. Opportunity is in the global economy not in the heartland of America. The only way to grow the economy is to accept that the U.S. isn’t the center of the world. The internet eliminated physical borders. You have to take advantage of the global economy. You cannot look to old ways of doing things. It’s political suicide but the right answer.

Similarly, according to the COO of a BPO company, American insularity may ultimately undermine American exceptionalism. Outsourcing is a harbinger of what is to come:

The challenge for the U.S. is not outsourcing but when it truly globalizes. People [there] don’t realize that the world is much bigger than the 5 mile radius in which they stay. It’ll be a real upheaval for U.S. society…Right now the U.S. is so far ahead economically, but in 20 years?

Nonetheless, for Vikram as well as Friedman the unequivocal mark of progress is the ubiquity of Western multinationals. Where Friedman marveled that he could play golf in Bangalore against a spectral backdrop of corporate logos, Vikram talks about “pizzas, cellphones, cars, computers—goods and services. Microsoft, Dell, and Sun have opened up. It’s just going to get better and better.” A row recently erupted when the founder of Infosys, Narayana Murthy, refused to play the Indian national anthem with lyrics during a visit by

104 Of the new temporality, they write: “The time clock of the average company will be drastically altered as companies no longer shut their doors at 5 and open again at 9 the next morning. Global ITO and BPO will allow companies to be truly be 24/7 enterprises. As one shift ends in New York, another will be starting in India, and when that ends yet another will start in Eastern Europe, or China, or Chile. The productivity and profitability potential of tripling the hours in the average corporate work day will be tremendous.” (Vashishta and Vashishta 2006: 213)
Indian President Abdul Kalam, saying that it would “embarrass foreigners” working for the firm (Beary 2007). While he later apologized, the incident sheds light on the cosmopolitan aspirations of the business elite. In the antiseptic vocabulary of academics, globalization produces an “outward-looking sense of place” (Pieterse 1994: 177).

In India, the new sensibility—the waxing of the global and the waning of the national—would not go unremarked upon. Shorn of the particularities of place, upwardly mobile Indians now see their country of birth as “merely one stopping place in a global employment market” (Khilnani 1999: 149) “Contributing to the inflow of foreign exchange,” Chopra (2003: 439) writes, “is seen as sufficient for realizing the dreams of national development and prosperity.” According to Deshpande (1993: 28), “the darling of the national imagination is no longer the patriotic producer but the cosmopolitan consumer who has made the world his oyster.” For Khilnani (1999: 148), the globalized strand of the middle class is no longer “constrained by the territorial frame of the nation.” As Deshpande (1998: 160) writes, “for the most influential and powerful elite fraction of this class (which would have supplied the second generation of Nehruvians), the nation is no longer the canvas for their dreams and aspirations.” The poor are erased from the canvas altogether.

**Techno-populism**

As a practical political program, then, business cosmopolitanism would not do. The B.J.P., for example, was soundly defeated at the polls in 2004 for its “India Shining” triumphalism, which was little more than the business class’ romance of itself. They celebrate the rebirth of India, the releasing of repressed civilizational energies. But to cast contemporary India as a country belatedly freed of the shackles of autarky by a set of forward-thinking politicians and brave entrepreneurs is a bold try. It is true that many bureaucratic hindrances have been removed and that parts of India have benefited greatly from expanded
international trade. What is eclipsed in such a rendering is the state’s important role in
developing the country’s pipeline of tech-savy, English-speaking labor; the very pipeline, that
is, which allows India to reap the benefits of globalization.105

Thus they are quick to call upon the state to deliver a host of public goods from which
the industry, incidentally, will also benefit. The two major concerns are infrastructure and the
dearth of “employable” talent. In terms of the former, India spent $2 billion on its road
network in 2004 as compared to the $30 spent by China (Luce 2004: 6). As for talent, venture
capitalist Vivek Paul said at an industry conference:

To answer your question about labor availability, the entire IT and BPO
business out of India constitutes less than 1% of the population in India. So
as a result you have to ask yourself, if there’s going to be a shortage of labor,
that actually is a shortage of education capacity versus a shortage of labor
(Churchill Club 2005).

Thus the techno-populist slogan of the industry group, Nasscom: “Roti, kapra, makan,
bijli \textit{aur} bijli and bandwidth” (food, clothing, housing, \textit{and} electricity and bandwidth). “Roti,
kapra, makan” was a popular slogan in the 1970’s—bijli and bandwidth is the industry’s
twist on that familiar theme. If business cosmopolitanism is the projection of the wish to be
done with national strictures and limited expectations, techno-populism is its practical
manifestation.

Executives view economic liberalization as consistent with development priorities.
After an interview, the COO of one of India’s leading outsourcing companies handed me a
wire-bound copy of Will Durant’s famous anti-colonial tract, \textit{The Case for India} (1930).
(Durant charges the British with no less than the “rape of a continent”). “Read this,” he said,
“it will teach you to take pride in India.” He keeps a large stack of copies in his office.

