

Socio-economic Impacts of Globalisation on Young Adults in India: A Study of Call
Centres in the Environs of New Delhi

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Abstract

Call centres are high on the list of service industry jobs that have been outsourced and relocated to India. Conditions of employment in such call centres are unique. Though call centre employees live and work in India, they are required to organise their lives in terms of American or European time, celebrations and communication styles to put their customers “at ease”. Moreover, these call centres advertise a Western lifestyle combined with a handsome salary to the young adults, luring them to join the industry. Once on the job, the employees are trained to work in an environment where they not only adopt English language pseudonyms and talk with the “right accent”, but also experience glimpses of the advertised Western lifestyle through training, the office atmosphere and various socialisation practices. Hence, the working hours, training processes and work ethic all encourage a particular way of life not the norm in Indian workplaces in particular, nor Indian society, at large. Such labour expectations influence the lifestyles, social behaviours and identities of these employees. Based on the qualitative analysis of information collected from fieldwork conducted with 70 New Delhi call centre employees and ten employers (between November 2004 and March 2005), in this thesis, I argue that international call centres in India are active sites of globalisation causing the various socio-economic changes and influencing the identities of their young adult employees. Hence, this thesis provides an in-depth micro-level analysis of the role of service sector workplaces - active participants in the process of globalisation - as vehicles for socio-economic change among young adult employees, in India.

Résumé

Les centres d'appels figurent de façon prééminente parmi les emplois dans l'industrie des services à avoir été sous-traités et relocalisés en Inde. Les conditions d'emploi dans ces centres sont uniques. Alors que leurs employés vivent et travaillent en Inde, ils doivent organiser leur vie en fonction des célébrations, styles de communication et heures américaine ou européenne pour le confort de leurs clients. Ces centres d'appels promettent un style de vie occidental ainsi que des salaires attrayants aux jeunes adultes afin de les recruter. Une fois dans l'équipe, les employés sont formés pour travailler dans un environnement où ils adoptent des pseudonymes anglais et parlent avec le ‘bon accent.’ De plus, ils sont exposés au mode de vie occidental lors de leurs formations, dans l'atmosphère de bureau et les pratiques de socialisation auxquelles ils ou elles sont soumis. Ainsi, les heures de travail, les processus de formation et l'éthique de travail encouragent un mode de vie qui n'est pas la norme dans les milieux de travail en Inde et plus généralement dans la société indienne. Les attentes des centres d'appels envers leurs employés influencent les styles de vie, comportements sociaux et identités de ces derniers. Faisant appel aux analyses qualitatives de l'information collectée lors d'entretiens avec les employés et employeurs de tels centres d'appels à New Delhi, je propose dans cette thèse que les centres d'appels internationaux situés en Inde sont des sites actifs de mondialisation qui engendrent plusieurs changements socio-économiques et qui influencent l'identité de leurs employés. Ainsi, cette thèse comporte une analyse en profondeur, au niveau micro, du rôle des lieux de travail dans l'industrie des services – qui sont des participants actifs au processus de mondialisation – en tant qu'agents de changements socio-économiques parmi les jeunes adultes employés, en Inde.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the early 1990s economic liberalisation in India stimulated substantial socio-economic changes and increasingly integrated the country into the world economy (Bhandare 2000; Shurmer-Smith 2000; Nagaraj 2002). Thereafter, globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation became three buzzwords in India, as had already occurred in many other developing parts of the world. A common trend in this increasingly global economy is the outsourcing of services, with many such industries now being outsourced to developing countries. With a pool of 20 million educated, English-speaking, unemployed youth, India could be considered the “outsourcing capital of the world” (Smith 2007). According to statistics provided by the Indian National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM), in March 2003 India had 171,500 such jobs outsourced from Western Europe and North America (NASSCOM 2003, cited in Hiebert and Slater 2003). The American consultancy firm Forrester Research also predicts that the United States of America (USA) will lose 3.3 million white-collar jobs to India between 2003 and 2015 (Monbiot 2003).

Call centres - forms of back office employment - are high on the list of service industry jobs that have been outsourced and relocated to India. Conditions of employment in Indian call centres are unique. The differences in time zones require employees to work at night to cater to the needs of their European and North American customers. Employees are expected and trained to acquire an accent common to the country for which they are working, and to adopt English language pseudonyms to put their customers “at ease” (Bach 2001). In short, they are expected to develop a different identity while at work. Thus, it is my argument in this thesis that the growth of call centres in India illustrates two aspects of globalisation. Firstly, at the macro and structural levels, changes in technology, national governance, and economic relationships have allowed services previously provided “locally” (within national boundaries) to be provided by firms and agents located in developing countries, particularly India. This trend has produced a new category of employment that provides high salaries according to the local standard. Secondly, at the micro and individual level, such employment has great impact on the daily lives of employees. The training and employment practices of

call centres along with high levels of discretionary income encourage the employees - in my study typically middle-class urban young adults (18-35 years old) - to cultivate specific consumption patterns and lifestyle practices, which ultimately have an impact on their identities.

1.1 Introducing Call Centres

A brief overview on call centres will enable the reader to contextualise the thesis within the broader framework of academic research. Brown and Maxwell (2002) state that call centres were developed in the USA in early the 1980s and a few years later in the UK and Australia. They contend that due to the dramatic rise in consumer demand, call centres then started to increase in number in the UK around 1990. Employment data show that in developed countries, such as - the USA, UK, Netherlands and Germany, around 2.5 per cent of the total workforce was employed in call centres at the beginning of the millenium (Beekman et al. 2002; Brown and Maxwell 2002; Batt et al. 2005; and Grip et al. 2005). Though there is not much literature available on the history of call centres, scholars agree that call centres represent one of the economic sectors whose existence is directly related to the growth of information and communication technology. Beekman et al. (2002) state that the past two decades have witnessed a rapid growth of employment in the call centre industry, and outsourcing (discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.4.1) - has been instrumental in the expansion of this industry. Holtgrewe and Kerst (2002) note that bank and telecommunication companies were the first to outsource call centres from the UK and Germany. Nevertheless, the nature of the call centres which are outsourced has changed over the years and they now it range from insurance companies to IT support (discussed in Chapter Four).

A review of literature on call centres reveals that this industry has attracted the attention of a number of disciplines including industrial engineering and management studies. However, given the nature of my thesis, I shall restrict my discussion of call centre research to those published in the social sciences. Holtgrewe and Kerst (2002) argue that the literature on call centres in the social sciences can be broadly categorised under three categories, namely, theoretical-empirical; descriptive; and intervention-oriented. Theoretical-empirical research involves research designs in which empirical

research, mainly case studies, tests, inspires or transforms theoretical reasoning on the transformation of work, the mode of rationalisation and the workings of control. Descriptive studies focus on the labour market, considering the number and composition of the workforce, as well as workers' experiences and attitudes. The intervention-oriented research concentrates on the technical or social design of workplaces, which is supposed to be worker-oriented, stress-minimising, empowering or even participatory. I follow this framework to discuss the existing literature on call centres.

The maximum volume of research on call centres has been theoretical-empirical in nature with the main focus being the working conditions and labour organisation within the industry. This research uses specific case studies that link to broader theoretical debates in that area. Taylor and Bain (1998) in their study of call centres in UK argue that call centre work could be compared with assembly-line production or Taylorism. They posit that in call centres work is highly scripted and employees have no discretion in their work. This argument is strengthened by Mirchandani's (2003) study of call centres in India, where she refers to call centre employment as scripted Taylorism. On a similar note, Larner (2002) in her study of call centres in New Zealand argue that international call centres have given rise to a new form of international labour division, whereby services are outsourced to other countries to take advantage of cheap labour. Specifically in New Zealand, which has recently attracted outsourced call centres, Larner (*ibid.*) notes that international call centres provide situations where locally based service sector activities are integrated into global flows, fostering low wage, feminised forms of employment – thus linking it with the debates of globalisation.

Working conditions of call centres have always been central to call centre research in industrialised developed countries. Such research concentrated on the recruitment procedures (Callaghan Thompson 2002); the work environment (Taylor et al. 2002; Batt 2005; van Jaarsveld and Batt in press); as well as management strategies to retain the workforce (Taylor and Bain 1998). However, following the outsourcing phenomenon, recently researchers have been drawn to examine the working conditions as well as management strategies of international call centres in India. Studies conducted by Mirchandani (2004), Krishnamurthy (2005), Noroha and D'cruz (2006), Poster (2007) show that the labour expectations of customer service representatives in India are very

demanding not only in terms of the work-schedule but also the training processes which train them to create the illusion for American and European customers that they are interacting with an employee based in their own country. Shome (2006) in her study of call centres in India theorises how the cultural politics of call centres, and global flows of information technology, manifest new and emerging frameworks for understanding the Indian diaspora.

Deery et al. (2002) state that since customers are one of the most important components of call centre employment, they are also a source of considerable work satisfaction as well as a cause of great anxiety and stress. Customers might be abusive, irritating and their demands unreasonable. Customer service employees are increasingly being mistreated by customers (Harris and Reynolds 2003; Grandey, Dickter, and Sin 2004; Rupp and Spencer 2006). To date, research on customer mistreatment has primarily focused on the North American context with a couple of studies being undertaken in Germany (Rupp and Spencer 2006; Dormann and Zapf 2004; Grandey, Dickter and Sin 2004; Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, and Walker 2008). These studies have examined a range of reactions to customer mistreatment including emotional exhaustion, employee sabotage, and job performance. While, Taylor et al. (2003) points out that difficult customers contribute to increased pressures for the agents, Deery et al.'s (2002) study of call centres in Europe explains that call centre agents are actively discouraged from arguing with the customer and are expected to be polite and remain calm in their behaviour in all circumstances. These studies strengthen the theoretical argument of how occupational requirements cause emotional exhaustion and burnout among employees as proposed by various scholars (Hochschild 1983; Jackson et al. 1986). This point is further elaborated in Chapter Eight, Section 8.3.

Numerous descriptive studies have been conducted in different countries to illustrate the characteristics of call centres, the composition of the labour force, as well as management and employment practices in these centres. Batt et al. (2005) in their national report on call centres note that in USA in-house call centers constitute 86 per cent of the market while outsourced centers comprise 14 per cent and the annual pay of the typical call center worker averages \$33,794, with a high of \$45,075 in centers serving large business customers and a low of \$25,529 in outsourced centers and \$25,021 in retail

centers. In the same report they also discuss the recruitment processes and training involved in these call centres. Similarly, Holman et al. (2005) in their study of call centres in the UK examine the extent and effectiveness of human resource management practices in call centres. They note that customer service representatives in the UK call centres have a low level of discretion over their work and how they interact with customers. Hence their quality of the work suffers and there is a high turnover rate. Holman et al. (ibid.) suggest that the situation might improve if jobs were designed with high levels of discretion along with training in interpersonal skills. Holtgrewe (2005) traces the growth of call centres in Germany and analyses the changing nature of the industry in accordance with demand of the economy. The Australian national report on call centres prepared by Australian School of Management and Steven Hallis Personnel Services Pty. Ltd. (2005) explains the improving performance of human resource services in terms of absenteeism, tenure and turnover. Similar reports have been prepared by other countries, such as France (Lanciano-Morandat et al. 2005), Netherlands (Grip et al. 2005), Canada (van Jaarsveld et al. 2005) and Denmark (Sorensen and El-Salanti 2005) illustrating the human resource practices of call centres in each country.

The intervention-oriented research on call centres has been preoccupied mainly with the health impacts of call centre employment. Nevertheless, Copas (2004) in her ethnographic study of call centres in New Zealand focuses on the life experiences of the employees, examining how work and life are intricately related. Turning to the literature on health effects of call centre employment in developed countries (including Jackson et al., 1986; Deery et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2003), it can be concluded that the various aspects of call centre work processes that increase pressure for the employees and lead to emotional exhaustion are work overload; work pressure, including lack of time between calls; repetitiveness of calls; call monitoring; meeting targets; and having to keep to scripts. Baldry et al. (1997) argue that there are certain social processes that generate occupational ill health in call centres, and such processes can be understood by examining the degree of fit between three interrelated components of any work system- the social environment (work organisation, job design, managerial control systems, industrial relations context); the proximate environment (work technology, workstation design); and the ambient environment (work building, lighting, temperature, air quality,

acoustics). Having reviewed the available literature on call centres, I delve into a discussion of international call centres in India.

1.2 International Call Centres in India

In the 1980s, an economic crisis started to surface in India that became a major blow to macroeconomic management (Bhandare 2000). To combat the situation, in July 1991, the government of India launched a major stabilisation and structural adjustment programme, called the New Economic Policy (NEP) (Nagaraj 2002). This programme provided a stepping-stone for India to enter the global economy. India fitted well into the offshore model that is the current trend in globalising processes. According to this model, the outsourcing of business processes, known as business process outsourcing (BPO) to other countries became the norm among large European and North American companies seeking to lower their costs (Lappin, 2002; Marshall, 2002). India, being the second largest English-speaking nation after the USA, and possessing a large educated and skilled labour force, proved to be one of the favourite sites for outsourced jobs, especially within the call centre industry. The large, eligible labour pool, combined with political and technological support, paved the way for India to becoming the world's "back office". In 1998, General Electric (GE) opened its first voice call centre in Gurgaon, in the environs of New Delhi. Soon after, the process that began as a trickle became a flood (Bach 2001). In 2004, the call centre industry employed 245,000 people in India while in 2008, the industry employed 1.1 million people (NASSCOM 2008). In fact, the call centre phenomenon continues to grow in the major cities of India, with New Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune and Mumbai being among the most favoured locations.

The global strategy of call centre site selection recognises that labour quality and costs will always be the key issues in location choice (Beatty 2002). The move to India, though, was also the product of many other pull factors. Some statistics can help us to understand the situation better. India produces two million college graduates annually; unemployment among college graduates is as high as 20 per cent, and India cannot provide jobs for a quarter of its English-speaking college graduates (ibid.). As such, India offers significant opportunities in terms of improved client services and greater productivity, as a result of having a highly-skilled, underemployed workforce (*Global*

Investor 2003). Most employees are not only well-educated but also highly motivated. Outsourcers in India even assert that their employees make fewer mistakes than North American workers (Carmichael 2003). Moreover, salary costs in India are often one-tenth of the salaries of developed nations with Indian employees receiving monthly salaries of Rs.8,000-10,000 (US \$180-230) (*The Economist* 2000).¹

Despite the growing importance of call centres in India, call centres have remained a relatively unexplored area of research and to date the vast majority of academic literature on call centres has been published in Western industrialised countries such as the UK and USA and more recently New Zealand and Canada, as discussed in Section 1.1. In India, most of the locally produced research on call centres is either theoretical-empirical (Chakravarty 1999; Unni and Rani 2000; Rama 2002) or descriptive (Mirchandani 2004; Taylor and Bain 2004 and 2005; Shome 2006) in nature. There is thus, a serious lack of research that deals with the intervention-oriented approach, analysing the social impacts of call centres on their employees. Hence, the present study responds to a pressing need for research that concentrates on the social impacts for young adults of being employed in call centres in India.

Therefore, the importance and originality of my study can be broadly categorised under three headings- subject matter, scale, and composition of the study population. To date, studies of the social impacts of economic liberalisation in India have focused predominantly on the role of the media in influencing lifestyles of individuals. Rather, it has been in the popular press where changes in lifestyles and changing consumption patterns among young adult employees of outsourced service industries have attracted the greatest attention both in India and abroad (Monbiot 2003; Slater 2004).² Interestingly enough, except media, the only mention of the social impacts of call centres surfaced in a recent report by NASSCOM (2003) that states that call centres in India are facing very high turnover rates, as many employees are unable to manage a work-life balance due to the unusual working hours. This is surprising considering that call centres appear to act as

¹ Currency exchange rates given in this thesis are those at the time the information was collected, for example, 2004 in this case.

² Popular magazines in India such as *India Today* and *Frontline*, frequently feature articles on the consumption pattern and lifestyle of young adults. Two documentaries- *I-800-India* (2006) and *Bombay Calling* (2006)- have been produced to highlight the impacts of call centres in metro cities of India. Nonetheless, both of these documentaries emphasise mainly the economic aspects of call centre jobs, which are projected as good career options. In Chapter Eight these will be discussed in detail.

catalysts of socio-economic change, especially in terms of influencing the consumption decisions and lifestyle choices. This study thus delves into an unexplored area of research in India.

One distinctive feature of call centre employees in India is that, while at work, those managing the telephones have pseudonyms and are expected to mimic Western accents to put their European and North American customers at ease. During working hours they are encouraged not only to speak like their customers but, if possible, for a few hours a day, to think like them as well (*The Economist* 2000). As such, these employees begin to acquire new elements of identity while at the work place. I wish to examine how such changes impact upon other factors in their lives, leading to changes in their identities.³ This study will further consider whether, within the broader realm of the global-local nexus, even personal attributes like identity - at least workplace elements of these - are being modified to suit the perceived needs of the global economy.

Turning the focus to scale, to date studies on the social impacts of economic liberalisation in India have been carried out at a macro-level derived from secondary sources (Srinivasan 1997; Shurmer-Smith 2000; Saldanha 2002). The present study, in contrast, will provide a micro-level analysis based on primary sources of information. In addition, the age group that forms my study population adds another unique dimension to this study. Almost 80 per cent of call centre advertisements mention the preferred age group of potential employees to be between 18 and 35 years. No study on call centres has considered this particular group of “young adults” which this study will. This age group defines one of the most crucial periods in the lifespan of an individual with regards to employment decisions, identity formation, and consumption decisions (see Erickson 1968). In total, the study will provide an in-depth micro-level analysis of the role of service sector workplaces - active participants in the process of globalisation - as vehicles for socio-economic and identity change among young adult employees, in a developing country. This is of particular importance because of the number of such countries either

³ Identity is a highly contested term. Early understandings of identity conceptualised it primarily in terms of social categories such as class and gender, in which identity was assumed to reflect a core or fixed sense of self. More contemporary theorisations understand identity as a reflexive project, emphasising its multiple, fluid and unstable natures (Valentine 2001). This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.