105 By way of a backhanded complement, an Indian executive acknowledges the state’s contribution to
education: “I think the fact that India is doing relatively well despite the fact that we had all the wrong
policies for a long time is just that, at least in the Nehruvian socialism, there was some peace and
stability. And it allowed people to focus on education. And I think the only thing that Nehru gave us
good was education. That allowed people to be in a good position when the knowledge boom came,
people actually had some skill set. And now that we know what is working, we are trying to grapple
away and get our policies in place. It’s taking a lot time to get it there.”
Globalization, he says, is in the national interest. It is a second independence. Chopra (2003: 435) writes that “In the Nehruvian vision of independent India, scientific and technological progress was defined as essential to realizing India’s unique modernity and destiny. A scientifically developed and socially progressive India was visualized as an embodiment of a timeless Indian ethos.” The industry’s needs are grafted onto this historical narrative of national development.

Still, in a country that hosts about a third of the world’s poor, the proper note of humility must be sounded. One way of doing so is to argue that globalization-related wealth will trickle down to the poor. Vikram, an executive, describes himself as a “big free trader” and thinks that “all this talk” about the growing digital divide as “bullshit.” Yet he has a real interest in the socio-economic impact of outsourcing, arguing that the boom is percolating down to the lower classes. This can be seen, he says, in the increased purchasing power of workers as the money they spend most certainly finds its way back to the “villages.” He also tells poor-boy-makes-good, Horatio Alger-like stories.

His former cleaning lady’s son, for example, spoke English very well and dreamed of going to college. He had only a pair of slacks and a dirty shirt and worked at two tea stalls in the airport, earning around Rs. 3,000 ($75) a month. Vikram’s company hired him as an office administrator and he “basically made sure that there was paper in the printer, toilet paper in the bathroom, etc.” They initially paid him Rs. 4,500 ($110) but soon bumped his pay up to Rs. 7000 ($172) as a result of his performance. And there was also the Dominoes Pizza delivery man who walked into Vikram’s office and asked for a job. Admiring his initiative, they hired him and he quickly moved up the office chain. He eventually left the job because “it wasn’t that challenging. His aspirations were in IT.” This, Vikram says, is a case of someone who would have had a professional job but did not have the opportunity. Once given the chance, he excelled.
Another way to observe the trickle-down effect, says a BPO executive, is to consider “the overall employment generation including support staff.” He reels off a list of people who support his office that “didn’t have a job before or at least at the level they have now.” For all of these workers, this work is “much more valuable” than what they were doing before. According to the former executive Tyler Pfeiffer, his company employs 34 support personnel who earn between Rs. 30,000 ($720) and Rs. 48,000 ($1,155) a year. These individuals, he says as evidence of their modest backgrounds, mostly “don’t speak English.” (Extrapolating from these figures, the number of support staff employed by the industry could be around 29,500).

Others argue that globalization is eroding status distinctions like caste. Whereas a typical Indian employer, Vikram says, would ask “a number of questions” about a prospective employee’s family and caste background, outsourcing companies are equal opportunity employers and as such are unconcerned about social criteria in hiring. As the Wall Street Journal reports, “India's rapid economic expansion—and its booming high-tech sector—are beginning to chip away at the historical system that reserved well-paying jobs for upper castes and menial jobs for Dalits [untouchables]” (Beckett 2007: A1). The article quotes the chairman of Microsoft India as saying, “We don’t give a damn about any of these differences in caste or religion.” Talent, he says, is all that matters. At a small IT service company I visited, six out of the fifty two workers said they were from backward or scheduled castes. Says the company’s CEO:

I think the kind of people we hire, you would never hire otherwise. We are not hiring from the best schools, we are not hiring the best people. This because there’s so much scarcity, we don’t have too much flexibility. If we get somebody we have to hire them, it doesn’t matter who he is. We have

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106 Ramesh, the cleaner makes 2,000 rupees/month (part-time); Mahendra makes Rps. 3,500 month; Vinod, works at night, making photocopies and performing various chores and earns Rs. 2,800; The “coffee guy” makes five rupees on each cup of coffee and six rupees tea. Their driver’s base salary is Rs. 5-6,000/month but can reach Rs. 12,000, even as high as 20,000 depending on how late they keep him at the office.
had developers that are barely able to speak a word of English and they're very good developers. ¹⁰⁷

Yet this is the exception to the rule; even the Journal reports that such instances are “rare.”¹⁰⁸ A small survey of 150 workers I undertook found that 79% were Hindu, 84% of whom were of upper-caste or well-off middle-caste background. Another survey of IT workers found similarly that 86% came from upper castes and/or economically better-off communities (Upadhya and Vasavi 2006). This is because, while class and caste are not isomorphic, most Dalits are very poor and come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. While the federal government reserves 23% of positions for Dalits and oppressed castes as part of an affirmative action program, only two private sector companies—Bharti Enterprises and Infosys—have said that they will also set aside jobs (Wax 2007). And even at multinational companies they often face biased recruiters (See Chapter 5). According to another study, informal barriers to employment like class and caste and most specifically parent’s education mean that only “between 4 and 7 percent of rural Indians will qualify to gain entry” (Krishna and Brihmadesam 2006: 3310). Says an HR manager at a call center, “We hire from the middle, the higher middle class. Convent, private schools, good schools mostly. The exceptions are very few.”

An even larger problem with the trickle-down argument is that the industry remains at a remove from the domestic economy. According to consultants Gartner (2005):

India is one of the few countries in the world where the impact of the services export oriented business far outweighs that of the domestic side...The overall impact of ICT development in the country is skewed heavily around the unique dynamics of this services export trend, often to the detriment of the domestic opportunity.

¹⁰⁷ Working conditions, incidentally, are better in large companies, which suggests that caste and class inequalities are also reproduced within the industry.
¹⁰⁸ As a trade union official writes, “If we keep in mind the hierarchical caste-based division of Indian society, the workers in this sector predominantly belong to the upper castes with a marginal presence of people from the backward or scheduled castes or scheduled tribes” (Pradeep 2004).
The COO of a BPO company discusses the limitations of outsourcing-generated employment: “It’s too much hype. Travel and tourism have a bigger multiplier effect on the economy than the IT, ITES and BPO sectors combined. In terms of jobs, it’s a trickle. Where are the jobs going to come from? It’s not a panacea for all ills.” And Vikram’s views on the digital divide aside and despite India’s image as a high-tech powerhouse, the country has extremely low rates of internet and personal computer penetration (Economist 2005).

Another factor to consider is the industry’s dependence on the Western market. According to Taylor and Bain (2005: 270),

The Indian outsourced sector emerged as a dependent niche market for developed nations’ requirements. This reliance on labour arbitrage in the provision of low-value, standardized services was producing commoditization of the Indian industry...threating profit margins and undermining efforts to diversify from mass production work.

However globalized their supply chains, the ownership and corporate governance of multinational corporations, “remain national rather than global. Shares are held by individuals and entities from the home country rather than from foreign countries. Most seats on the board of directors are held by home country nationals, enabling the retention of control within that country” (Yeung 1998: 300). This obtains for the ownership of intellectual property as well. Also, most sophisticated work and R&D remains in the home country.

In other words, large multinationals have learned how to leverage the “flat” world to their advantage. Cross-border opportunities give corporations more power vis-à-vis the individual worker and the lower-level supplier. In terms of the latter, it carves out spaces for suppliers in developing countries but they must understand their subordinate role in the global value chain (Lynn 2005). Large firms can use their considerable clout to demand that suppliers constantly cut costs in addition to improvements in quality and productivity. An ABN-AMRO contract with Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services, for example, includes a clause that mandates productivity gains. CIO magazine suggests that companies have at least
two subcontractors “and make them compete for your dollars” (Worthen 2007). And more and more suppliers are learning this lesson and acting in the same way. They are also beginning to outsource work to other developing countries like China, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines.

Thus questions arise about the costs and benefits of giving large incentives to an industry that employs less than a percentage of the population. (At the generous estimate of 250 million, the “middle-class” makes up 22% of the population). Given that there is also no guarantee that the jobs will stay in India, Ross (2006) argues such concessions amount to little more than the buying of short-term employment. According to a report by the company Evalueserve (2004: 11), by 2010, India may become “too costly to provide low-end services at competitive costs.” As Vivek Paul put it, “we'll have to swallow the same medicine of globalization” (Waldman 2004). More generally, compared to its heavy spending on higher education, India invests a minuscule amount in primary education (Shurmer-Smith 2000).

And while the Indian political establishment—spanning Hindu nationalists to secular moderates to reconstructed Communists—is largely supportive of economic liberalization and market reform, it is still unclear whether the large majority of the population has benefited. Chopra (2003: 420) cites a report by the Indian Planning Commission’s Special Group on Job Creation, which finds that “the number of jobs in the post-liberalization decade of the 1990s was less than a third of the corresponding number in the decade preceding liberalization.” Absent “corrective measures,” the report predicts that in the next five years the number of unemployed people will double to 45 million.

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109 Such strategies are particularly problematic for smaller vendors as the CEO of one company notes: “The cost has come down. Part of it is the fact that you have vendors. In fact we get killed because you can always get freelancers and the freelance cost is minimum. So, let’s say you want to get something done. You want to get your whole thesis written for example. You could outsource it, right? And you could get it done for minimum cost, which would make it worthwhile for you.”

110 This is in part due to the fact multinationals are increasingly insisting on geographic diversity, so that in the event of a natural disaster or power outage work will not grind to a halt. As one executive put it, “They want disaster recovery and want providers to have two different functioning facilities, where data is redundant and things can be worked on.”
Worker Internationalism

Labor’s take on globalization is as sobering as capital’s is euphoric. Although unions of all stripes are clamoring for “fair trade” and a more socially-inclusive model of globalization, there are considerable discrepancies as to how best to realize these goals. Where technological advancements make it possible to move work seamlessly from Los Angeles to Bombay, does not the job security of the Angeleno vary in inverse relation to that of the Bombay-ite? What can fair trade possibly mean in a context where workers in developing countries have an interest in the insecurity of their counterparts in the developed world? The political opportunity structure for labor movements—at the national and transnational levels—has thus been altered significantly by globalization and offshoring.