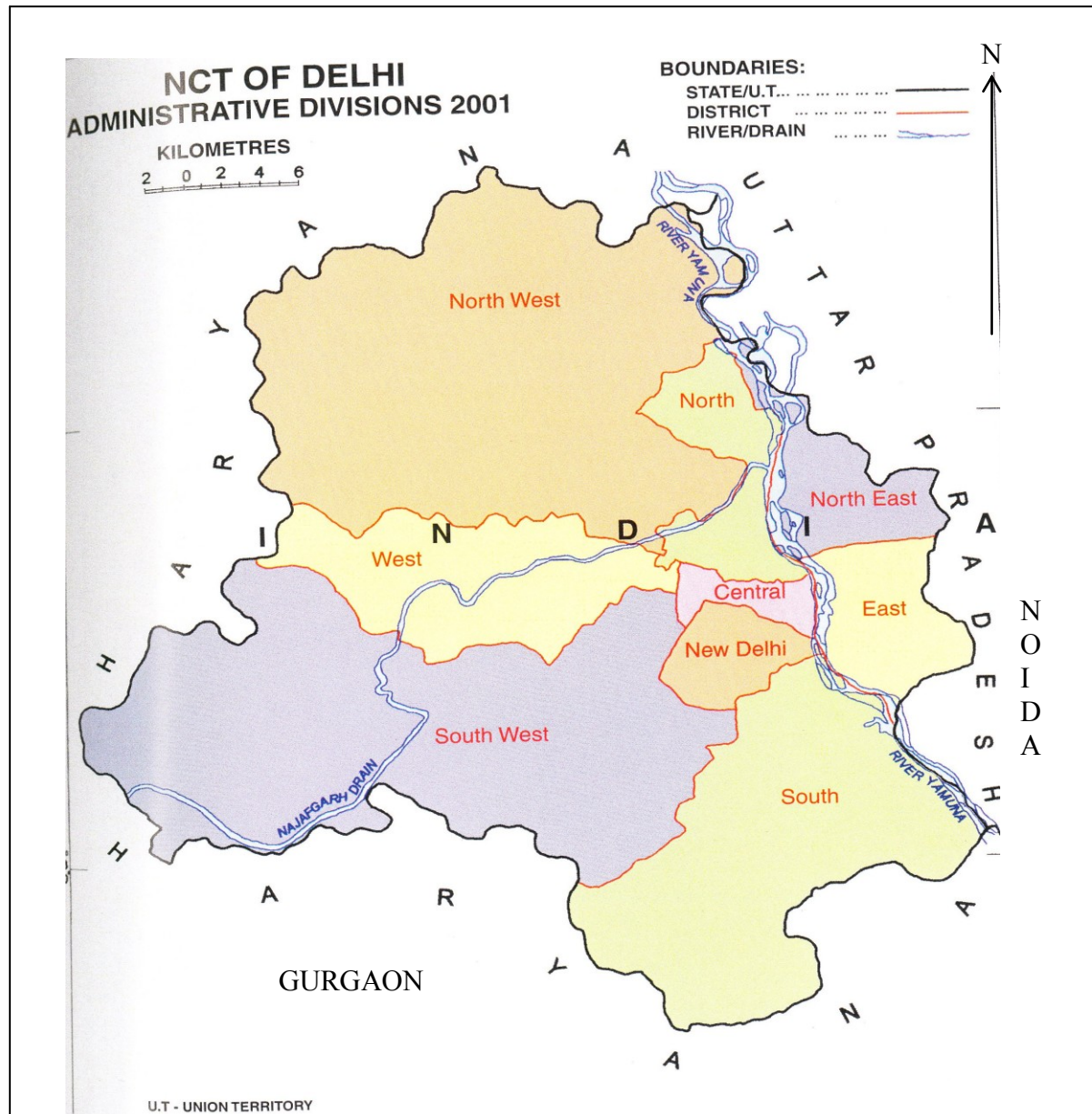
currently undergoing, or about to undergo similar experiences, and the large numbers of young adult employees who are presently, or soon to be employed at such sites.

1.3 Studying Call Centres in the Environs of New Delhi

Though call centres have “mushroomed” in many of the major metropolitan cities in India (Marshall 2002), the present study concentrates on call centres located in the environs of New Delhi. This includes call centres located in Noida and Gurgaon, located in the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi, located in Figure 1.1.

Apart from the fact that General Electric (GE) opened the first call centre in India, in Gurgaon in 1998, there are a number of other reasons why I focus on this region. Firstly, studies on call centres in India have mainly concentrated on Bangalore, the so-called “silicon plateau” of India (Singhal and Rogers 2001) and those located in the environs of Delhi have been relatively ignored, despite Delhi being a favoured destination for large numbers of call centres not only from the UK and the USA, but European countries too.⁴ Secondly, according to a NASSCOM (2003) report, the highest numbers of call centres are located in this region. Thirdly, unlike other Indian cities in which call centres are located, Delhi, being the political capital of the country, has always had political prominence rather than commercial dominance, housing a large number of public sector offices and the country’s bureaucratic hub. As such, it will be interesting to gain a more detailed understanding of how the establishment of call centres in this location has brought about socio-economic changes driven by the needs of these young adults. For example, the opening of sprawling shopping malls and the emergence of an active nightlife in the city, aspects not directly linked to the city’s political role.

⁴ *The Times of India* (2004) reports that, in recent years, India has attracted outsourced companies from other European countries in addition to those from the UK and the USA. For the former companies, knowledge of European languages (like French, Italian, and German) other than English is an asset for employees. In India only two universities provide foreign language courses (at undergraduate and graduate levels) and both are located in Delhi- Jawaharlal Nehru University and University of Delhi. This has led many such companies to choose Delhi over other places.



Source: Census of India: Delhi Series 8

Figure 1.1 Map of the study area

1.4 Principal Aim and Research Questions of the Thesis

Considering the growing importance of call centres in India, the principal aim of this thesis is:

To understand the socio-economic impacts of call centres, located in the environs of New Delhi, India, on the young adults who are employed in them.

The following four research questions will delve further into exploring the aim of the study:

1. *What are the characteristics of call centre employment in the New Delhi environs and what do call centre companies expect of their employees?* (Chapters Six and Seven)
2. *What impacts does employment in call centres have on the lifestyles of young adult employees and their consumption decisions?* (Chapter Eight)
3. *How does employment in call centres in the environs of New Delhi affect the identities of young adult employees?* (Chapter Nine)
4. *How are international call centres in India situated within broader debates regarding globalisation?* (Chapter Nine)

These questions have been approached by a combination of critical literature reviews regarding globalisation debates and their implications on youth in Asia, intensive fieldwork in the New Delhi environs, and a diverse range of qualitative analysis techniques.

1.5 Working Definitions

1.5.1 Call centre

Call centres are units within organisations – whose primary role is to handle incoming or outgoing telephone calls (Taylor and Bain 1999; Beekman et al. 2002). These calls are processed or controlled by either an Automated Call Distribution (ACD) system or predictive dialling system. Other definitions of call centres are provided by Richardson et al. (2000). Call centres are offices providing a variety of sales, marketing and information services remotely by telephone replacing the need for face-to-face interaction with customers. In this thesis I follow Richardson et al.'s (2000) definition.

Therefore, a call centre could be any one or all of the following:

- a telemarketing centre

- a teleservicing centre
- a help desk
- a reservation centre for airlines or hotels
- a catalogue retailer
- an e-commerce transaction centre
- a fund-raising and collection organisation

There are two types of call centres depending on the clientele: international call centres serving international clients, and domestic call centres catering to the domestic market (explained more in Chapter Four). For my thesis, I consider only international call centres since the working conditions in these call centres are unique and - as I will argue in Chapter Eight and Chapter Nine - such conditions ultimately affect the lifestyle practices, consumption decisions and identity of the young adults employed in them.

Moreover, call centres can either be voice-based or non-voice based. In the former, call centre employees interact with customers via telephone. In the latter, non-voice based call centres, employees' interactions with clients may be either through e-mail, "live chat" or any other technique that does not require employees to speak directly with the customers. In my thesis, I have concentrated on voice-based call centres since the agents in these call centres have the most extreme adjustments to make at work, including adopting English language pseudonyms and learning the accent and culture of the country for which they are working. Such factors will be discussed in detail in Chapters Seven and Eight. Henceforth when I mention the term call centre in the context of my thesis I refer to international voice-based call centres unless otherwise noted.

1.5.2 Call centre agent

I use the term "call centre agent" to refer to call centre employees who are engaged in direct interaction with customers by either answering or making phone calls depending on the nature of the call centre. Though various terms are used for this position in the media and academic literature, such as call centre executives, customer care executives, and so on, I prefer to use "call centre agent" as an umbrella term. Nonetheless, the designations for all other employees are indicated in this thesis according to their specific job profile, for example, trainers, supervisors and managers.

1.6 Thesis Organisation

The thesis is presented in nine chapters. Having introduced and outlined the aim of my study and research questions in this first chapter, the conceptual framework is discussed in the second and the third chapters, dealing with three broad areas that form the conceptual building blocks of my research. Chapter Two critiques the political and economic concepts used in the thesis. Emphasis is placed on debates concerning the role of the nation state, the globalisation of service industries, the importance of the service sector in today's global economy and the concept of the global division of labour (with specific attention given to call centres). It thus provides the base of the conceptual framework. The social impacts of globalisation in developing Asian countries, including the emergence of a new urban middle class and their changing patterns of conspicuous consumption, particularly in the case of India, are discussed in Chapter Three. This chapter also details the ways in which changing lifestyles and consumption patterns of young adults in developing Asian countries can influence identity formation.

The fourth chapter places the research in the context of the present political and socio-economic environment of India in general and the study region in particular. It is subdivided into three broad sections. The first part discusses India's role in the global economy, including the New Economic Policy of 1991 and other acts and reforms that facilitated multi-national companies (MNCs) to open their units in India. The second part addresses the state-level and local initiatives that have attracted call centres to the environs of New Delhi. The third section examines the salient features of call centres. Having set the context, in Chapter Five I describe the methodology, including the methods adopted for the study, as well as how I am situated within the research process.

Three chapters analysing the results follow. Chapter Six addresses the first part of my first research question - what are the characteristics of call centre employment in the New Delhi environs - based on a content analysis of printed newspaper advertisements for call centre jobs. Then Chapter Seven answers the second part of the first research question - what do call centre companies expect of their employees - drawing on information from interviews with employees and employers. The second research question- what impacts does employment in call centres have on the lifestyles of young adult employees and their consumption decisions - is answered in Chapter Eight. In

answering this question the latter part of the chapter examines how such lifestyle practices and consumption decisions also impact upon the health of employees.

Finally, the discussion and conclusions chapter (Chapter Nine) is divided in two sections. The first section “wraps up” the research, and based on the three preceding analysis chapters answers the third research question- how does employment in call centres in the environs of New Delhi affect the identities of young adult employees? The second part of the chapter describes the main results while also addressing the fourth and final research question- how are call centres situated within the broader debates regarding globalisation? It concludes with suggestions of avenues for future related studies.

On the whole, this research provides an in depth, micro-level understanding of the importance of call centres in influencing socio-economic and identity changes among young adult employees in India. This topic is of particular importance in the contemporary world where - though globalisation forms the focus of much academic research in social sciences - the relationships between globalisation and a range of critical social issues are still to be addressed.

Chapter 2

THE GLOBAL-LOCAL NEXUS AND GLOBALISATION OF SERVICE INDUSTRIES

This chapter begins to structure the conceptual framework that I have adopted for analysing the aim of this thesis. Figure 2.1 shows the relevant bodies of literature from which I pull specific key concepts to weave together the conceptual framework of my thesis. As is evident from the figure, the literatures can be broadly categorised into three groups - the three building blocks of my framework - namely globalisation, the service sector, and the social impacts of globalisation, respectively. The first two bodies of literature (globalisation and the service sector) are political and economic in nature, while the third focuses more on social aspects. Thus, I have divided the framework into two chapters: in this chapter I discuss the relevant political and economic concepts and debates that will enable a greater understanding of call centre operations in India, including their origins, growth and shape; while in Chapter Three I discuss the social impacts of globalisation, to provide a background for comprehending the influences of these call centres on their employees' lives. From each of these three bodies of literature I pull out key concepts that form the building blocks of the conceptual framework for my thesis. These building blocks, shown in Figure 2.1, are therefore further refined and detailed (or "filled in") at the end of each of the three sections in this chapter and the next, after a critical review of each body of literature.

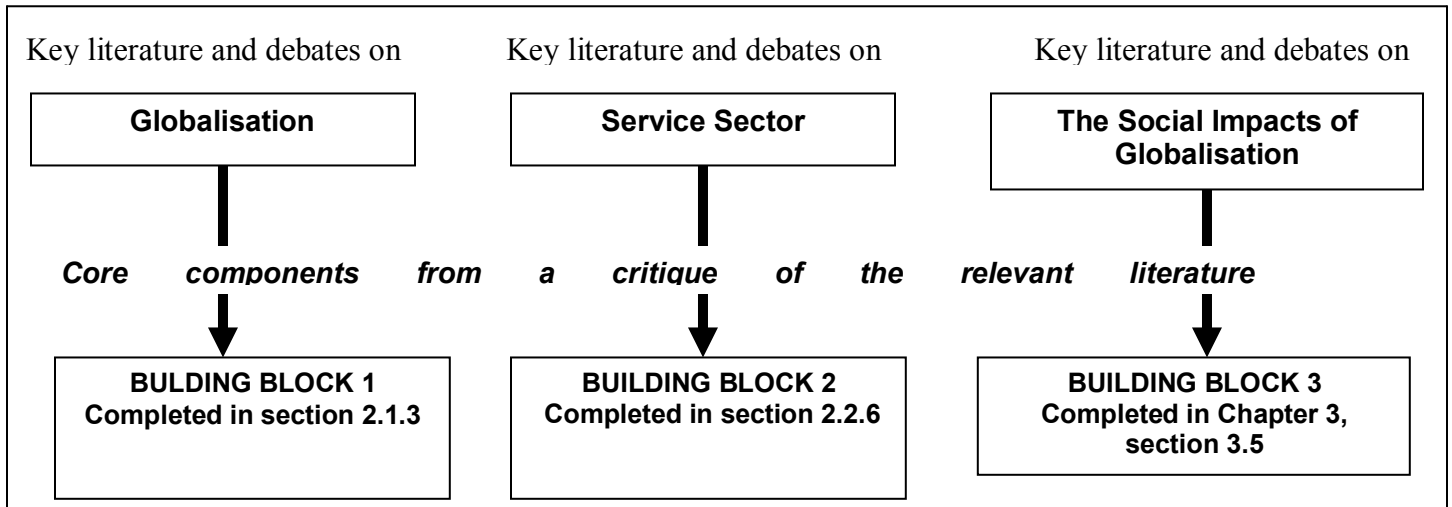


Figure 2.1. The construction phases of my conceptual framework

2.1. Globalisation- Introduction

“Globalisation” is a key buzzword in today’s world. It is used by journalists, politicians, business executives, academics and others to signify that the world is changing rapidly, giving rise to a new world order in terms of economics, politics and culture. As Appadurai (1999) rightly states, the word “globalisation” provokes heated reactions. Some of these reactions concern definitions, others concern whether globalisation has “gone too far” or not, and still others are about the officialisation of the term and its conversion into a slogan for the forces that support liberalisation, marketisation and “reform” across the world.

It is generally agreed that globalisation emerged as a concept in the 1960s after Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village” in his book *Explorations in Communications*, to capture the impact of new communications technologies on social and cultural life (McLuhan 1960). In academic circles, however, it was not recognised as a significant concept until the 1980s (Robertson 1992).⁵ Hoogvelt (1997) states that in the mid-1980s “globalisation” began to replace terms such as “internationalisation” and “transnationalisation” as a more suitable concept for describing

⁵ Therborn (2000: 149) states that globalisation is basically a concern of the second half of the 1990s, “although there were significant sociological contributions in the first half, such as Ianni (1992) and Robertson (1992). ... The *Social Science Citation Index* records only a few occurrences of ‘globalization’ in the 1980s but shows its soaring popularity from 1992 onwards, which accelerated in the last years of the past century.”

the ever-intensifying networks of cross-border human interactions. Since then, it has become one of the most discussed and debated concepts in the social sciences and, not surprisingly, is frequently defined differently across disciplines.

Aspects of globalisation - particularly the process of geographical reorganisation - have been traced through the broader history of capitalism by various authors (see Harvey 2000). In different phases of history, through the production, reproduction and expansion of space, globalisation has materialised as a complex process by which the economic and cultural activities of people are shaped and reshaped the world over. Due to the versatile nature of the concept an extensive literature review of globalisation is beyond the scope of this thesis. But if one turns to focus primarily on the economic geography literature - directly relevant to a thesis on this topic – it can be determined that early on, such scholars were preoccupied with defining the concept of globalisation and situating it within the broader framework of the discipline. This gave rise to a spectrum of definitions and, to date, no universally agreed upon definition has emerged. Nevertheless, these disagreements generated several important debates, a main focus being to determine the role of the nation state in the processes of globalisation. This in turn led to further discussions on relations between global and local actors, and conceptualisations of the global-local nexus, which geographers attempted to explain with recourse to scale. Hence, recent economic geography literature on globalisation has been more concerned with the various scales at which globalisation occurs, what Mittelman (2001: 212) calls “mapping globalisation”.

Thus, this chapter explores these major areas of discussion, frequently found within economic geography that form the basis for understanding how globalisation processes have resulted – among other things - in the emergence of call centres. The first part of this section (Section 2.1.1) provides a review and critique of definitions of globalisation as cited by economic geography and like-minded scholars, to help set the scene. The second part (Section 2.1.2) addresses the key positions in the debates over globalisation and the nation-state, broadly categorised as the hyperglobalists, the transformationalists, and the sceptics. This section provides the backdrop for developing an understanding of how the call centre phenomenon emerged in India and the role of the nation state. This is followed by a review of literature on the global-local nexus,

highlighting the importance of scale in discussions of globalisation (Section 2.1.2.1) from a geographic standpoint. Therefore, this section enables us to situate the call centres in India within the broad framework of the global-local nexus while analysing how various actors involved in globalisation processes gain importance at different scales.

2.1.1 Defining Globalisation

As noted above, the term “globalisation” is used by various groups, often loosely, and thus assumes various meanings. Typically, globalisation is described as increased economic, cultural, environmental and social interdependencies, along with new transnational financial and political formations, arising out of the increasing mobility of capital, labour and information, with both homogenising and differentiating tendencies (Yeung 1998; Kellner 2000; Mittelman 2001). Thus, according to Grant and Short (2002) globalisation can be defined as a compression of the world by flows of interactions that are broadening as well as deepening around the world. They argue that these flows have brought about a greater degree of interdependence and economic homogenisation and a more powerful burgeoning global market, where financial institutions and computer technologies have overwhelmed traditional economic practices. On the same note Held (1991) extends such a definition of globalisation by stating that it can also create new forms of collective decision-making, assist in the development of intergovernmental and quasi-supranational institutions, and result in the intensification of translational communications, leading to new regional and military orders.

Similar to Grant and Short, Dielman and Hamnett (1994: 357) define globalisation as “the growing integration of various parts of the world into a global economy and global financial system”. Giddens (1990) also summarises globalisation aptly when he suggests that globalisation can be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations that link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by distant events, occurring many kilometres away and vice versa. The fact that call centre employees located in India are given time off on US national holidays that are irrelevant to such employees is one such example.

Other notable definitions of globalisation can be found in the works of sociologist Ronald Robertson (1992) and geographer David Harvey (1989). Robertson’s explanation

of globalisation is based on the theory of society as a specific kind of social system.⁶ He states that globalisation at the cultural level began to occur because of two things- *compression of the world* and *global consciousness*. Compression of the world refers to how interdependencies are being created in the economies of the world to such an extent that, today, the way we live our lives on one side of the globe bears immediate consequences for people on the other side (Hoogvelt 1997). Robertson (1992) argues that world compression intensifies “global consciousness”. Global consciousness is manifested in the ways by which people all over the world, united through mass communication, speak of political, economic and social issues at a global scale. For example, political issues are often discussed in the context of the “world order” and “world peace” while economic issues are often discussed in terms of the “international recession”.

Human geographer David Harvey (1989: 241) has theorised globalisation using the concept of “time-space compression”. He argues that the main focus of revolutions in information and communication technologies is to enable instantaneous communication around the globe and bring more places into contact with one another, thus generating a sense of global simultaneity. This, in turn, has had an impact on economic as well as social spheres. For example, economic actors who are absent in time and space may have as much influence on local processes as those who are physically present, such as executives of General Electric in USA dictating working conditions in call centres in Delhi, India. Similarly, social relations can now be extended or stretched over space so that people can easily participate meaningfully in disembodied global social networks, for example, through the Internet (Valentine 2001a). Thus, Harvey (1989) states that the organisation of space defines relationships not only amongst activities, things and concepts, but also, by extension, amongst people, and hence the organisation of space defines social relations.

Other geographers including Dicken (1994), Kelly (1999) and sociologist Kellner (2000) are of the opinion that there is no such thing as “globalisation” per se. They

⁶ “Social system theory is elaborated upon by Talcott Parsons. According to him, any social system is thought to have four sub-systems that are functionally related to serve the maintenance of the whole. These sub-systems and their functions are: the economic (adaptive function), the political (mobilisation for collective purposes), the social (integrative function), and the cultural (providing the governing value system necessary for reproducing the system through time)” (Hoogvelt 1997: 116).

suggest that the term is used rather as an umbrella concept for multiple processes, each of which needs to be discussed separately. Kellner (2000) asserts that the term globalisation is a theoretical construct and argues that the concept entails everything from the Westernisation of the world to the ascendancy of capitalism. He concludes that globalisation is one of the main processes noted in modern and post-modern social theories. By analysing the various views of globalisation held by people in developed countries Kellner demonstrates that while some people view globalisation as increasing the homogeneity of societies, others on the contrary, view globalisation as increasing the hybridisation of cultures and diversity. He states that some see globalisation as an evolving operation of power by multinational corporations and states, while still others offer an alternative vision of globalisation as the linchpin of environmental action, democratisation, and humanisation. Alternatively, the concept of globalisation might be argued to be a contemporary ploy to hide the effects of imperialism or modernisation, but others again refute this and claim that globalisation will open a new “global age” that differs from “modern age” (Kellner 1997). In his own analysis however, Kellner takes a broader stance than any of these groups and concludes that globalisation includes all of the above arguments.

McGrew (1992) provides another balanced, but different, view of globalisation. He describes globalisation as the multiplicity of linkages and interconnections between the states and societies that make up the modern world system. Thus, globalisation describes the process by which events, decisions, and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant consequences for individuals and communities in quite distant, other parts of the world. He states that the two distinct dimensions of globalisation are scope (or stretching) and intensity (or deepening). Based on these dimensions, on the one hand globalisation defines a set of processes that operate worldwide and thereby he assigns a spatial connotation to the concept. On the other hand, globalisation also implies intensification in the levels of interaction, interconnectedness or interdependence between states and societies that constitute the world community. Accordingly, stretching and deepening of global processes occurs simultaneously. This argument is of particular importance for understanding the socio-economic impacts of call centres in India. Though outsourcing of call centres is a result of the scope of

globalisation, the deeper implications they have on the daily lives of employees can be explained through the intensity of globalisation.

However, these authors show that despite precise agreements over defining globalisation this debate regarding internationalisation versus global continues at a more specific scope. It is now increasingly accepted that globalisation leads to greater integration of the world economy. Nevertheless, debates have continued over whether this integration is occurring within a process that is labelled globalisation per se, or rather whether it is occurring within internationalisation, a term often used interchangeably. The next section turns to this question so as to develop a more nuanced understanding of differences between these processes since I will argue that outsourcing of call centres is an outcome of globalisation rather than internationalisation.

2.1.1.1 Differences between Internationalisation and Globalisation

I argue that *globalisation* processes are qualitatively different from *internationalisation* processes (see Dicken et al. 1997; Storper 1997). The distinctions may be recognised in three spheres- economic, political and cultural. With respect to *economic relationships*, internationalisation can be thought of as the simple extension of economic activities across national boundaries while globalisation, an idea of deeper and more complex connections as was shown in the preceding section, implies that functional integration also occurs among geographically dispersed activities (Dicken 1998). Storper (1997) argues that data on foreign direct investment (FDI)⁷ and similar financial flows reveal very little about the dynamics of relations between territory/space and the economy. These quantitative measures refer to the functional integration of activities around the globe through centralised co-ordination and control, as opposed to simple international connections forged through flows of capital, people, images, and commodities. With regards to the organisation of *political relationships*, internationalisation denotes a situation in which the primary agents of change and the sites of struggle are nation states, while globalisation implies a deprivileging of this pre-eminence, as both the strategies available to nation states and the parameters or terms of political struggles are

⁷ Foreign direct investment is the total of business investments made by private companies from outside a country in another country (Knox and Marston 2001).

increasingly constrained and conditioned, though not necessarily determined, by extra-national forces (Cox 1993). Globalisation also means that its not just states that are political actors. Kellner (2000) argues that politics in the contemporary world includes NGOs that might have a regional or global reach, working outside the terms and conditions of any one state (especially, those that organise on the internet). In terms of *cultural relations*, globalisation implies a complex re-articulation of cultural forms and channels on a range of scales whereas internationalisation suggests that the primary interchanges are between and among nation states (Featherstone 1990).

Thus from this analysis of the literature, at this stage I draw two conclusions that inform my research, the first is that globalisation is qualitatively different from internationalisation in terms of the shape of economic relationships, the power of different political structures (discussed more next), and cultural relations. Second, drawing on the work of a broad range of economic geographers and associated authors, I agree that when defining globalisation one can argue that a time-space compression has occurred, one that involves instantaneous communication across the globe, leading to interconnectedness of different parts of the world through common processes of economic, environmental, political and cultural change.

The next section now moves the discussion forward from definitional concerns to introduce the main debates surrounding globalisation processes and the role of the nation state in these. I do this in order to develop a more nuanced understanding in later chapters of the balance between globalisation tendencies, multi-national corporation activities and different levels of state control in India with regards to the emergence of the call centre phenomenon and their impacts on lives of the employees.

2.1.2 Debates over Globalisation and the Role of the State

At the end of the nineteenth century there was substantial debate concerning the transformation of economic life by the expansionary forces of capitalism, that might be regarded as the “first globalisation debate” (Dicken 2000: 315). While numerous other debates have emerged since then with respect to globalisation, as already mentioned, central to many nowadays is the question of the nation state’s role in the contemporary global world. The stances in these debates have been broadly categorised by a range of

economic geographers as the hyperglobalists, the transformationalists and the sceptics. These three conceptualisations of globalisation are summarised in Table 2.1 by Held et al. (1999). The table highlights the main arguments put forward by each of the approaches. Alongside these terms, discussed next, have also emerged others that attempt to refine further the globalisation processes occurring in the world today, namely localisation and glocalisation.

Table 2.1 Conceptualising globalisation: three tendencies

	Hyperglobalists	Sceptics	Transformationalists
What's new	A global age	Trading blocs, weaker geogovernance than in earlier periods	Historically unprecedented levels of global interconnectedness
Dominant features	Global capitalism, global governance, global civil society	World less interdependent than in 1890s	'Thick' (intensive and extensive) globalisation
Power of national governments	Declining or eroding	Reinforced or enhanced	Reconstituted, restructured
Driving forces of globalisation	Capitalism and technology	States and markets	Combined forces of modernity
Pattern of stratification	Erosion of old hierarchies	Increased marginalisation of South	New architecture of world order
Dominant motif	McDonald, Madonna, etc.	National interest	Transformation of political community
Conceptualisation of globalisation	As a reordering of the framework of human action	As internationalisation and regionalisation	As a reordering of interregional relations and action at a distance
Historical trajectory	Global civilization	Regional blocs/ clash of civilizations	Intermediate: global integration and fragmentation
Summary argument	The end of the nation state	Internationalisation depends on state acquiescence and support	Globalisation transforming state power and world politics

Source: Held et al. 1999: 10.

Hyperglobalists assert that the end of the nation state has occurred. They stress that everything - from the economy to culture - is being shaped globally and that the world's money, technology and markets are controlled and managed by large, global corporations (Ohmae 1990; Korton 1995; Kuper 2004; Caney 2005). As such, corporations are free to act solely on the basis of profitability, without regard to national or local consequences, as they are not bound to particular places nor communities. Globalisation is thus marked by global competition among workers and localities to offer their services to investors at the most advantageous terms. Grant and Short (2002) state that global markets in finance, trade and services now operate under a regulatory umbrella that is not state-centred but market-centred. Valentine (2001: 315) argues that in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries revolutions in transport and technology started this market-centred process by way of a "time-space convergence". In other words, previously distant locals have effectively "converged". Revolutions in technology have enabled instantaneous communication, allowing absent actors to have as much influence on local processes as those who are physically present. Thus, there has been a shift in the structure and organisation of the economy, with transnational corporations replacing nation states as the main players in shaping investment and economic activities.

Moreover, hyperglobalists and those arguing that the power of the state has declined contend that in the globalised world, there is a common consumer culture that unifies all people. The argument is that as a consequence the nation state will erode to the point of insignificance, both as a unit of analysis and as a political agent (Appadurai 1999). Appadurai (*ibid.*) contends that we stand on the edge of a global order characterised by the emergence of a large number of forces that constrain, erode or otherwise violate the workings of national sovereignty in the domains of economics, law and political allegiance. He continues that the era of the nation state may not yet be at an end, but that the period in which the "system of nation states was the only game in town, as far as international governance and translational political traffic are concerned, is surely over" (Appadurai 1999: 230).

Hyperglobalists also argue that the worldwide organisation of international business - facilitated by increasingly improving information technologies and cheaper and more effective means of transportation - has rendered the nation state obsolete as a

vehicle for regulating contemporary economic conditions (Held 1991). The nation state's powers have been superseded by the rise of supra-national institutions, for example, the European Union (EU), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Jessop 1993).

With such points in mind, Knutsen (1998) states that the hyperglobalists are supporters of the globalisation thesis, which attempts to characterise certain new realities of the global community (Gertler 1997). There are three prominent postulates within this thesis- first, the liberalisation of financial markets has fuelled the flow of capital across and between countries and has fostered the integration of national markets into global ones. Second, international flows of commodities, both manufactured goods and natural resource products, have increased as barriers to trade have fallen. Third, the creation of production systems organised on multinational or transnational lines has proceeded together with the reduction of trade barriers and the heightened mobility of capital. Developments in transport and telecommunications technology have further facilitated these trends.

Hyperglobalists have, however, been severely criticised for their extreme views regarding globalisation. Some of the major criticisms of the hyperglobalists are best formulated in the arguments of the **sceptics** who believe that globalisation is a “myth”. Petras (1999) criticises hyperglobalists by stating that although globalisation involves the creation of a world economy, this is not simply equated to the sum of its national economies. Clark (1996) observes that the innovation and production of financial products remain strongly centralised in a few world centres, mainly New York, London and Tokyo, suggesting that these processes are spatially bound. Dicken (1994) points out that FDI flows, unlike as portrayed by hyperglobalists, have become increasingly concentrated in industrial countries and currently, within developing countries, the distribution of FDI is extremely uneven. Newman (2006) posits that despite increasing globalisation we do not live in a “borderless world” as proposed by hyperglobalists.

Recalling the earlier discussion regarding internationalisation and globalisation in Section 2.1.1.1, Hirst and Thompson (1996) argue that the present world situation is characterised by a highly internationalised economy, but one that is not entirely unprecedented. Tisdell (2004) supports this argument by pointing out that attributes of

economic globalisation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have had their forerunners, albeit on a more modest scale, throughout the development of human societies. He argues that such characteristics of economic globalisation are the result of interactions between socio-economic, cultural and political groups. He provides examples of interactions brought on by trade of cotton and spices along the Silk Route, the shipping routes of Arabic, European and South Pacific sea-traders, the trading practices of European trading posts in North America and companies such as the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Tisdell 2004). He states that there are in fact numerous examples which show that international trade, exchange of skills and labour and the dominance of ascendant economic and political systems over less powerful economies are not recent developments. Indeed, such practices predate the European colonisation of Africa, India and the Americas, not to mention more recent global economic developments (Datt 2004). Similarly, Castells (1998) notes that globalisation is essentially a post-modern expression of historical processes of capitalist expansion. Thus they are sceptical about the process of globalisation being something relatively new and disconnected with the past and instead believe that it is an intensification of internationalization which is occurring.

Hirst and Thompson (1996) assert that genuinely transnational companies (TNCs)⁸ appear to be relatively rare, as most companies are nationally based and trade in other countries too on the strength of a significant national location of production and sale. Sassen (2001) agrees with Hirst and Thompson on this point and adds that TNCs tend to exhibit a strong centralised management structure, and that managerial control tends to reside in London, New York and/or Tokyo, which she terms “global cities”. According to her, in a progressively more globalised world economy, these cities are becoming increasingly concentrated loci of power and control. These cities are the key locations of transnational corporate head-offices, specialised producer services and are also the primary market for these specialised services and financial products.

⁸ A transnational company is the one with investments and activities that span international boundaries and with subsidiary companies, factories, offices, or facilities in several countries (Knox and Marston 2001).

Moreover, it has been shown that capital mobility is not producing a massive shift of investment and employment from the advanced to the developing countries (Gertler 1997; Jones 2002). Hirst and Thompson (1995) draw on similar evidence to stress the continued relevance of the nation state as the locus of political decision-making. They are, thus, in support of what has been called the *localisation thesis*, which is a response to perceived inadequacies in the globalisation thesis (Storper 1992).

Proponents of the localisation thesis believe that under a newly emerging, qualitatively different set of competitive conditions, localities and regions have become increasingly important to the processes of economic development and that economic success is more likely to be achieved in those places sharing a specific set of social and economic attributes. According to the localisation thesis, therefore, dynamic economic growth has a *distinct geographical order* to it. It occurs in the spatially concentrated form of “clusters”, “industrial districts”, “technopoles”, or “territorial production complexes” (Gertler 1997). Moreover, the spatial configuration of economic activities has a significant influence on costs, productivity and efficiency by reducing the transaction costs incurred in buyer-supplier interactions.

Thus, while the sceptics assert the continued relevance of the nation state as the locus of political decisions, critics of this thesis point out that the sceptics fail to recognise that globalisation represents a process, rather than a condition, and therefore the sceptics’ dismissal of a globalised condition says nothing about globalising tendencies (Kelly 1999). Another criticism of the sceptics, put forward by Kelly (1999), is that early globalisation was shaped by imperialism while contemporary globalisation processes are based on very different political and technological foundations. Smith (1997) notes that while global markets for commodities and finance capital were already in place by the mid-twentieth century, it was only in the 1970s that production, labour and cultural capital saw equivalent globalising tendencies. Amin (1997: 126) argues that the thesis proposed by the sceptics “does not provide any sense of trends and change in the world economic system which might be genuinely challenging the balance between national and global influences”. Hence, it fails to reassure that globalisation has a distinct geographical order to it. On a similar note, I would also argue that compared to developments in the past, current processes of globalisation differ in the *scale* and the

speed in which they are being established and in the way they are spreading and becoming more deeply integrated.

By comparison it has been argued that the **transformationalists** take a more moderate “middle path” and suggest that globalisation transforms the power-relations between the nation state and international powers, but that the state remains an important agent (Luke 1994; Dicken 1998; Yeung 1998; Kelly 1999; Held 2000). The processes of globalisation - economic and otherwise - create new economic adjustments and political challenges for all. The ability of national governments to act independently on economic and social policies is constrained by growing global economic interdependence. To quote Mittleman (2000: 922), “globalisation involves a series of interactions among the economic, political and cultural spheres of life. It also appears in diverse sizes and shapes in different regions”.

Unlike hyperglobalists, transformationalists do not support the thesis that globalisation is leading to the death of the nation state (Mittelman 1996; Cox 1997; Dicken et al. 1997; Dicken 1998; Knutsen 1998). Instead, they state that globalisation is a set of *complex interrelated tendencies* and is not a rigid set of mutually dependent and absolute causal claims. As Kelly (1999: 390) observes “[w]hile some State functions... might be rendered more difficult to implement under globalisation, others are in fact more effectively conducted.” Similarly, Amin (1997) argues that under globalisation, certain state policies become more and more driven by external forces. They argue that globalisation is a contradictory process that will proceed hand-in-hand with uneven spatial development and that these processes will be realised in institutionally, historically and geographically specific sites. On a similar note Banerjee–Guha (2002) adds that globalisation might be characterised as a producer of divergent trajectories of development and underdevelopment. Panitch (1994) notes that globalisation is both authored by states and is primarily about reorganisation rather than by-passing states. He further contends that the notion that multinational corporations are fundamentally incompatible with each other is not necessarily true. Having critically analysed theories that define relations between state (read nation) and the global processes, Jessop (2002) argues that states are actively involved in the process of globalisation by redrawing the spatiotemporal matrices within which capital operates. As globalisation increases states

are no longer mere responsible for managing their closed national economy rather they are increasingly involved in managing a range of transnational processes. He (ibid: 110) emphasises the fact that under such situation of particular importance is the “states’ own role in redefining the boundaries between the economic and extraeconomic and/ reorganising the latter and subordinating them to the demands and pressures of globalisation.” Thus, according to the transformationalists, “like a constitutional monarch, nation-states remain both sovereign *and* subject” (Dicken et al. 1997: 162).

Based on these arguments, transformationalists tend to favour the concept of *glocalisation*. Robertson (1995: 28) has defined glocalisation as “the processes that telescope the global and local (scales) to make a blend”. This idea acknowledges the dominance of large, powerful corporations acting on the global scale, as well as the characteristics of particular communities and regions (Luke 1994; Peck and Tickell 1994; Cox 1997; Mittelman 2000). Glocalisation is hence the double movement of globalisation processes on the one hand and localisation processes on the other.

There are three variants to the glocalisation thesis. First are those authors such as Cox (1997) and Mittelman (2000) who argue that geographical differences in the character of the market prevail, despite the supposedly homogenising influence of globalisation due to local cultural variations or regulatory discontinuities. Hannerz (1996) strengthens the argument by stating that in cultural life one experiences the development of cultural ecumene resulting in multiple hybrid cultures and identities. The second variant is apparent in Porter’s (1990) work. He states that the prerequisite for competitive success in international markets is the special combination of supportive and competitive conditions arising in local home markets. The third variant is conceptualised by Reich (1991), stating that international manufacturing capital will most certainly come to settle in those localities and regions that offer the best human resources. Thus, a region’s educational and training system plays a vital role in this respect.

I am in agreement with the transformationalists, who argue that though the role of the nation state has undergone tremendous changes in the present globalised world, it is still an influential agent. Nation states continue to influence global policy, trading patterns, and industries, as well as FDI. They also remain the sole controller of international borders and the movement of people and goods across them, and thus play a

major role in regional, political and economic integration. The nation state, by virtue of its continuing dominance as a regional political agent, acts as the primary source of binding rules and laws within a given territory. International laws cannot function without the cooperation of nation states, thus transformationalists would argue, in opposition to globalisation rhetoric, that nation states are not mere municipalities or local authorities, without significant power (Dicken 1998).

Having conducted detailed historical research on the political-economy of developing countries Helleiner (1995) concludes that there are three distinct roles of nation states in the globalisation of capital and finance, namely, granting freedom to market actors through liberalisation initiatives, preventing major international crises, and choosing whether or not to implement specific controls on financial movements. Similarly, according to Yeung (1998), global financial integration occurs not because of the decline of nation states, but rather because of the regulatory activities of such states. It is a question of the willingness of the nation state to take advantage of the opportunities presented by globalisation, rather than the nation state's inability to confront globalising tendencies, that is of particular importance in the context of outsourcing call centres to India. In this case the TNCs were not able to take advantage of the country's human capital until the government introduced its liberalisation policies.