Organized labor has responded in essentially two ways to offshoring. The first is largely domestic. Unions like the Communication Workers of America view offshoring as a threat to the security of workers and the health of the U.S. economy. They brand companies that move work abroad “unpatriotic” and employ slogans such as “Keep Jobs in America.” The AFL-CIO (2004) issued the following statement on offshoring, which underlines the complexity of the issue: “We support raising living standards around the world, but we steadfastly reject and resist any notion that improving living standards elsewhere requires sacrificing good jobs and living standards for American workers and their families.” Likewise, the major Indian unions maintain a domestic focus. They say that they want outsourcing to continue as it provides jobs and foreign exchange and “are prepared compromise on working conditions to make the country strong.” Moreover, some unions along with the government have opposed the insertion of labor standards into trade agreements, coming out against, for example, the inclusion of a social clause at the World Trade Organization, arguing that it is motivated by “protectionist” intentions.
The second approach is internationalist. Unions of this persuasion argue that because the livelihoods of workers in the global north and south are linked through trade, it makes little sense for unions to pursue an exclusively national agenda. There is a less a focus on stopping offshoring than on dealing with its consequences. While in India, I spent a considerable amount of time with a new union dedicated to organizing call center workers. Supranational in its conception, it is funded by a European non-governmental organization. The purpose of the collaboration is to develop “rules and guidance for stakeholders for making offshoring sustainable in social and economic terms.” The emerging consensus is to try to ensure that core labor rights are respected globally and to work toward some degree of uniformity in labor standards.\footnote{In contrast to addressing technology-based offshoring, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), for one, is focusing on global cooperation in organizing the property services industry. While the janitorial and security jobs are not moving, workers in far-flung locales are connected by the same global employer. By developing a transnational network of local unions, they envision a day where they will have the clout to negotiate a common code of conduct and workers’ rights. It may be that resources are better spent organizing in this sector as its blue-collar workforce is more amenable to unionization than, say, call center workers and software programmers. Such efforts are in their initial stages.}

But while the idea of labor internationalism is very appealing, there are enormous obstacles to its realization. I have already mentioned the conceptual problems regarding conflicting interests in a global economy. In addition, unionization rates have been dropping steadily in the affected countries; labor laws everywhere are being “reformed”; and, while India is presently the global hub of offshore back office services, China is not far behind, raising the specter of artificially-depressed wages, poor working conditions, and the denial of labor rights.

**False Consciousness and the “Anxiety of Utopia”**

Entering the offices of a union affiliated with the Communist Party of India, one has distinct the feeling that time stopped slightly before perestroika. The tables and desks and
windows are rimmed in red paint. Framed pictures of the Great Wall of China, Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh sitting ponderously with pen in hand, hang over doorways. My appointment is with the union secretary, a short bespectacled man in a windbreaker. A calendar pinned to the partition by his desk reads, “To fight global capital, global unity of workers.”

None of the Indian trade unions say they are against international outsourcing. They do, however, have major misgivings about the political-economic framework in which it occurs. “There has been a serious development in the country for ten to fifteen years,” the secretary says gravely. “All labor laws have been put on hold to face international competition. Hire and fire with social security and unemployment [insurance] is one thing. Without it, it’s different. There’s nothing to fall back on.” Similarly, an official of a rival union points to things like privatization, the contract system, and voluntary retirement schemes. “We are opposing this tooth and nail. Like hire and fire in your country,” he says, pointing an accusatory finger. The government is of little help; its mindset, the secretary says with understatement, is “not to indulge trade unions.” And it is within this “framework that they’ve started BPO/ITES.”

This strategy, he says, is being influenced by the reality of widespread unemployment: “The government feels like this is the best way create employment, for the jobs come to us.” But while the “profitability of MNCs is increased, the country is not getting a share. For every dollar earned in America, only 30 cents comes to India. They are free from all income taxes. This is law of the jungle now: ‘Let the market prevail.’ This is going to be counter-productive.” By “putting all eggs in one basket, in exports,” moreover, the country is “vulnerable to ups and downs in American and European markets. China is doing far better; their domestic market is growing. Here, the domestic market is growing only for a section of people.” The government, he says, wants to promote India as a superpower in IT, which is “propaganda” for the privileged classes. While acknowledging that “BPO and IT are contributing a lot to GDP,” he says they want a fairer distribution of the spoils.
Foreign capital is thus predatory; corporations “are making money at the cost of the people, the country.” But perhaps the proper metaphor is not of a vulture circling overhead, but of a mother nurturing her child into lifelong dependence and incomplete individuality, as was discussed in Chapter 5. Under Western tutelage India, moves forward but is held back. The Bush administration, after all, has announced its intention to groom India in the U.S. image, one superpower rearing another. Globalization may signify a new “tryst with destiny” but it can only be redeemed on Western terms.

Worksites are branded electronic sweatshops and workers, cyber-coolies. But the stridency of the critique is qualified by a number of factors, such as the individualism of the workforce and its elite employment base, the supply-demand imbalance that results in rising wages and decent work conditions, and the possibility of capital flight. Unions regard worker individualism and indifference to unions as a species of false consciousness—the inability to understand the true conditions of one’s productive existence. “For him the entire world is in the screen. It’s like a prison he works in,” says a call center worker and union member. High pay and free or subsidized transportation and food merely gloss over this fact: “they have that but if you go into the employee you’ll find the problems.” Writes a trade union official:

A worker who performs duties in a call center would not like the use of the term “worker” to denote him/her, since the business puts the “respectable” tag of “executive.” The use of the term “worker” does not go well with the neatly clad young men/women in their twenties working in cosy shops littered with computers and modern equipment that gives an ambience entirely different from the floors of a factory. They would rather like to be called IT professionals or knowledge professionals…Yet, all this does not obliterate the fact that they are skilled labour working for a firm, hired by the management to expend labour for some hours under a set of rules framed by the management (Pradeep 2004).