Following the arguments of the earlier transformationalists, more recent scholars including Phillips (1998), Gainsborough (2007), Woods (2007), Nayar (2008) believe that in the era of globalisation not only does the nation-state remains a significant power, but in various instances the nation-state becomes more powerful than transnational actors. Newman (2006) reinforces the importance of "borders" and asserts that despite increasing globalisation we do not live in a borderless world, as suggested by hyperglobalists. Woods (2007) posits that the politics of globalisation cannot be reduced to the domination or sub-ordination of transnational actors or the nation-state in a dualistic nature; instead it is a politics of negotiation and configuration. His argument is supported by Phillips' opinion (1998) that with globalisation the state is stronger in some realms and weaker in others. However, the challenge lies in recognising where this is the case. This argument is not only applicable to developed countries but also extends to developing countries as explained by Gainsborough (2007) and Nayar (2008).

Gainsborough (2007) in his discussion on cross-border flows in Vietnam explains that in the phase of globalisation despite the emergence of transnational actors, the state has retained its powerful role. On a similar note Nayar (2008) concludes that in India the economic role of the state has been strengthened regardless of intensive globalisation.

As is evident from table 2.1, it is difficult to fully endorse any one of these theories of globalisation. Indeed, I would argue that the three approaches (hyperglobalists, sceptics and transformationlists) should be considered contextually. Turner (1998) remarks that as with many theoretical concepts, the validity of any of these globalisation approaches must be tested by empirical studies in specific contexts. Using different means of analysis to focus on various actors in different contexts, it is clear that each approach makes a unique contribution to the discourse. First, hyperglobalists alert us to issues regarding the power of new players in global financial and capital markets, in the form of TNCs. Secondly, transformationlists highlight the complex role of the state, which I would argue remains a significant actor in the process of globalisation, and thirdly sceptics remind us of the historical roots of the current processes of globalisation. The situation is well explained by Amin and Robins (1990: 28) who observe that

... as far as the geography of change is concerned, it is necessary to grasp the coexistence and combination of localising and globalising, centripetal and centrifugal forces. The current restructuring process is a matter of a whole repertoire of spatial strategies, dependent upon situated contexts and upon balances of power.

In response to these complex and diverse situations, in the recent years there has been increasing attention paid to the concept of “global-local”, the interface between global and local processes currently underway (Turner 1998). This has led to discussions of the global-local nexus, detailed in the next section.

2.1.2.1 The Global-Local Nexus and the Importance of Scale

While this next body of literature features arguments that overlap at times with those of the transformationlists above, it revolves around a valuable development in the analysis, namely the importance of scale. A review of literature (see among others Dicken 1994; Peck and Tickell 1994; Storper and Scott 1995; Brenner 1999 and 2001; Swyngedouw 1997; Mittelman 2001; and Jessop 2002) suggests that the global-local nexus is best

understood in terms of scale. Rankin (2003) observes that “scale” first acquired its broad currency in relation to globalisation debates through the promotional efforts of Swyngedouw (1997) who argues that “conventional bipolar perspectives relating ‘the local’ to ‘the global’ are too narrow and overlook the multiple, intersecting scales through which everyday life is constituted” (Swyngedouw in Rankin 2003: 723). Thus, Mittelman (2001) states that globalisation is about the quest for an appropriate temporal and spatial scale for social organisation. In as much as globalisation is not a single process, but a complex of interconnected processes with different vectors in various regions, it is a “multiscaler phenomenon” (Mittelman 2001; Jessop 2002). Brenner (2001) questions the methodological approaches to define scale and re-scaling processes. He argues that in geography scale has been defined as a sociospatial process. Hence according to him the literature on geographical scale focus on the shifting organisational, strategic, discursive and symbolic relationships between a range of intertwined geographical scales and on the ramifications of such interscaler transformations. Dicken (1994) also acknowledges that while discussing the global-local nexus it becomes important to emphasise that the terms “global” and “local” are not fixed scales. Unlike the hyperglobalists who claim that time-space compression has so transformed the structure and scale of human relationships that social, cultural, political and economic processes now operate on a global scale with a consequent reduction in the significance of other scales (national, local, regional); Dicken et al. (1997: 60) point out that globalisation is not “just about one scale becoming more important than the rest, it is also about changes in the very nature of the relationships between scales”. They argue that the only sense in which a “global-local dialect” is a useful idea is in collapsing the dualism and recognising the constructedness of scale. Mansfield (2005: 460) also focuses on the concept of “complex scaler relations” with regards to the global and the local.

Swyngedouw (1997) also discusses the concept of spatial scale in defining the global and the local and outlines the problems associated with measuring these scales. He argues that strategising around the politics of scale necessitates negotiating through difference and similarity to formulate collective strategies without sacrificing local loyalties. However, the highly fluid and dynamic nature of spatial scale makes it difficult to conceptualise geographical units, as scale is constantly redefined and contested. This

argument is of particular importance while addressing call centres in India since at the national level there are three key actors involved- the federal government, state governments and local municipalities within the state. Though, through a broad lens of globalisation, all these three could be categorised as the “local” it is important that variations within this “local” are examined for a more nuanced understanding of the different roles that these actors play, their relational power differences and strategies, and their direct impacts on call centre developments. Hence, I agree with Mansfield (2005: 471) who argues that “while we need to avoid thinking of the national simply as a unitary container..., we need to move beyond rescaling by reintegrating the national as a dimension of scalar process”.

This argument can be strengthened by the work of Storper and Scott (1995). They argue that different transactions occur at different geographical scales and the technologies of transitions are subject to development and change. They suggest that such changes are not always unidirectional in favour of globalisation. Moreover, agglomerated regional industrial complexes remain important foci of economic activities. They emphasise the localised nature of labour markets and state that regions are one of the essential bases of industrial organisation in the emerging global economy. Brenner (1999) argues that the current wave of globalisation is leading to new configurations of territoriality on both sub- and supra-national geographical scales. He contends that globalisation is a multi-scalar process of reterritorialisation in which states play crucial roles. He views the process of globalisation as a continual deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation that has underpinned the production of capitalist spatiality since the first industrial revolution of the early 19th century.

On a similar note Peck and Tickell (1994) note that the global-local nexus has given rise to terms like “global-local dialects” and “glocalisation” in order to explain the alignment of local-global relations. Discussing the global-local nexus, these authors state that the debates over globalisation and localisation need to be understood within a context of neo-liberalism. To that end, they point out the extent to which there has been a significant shift in the political environment and economic practices in the world. They believe that the nation state is being “hollowing out” but at the same time, it remains an important actor. According to them, the present situation is perhaps best described as

“global-local disorder” (ibid: 318), a result of political-economic disorder caused by neo-liberalism. They argue that after the breakdown of Fordism- Keynesianism, neo-liberalism became the newly ascendant global order. The prescriptions of neo-liberalism provided no solution to the prevailing disorders in the global economy, but rather encouraged a new global-local disorder. Thus prevailed the “jungle-law” under which the local suffered. Peck and Tickell (1994) suggest that since neo-liberalism is socially, economically and geographically unsustainable, its prevalence leads to unsustainable growth.

2.1.3 Globalisation Conclusions

Increasingly, the term “globalisation” is being related to the weakening status of nation states and the elevated status of the market (Banerjee-Guha 2002). I would argue that in spite of attempts to reinforce the significance of nation state, it becomes evident from the above discussions that the power of nation state has to some extent been reduced by the emergence of supra-national institutions. To state that the nation state is actually “hollowing out” is rather extreme but nation states are becoming less dominant in the contemporary capitalist economy compared to the early years of the last century. This situation is augmented by steady improvements in information technologies and cheap and effective means of transportation, which have led to the time-space compression of the world. Luke (1994) rightly points out that these global economic changes are leading to disorientation, as they are not creating either a stable nor homogenous global economy or society. As a result, globalisation is generating many unusual new effects at the local, regional and international levels. This draws attention to the importance of gaining a great awareness of the various consequences of globalisation at a multiplicity of scales and locations.

As such, from this discussion I have selected a range of key points that I incorporate into the conceptual framework for my thesis. These are presented in Figure 2.2, in the left hand box (Building Block 1). I argue that globalisation has and continues to lead to the increasing integration of the world. With advancements in information and communication technologies there has occurred a *time-space compression*, thus enabling instantaneous communication around the globe and bringing more places into contact with one another. Call centres in India are one obvious example of this time-space

compression; employees are physically located at distant geographical locations yet virtually - with the help of the Internet and telephones via satellite communications - they cater to customers as if they were “just around the corner”.

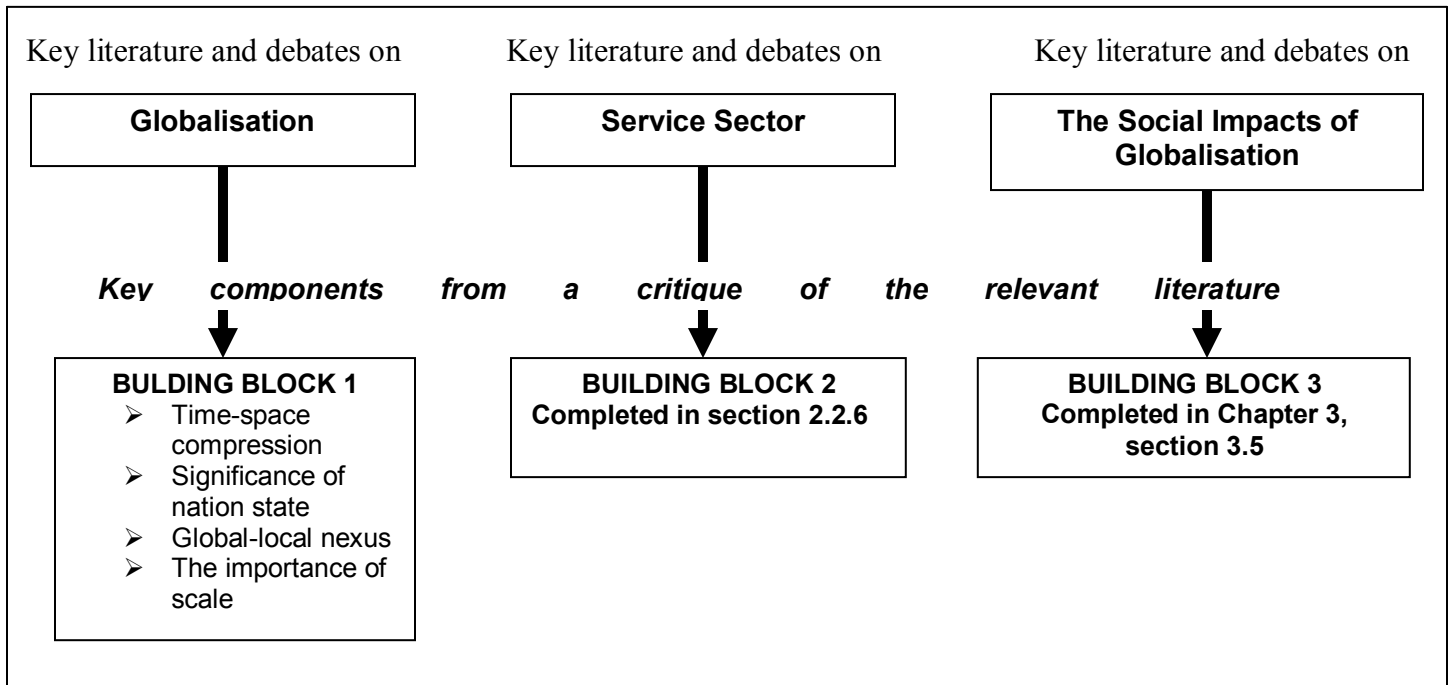


Figure 2.2 Key ideas from globalisation literature used to develop my conceptual framework.

In an increasingly globalised world, the role of the nation state is often discussed and debated. A critical appraisal of such discussions and debate brings to light that in the era of globalisation the powers of nation states have to some extent been reduced by the emergence of supra-national institutions. Nonetheless, the *significance of the nation state* cannot be fully nullified as nation states are still important in the globalisation of capital and finance through liberalisation policies, trading regulations, and FDI flows. This significance is clear in India, where it is only through the recent liberalisation policies of the government, that it has been possible for transnational corporations to open their branch offices in India.

The discussions in Section 2.1.3.1 showed that recent work on the concept of *global-local nexus*, the interface between global and local processes currently underway,

has been important in highlighting the role of scale. Hence, the concept of the global-local nexus is best understood in terms of *scale*. This particular concept is of great importance in examining call centres in India, which exemplify a unique blend of global and local processes simultaneously, as will be elaborated upon in the results chapters (Chapters Six, Seven and Eight). However, it is evident that the global and the local are not fixed units, rather they change according to context and time. These key concepts form the first building block of my conceptual framework.

2.2 The Service Sector

This section is broadly divided into six sub-sections to understand the nature and characteristics of the service sector, from which I select key points, in the same fashion as above to continue to build the conceptual framework for my thesis. The service sector literature is critiqued here because the nature of call centres places them directly into this categorisation within the world economy. In the first sub-section (Section 2.2.1) I address the changing nature of the service sector in the globalised world, followed by a discussion about how services tend to be categorised (Section 2.2.2). This provides a backdrop for understanding the nature of services that are outsourced to various developing countries including India. Section 2.2.3 focuses on the importance of service industries for a country's economic status and then the globalised nature of service sector industries is examined in Section 2.2.4, providing a nuanced understanding of the reasons for outsourcing service industries of which call centres form an important segment. Finally, I situate the new international division of labour within the existing globalised service sector in Section 2.2.5 to allow for an analysis of the labour division within the call centre industry. I conclude this section (Section 2.2.6) by discussing the key points that make the second building block of my conceptual framework.

2.2.1 Introduction to the Service Sector

Services are usually defined as activities that are relatively detached from material production and as a consequence do not directly involve the processing of physical materials (Thrift 2000). Daniels (1985: 1) suggests that a service might be defined as “the exchange of a commodity which may either be marketable or provided by public

agencies and which often does not have a tangible form” (also see Melvin 1989). On a similar note Singer et al. (2002) state that a service activity adds value to something: either a good belonging to another person (example, car repairs) or to another person *per se* (example, a hair cut).⁹ Madheswaran and Dharmadhikary (2000), and Unni and Rani (2000) argue that the importance of the role of the service sector in economic development has only been recently realised. Service industries in the form that we know them today gained prominence during the industrial revolution and have matured over time in post-industrial society. Both neoclassical and Keynesian economics ignored any distinction between the production of goods and services, let alone distinctions within service industries (Sassen 2001). Indeed, there has been a neglect of the service sector in analysis due to long term biases against services among economic analysts such as Smith and Marx (Lakshmanan 1989). Adam Smith viewed services as unproductive, while Karl Marx adopted a similar position when he relegated all activities that were remote from material production into the “superstructure”. Moreover, there have been arguments that services are not subject to economies of scale and that in many cases the substitution of capital for labour is not possible (Baumol 1967; Lakshmanan 1989; Sassen 2001).

As a result, until the 1940s the service sector was essentially conceived by most economists as a residual category that was neither part of the primary nor the secondary sector. This neglect in many branches of economics and urban geography persisted until 1940 when Clark (1940) in his classical analysis of the relationships between economic growth and changes in the structure of the labour force mentioned the need to address economies of tertiary industries (also see Daniels 1985; Sassen 2001). At the same time, service industries were also ignored within international development theory, based on the rationale of services being unproductive and having a retardant effect on economic development (Sassen 2001). Further important theoretical elaborations regarding the services category finally came from such social scientists such as Bell (1973) in the United States, and Crozier (1963) and Touraine (1969) in France, who examined the implications of the growing influence of services in highly developed economies.

⁹ For more definitions of services see Hill (1977); Corden (1985); Sassen (2001); and Madheswaran and Dharmadhikary (2000).

According to these scholars the service economy is equated with a new type of society commonly called the post-industrial society.

In 1985, the service sector received further impetus from Walker (1985) who attempted to analyse the so-called “service society” (Tickell 2002). At that time the dominance of services within economic theory of the developed world was becoming increasingly accepted and it was believed that such changes were part of a natural progression from the production of basic human needs to a more sophisticated and complex socio-economic form.

Despite growing interest in the service sector it is not an easy task to measure the exact impact of services due to their “non-material” nature (Betchermen et al. 1991; Aarnio 1999). Moreover, in national income account statistics on economic activity by industry, the service sector is traditionally identified as part of the tertiary industries, thus including all those other than primary (for example, agriculture, fishing, forestry) and secondary (manufacturing, mining, construction) industries (Aarnio 1999). However, in light of recent studies, merging services as a single entity “the tertiary sector” seems inappropriate for purposes of an analysis of the potential employment and growth effects these services might have. Hence, the great diversity of economic activity performed under the heading “services” requires disaggregation. Though this is widely accepted, there is little agreement on which typology or classification of service industries to use. The next section introduces the various categories under which services are classified, and concludes with a discussion of how I categorise call centres within this framework.

2.2.2 Categorising Services

To understand the nature of outsourced call centres in India, it is important to provide an analysis of the various categories of services. The extreme diversity of service industries makes it very difficult to categorise them into specific groups. Service industries range from highly sophisticated, knowledge and information-intensive activities performed in both private and public sector organisations, to very basic services of cleaning and simple

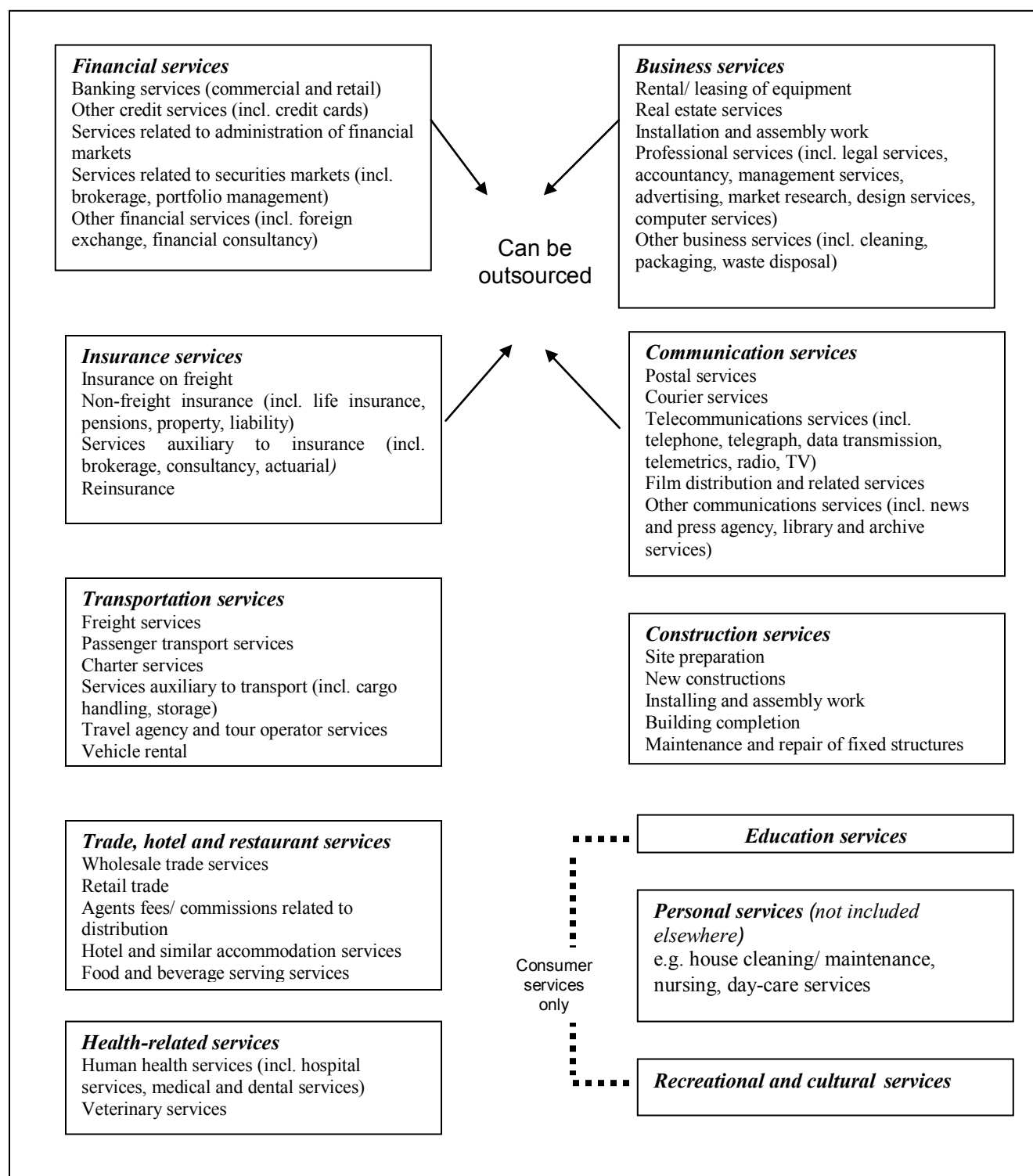
maintenance (Dickens 1998).¹⁰ Table 2.2 provides a detailed typology of such services, broadly dividing services into eleven categories. As is apparent from the table, even within each category there are several sub-categories with specialised functions, and it follows that it is not justifiable to make generalised statements about any service category. For example, banking services include commercial and retail services, credit card services and also other services related to foreign exchange and financial consultancy. Each of these services is highly specialised in terms of labour skills, financial planning and operationalisation, and location. Moreover, due to the specific nature some services - financial services, banking services, insurance services, and communication services - can be outsourced (call centres fall under this category), while others like construction services cannot.

It quickly becomes evident from this table that services are diverse and hence difficult to classify. Daniels (1985) also provides various alternative classifications that can help one to categorise service industries.¹¹ However, a review of such literature reveals that a broad categorisation grouping services into those meeting intermediate demand (producer services) and those meeting final demand (consumer services) is widely used (Daniels 1993, see also Aarnio 1999). Greenfield (1966) popularised the classification of services into producer and consumer services, while Knox and Martson (2003: 89) define producer services as those “that enhance the productivity or efficiency of other firms’ activities or that enable them to maintain specialised roles.” Some examples of producer services include advertising, marketing, and research and development. Consumer services cater directly to (consuming) individuals, examples including recreational, education, health, welfare and personal services. Nevertheless, Allen (1988) criticises the concept of producer services and argues that they are no less a chaotic concept than the idea of “services” as a whole, adding that growth within different producer services is the result of markedly different causal processes (see Tickell 2002).

¹⁰ According to a World Bank (2004) definition, services include wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels, transport, storage, communications, financing, insurance, real estate, business services and community, social and personal services.

¹¹ For other classifications of various types of service activities also see Greenfield (1966); Katouzian (1970); Aronson and Cowhey (1984); Daniels (1985); Tucker and Sundberg (1988); Dickens (1998); Aarnio (1999); and Unni and Rani (2000).

Table 2.2 A typology of service activities



Source: Adapted from Dicken 1998: 388, based on GATT 1989, Appendix II.

Daniels (1985) suggests that producer and consumer services could be further subdivided according to their perishable, semi-durable and durable attributes. Nevertheless, he continues that durability is a difficult concept to define especially in terms of services, arguing that the length of time over which the service yields utility is an important factor in this categorisation. Such categorisations might help us to understand the locational aspects of service industries (Price and Blair 1989). According to Sassen (2001) this categorisation and the consequent differentiation between consumer and producer services has led to a reevaluation of the traditional characteristics attributed to services (that services are not transportable, cannot be stocked or warehoused, and are not subject to accumulation or export). Indeed, the issue of classification of the service sector has triggered many debates.

However, in practice, so-called producer and consumer services are not mutually exclusive groups, many service industries serving both consumers and producers (Daniels 1993; Dicken 1998; Aarnio 1999). In fact, most services such as transportation and communication, banking, financial, insurance, and legal and accountancy services are “mixed” since they are both producer and consumer services. As such, and based on the above discussions, I have developed a schematic understanding of the categorisation of services, shown in Figure 2.3, that is used for this thesis. I argue, as shown here, that there are broadly three types of services that can be identified - producer, consumer and mixed services. The dotted lines in the figure signify that most services do not actually belong to any fixed category but rather, depending on their recipients, their categorisation changes. As Daniels (1985: 7) states, “most of the industries classed as services have to satisfy demand from a highly amalgam of other businesses, individual consumers, government and non-profit organizations.” This can be explained with the help of Table 2.2 that illustrated a typology of service activities.

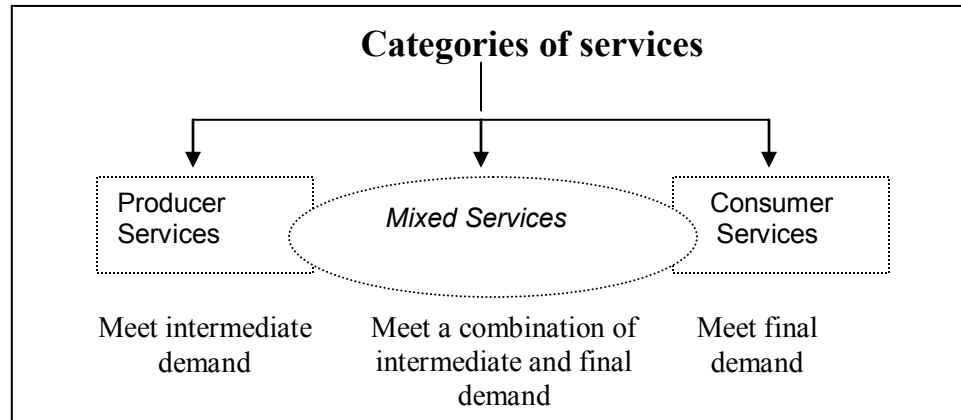


Figure 2.3 Categorisation of services

In Table 2.2, except for three categories (educational services, personal services, and recreational and cultural services) which are solely consumer services, all the other types of services are mixed services. This is because the latter all have elements of both producer and consumer services. For example, certain segments of financial services, commercial banking services, and services related to the administration of financial markets are producer services, while there are other segments within the same service type, such as retail banking services, and credit card services that are consumer services. Similarly, insurance services can also be sub-divided into producer (insurance on freight, services auxiliary to insurance) and consumer (life insurance, pensions, property insurance) services. However, from these illustrations the important point that emerges is that the categorisation of services is highly dependent on who is actually being “served”, and that due to the flexible nature of the service industry, many services fit best within a “mixed” category, serving both intermediaries and final consumers. In section 2.4.1.1, I contextualise call centres within this framework and argue that they are categorised under “mixed” services. However, despite disagreements and difficulties in categorising services, the growing importance of service industries in the economy has been globally recognised, a point I turn to next.

2.2.3 Importance of Service Industries in the National Economy

The last three decades have witnessed a revolution in the composition of economic activity in most developed economies, with services replacing goods manufacturing as the predominant production activity (see D'Souza 2000).¹² The growth of service industries is linked to the level of economic development of the country. There is evidently a link between income and services (for sources of growth of the service sector see Daniels 1985; Madheswaran and Dharmadhikary 2000). The argument that the growth of service industries at the expense of other kinds of industry is in some way linked to the level of economic development, has been examined by several economists (see Bhalla 1970; Gershuny 1978; Oberai 1978; Daniels 1985). In most advanced industrialised countries over 50 per cent of employment is currently in the service sector, while in both the USA and the UK the proportion is even higher (Price and Blaire 1989). Yet, Singh (2000) observes that the service sector accounts for a considerably large proportion of income and employment not only in developed countries but also in developing countries. Indeed, services represent more than 80 per cent of economic activity in Singapore, while they are close to 50 per cent in most other Asian countries (Mukhopadhyay 2002; Lovelock et al. 2002).

One of the most important reasons for increasing the share of services in a country's economy is the trade in these services (see Daniels 1993), and indeed, globalisation of the world economy has encouraged trade in services between nations (see Price and Blair 1989; O'Connor and Daniels 2001).¹³ Singer et al. (2002) state that since the early 1980s, international service transactions expanded rapidly as new modes of supply materialised, as in the case of services transmitted over electronic networks. Indeed, throughout the 1980s, trade in services grew faster than trade in merchandise. In 1990, global services trade, defined as "non-factor services in balance of payments minus government transactions", stood at US\$0.8 billion or 20 per cent of global trade (Singer et al. 2002: 2). By 1995, services trade reached roughly US\$1.2 trillion, maintaining a 20 per cent share in global trade (ibid.). However, Daniels (1993) observes that it is producer

¹² Madheswaran and Dharmadhikary (2000) state that the structural transformation of an economy takes place mainly along two dimensions- one related to a changing sectoral share in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the second related to the changing share of the labour force engaged in each sector.

¹³ See Porter (1990) for more details regarding international competition in services.

services more specifically, that have been responsible for the growing involvement of services in the world economy, as well as within national economies.

While manufacturing and service industries may have some factors of production in common such as labour, capital or land, others such as technology or knowledge are more central to services than to manufacturing. Unni and Rani (2000: 805) suggest that information is also increasingly becoming a fourth factor of production, arguing that in fact, “information is a raw material for knowledge”. Daniels (1993) points out that other factors that act as catalysts for increasing trade in services include information technology, the telecommunication revolution, transport technology and government influence. It thus follows that with the advent of the information and technological revolution, services need not be consumed at the same place as where they are produced. Each of these factors which are impacting the trade of services will be illustrated in Chapter Four in relation to the position of India in the global trade of services, as they have had direct consequences for the growth of call centres in that country.

It also needs to be mentioned that for developing countries, one of the important methods of expanding the service sector is to allow FDI into the economy. This link between FDI and the service sector is highlighted by Daniels (1985) who notes that as of the early 1990s, about 50 per cent of the global stock of FDI was in services activities. In India during the financial year of 1999-2000, the total services trade was estimated at about US\$30 billion, much higher than the comparative growth in manufacturing and agriculture. I also return to this point in detail in the context chapter (Chapter Four), where I discuss how government regulations through liberalisation and privatisation policies have played an important role in encouraging the globalisation of service industries in India.

2.2.4 Globalisation of Service Industries

Historically the successful operation and growth of service industries has been hindered by restrictions on the physical movement of people and information. In the globalised world however, technological developments have given a “foot loose” character to service industries. With the advancement of technology and changes in government policies (reflecting earlier conclusions that the nation-state still has a role to play), many

parts of the service sector have assumed a globalised character which might be called the *globalisation of the service sector*. Global transactions in services are definitely increasing, even if this is often reliant upon the physical movement of consumers (such as consumer-mobility trades, for example tourism), or of service providers, founded upon the establishment of production units in countries other than original locations (for example, help desk for computer operations) (Daniels 1985). In this regard, Bhagwati (1987) has analysed whether it is necessary to be physically present at the same location as the customer to provide a service. He distinguished between three situations- first, the supplier of the service is mobile but the customer is immobile, second, the supplier is immobile but the customer is mobile, and third, both customer and supplier are mobile (see also Sampson and Snape 1985, and Singer et al. 2002).¹⁴ It is my argument that with the globalisation of service industries the third situation as put forward by Bhagwati is most applicable for call centres outsourced to India. This argument will be strengthened below as I discuss the nature of globalised service industries and their clientele.

Call centres belong to this third category, mobile with regards to both the supplier (now outsourced in countries like India) and customer (often very mobile “global citizens” in developed countries). Indeed, call centres are a service industry that may establish firms in foreign countries to cater to local and/or internationally based customers. The technology now available to service industries or their customers includes telecommunications, electronics and computing, labelled as information technology (IT). As information technology has evolved and become within the reach of more service activities, the spatial organisation of call centre firms has become more dispersed (Daniels 1985). Thus, advancements in information technology have overcome the geographical barriers of distance, especially with the advent of the Internet and advanced telecommunications, resulting in David Harvey’s (1989) “time-space compression” of the service sector. The capitalist economy has made the best use of these developments leading to the globalisation of many service industries. New technology not only influences, expands and redefines producer services but also services which require over-the-counter interaction with customers. Call centres are one of the best examples to

¹⁴ For theories about location and spatial distribution of service industries see Daniels (1985) and Price and Blair (1989).

explain these dynamic changes. Information technology is generating changes in the way in which numerous types of service sector providers whether producer, mixed, or consumer based, interact with their clients or customers, and call centres are at the heart of such changes (Daniels 1985).

2.2.4.1 Outsourcing of Service Industries

From the above discussion it becomes evident that the combination of information technology and changing government regulations makes it feasible for service industry tasks to be undertaken in a much wider range of locations than in the past. This phenomenon is referred to as the outsourcing of service industries. Rodrik (1997: 4) states that outsourcing “refers to companies’ practice of subcontracting part of the production process - typically the most labour-intensive and least skill-intensive parts - to firms in other countries with lower costs”. Services currently outsourced include processing credit cards, dealing with credit card claims and payoffs, providing information systems such as data centres, networks and helpdesks, and services undertaking business processes such as customer services, finance, logistics and human resources (Unni and Rani 2000). Nowadays, the outsourcing of services represents a very common trend in the globalised economy, with many such service industries being outsourced to developing countries. Yet, until relatively recently the expectation that technology would threaten jobs in the service sector in traditional service sector locations (predominantly in developed countries) was considered unrealistic, white-collar office worker in particular being seen as immune from the cyclical fluctuations in the demand for labour characteristic of other economic activities in advanced economies (Daniels 1985). Nevertheless, the “Communications Workers of America” estimates that 400,000 white-collar jobs have already been “lost”, especially to India since late 1990s.¹⁵ They also project that by 2012 about three million more service jobs are expected to migrate offshore to India (Hiebert and Slater 2003). *Time Magazine* (2004) reports far higher figures in 2004, noting that from 2003 to 2008, 2.3 million service jobs will “vanish” from the USA to developing countries. Nevertheless, outsourcing is not just a North

¹⁵ A website maintained by protestors against outsourcing of jobs from US (<http://saveusjobs.biz>) gives data on the number of jobs being outsourced to various countries. Clearly figures from such a website need to be treated with caution.

America phenomenon with Monbiot (2003) stating that from 2003 to 2008 at least 30,000 executive positions in Britain's finance and insurance industries are likely to be outsourced to India.¹⁶

Based on the discussion of the nature of services in Section 2.2.2, it is evident that all services can be outsourced, for example a haircut, or house cleaning. This leaves services that are outsourced grouped under financial, business, insurance, and communication services respectively (shown in Table 2.2). In this section I focus specifically on services from these four groups that are being outsourced. The services that are outsourced are all IT-enabled services. IT-enabled services refer to services that can be carried out at a distance from the front office where customers make contact. Additionally, sales are then carried out through teletrade (Unni and Rani 2000).¹⁷ Thus, IT-enabled services are not necessarily related to the production of software or IT in general, but use IT to make the provision of services possible (Singh 2004). Ramani (2000) states that these services refer to back office work.¹⁸ In India such outsourced back office employments cover a wide range of services, with some of the most common including call centres and medical transcriptions (Unni and Rani 2000).¹⁹ Figure 2.4 contextualises call centres within the categories of services discussed in Section 2.2.2.

¹⁶ Considering the fact that there is a wide variation in statistics provided by various newspaper articles and magazines on outsourcing, these figures might not be absolutely reliable.

¹⁷ Any form of trading activities carried over by telephones, for example, hotel reservation via telephone.

¹⁸ Back offices, by definition, are a consolidation of activities with low contact needs, which tend to employ a high proportion of low- wage office workers, compared to other office types (Nelson 1986).

¹⁹ Sassen (2001) states that despite outsourcing of services and locating service industries across the globe, there is a strong centralised management that control TNCs. She argues that such managerial control resides in three cities- London, New York and Tokyo, which she calls "global cities". According to her, in progressively more globalised world economy, these cities are becoming an increasingly concentrated loci of power and control. These cities are the key location of transnational corporate head-offices, the location specialised producer services and also the primary market for these specialized services and financial products. This argument has received support from many scholars (Holton 1998; Beck 1999; Lechner and Boli 2000) and became a fundamental theoretical building block to theorizing and understanding globalisation. Nonetheless, it also attracted criticisms. Jones (2002) argues that Sassen provides an oversimplified version of understanding the complex process of management in TNCs. He states that managerial control in some of the most globalised of business service industries, such as investment banking and management consultancy, cannot be understood as being centralized in global headquarter offices and nor does it reside only with a few senior managers at the top of the transnational organisation.

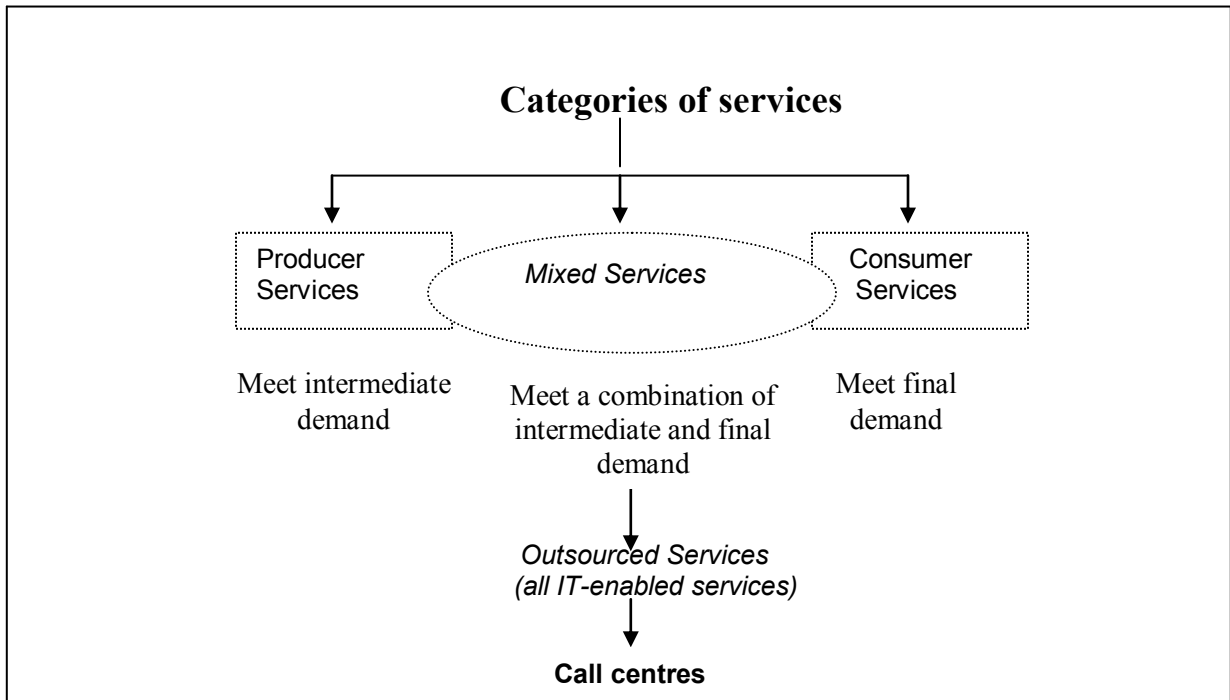


Figure 2.4 Contextualising call centres within service categories.