Higher-than-average salaries, says another official, “lead to a false status”: “There is no trade union movement in the IT industry. They're exploited. They get money but they're

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112 While the working conditions compare favorably with other “traditional” Indian industries, a major obstruction to organizing efforts is the high level of monitoring. “From day one,” says an official, “they say come in, work here, but don’t talk about trade unions.” In workspaces, there are closed-circuit cameras and nearly “everything is recorded and monitored in call centers.”
overworked. They are very upset but are afraid to speak out. There is no bar to forming a union. But they don't come near us because they're high paid.” Workers do have a myriad of complaints, but the salaries they draw and their impressive titles convince them that they are upwardly mobile professionals and not downtrodden workers in need of collective organization. Such titles are also a corporate strategy to bring workers outside the purview of labor laws: “workmen” are covered; those performing managerial functions or entrepreneurial roles are not. In adopting the professional title, workers “forfeit rights for an intangible sense of status and social standing…I don’t mean to sound cruel but if that’s what they want, then I don’t care. Go exploit yourself. I can’t help you if you don’t want to help yourself.”

False consciousness is further exacerbated by the nature of the work. Whereas with the physical stress of manual labor “you feel it now,” you experience “mental stress after some time,” says an organizer. “This is the new economy,” says another, “Physical exertion is self-evident. The long-term repercussions of mental stress are not.” Of his son who works 12 hours a day in the IT industry, a union secretary says,

…the flexibility’s there but its brainwork. I tell my son that the brain takes 80% of our blood circulation. If you go on taxing your brain like this, it will result in the long-term damage to the mind. At any other job, you stay up to 35 years. Not here. Safety is becoming a big problem; especially for girls. [The murder of a call center worker by her driver] was one incident; it showed how vulnerable they are.

Another official says that because outsourcing is new, “the health hazard impact has not been felt.” Only later will workers begin to complain about “neck pain and chest pain. All these complaints will come. Youngsters are running a race; only after the race will they get tired. Today they are insensitive.”

But even unions are afraid of capital flight, an example of what Jameson (1990: 207) has called “the anxiety of Utopia,” the fear of what would happen if their designs (to organize a majority of workers and bargain up wages and conditions) were fully realized. They have thus scaled-back their ambitions: modest organizing goals mixed with occasional agitation. It
is a market-friendly strategy of “sustainable globalization.” As an official of a communist union puts it, “Our slogan is defend the industry, defend the interest of the worker. Both we follow, other trade unions don’t. Industry has to grow and flourish, but a share of the profit has to come.” The major unions are concerned about labor issues in the industry but generally feel that outsourcing employees are better off than other workers. Organizing them is not a top priority though they announce their intention to do so repeatedly in the press. As the same official explains, “Workers in IT and BPO aren't coming nearer to us. We are there to lead them. They are fearing that they will lose their jobs. We are now trying to go nearer to them. The possibilities are there.”

It is this Leninist approach that the new union dedicated to organizing ICT workers seeks to distance itself. As a participant at their executive council meeting in 2006 argued, “We must project the organization as something completely new.” The reason for this recasting is that the political environment is currently hostile to unions, which “are seen as anti-company and anti-establishment.” By projecting themselves as free and democratic they think that industry will prefer them to unions on the communist left. The goal is to reach a point where employers are confident in the union as an honest broker, a point forcefully made at the meeting by a scholar and union advocate. He recalls meeting with the president of a large Indian IT firm and discussing the idea of unionization with him: “He said, ‘For god’s sake don’t do this, not in my company, you’ll spoil everything.’ That is the name we have and we need to remove it.” He advises the union not to dwell on the negatives. “Then you’re challenging the employer. Then you’re putting the employer on the defensive. You should appeal to them.”

Traditional unions are portrayed as self-interested and combative. Someone says they sometimes function like “gangster organizations.” Their attitude is that “my nose is more important than your job.” The new union, by contrast, does not “want to sacrifice jobs to grow [its] strength.” They should “take a different tack.” They “don’t have to show brawn or
strength, we’re dealing with knowledge workers. Not that we’re losing our trade union values.” For a slogan, someone suggests, “Mobilize the intellectual capital in India.” Another proffers: “Adding human value to the techno-culture.” But there is one dissent. “It’s hard core union activity,” says a veteran unionist, “We need a direct message. We’re gathering people who have nothing to lose but their chains. ‘You can’t do it alone. You have to do it together.’ That’s it. We have to give a straightforward meaning.” The consensus that emerged is to emphasize the immutably social character of labor. Deploying the space-place dichotomy, workplace alienation is juxtaposed to the possibility of a sense of “belonging, happiness and security and power.” As an organizer says:

You’re all doing routine, repetitive things where there isn’t much satisfaction. You’re tied down to technology. You are being individualized, compartmentalized. Money will not give you satisfaction. It will only reduce your dissatisfaction. We have to counter this…You merely exchange words, you don’t exchange feelings. That is something we have to exploit. Trade unions mean working collectively to achieve satisfaction…How do you understand others? For you this is through the screen. You are dealing with U.S. customers, how they treat you. What type of relationship are we trying to promote? Social needs where you want others to recognize you. In the BPO sector, workers have this need…to be recognized by your other employees.