Outsourcing leads to employment creation in the countries to which such service firms are re-located, such as India (Sassen 1989; James 1993; Rama 2002). Indeed, a review of the literature (see among others, James 1993; Lakha 1994; Parthasarathy 2000; Larner 2001; Monbiot 2003; Hiebert and Slater 2003; Thottam 2004) suggests that since one of the main purposes of outsourcing is to take advantage of cheap labour, most such jobs are outsourced to developing countries that can provide a large and approximately skilled labour pool. India is one of the “favourite” locations for such outsourced services from Western Europe and North America and in Chapter Four I analyse the various types of employment that are now available in India as a result of outsourcing of service industries. More specifically, the outsourcing of service industries creates a new form of the international division of labour that I discuss in the next section.

2.2.5 New International Division of Labour in the Globalised Service Industries

The globalisation of service industries has produced new divisions of labour to suit the demands of the various specialised industries within this sector. Developing countries

have been greatly affected as a result of these new labour trends, often providing the required labour pool. These impacts have been felt keenly in India and call centre employees form an important part of this new international labour division. As such, in this section, after briefly examining the historically changing forms of the division of labour to help set the scene, I focus upon the changing nature of service industries in the new international division of labour.

The concept of the “division of labour” was formalised by Adam Smith in 1776. He defined this as the specialisation of labourers in different stages of a production process. Hence, this concept did not initially have a geographical meaning (Velden 1989). Yet, acknowledging the notion of spatiality, Coffey (1996) recognises three major forms of division of labour, namely, the technical division of labour (the specialisation of workers in each stage of production process), the social division of labour (specialisation of functions performed by individuals in society) and the spatial division of labour (specialisation of production by geographic zones).²⁰

After World War II, important changes occurred in the relationships between the industrialised countries and the former colonies giving rise to an *international division of labour* (IDL). Coffey (1996) defines the IDL as being based on specialisation at the national scale, which gives rise to international trade flows. Walton (1985) classifies three phases of the IDL (also see Knutsen 1998). In Walton’s classification the first phase corresponds to the early period of European colonization and is characterised by the extraction of agricultural products and minerals from developing countries. The second phase stretches over most of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This phase witnessed the expansion of industrial production in the developed countries of Western Europe and North America while the developing countries still specialised in agricultural products and minerals based on the concept of the comparative advantage of nations (see Porter 1990). However, around the mid-1960s, a third phase began. The production stages of labour-intensive industries, such as leather working, textiles, clothing and electronics, were transferred from Western Europe and North America to the developing countries to take advantage of cheap labour (Parthasarathy

²⁰ The spatial division of labour as a concept was introduced by Massey (1984). She defines it as a division of labour which involves the concentration of a particular sector and/or production tasks in specific geographical areas.

2000). The outcome of these developments gave birth to the *new international division of labour* (NIDL) (see Lipietz 1986; Velden 1989; Coffey 1996). The NIDL refers to a new spatial division of labour at a global scale (Wright 2002; Knox et al. 2003). Ladreit (1969) was one of the first to use the term NIDL, though it was popularised by Palloix (1977) and Frobel et al. (1980). These scholars argued that the NIDL emerged due to changing market and production conditions in developed countries that encouraged companies from these countries to open production facilities in locations where they could lower their costs.

Like the globalisation debates, writings on the NIDL sprouted debate as to whether it was a “myth” or if it was actually replacing the traditional division of labour. Many, including Knox et al. (2003), support the latter notion and believe that the NIDL has replaced the traditional division of labour. They argue that this situation is made possible by cheap labour in developing countries and the development of new technologies, especially in transport and communication. Manufacturing sites are no longer heavily dependent on geographical distances. However, others believe that the NIDL is a myth. Mittelman (1995) states that the NIDL thesis overemphasises the significance of cheap labour. He argues that low wages do not necessarily explain the decisions made by transnational corporations to move to countries where labour is relatively costly. Instead, he suggests that locational decisions represent an amalgam of considerations including government policies and such decisions might often favour countries where labour costs exceed those in neighbouring countries.

On the same note, others such as Lipietz (1986), and Coffey (1996) suggest that the NIDL has not totally replaced the old international division of labour. In fact, they co-exist. They argue that there is no single model that can generalise the existing patterns of labour, instead there are multiple regional divisions of labour emerging that are related in varied ways to different global structures. Each of these labour divisions is engaged in unequal transactions with world centres of production and is presented with distinctive development possibilities. Dicken (1992), Mittelman (1995), and Coffey (1996) refer to this pattern of labour as the global division of labour (GDL), while Coffey (1996: 43) prefers the terms “new NIDL” or “NEWER-IDL”. The four main characteristics of this phase can be summarised as follows: subcontracting by firms from developed countries

to developing countries becomes more prevalent; service functions are located in developing countries; TNCs based in developing countries invest FDI in other countries that are less developed than themselves, and there is an increase in the level of FDI also invested by developed countries to other developed countries. It is within this global division of labour that I argue contemporary outsourced service industries - such as call centres - are placed, especially due to the movement of service functions to developing countries.²¹ These call centres fall within the broader category of “back offices”, the labour requirements for which I discuss next.

2.2.5.1 Labour Demand and Supply for Back Offices

In their work on industrial location theory, Walker and Storper (1980) state that what constitutes an appropriate labour force for any industry requires a specification of labour demand. This also applies for service industries, which are highly specialised in nature. As mentioned in Section 2.2.1, back offices form an important segment of service industries. Generally back offices are clerk-intensive involving semi-skilled workers. Nevertheless, Nelson (1986) does argue that there are some back offices that do not fall into this category, such as technical and research work back offices. In general, however, apart from a large number of clerks, the labour composition of back offices consists of a small group of supervisory staff, including some middle management employees and a small component of blue-collar workers for providing maintenance. Thus the labour demand for back offices can be broadly categorised as including a large demand for clerical workers and a small demand for higher-wage managerial and technical workers, respectively (Nelson 1986). Nelson (ibid.) observes that over the last few decades there have been considerable changes in the demand for clerical workers due to the automation of back offices, with an increasing demand for high-quality labour with computer knowledge.

However, one cannot generalise the labour demand of back offices because they are so specialised. Call centres - as one form of specialised back office - constitute a major source of employment in many developing countries such as India. As Lerner

²¹ See Luthje (2002) regarding the division of labour in the electronic sector in developing countries. Other examples include Lipietz (1993) and Hoeschele (2002).

(2001: 298) observes, “call centres are part of a NIDL, in which workers in lower wage locations service the activities of firms in industrialized countries”. The nature of call centres varies (as explained in Chapter One) and so correspondingly does labour demand. Broadly speaking, call centres in India are clerk-intensive, and they provide customer care services to firms located around the globe. Despite the clerical nature of work, in India the call centres require workers with high educational levels (for example, management degrees) and computer skills, along with fluency in the English language. This point will be elaborated upon further in the first results chapter (Chapter Six), where I provide a content analysis of the advertisements for call centres employments. In the meantime, gender is also an important criterion for labour selection in back offices, discussed next.

2.2.5.2 Gender and Work Participation in Back Offices

Gothoskar (2000) and Boyer (2004) state that with the information and technological revolution in the service sector, the gendered nature of labour within the sector has also been changing and by the end of the first quarter of the 20th century most of the work in back offices within the service sector was performed by women. As was evident from the discussion in the preceding section, the major labour-force for back offices are clerical in nature. With more females entering the workforce in developed countries than in the past, there has been a general tendency to refer to the back office labour force as the “feminisation of back offices” (Breathnach 1997; also see Lowe 1987). However, the feminisation of labour as a process should be understood in the wider context of labour market processes undergoing change globally since the 1980s (see Deshpande and Deshpande 1998). With the technological revolution, demand for back office female labour increased in developed countries, where the revolution had its inception. Therefore, until very recently most studies and theories about the feminisation of back offices were rooted in the experiences of these countries (Boyer 2003). Recently, outsourcing of back office work in developing countries has been generating a demand for female labour in these offices. Howes and Singh (1995) observe that women are entering the service sector labour-force at a rapid pace and that this phenomenon is now

more striking in developing countries, beginning to attract the attention of feminist scholars (Dutta 2000; Gothoskar 2000; Madheswaran and Dharmadhikary 2000).

Academics argue that the reason women are hired in such positions is that they are reputed – irrespective of their geographical location - to have better telephonic skills and be better “suited” to part time and shift work with low wages (typical of back office employment). In Larner’s (2001: 3) words “the ability to ‘smile down the phone’ is prized”. Among back offices, call centres in developed countries have been referred to as “feminised workplaces” as the vast majority of those currently employed are women (Larner 2001: 3). In the developing country context, this is supported by Monbiot’s (2003) study, according to which almost two-third of call centre workers in India are women. As such, gender is an important element that must not be ignored in a study of back office work in a developing country context, such as this thesis.

2.2.6 Service Sector Conclusions

From this analysis of debates concerning the definition, role and structure of the service sector, I have drawn four key points that I will utilise as part of the conceptual framework for this thesis. These are presented in Building Block 2, in the middle box of Figure 2.5. First, based on categorisation of services into producer, consumer and mixed services, respectively, call centres can be broadly categorised under mixed services, since they meet both intermediate and final demands. Therefore, to understand the nature of call centres in India it is crucial to understand the characteristics of *mixed services*.

Second, in Section 2.2.4, it was argued that developments in technology, alongside the liberalisation policies of certain developing country governments have increased the trade in services leading to a growth of service industries across the globe. As a result, a large proportion of IT-enabled services are being *outsourced* to developing countries, and call centres - such as those at the heart of this study in India - are high on the list of such services.

Third, the outsourcing of service industries has given rise to new forms of labour structures. Drawing upon the discussion in Section 2.2.5 I argue that the concept of the *global division of labour* best explains the forms of labour relations relied upon by contemporary outsourced service industries, especially call centres in India. Therefore, it

is pertinent to examine this specific form of division of labour for a nuanced understanding of the features of labour requirements in call centres. Fourth, another important aspect of recruitment in back office employment, including call centres, is a tendency to employ more female workers, leading to the *feminisation of back offices* (Section 2.2.5.2). This has occurred in India, where more than two-third of call centre employees are women (Monbiot 2003). Therefore, this forms a vital component for analysing the socio-economic impacts of call centre employment, which are obviously gendered. These above mentioned four key concepts form the second building block for my conceptual framework. This framework continues to be developed in the next chapter, Chapter Three, where I turn to focus on the social impacts of globalisation.

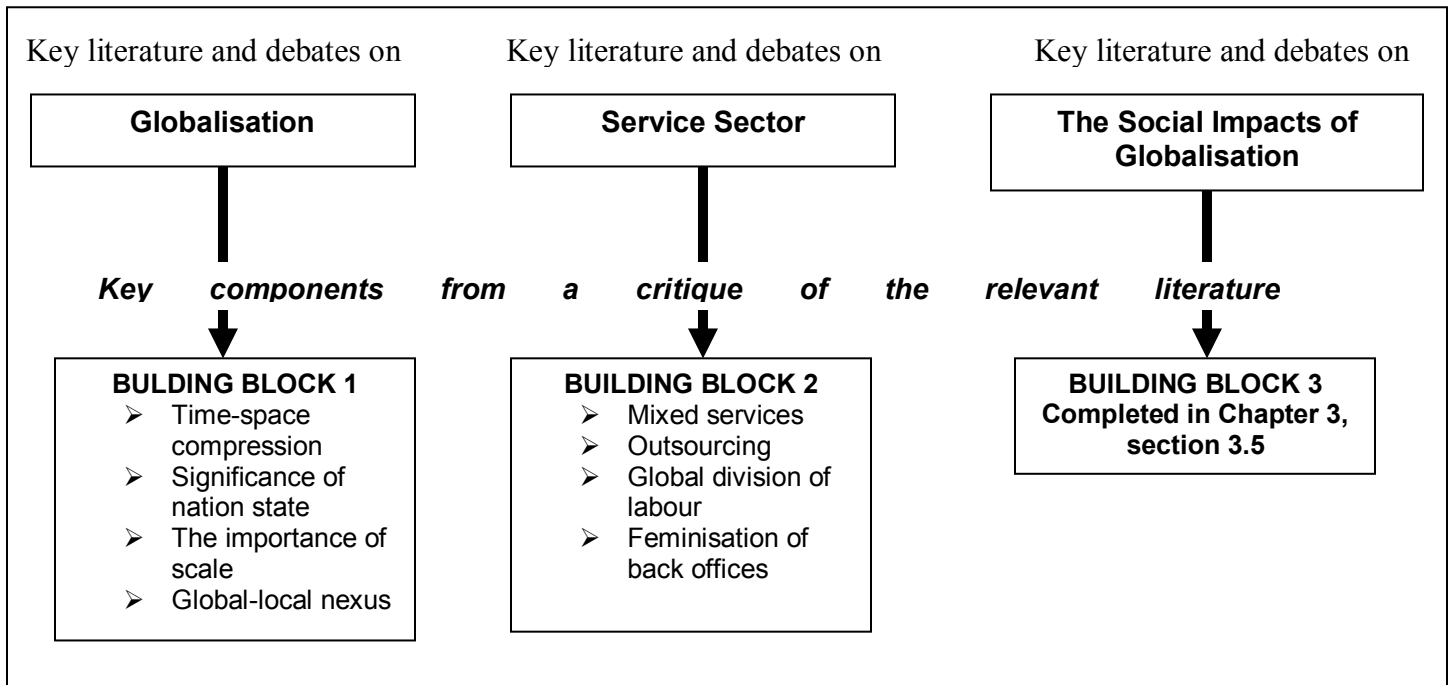


Figure 2.5 Key ideas from service sector literature used to develop my conceptual framework.

2.3 Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter I reviewed the economic geography literature on globalisation and the service sector, so as to draw out key components with which to begin to develop a conceptual framework for this thesis. Firstly, I highlighted the major debates surrounding globalisation discourses, turning to discuss the diversity of definitions used, the roles of different actors, and debates concerning scale. Starting with defining the concept of

globalisation in Section 2.1.1, it was noted that though economic geographers generally agree that global integration is occurring, and that a time-space compression has been brought about by communication and transportation technology revolutions, there remains a number of disagreements regarding the extent to which this has occurred and also whether it is creating homogenising tendencies. Some scholars (such as Hirst and Thompson 1996) view globalisation as a condition, while others (see Dicken 1994; Kelly 1999; Kellner 2000) consider it to be a set of processes. These discrepancies have provoked debates on globalisation that have matured over time, with one key emerging element being the role, if any, of the nation state within globalising processes. The various stances in the debate can be categorised as hyperglobalists, transformationalists and sceptics. Based upon the discussion in Section 2.1.2 I argue that though powers of the nation state have at times been reduced to a large extent, in other cases it continues to play a major determining role. This can be illustrated in relation to the enforcement of laws within national boundaries and also the control of the movement of people across boundaries. These examples reinforce the argument that the world is not borderless and that the “end of geography” is, as yet, untenable.

Indeed, I agree with Jones and Jones (2004) who argue that geographers need to focus on the ways in which the nation state continues to act, though in a modified manner, within the era of globalisation. They state that despite the nation state being affected by the processes of globalisation, the concern is how the nation state is adapting to challenges of globalisation rather than becoming totally insignificant. In this regard it becomes important for geographers to analyse globalising processes on the basis of *scale*, as noted in Section 2.1.2.1. The discussions in Section 2.1.3.1 showed that recent work on the concept of *global-local nexus*, the interface between global and local processes currently underway, has been important in highlighting the role of scale. In sum, there are still a number of uncertainties to be resolved in the debate concerning globalisation and thus the concept “must be regarded as problematic, incomplete and contradictory” (Mittelman 1995:273). Yet, at the same time, certain core elements from a critique of this literature appear to help provide guidance for research such as this on call centres and their development in a developing country context.

Following a critique of the relevant globalisation literature, I noted in Section 2.2. how the service sector has emerged as one of the most important sectors within the global economy. This sector has assumed a footloose character and as a result various service industries are now outsourced to developing countries. Most such outsourced services, including call centres, can be categorised under *mixed services*. The *outsourcing* of service industries has generated a new form of labour division, the *global division of labour*. Like globalisation debates, writings on the global division of labour have also generated debate as to whether it is a “myth” or if it is actually replacing the traditional division of labour. Despite differences in opinion, it is widely agreed upon that the main purpose of new labour structures is to take advantage of cheap labour in developing countries. Back office operations, such as call centres, are high on the list of services that have been and continue to be outsourced to developing countries and as a consequence they have generated much employment in these countries, notably for women, highlighting the importance of analysing the *feminisation of back offices*.

This final point leads us neatly into the third section of the conceptual framework, developed in the following chapter. Indeed, if the situation for youth employees in India’s call centres is analysed only from the angles discussed above, while a clear understanding of the economic and political elements behind the emergence and operations of call centres would be possible, this would remain predominantly at the macro level. For a human geographer, this leaves a glaring gap in terms of our understandings of the social impacts that are generated as a result of these globalisation processes. Apart from employment creation and improving the economic condition of a country as a whole, these processes also act as stimulators of various perceptible social changes at the micro level. It is because of this gap in our current understanding, that in the next chapter I discuss the social impacts of globalisation on outsourced services in developing countries to complete the creation of a conceptual framework to provide a holistic understanding of the socio-economic impacts of call centres, located in the environs of New Delhi, India, on the young adults who are employed in them.

Chapter 3

CONCEPTUALISING THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF GLOBALISATION

In this chapter I analyse the social impacts of globalisation in Asian countries and highlight the key concepts that I use from the literature to date to build the final building block of my conceptual framework. As is already evident from discussions in Chapter Two, globalisation has generated substantial employment in a number of Asian countries. This in turn has given birth to a new urban middle class in many of these countries. An important majority of the members of this emerging class are employed in the service sector and constitute a growing and increasingly large proportion of these countries' populations (Shurmer-Smith 2000). This group is commonly characterised by a newly emerging lifestyle- a metropolitan, or *nouveau riche* lifestyle - in which the consumption of items such as brand name clothes, personal adornments and expensive pleasurable pursuits has become central (Bocock 1993). Changing consumption patterns linked to this change in lifestyle are argued to have impacted upon the identity constructions of these people (ibid.). Studies carried out in Asian countries including China (Buckley 1999; Farrer 2002), Malaysia (Kahn 1996), Thailand (Ockey 1999; Shamsul 1999), Phillipines (Pinches 1999), Indonesia (Heryanto 1999; Gerke 2000), India (Shurmer- Smith 2000; Sadanha 2002), and Vietnam (Nguyen 2003 and 2004) reveal that social norms in these countries have undergone changes as a result of globalisation and that many young people are aspiring to achieve identities similar to their counterparts in Western developed parts of the world. If Indian call centre employees are placed within this sector of society - which is logical based upon their relative high incomes, conspicuous consumption patterns and urban locations - it is important that my conceptual framework include an analysis of the key social elements involved with globalisation changes at the local level. To do so this chapter is divided in six sections. In the first three sections I define three concepts used to help us understand the social impacts of globalisation in Asian countries, namely the "new" middle class (Section 3.1), conspicuous consumption (Section 3.2) and identity (Section 3.3). In Section 3.4 I contextualise these terms, engaging in an in-depth discussion of these concepts with reference to Asian countries, specifically India (Section 3.5). In Section 3.6 I pull out the key arguments from these

literatures and hence complete the conceptual framework that I began to develop in Chapter Two, before concluding the chapter in Section 3.7.

3.1 Rise of a “New” Middle Class

Through history the notion of the “middle class” has remained highly contentious in the social sciences (Chan 2000). The liberal pluralists tend to regard the middle class as primarily a cultural entity defined by values of individualism and rationality, as well as by indicators of status, occupation and income. Accordingly, the middle class cannot be distinguished from the bourgeoisie and there is no means of distinguishing between the type of social power that they derive from property on the one hand, and salaries and qualifications on the other. Weberian scholars have a different opinion about the middle class, integrating the idea of class conflict, in which classes result from the technical division of labour. However, some neo-Weberians have attempted to overcome this problem of conflicting opinions. They differentiated between strata and class. They argue that the middle class was viewed as a subjective category, defined by the consciousness of its members. Robinson and Goodman (1996) argue that even this approach proposed by neo-Weberians is not fully satisfactory as they question whether the middle class has a coherent identity of its own, or whether it is only a residual category, with its constituent parts having different interests and agendas, acting only in alliance with fractions of capital or labour (for various views regarding the composition of the middle class also see Stearns 1979; Burris 1986; Robinson and Goodman 1996). However, while scholars continue to struggle to provide a comprehensive definition of the middle class, there has emerged in the literature a sub-group within this class, namely the “*new middle class*”.

The concept of the “new middle class” originated in opposition to the official Marxist theories of the late nineteenth century. Prior to 1933, Gustav Schmellar of Germany was the first to popularise this term. He designated “salaried workers” as members of the new middle class (Burris 1986). The post-industrial phase witnessed an increase in the number of civil servants, technical employees, supervisors, and office and sales personnel. Thus, there arose a need to describe this new set of people who had distinct characteristics by virtue of their professions. In American sociology, by the 1950s the growth of an affluent new middle class was also noticed (ibid.).

Barbalet (1986) contends that there exists a good deal of disagreement about the precise composition of the new middle class, the basis of its formation and even the name which can be attached to it. Betz (1992) relates the growth of the new middle class with changing production systems in a society and analyses it against a postmodern background. Betz (ibid.: 100) states

the theoretical approaches to describe the new middle class in post-industrial, consumer and information society generally characterise the new middle class as a rather homogenous class (the 'service class' of employers, managers and professionals) united in its members' shared pursuit of social status.

He argues that based on this theorisation, the new middle class emerges at a particular stage in a country's economic development where its precise function is to promote consumption ethics. Thus, Betz (ibid.: 99) argues that the new middle class is intricately connected to the growth of the "societe de consommation." The new middle class is hence the creation of post-industrial society, which is marked by a new system of production – a transition from manufacturing to white-collar service jobs. Similarly, Featherstone (1990) observes that in postmodern societies there has been a dramatic growth and expansion of services. This expansion in turn has led to the inflationary growth of a new middle class of symbolic specialists who are instrumental in the spread of new social and cultural attitudes (see also Perlmutter 1970; Cespedes and Gibbs 1972; Stearns 1979).

Following Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of social distinction, it becomes evident that the rise of postmodernism is less a reflection of an occupational shift in Western societies, rather it is more of a cultural differentiation based on how individuals try to differentiate among themselves. Against such conditions, Featherstone (1987) states that consumption and tastes become vital channels in the struggle between various classes and a particular class, the new middle class, is formed leading to a growing aestheticisation of everyday life via signs, symbols, images of pleasure of consumption. Hence, the very nature of the new middle class puts heavy emphasis on consumption. In such a situation the new middle class are the "new heroes of consumer culture". Based on the above discussion I would distinguish the new middle class in this theses based on their consumption decisions, since it one of the main characteristics of this specific class.

While this section provides a broad overview about the new middle class in industrialised developed countries of the world, in Section 3.4.1, I engage into an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the new middle class in Asian countries, where it gained prominence after 1970s.

3.2 Conspicuous Consumption

Consumption is a multi-dimensional concept and definitions vary according to the academic discipline by which it is reviewed. For example, traditional (neo-classical) economists do not give much importance to consumption, while less traditional economists suggests that it is certain characteristics of goods which consumers seek (Carr-Hill and Lintott 2002). Thus, both look at consumption in terms of the overt purpose of the good consumed. On the other hand, the concept of consumption has been used by some sociologists for instance, in a way which is distinct from its role in economic theories, whether these were monetarist, Keynesian or Marxist theoretical frameworks. Sociologists have focused on consumption as a social activity, rather than as a primarily economic activity (Bocock 1993). Similarly, anthropologists and psychologists and “consumer researchers” interested in marketing and the role of business, highlight explanations for consumption in terms of psychological or social benefits that are not directly related to the overt purpose of the good consumed. Such explanations emphasise factors such as constructing identity, marking status, and group participation (Carr-Hill and Lintott 2002). However, research on geographies of consumption has also gained wide recognition over the last decade. The interest of geographers’ mainly concerns the spatial aspects of consumption, including sites such as shopping malls (Jackson and Thrift 1995). In sum, consumption in late twentieth-century Western forms of capitalism may be seen as a social and cultural process involving cultural signs and symbols, and not simply as an economic utilitarian process (Bocock 1993). Therefore, the place to begin an analysis of various means of consumption is with the view that postmodern society is a consumer society (Featherstone 1990). Indeed one often sees these terms used synonymously.

Once people have been influenced by the social and cultural practices associated with the ideology of current day consumerism stemming from Western societies, then

even if they cannot afford to buy the goods portrayed in films, advertising, and in the media, they can desire them. Consumption is therefore seen as being based increasingly upon desires, not simply upon need (Baudrillard 1998). This sows the seed for analysing an exceptional form of consumer behaviour termed *conspicuous consumption*. Mason (1983:3) defines this as being “motivated by a desire to impress others with the ability to pay particular high prices for prestige products, it is a form of consumption which is inspired by the social rather than by the economic or physiological utility of products”. However, conspicuous consumption is not a recent phenomenon. This concept surfaced as early as 1899 when Veblen, in his seminal work *The theory of the leisure class*, mentioned such consumption behaviour (see Veblen 1992). Veblen contends that wealthy individuals often consume conspicuous goods and services in order to advertise their wealth and thereby achieve greater status.²² Corneo and Jeanne (1997) also developed a model to illustrate that consumers purchase conspicuous goods in order to display a high income and thereby achieve greater social status. Thus, the utility of conspicuous consumption is associated more with psychological than economic motivations. Here it needs to be mentioned that effects of utility of conspicuous consumption can be broadly differentiated into three categories - bandwagon, snob and Veblen effects, respectively. The *bandwagon effect* refers to a situation in which the demand for a commodity increases because others are already consuming or intend to consume the commodity in question (Mason 1983; Corneo and Jeanne 1997). The *snob effect* is just the opposite; it reflects the extent to which demand for a commodity may, in fact, decrease due to the fact that it is already being consumed by too many people so its status value decreases in the eyes of the potential buyer. On the other hand, the *Veblen effect* refers to the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption that focuses on how the demand for a consumer good increases because it bears a higher price, with price taken as an indicator of the prestige value (see Mason 1983; Braun and Wicklund 1989; Bagwell and Bernheim 1996; Mason 2000; Cooper et al. 2001; Strasser 2002). Despite various effects of conspicuous consumption the cord of uniformity that runs through all is the fact that these commodities are not necessities, they are “status goods” or “positional goods”.

²² For detail discussion about Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption also see Campbell (1995), Bagwell and Bernheim (1996), and Trigg (2001).

Thus, according to Baudrillard (1998) such goods are “signs” or “sign values”, and images or messages rather than commodities that are consumed. The purposes of these goods are as means of communication to express identity and mark status (Douglas 1982; Fine and Leopold 1993; Stillman 2003). Thus, conspicuous consumption feeds off a status system (Mason 1981).

I argue that we cannot generalise the utility effect of conspicuous consumption behaviour into any one of the above-mentioned phenomena. Rather the utility effects of conspicuous consumption are specific to the particular commodity being consumed and the individuals too. Also, in many cases each of these effects may co-exist in various stages of conspicuous consumption of the same commodity. For example, when a young adult in India decides to buy a cellular phone it is often the result of the bandwagon effect. His decision against buying certain company’s cellular phone is a snob effect. When he finally decides which company’s cellular phone to buy it is often the Veblen effect. I will explain this point in more detail in the following sections discussing conspicuous consumption among the new middle class in Asia.

When Veblen proposed his theory of conspicuous consumption it was designed as a concept applicable only to the rich and wealthy class, but in the postmodern society, often termed the “consumer society” (see Ritzer 1997; Baudrillard 1998; Clarke 2003), conspicuous consumption is one of the most dominant features of the new middle class. As Mason (1981: 150) states, “...conspicuous consumption may well be confirmed in future as an exclusively ‘middle class’ form of behaviour” (for a related consumption and class analysis see Crompton 2003).

More often than not, the income of consumers bears an impact on patterns of consumption, and various economic theories have been proposed to understand consumption behaviour (see Mason 1983; Gupta 1986; Mason 2000; Cooper et al. 2001).²³ One of the most accepted theories is that proposed by Ernst Engel. In 1857 Engel investigated and analysed a family-budget study. This showed that consumption expenditure of a particular commodity varied with the level of income of a household. Based on this he proposed the Engel’s curve, which defines the relationship between item-consumption expenditure and income (or total consumption expenditure as a proxy

²³ For more on the theories of conspicuous consumption see James (2000).

of income). Thus, according to this curve, the proportion of expenditure on food items and other necessities decrease with an increase in the income of the household (or individual), while the proportion of expenditure on luxury items increases. The present situation of increasing conspicuous consumption in Asia can be explained by Engel's curve.

Ger and Belk (1996: 272) have added "consumptionscape" to Appadurai's initial five scapes (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes) that were defining global cultural flows and disjunctures (see Appadurai 2003) to explain recent global flows of consumption. They state that the global consumptionscape adds to the resources available to people and becomes part of how consumers draw from all available global and local, new and old sources as they use products to position themselves in local age, gender, social class, religion and ethnic hierarchies. Based on this, Kjeldgaard (2003) situates consumption behaviour within the broader perspective of the global-local nexus, defined in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.2.1, and explains how relations of a particular "local" with the global cultural economy affect consumption behaviour. His argument can be supported by the patterns of conspicuous consumption among call centre agents in India. The high income derived from call centre employment coupled with the consumption choices provided by the work atmosphere allow these agents to actively engage in conspicuous consumption behaviours. Nevertheless, one of the main factors triggering such consumption behaviour is the desire of this cohort to (re)negotiate their identities, which I discuss next.

3.3 Identity

In recent years the concept of "identity" has received much attention from scholars across the social sciences. To quote Bauman (2001:121) "identity has become by now a prism through which other topical aspects of contemporary life are spotted, grasped and examined." While the usage of the term "identity" is loosely used to refer to selfhood (Erickson 1959), it is treated more sociologically to emphasise an individual's social and cultural milieu and the process of their acquisition (Giddens 1991). As such, one defines or gets defined according to his/her membership to a segment of society or culture. While

sharing some features of the concept of “status and role”, the usage here of identity is less prescriptive and mechanical, giving greater attention to individuals’ conscious typification (Byron 1996: 60). Castells (2004) asserts that it is necessary to distinguish identities from roles or role sets. He states that roles (for example, to be a worker, a mother) are defined by norms structured by the institutions and organisations of society. While, identities are sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation. Stryker (1980) emphasises the structural symbolic-interactionist perspective of role choice behaviour. Flowing from that, Stryker (1992) enlists four assumptions to conceptualise identity theory - human beings are actors as well as reactors, their actions gush from the shared meanings during the process of interaction, self-conception is critical to the meaning of their actions, and finally self-reflecting society is a major criterion helping their self-conception.

Castells (ibid.) argues that identity is people’s source of meaning and experience. He states that though from a sociological perspective it is easy to agree on the fact that all identities are constructed - real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what. Castells (ibid.) understands the process of construction of meaning by social actors on the basis of cultural attributes or a set of cultural attributes that is given priority over other sources of meaning. Hence, there might be multiple identities for a given individual. This argument is strengthened by Taylor’s (1994) definition of identity, which is described as a person’s understanding of who he or she is, of his or her fundamental defining characteristics as a human being, with this whole process being dependent to a certain extent on the recognition, misrecognition, or absence of recognition by others. Therefore, to quote Hall (2003:236), “identities are different names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.” As a consequence, identities are formed along multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, generation and sexual preference. They surface at the individual as well as at the societal level and give meaning to life. One’s multiple identities are not apparent in all contexts and vary with different spheres of reality. Similarly, Sen (2006) states that it is important to recognise that identities are robustly plural and that the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others.

Stryker (1992) argues that the “self” must be seen as multifaceted, as comprised of a variety of parts that are sometimes interdependent and sometimes independent of other parts, sometimes mutually reinforcing and sometimes conflicting, and that are organised in multiple ways. Therefore, Stryker (ibid.) rightly points out that a person has as many selves as there are “others” to react and to interpret. Therefore, views on identity must also focus on processes eternal to the construction of identity and should be approached as being formed by social processes and always in the making. He further contends that in the contemporary postmodern existence our conception of the “self” has become multiple, pluralistic and saturated; and therefore academic indulgence around identity becomes significant. Identity is thus a socialised sense of self, a self-perception of how one perceives oneself as seen by others.

While early understanding of identities conceptualised them primarily in terms of social categories such as class and gender, in which identity was assumed to reflect a core or fixed sense of self, more contemporary theorisations understand identities as a reflexive project, emphasising their multiple, fluid and unstable nature (Valentine 2001a). On a similar note Mendieta (2005) notes that earlier identities have been determined and constituted by the framework of the national economy, fairly stable class identities, gender and race relations that have entered into interaction with each other within the political economy of the nation-states. According to Sackman et al. (2003) identity depends on “self localisations” that engross patterns of orientations, self-conceptualisation, feelings of belonging and perceptions of symbolic boundaries. Mendieta (2005) states that identities are never univocal, stable, or innocent. They are always an accomplishment and a ceaseless project. “A version of identity is crystallised or captured as a portrait by a certain image” (ibid.: 407). He argues that our identities are a matter of positionality, or locality. Hence, an identity is a social locus, which is an imagined and imaginary “topos”. This place or locality is a function of social topography. At any given time, then, we are not just negotiating our localities or positions vis-à-vis race, class, gender and nationality, but also positionalities within a geopolitical system. On a similar note he contends that identities are not only unstable because they are fragile negotiations, but also because they are always succumbing to the shock of visual misrecognition. “More often than not. Identities fail to recognise themselves in the images

that are projected of them and for them” (ibid.: 412). Nevertheless, while identity remains a highly contested term, discussions of consumption practices often emerge in debates over how identity should be defined. Indeed, with regards to the axis along which identity is constructed, the debates on identity and consumption are so interrelated that often it becomes difficult to draw a fine line between them. Hence, in the next section I focus on consumption practices and how they relate to identity options.

3.3.1 Conspicuous Consumption and Identity

Lodziak (2002) suggests that nowadays sources of identity dwell in the world of images, symbols and signs, arguing that today’s individual is a somewhat “superficial” being. This, in turn, puts great importance on consumerism. As such, Dunn (2000) states that in today’s society identity formation is transformed by commodification processes in four basic ways. Firstly, the individual is turned into a *consumer*, mainly a consumer of signs and values. While social identities (like employee, parent, and student) persist, they are subsumed by the role of consumption, which now shapes and conditions an individual’s social orientation and relationships. Secondly, the *sources* of identity formation change as tangible, role-based relationships become subordinate to the disembodied visual images of mass culture. Thirdly, identity formation is *exteriorised* in the sense that its locus shifts from the inner self to the outer world of objects and images valorised by commodity culture. Thus identity formation is deeply rooted in culture, but now occurs increasingly through the appropriation of commodities and commodified images rather than by means of communal participation in a traditional group. Lastly, as a consequence of all these, it is argued that the self can tend to lose its sense of autonomy from the outside world and hence identity becomes susceptible to chronic instability, inconsistency, and/or incoherence (ibid.).

Bocock (1993) asserts that modern patterns of consumption for urban dwellers are, in part, a result of living in the metropolis, the city and its suburbs. The processes involved in living in an urban location increase the awareness of style, of the need to consume within a repertory which is both distinctive to a social group and expressive of individual preferences. Thus, against this backdrop, conspicuous consumers may be defined as groups for whom patterns of consumption play a central role in their lives,

providing them with ways of marking themselves off from other social status groups (ibid.). This process also helps to provide urban dwellers with a sense of social identity. Therefore, the construction of a sense of identity can be seen as a process which may make use of items of conspicuous consumption such as clothing, footwear, popular music or sporting activities. Such consumption patterns are used as a central means of defining who is a member and who is outside a specific group. This is even more so among youth groups, who use specific consumption patterns as a way of marking boundaries between peer group membership and outsiders. Accordingly, style, enjoyment, excitement, escape from boredom at work or at play, being attractive to self and others, become central life-concerns and affect patterns of consumption.

Bourdieu (2003) argues that consumption is the articulation of a sense of identity. According to him our identity is made up by our consumption of goods, which displays our expression of taste. Mason (1983) notes that in the later 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the importance of status-motivated consumption increased significantly. Giddens (1991) thus observes that a new kind of consumer had emerged for whom consumption itself plays a central role in constructing new senses of identity based on and around the possession and ownership of status-conferring goods. In line with these ideas Pilkington and Johnson (2003) delineate that globalised forms of consumption are one of the major forces that are reconfiguring class, gender, sexual and ethnic identities.

Many people's sense of identities then, are affirmed and contested through specific acts of consumption (Jackson and Thrift 1995). People define themselves by what they buy and by the meaning that they give to the goods and services that they acquire. Indeed, the view that consumption is the principal means through which we construct, maintain, reconstruct and display our identities has become the most important element of the latest ideology of consumerism (Lodziak 2002). It is argued that there is a close connection between identity construction and conspicuous consumption. Lodziak (ibid.: 51) argues that - for those with the financial means - there exists a "self-identity industry" that includes health-clubs, fitness gyms, therapy centres, beauty salons, cosmetic surgeries and so on. However, there is no essential, one-to-one, correspondence between particular commodities and particular identities, and the same commodity can have radically different meanings for different individuals and for the same individual

over time (Jackson and Thrift 1995). This view of consumption, as motivated by a need for identity and status thus brings important new dimensions to discussions of globalisation, dissimilar from those that have tended to emerge from an economic perspective.

3.4 Social Impacts of Globalisation in Asian Context

Having briefly discussed and defined the new middle class, conspicuous consumption and identity above, in this section I contextualise these concepts in the developing Asian realm and discuss how globalisation has influenced them. Thus, in Section 3.4.1 I examine the rise of the new middle class in developing Asian countries with special reference to India, and then, in the Indian context I analyse the relation between caste and class, unique to India.²⁴ Then in Section 3.4.2, I move to discuss how the creation of this particular “new” middle class in many Asian countries has generated an increase in conspicuous consumption among youth and how they are interwoven with changing lifestyles, in turn impact upon the identities of youth in Asian countries. The debates on these connections are outlined in Section 3.4.3. Examining the social impacts of globalisation in Asian countries is of particular importance for contextualising the socio-economic changes among call centre agents in India, who are parts of this new middle class and engage in various forms of conspicuous consumption and lifestyle practices influencing their identities.