In addition to satisfying the need for respect and recognition, they also seek to attend to worker health issues. Employees complain of burning eyes from staring at monitors. In Bangalore, one worker says, most companies are sharing headsets: “We are landing into ear infections.” Organizing campaigns could include eye and ear check-ups, suggests a union member, so workers see that they union is also looking out for their welfare. And in the heady atmosphere, another suggests that they eventually they could offer some form of “health insurance based on ear and eyes.” Additionally, someone suggests the union try to educate workers’ families, as “night work creates social problems in the house. Workers are becoming self-centered, aloof. They need some sort of counseling…A trade union of a new type needs to handle this.”
The comparatively good conditions of work also pose problems for organizers. As a government minister put it, they have “air-conditioned offices, free lunch, disco parties, and bonuses.” Why do they need a trade union? Or as a union member says, “When you ask workers about unions, they ask why. It’s Indian psychology: how’s it going to benefit me?” The union’s answer is that it is “shortsighted to see today’s condition as something that is permanent. What’s green today may be brown tomorrow. There is no guarantee that what has happened in the U.S., UK, and Canada won’t happen here.” That is, they need to prepare members for the possibility of job flight as one “cannot expect these jobs to be here forever.” Additionally, an organizer says that “we need to prepare ourselves for a situation where the gap between supply and demand is not so large.”

The response to both these dilemmas is to promote upskilling and technical training. Only a highly-skilled workforce can ensure its own long-term employability—a sentiment which duplicates, albeit in a different moral register, loose free trade talk about employees’ responsibility for losing their jobs. (As a heavy-set consultant says of globalization’s losers: “Shame on them for not developing their skills in seven years”). They consider offering skills training and even language classes in German and Spanish to appeal to an expanded service market. The union should work “hand-in-hand” with workers and industry on building a job security and creating a safety net, which would include things like as good retirement benefits. As workers are young, the union could offer to help them manage their funds, an innocent if ominous suggestion. “Contribute something toward your future.” “Maintain the value of your investment.” It is scarcely the diction of proletarian uprising.

In emphasizing cooperation rather than confrontation with management, they consider the possibility of a training-cum-placement service, where companies will actually go through the union to hire. They also discuss approaching companies about how to reduce turnover. The idea is to tread lightly. “We should work like a honeybee. The bee is the union, the flower is industry, the honey is profit,” says an organizer. There is also a calculated appeal to
nationalism: “The concepts of “value addition” and “intellectual capital” will ensure that the industry remains in India. All decision-making is over there. The heads of BPOs don’t realize this. We have to bring this point to them in a more professional way.”

To date, the union’s progress has been slow. Despite the discursive fine-tuning, call center workers continue to see themselves as call center executives. In their main office, organizers have begun an experiment in creating a new BPO workforce that is more amenable to organizing. Each week a crowd of mostly female Dalits show up for computer literacy classes. They acknowledge that it is unlikely that these BPO aspirants will ever land jobs in the industry—mostly because they do not know English—but still feel that it may help them advance economically in some way. They have also had what they call a constructive meeting with the president of Nasscom.

But despite the attempt to appeal to the good sense of the companies, the union recognizes that its most persuasive framing device lies in exposing the seamy side of things. At times the union office seems a clearinghouse for all that is unsavory about the industry. An official tells me about a call center worker who was beaten bloody by his manager when he tried to quit. They are organizing an event to commemorate the death anniversary of a HP worker who was murdered by her driver. (They protested vigorously outside HP offices after the actual incident). A news article is posted on their website about a 29-year old call center worker who was struck and killed by a call center vehicle outside the gates of Bangalore University. “Ironically,” the article wryly notes, the cab that hit him was from the same company that he worked for.

In the end, there is something ironic about the union itself. It wants to promote the very industry it stridently criticizes. It no longer uses terms like “cyber coolie” as they know workers find them demeaning, but they seem to feel that call centers are “electronic sweatshops.” Yet they know that exploitative conditions and the cheapness of labor are the country’s chief comparative advantage. Rectify the conditions and bargain up the wages and
companies may abscond. The union is not bent upon killing the golden goose but wants to spread the lucre around. It is a delicate balance. But again, I am writing, as if the union exercised any real clout, as if it could bargain up wages and conditions so high that India would lose its cost advantage. A union seeking a “partnership” with industry is especially unlikely to have any such effect.
Conclusion

“We now have the kind of government that is oriented towards the export
ghetto of the economy on the false assumption that this can become the
locomotive that will somehow drive the rest of society. For the rest of
society it offers just a sort of charitable benevolence, the crumbs off the
table”—Roberto Unger (quoted in Muralidharan 2001).

India has been cast as an unlikely, even “roaring” capitalist success story. Breaking
the shell of its quasi-socialist past, it has been selectively integrated into the global economy
as its impressive economic growth over recent years attests. But the questions arise: is the
industry sustainable and what are its implications for national development? Even industry
backers recognize that flexible labor laws and special economic zones are short-term tactics
and do not constitute a coherent development strategy. (Tax holidays, like all vacations from
responsibility, cannot last forever). Moreover, 88% of Indians work in the informal economy
and are mostly excluded from export-oriented activity (Harriss-White 2002). The offshore
sector is rather an exception to national laws and regulations. Thus a trade union official said
testily about the limits of concessions they are willing to make to foreign capital, “You can
come here and invest but you have to follow the law of the country.”

Moreover, the gains from trade must be put in the context of rising inequalities. The
unevenness of globalization is nowhere more evident than in its differential impact on urban
and rural areas. An issue of India Today (February 2006) reports on an outsourcing sector in
which wages are rising astronomically and IT professionals are being gifted Mercedes as
bonuses and performance incentives. But the same issue also details an epidemic of suicides
among indebted Indian cotton farmers, the combined result of a local system of debt peonage,
corporate agriculture, and unequal trade relations. (Since 1997, the number of peasant
suicides is estimated to be between 10,000 and 25,000. See Sinha (2006) and Frontline
(2004)). It is almost as if the reportage is of different countries – one in which the chrome and

glass office towers of the “sunrise sector” point skyward toward the heavens and another in which gazes are directed humbly downward to the barren soil.

The great irony about the economic reforms is that India’s educational and technological and skills infrastructure was built in large part on a nationalist-minded attitude toward development (c.f. Chibber 2006). Now the entrepreneurial class says it wants the state to stay out of its business. Yet, at the same time, it wants reformed labor laws, guaranteed power, land subsidies, and tax holidays, and greater investment in education to forestall an impending skills shortage. While the state obliges, it simultaneously retreats from public arenas. As UN-Habitat (2003: 2) points out in its report, *The Challenge of Slums*, “the main cause of increases in poverty and inequality during the 1980s and 1990s was the retreat of the state.” Despite a growth rate around 8%, India spends in 1.2 percent of its GDP on health expenditures, according to UN figures. And since the mid-1990s, the UN reports that hunger and household-level food insecurity have increased—India has the largest number of undernourished people in the world and one of the highest levels of child malnutrition (Sinha 2006).

Thus some sectors of the economy are neglected while others, notably the “sunrise sectors,” are pampered like newborn children. The question then becomes: in what direction should state efforts be directed: towards the maximization of global trade or towards maximization of economic opportunities for a broad range of the populace; towards expanded opportunities for the poor and the majority of the population which lives in rural areas or towards expanded employment for the educated middle class? Will economic strategy be confined to imitation the policies of the rich countries or conforming to the mandates of the “Washington Consensus”? Or are there alternative development paths available (c.f. Guillén 2003)?

113 And as Pilger (2004) notes, “spending on private health, which only the well-off can afford, is one of the highest in the world.”
Outsourcing has always been driven by an imperative to cut labor costs; offshoring takes this rule to a catch-penny extreme. What recent business developments suggest is that more and more types of work will be globally dispersed. And workers in developed countries will increasingly be put into competition with their counterparts in poor nations on the basis of labor costs. For developed economies, the immediate concern is how to handle job losses. A longer-term and more pressing matter is the impact of trade on wages and labor conditions. But in the end, the influence of the debate over outsourcing, in which in the media pitted free-trader Bush against semi-protectionist Kerry, may be profound but perhaps in a way that no one suspects.

Much more lasting may be the effect on the attitudes of business, policymakers and the citizenry. Market liberals triumphantly declare that they have won the great outsourcing debate in the relative cool following the election. As one Indian executive turned American venture capitalist put it, “The backlash is over. It’s finished.” Backed by economists, business groups, politicians and editorial boards, this expansion into the white-collar realm is depicted as continuous with economic globalization. What this signals is the naturalization of offshoring; that is, the casting of concrete decisions by corporations to reduce labor costs by sending work overseas as inevitable. It is a confirmation of a way of thinking that de-legitimizes the state in the area of trade policy—it is now to do nothing, as if this was the way things always were and will be.

CEOs that offshore work are no longer so many Benedict Arnolds but rather patriotic corporate citizens doing what is best for America (in the eyes of shareholders and politicians, at least) and whose efforts might even have the philanthropic benefit of job creation in the developing. At the very least, there will be no major political cost for espousing views that just a few decades ago would have caused great concern. A consultant tells a group of outsourcers that the mainstream climate in 2005 was such that outsourcing resulted in negative publicity and was “presidential political fodder.” Between 2006-10, she says, there will be
some “activist opposition” but this will be dwarfed by a “general acceptance of globalization”

The key task ahead is de-naturalize globalization and to develop alternative paths of development. Moreover, the prevailing desire for economic growth must be situated within a broader framework in which social goals can be pursued simultaneously.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

BPO (business process outsourcing). The delegation of one or more IT-intensive business processes to an external provider that, in turn, owns, administers and manages the selected processes, based on defined and measurable performance metrics.

IT enabled services (ITES). Where IT is used as a tool to execute various other functions like finance and accounting, HR, payroll processing etc.

Global sourcing. A service delivery model in which work is performed by a virtual team, which may consist of personnel that are on-site, domestic, nearshore or offshore.

Naukar. A Persian loanword in Hindi meaning servant, attendant, or retainer.

Nearshore. An outsourcing term describing the provision of services from a country that is close to the client enterprise's country — for example, services provided to a US enterprise from a service provider located in Mexico.

Offshore/Offshoring. An outsourcing term describing the provision of services from a country that is geographically remote from the client enterprises — for example, services provided to a U.S. enterprise from a service provider located in India.

Outsourcing. A contractual relationship with an outside vendor that is usually characterized by the transfer of assets, such as facilities, staff or hardware. It can include facilities management (for data centers or networks), application development and maintenance functions, end-user computing or business process services.

Sourcing. The procurement of resources — whether from internal or external sources — to accomplish business objectives. Sourcing purely from external sources is known as "outsourcing."

Source: Gartner (2004)
APPENDIX ONE

SURVIVING NIGHT SHIFTS

Sleep is needed by all human beings – even plants appear to have rest periods. The human body naturally follows a 24-period of wakefulness and sleep that is regulated by an internal biological clock. The body clock also regulates cycles in body temperature, hormones, heart rate, and other body functions, and is linked to nature’s cycle of light and darkness.

For hundreds of decades we have been sleeping in the dark and waking in the light. When we attempt to do the opposite of this set body program, we are fighting against generations of programming.

By working in night shifts, we are fighting the natural wake-sleep pattern. We hence find it difficult to stay awake and alert and more often than not, the body reacts unfavorably – typical reactions being burning in the eyes, lack of sleep, fatigue, stomach disorders, body ache, irritability, etc.

However, it is not impossible to reset the internal biological clock– all it requires is little effort from our side to consciously regulate the biological clock so that it depends on us and not on daylight or darkness for its functioning: and the catalysts that will help us achieve this are:

Sleep:

Set the stage for sleep even though it might be broad daylight outside. Wearing dark glasses on the way home if we working the night shift prevents the morning sunlight from activating our internal biological clock. Following bedtime rituals, making sleep a top priority, keeping a regular sleep schedule, setting rules with family and friends and making the bedroom pitch dark will help us to fall asleep and stay asleep!!!

Nutrition:

Eating a fiber rich diet, drinking plenty of water, limiting consumption of caffeine and alcohol and maintaining a regular eating schedule will ensure that we have the adequate energy to survive the night shifts.

Fitness and Alertness:

Regular exercise goes a long way in keeping fit and being alert. However, exercise is alerting and raises the body temperature, hence it should not be done close to bedtime. To keep alert – identify the crests and troughs of your body, learn power napping techniques, take a brisk walk outside during breaks and most importantly, give yourself permission to relax everyday!!!

Balancing work & family and social life

While working different hours, it becomes difficult to balance work and personal time. That is why it is important to talk with family members and friends about our concerns. We can ensure that we schedule special as well as regular times with them – and if we plan it well, it becomes something we look forward to.

And all along a ‘mantra’ that you should keep in mind is: ‘My 2 a.m. is the rest of the world’s 9 a.m’. This mantra combined with the catalysts will help you make the best of your life at _____BPO!
APPENDIX TWO

PACMan Parameters for Front Office for August, 2004

4 Parameters for August PACMan
1. AHT – Average Handled Time – 30% weightage
2. Quality Score – 50% weightage
3. PKT Score – Preoduct Knowledge Test Score – 10% weightage
4. Personal Attributes – 10% weightage

Rating System

AHT > 7:00 • 1 point
= 5:31 to 7:00 • 2 points
= 5:00 to 5:30 • 3 points
= 4:30 to 5:00 • 4 points
< 4:30 • 5 points

Quality Score < 75% • 1 point
= 75 to 80% • 2 points
= 80 to 85% • 3 points
= 85 to 90% • 4 points
> 90% • 5 points

PKT Score < 75% • 1 point
= 75 to 80% • 2 points
= 80 to 85% • 3 points
= 85 to 90% • 4 points
> 90% • 5 points

Personal Attributes – A subjective rating given by the TL (from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5) judging the CSP on attributes such as General behaviour and conduct, Schedule Adherence, Discipline, Initiative, Team Involvement, Team Building, Professionalism, etc.

Disqualifiers
Following shall disqualify an employee from earning a PACMan incentive:
• Less than 2 PACMan points on Quality Score. Quality score has to be > 75%
• 3 or more ‘Same Day leaves’ in a month or 6 or more in the Quarter
• 3 or more instances of latecoming
• 3 or more instances of Breaks being exceeded

Note that the Average PACMan score shall be truncated or rounded off to the nearest integer.
Eg 1) If Avg PACMan Score = 2.49, then PACMan rating = 2
Eg 2) If Avg PACMan Score = 2.50, then PACMan rating = 3

Example: What is my Average PACMan for August if my AHT = 3:50, Quality Score = 78%, PKT Score = 92%, Personal Attributes Rating = 3?

AHT Rating = 5 X 0.3 = 1.5
Quality Score Rating = 2 X 0.5 = 1
PKT Score Rating = 5 X 0.1 = 0.5
Personal Attributes Rating = 3 X 0.1 = 0.3
Average PACMan Score = 1.5 + 1 + 0.5 + 0.3 = 3.3 ≈ 3 PACMan points for August
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**Conferences**