3.4.1 The New Rich in Asia

In developing Asian countries, with economies predominantly based on extensive agriculture, the new middle class did not gain prominence either in number or in interest among researchers, media or politicians due to their insignificant numbers until the 1970s. From that decade onwards globalisation trends triggered a range of liberalisation policies across Asia (albeit to very different degrees and not in Burma) causing a shift in many occupational structures and the rapid growth of export-focused industries leading to

²⁴ Though caste system was originally a feature of the Hindu society, but Srinivasan (1997) argues that in the current day situation caste system is no longer restricted to Hinduism rather has spread among Christians and Muslims too, in India.

an employment boom. According to Robinson and Goodman (1996) as a consequence, in recent years we have witnessed the dramatic emergence of a new middle class in Asia.

In Asia the term “new rich” is used interchangeably with “new middle class”. This term is used to describe in broad terms the new wealthy social groups that have emerged from industrial changes in Asia, with their social power based either on capital and expertise or rent and/or position in the extensive state apparatus (Gerke 2000). The new rich are thus the professional middle class. Nonetheless, this term is a starting point for examination rather than an analytical tool. This needs to be clarified because the new rich is neither a cohesive category nor does it have common historical roots, and its impacts vary from one country to another depending on the pattern of economic transition in the country. Therefore, there are likely to be several patterns in the emergence of the new rich and its influence on the cultural, social, economic and political life of the country under study (Robinson and Goodman 1996).

Looking at specific country studies, Gerke (2000: 143) defines the new middle class in Indonesia based on consumption levels as shown in Table 3.1, following what he terms the “consumption line approach”. In this table the “new middle class” (in bold) has been delineated by those members who earn enough to participate in a modern consumer culture. This stratum consists of those who can secure tertiary education and are able to afford at least the symbolic items of middle-class consumption.

Table 3.1 Organisation of Indonesian society: consumption line approach

<i>Consumption levels</i>	<i>Social Strata</i>
Real consumption	Upper middle stratum
Symbolic consumption	Lower and middle-middle stratum
Enough	Lower stratum
Absolute poor	Lower-lower stratum

Source: Adapted from Gerke 2000: 143

Similarly, Ockey (1999) delineates the new middleclass in Thailand based on income and consumption patterns. Moreover, Chan (2000) comprehends two major factors that are responsible for the growth of the new middle class in Hong Kong. The first is economic restructuring and increasing links with the international economy, which

have led to increasing demand for professional and managerial personnel, particularly in the sectors of commercial and financial services. Secondly, rapid and continuous expansion of education, particularly at the tertiary level, has raised the overall educational attainment within the population. The situation is similar in many other Asian countries that have opened up to globalisation. Embong (2002), in his study of the new middle class in Malaysia, traces the rise of this class with expanding economic liberalisation that begun in the 1970s. On a similar note Smith (1999: 111) contends that economic liberalisation through its “social engineering” strategy fostered the creation of a large new middle class and waged working class, both of whom constitute Malaysia’s new rich. Beng Huat and Ean (1999) in their analysis of the growth process of the new middle class in Singapore argue that three decades of sustained economic growth (1965-95) have provided rapid expansion of education and economic opportunities. These in turn have favoured the rise of this class.

Turning to the case of India, the country site for this research, one notes that in the major cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai, there has been the emergence of a new service class since the country’s first tentative efforts towards liberalisation in the mid-1980s, discussed more in Chapter Four (Kulkarni 1993; Rao 1994; Fernandes 2000; Shurmer-Smith 2000). In 1984-85 according to the Indian National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) less than 10 per cent of India’s population constituted the middle class (excluding the new middle class) (*The Globalist* 2001). NCAER has delineated five categories based on income in 1994-95. According to the NCAER report in India there are one million households that belong to the “Very Rich” category, 30 million households form the “Consuming Class”, 50 million households are termed as “Climbers”, another 50 million form the “Aspirants”, and 35 million constitute the “Destitutes” (Shurmer-Smith 2000). The category of “Consuming Class” earns in the range between Rs.70001 and Rs.96000 (CAD\$ 1710 and 2345) and NCAER describes this as the new middle class, with a high level of consumption.

Verma and Sharma (1994) contend that the main reasons for such a massive rise of the new middle class in India are increasing tendencies for self gratification, a change in attitudes regarding working married women – by both men and women (it was estimated that in the mid-1990s more than 30 per cent of urban married women worked

for a living), and changing attitudes towards consumer credit business. Indeed, consumer credit card business rose to Rs.1,000 million (CAD\$ 24 million) in 1990, from virtually nothing in the three years preceding that date (NCAER 1990). In India it must be recognised that a substantial proportion of the new middle class are not part of a “rags to riches” story (see also the discussion on caste that follows). Many of them, mainly young adults, have gained membership to this class based on their higher education and economic liberalisation, allowing them to “move up the ladder”. However, given that the country has had a substantial government bureaucracy (Shurmer–Smith 2000), many members of the new middle class have emerged from this too – part of the existing traditional urban middle class (whether administrative, professional or commercial).

At the same time though, as well as a new middle class emerging from people shifting out of the government sector, more overwhelming in numbers has been the growth of youth in this cohort, mainly those between the mid-twenties and mid-thirties (Rai 1997; *Enroute* 2004). It is these educated youth who have found employment and in the service sector boom in India of which call centre agents are examples. However, it needs to be mentioned that this new middle class is not caste-free, as there exist caste hierarchies among this section too. Even call centre agents can be categorised according to their caste affiliation. Therefore, in the next section I delve into a discussion the caste system, one of the most prominent features of Indian society.

3.4.1.1 Caste and the New Middle Class in India

Caste is an institution, which is often regarded as the most predominant feature of Hindu social organisation. Membership to a particular caste is by birth and there is no vertical mobility within the caste system (refer to Appendix I for detailed account of caste system in India). One of the most important characteristics associated with the caste system is occupational speciality of various caste groups. This in turn affects a person’s economic status situating them within the class hierarchy. Caste has therefore provided the seedbed for generating debates and discussions for centuries on the relationship between caste and class, which are often used interchangeably in India (Srinivasan 1997; Chakravarty 2001; Raj and Raj 2004). However, many scholars argue that with waves of modernisation, castes are no more endogenous in terms of their occupation (Heuze-Brigant 1996;

Srinivasan 1997). The economic and political activities in which members of a caste are engaged now, are quite different from those traditionally perpetuated by the caste system (Sheth 1999). Sheth (ibid.) also argues that the idea of upward social mobility today motivates people from all castes, and that caste does not reproduce itself as it did in the past. Indeed, he states that this motivation has created the “new middle class”, whose emergence is directly related to the disintegration of the caste system. Sheth (ibid.) argues that members of different castes now compete for entry into the new middle class. As a result, sizeable numbers of lower castes have entered the new middle class. This in turn has changed the character and composition of the old, pre-independence, middle class, which constituted almost entirely a small English-educated upper caste elite. Thus, in the 21st century, the new and vastly enlarged new middle class is becoming highly diversified in terms of social origins of its members.

Membership of today’s new middle class is associated with new lifestyles (modern consumption patterns), ownership of certain economic assets and the self-consciousness of indeed belonging to the new middle class (Sheth 1999; Saavala 2001). Thus, to quote Mukherjee (1999:1759) “what exists in India is caste in class, not caste per se or caste and class”. Nonetheless other studies show that caste affiliation still has a great impact on the occupation of a person. Shurmer-Smith (2000) states that during British rule, many brahmins, who traditionally controlled knowledge and specialised in religious activities, learnt English and specialised in clerical work, the liberal professions, science, administration and academia. After the New Economic Policy in early 1990s, private sector employment became more lucrative than working for the state bureaucracy and a new generation of brahmins was attracted to professions such as management, finance, corporate and international law, and high-tech industries. This point is strengthened by Asser’s study (1998, as cited in Shurmer-Smith 2000) showing that in Bangalore, brahmins virtually monopolise the software industry in management, research and development. This holds true both in cases of small local software firms or the Indian branches of multinationals (for discussions on caste and occupation also see Heuze-Brigant 1996; Scoville 2003). Similarly, Deshpande (2003: 109), based on data provided by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) argues “caste continues to be a major fault line of economic inequality in contemporary India.” NSSO (2001) data on

consumption expenditure reveals that in urban India the proportion of upper castes are the highest among the high income and consumption category.

I argue that within the new middle class in India there is certainly caste stratification and it is not “caste free” as proposed by some scholars. I contend that those employed in the middle rung of the employment spectrum (for example as clerks in back offices, like call centres) are mainly from the middle castes, while those employed in managerial and other higher posts are mostly from the upper castes. In Chapter Five, while analysing caste affiliation of call centre employees in New Delhi, this point will be argued further.

Although debates continue over the caste composition of the new middle class in India, it is widely agreed upon by scholars that the members of this class have emerged as great urban consumers. This calls for a analysis of conspicuous consumption among the new middle class, which follows.

3.4.2. Conspicuous Consumption among the New Middle Class in Asia

It is as consumers that the new rich of Asia have attracted an interest of almost cargo-cult proportions in the West. They constitute the new markets for Western products: processed foods, computer software, educational services and films and television soaps. They are the new tourists, bringing foreign exchange in hard times (Robinson and Goodman 1996: 1).

The new rich in Asia form a large proportion of consumers of Western products. This class is characterised by a lifestyle in which consumption is of great importance (Bocock 1993). For example, Embong (2002) links the new middle class in Malaysia with a specific lifestyle and consumption patterns, similar to other Asian countries that have undergone the process of economic liberalisation. In the same tone Gerke (2000) argues that consumption has become a symbolic act signalling “modernity” and membership in the ascriptive category of “middle class” in Indonesia. Lett (1998) also provides similar conclusions based on his study of class in South Korea.

Indicators of opulent lifestyles among the new middle class in one Asian country, Malaysia, can be gleaned from the conspicuous symbols of wealth - the kind of houses, modes of transport, the parties thrown, especially during festivals and weddings, at five-star hotels, memberships of exclusive clubs, children’s enrolment in expensive private

schools at all educational levels, and shopping in up-market malls (Talib 2000; Embong 2002). Similar examples of new middle class and conspicuous consumption behaviour are also noted in other Asian countries like Japan (Young 1999). Other authors have focused on specific events that portray conspicuous consumption behaviour in Asian countries such as wedding ceremonies and parties (see Lett 1998; Bloch et al. 1999; Embong 2002), and tourism behaviour (see *The Economist* 1995; Urry 2003).

It has been argued that this trend of conspicuous consumption which is so apparent in the urban realm of many Asian countries, is not only because of easy availability of these commodities, but rather is mainly due to a growing population having the means to buy them. Rai (1997: 86) aptly calls this group “middle class but millionaires”. Studies by authors such as Moon-kyum (1996); Chan (2000); Schuman (2003) have shown that in these countries it is not just the increase in income that leads to such conspicuous consumption behaviour, it has been vigorously encouraged through the widespread introduction of credit cards.²⁵

In India, it has been argued that the new middle class represents essentially 20 per cent of the population, constituting an effective market for high priced and high quality goods (Verma and Sharma 1994). Based on class composition data provided by NCAER (1995), households in India that belong to the upper middle class exhibit very specific consumption patterns - a car is very affordable for them, they employ a full-time domestic servant (an important status symbol), they make use of personal services such as washing machines, and their children will invariably attend good private schools. Often, this class tries to demonstrate their prestige by consuming international products, which are very expensive according to Indian standards. Indeed Table 3.2 illustrates the comparative prices for some of the international products that members of this group see as desirable assets. From the table it is apparent that though these items are easily affordable (for most) in developed countries like the USA, they are expensive in countries like India. In the latter case a few months' salary is often required to buy such products.

²⁵ Moon-kyum (1996: 97) interestingly states “the word ‘credit’ was used as a euphemism, to distort the meaning of ‘debt’, thus seducing consumers into buying goods in advance as a kind of reward for their future labour.” Since it is not within the purview of my study to analyse the role of credit cards leading to increased conspicuous consumption I will not examine this point any further here.

Table 3.2 Comparative prices of international products- India & USA

	US price in Rs*	Indian price in Rs*	Days work to buy in US	Days work to buy in India
Colour TV	7140	13000	2.1 days	2.3 months
VCR	7350	14000	2.2days	2.4 months
Microwave oven	3780	9000	1.1 day	1.6 months
Personal Computer	33600	50000	10.0 days	8.7 months
Mid-size car	420000	560000	4.2 months	8years 1 month

Source: Shurmer-Smith 2000: 32

Note: work needed is based on average middle-class income equivalents for US and India

*1 US\$ ~ Rs.46

Fernandes (2000) observed, while conducting fieldwork with middle class people in urban India, that they constantly pointed to the new choices of commodities as a central indicator of the benefits of economic liberalisation. Before the Indian economy was liberalised in 1991, goods from “abroad” were only within the reach of members of the upper class who either had the means to travel and import goods from abroad or had relatives who had migrated to the Persian Gulf or to industrial countries. Yet after economic liberalisation “abroad is in India”. My personal experiences also support these views.²⁶

The increasing pace of conspicuous consumption behaviour in India is nowadays very striking and is often discussed in academic circles as well as in popular magazines (see The Economist 1989 and 2004; Rao 1994; Rai 1997; Enroute 2004; Mathur and Parameswaran 2004; Wessel 2004). The evidence appears to be everywhere in urban India, for example the numbers of shopping malls are growing rapidly to fulfil the growing appetites of these consumers (Far Eastern Economic Review 1993; Wall Street Journal 2003), and in 2006 there were 450 shopping malls under construction in different parts of India (Smith 2007). Shields (1992) in his study shows that in India shopping malls have emerged as specific spaces of consumption.

²⁶ In the early 1980s I visited Darjeeling (the northern district of the state of West Bengal, India) with my parents. As a part of our guided tour we were taken to Pashupati market (one of the major tourist attractions) on the border of India and Nepal. This market was full of goods from “abroad” (from electrical gazettes to brand name jeans). However, to the discontent of the tourists, each person was allowed to buy only one item from this market and there were security checks to ensure this rule. Those very sought after foreign goods are now available in every city of India and are within the reach of a large percentage of the urban population.

Thus, from the above discussion it can be concluded that in Asian countries conspicuous consumption has emerged as a lifestyle option available to some mainly to demonstrate membership to a specific social class- the new middle class. These patterns of conspicuous consumption are more significant among the young population, who form a major proportion of consumers in these societies. Such behavioural patterns are noticed in India, gaining prominence mainly after liberalisation of the economy in 1991. Hence, this analysis provides a backdrop for examining the consumption decisions of call centre agents in India, young adults who have emerged as an important cohort within the new middle class after liberalisation of the country's economy. In the following section I concentrate on a nuanced discussion on the conspicuous consumption behaviour among Asian youth.

3.4.2.1 Conspicuous Consumption among Asian Youth

I analyse the literature on conspicuous consumption behaviour among youth for two reasons - firstly, my study population employed in call centres is derived from this group. Termed "young adults" in my study, they belong to the cohort between 18 and 35 years. Secondly, these young adults are among the major consumers in Asian countries. In the Asian context, Beng-Huat (2000: 14) defines "youth" as the period between teenagehood and marriage and states that it is "a window for unlimited consumption, constrained only by financial circumstances." During this period of life one is not usually burdened with making large investments, like buying a house and is comparatively free from familial concerns, hence members of this group can often spend on themselves. This phenomenon is on the increase in Asian countries undergoing economic transformations and becoming more integrated into globalised consumerism.

Pilkington and Johnson (2003) state that the classic 20th century studies of youth culture were rooted in North American and British experiences. Yet in the 1990s, impressed by the tangible and visible presence of the "global market" in local, non-Western contexts and by general debates about globalisation and culture, researchers began to focus on "peripheral" youth as well (Massey 1998: 122). Pilkington and Johnson (2003) also suggest there has been a paradigm shift in youth studies. They argue that if

youth subcultural theories of 1970s and 1980s were rooted in concepts of identity, collectivity and resistance, then more recent post-subcultural theorising fragments the notion of “identity” and locates the cultural practices of youth within consumer and lifestyle niches rather than dominant and subordinate cultures (Ruddick 2003). Theories of contemporary youth culture advocate that the decline in importance of ties with family and class-based community means that young people are now more independent to construct their own lifestyles “via the exercise of consumer choice in the global market” (Reimer 1995: 22). Hence, as Kenway and Bullen (2008) in their discussion on global consumer culture note in the current world situation consumerism is becoming normalised as a defining characteristics of lifestyle.

In contemporary Asian society, urban youth are increasingly able to lead a Westernised lifestyle, clad in designer or brand named clothes and accessories and spending time and money in discotheques and foreign restaurants (Beng-Huat 2000). A “Westernization” or “Americanisation” of some urban Asian youth through fashion consumption has occurred and correspondingly, there is a noticeable increase of notionally “Western” goods available in Asian countries.^{27&28}

Apart from fashion, these young populations are also the largest consumers in the world of US-dominated globalised popular culture industries, such as television soap operas, movies, and popular music (Sadanha 2002). It has been argued that such consumption patterns of Asian youth put them in “cultural confusion” and that they are often lost in terms of their own essential identity as *Asians* because of such consumption choices, creating an “identity confusion” (Beng-Huat 2000: 16). Beng-Huat argues that youth in Asia, like in other parts of the world, draw their identity from an “image bank”, which is nowadays globalised through the popular mass media. The reference point in the imaginary is, therefore, a globalised image of youth rather than local cultural images (for similar studies in Latin American countries see Massey 1998).

Taking a slightly different approach, Kim (2000) suggests that a key feature of contemporary consumerism among youth in Korea is the expansion of leisure activities.

²⁷ Western goods are a convenient but incorrect label because so many are actually manufactured in Asian countries for Western multi-national corporations, or for local companies (Kim 2000).

²⁸ Some also suggest that there has been McDonaldization and Disneyization in these Asian countries (see Alridge 2003; Stillman 2003).

Many leisure activities have become inseparably integrated with consumptive behaviour such as shopping, eating out, tourism and sports. A survey by the Korean Chamber of Commerce (1993, in Kim 2000) provides certain characteristics of consumption and leisure patterns among the young population. According to this survey, this sub-group preferred Western and fast foods, dining out was more dependent on mood rather than expense, high levels of impulse buying were evident (mainly among women), credit cards were frequently used, and design was prioritised over function in purchasing products. In addition, there was a high sensitivity to fashion with marked preference for casual cloths, there were relatively higher expenditures on clothing, there was a strong orientation to recreation and entertainment, and this youth population enjoyed various types of hobbies and leisure activities. Similarly Talib's (2000) study in Malaysia shows that a higher proportion of the expenditure among this group was on luxuries rather than on necessities.

Similarly, the young new middle class in India spends money freely on everything from fashion to food, entertainment to electronics, a point that has been highlighted also by the media (*Enroute* 2004). Schuman (2003) confirms this, reporting that India's youth are becoming world-class consumers. This new breed of young consumers in India is wealthy and willing to spend on commodities that were only available to the local elite in the recent past. Smith (2007: 162) observes that large proportions of these consumers are between the age group of 18-35 years and belong to the IT and outsourcing sectors, who "spend rather than save". Such conspicuous consumption behaviour is most noticeable in the large cities of Mumbai, New Delhi and Bangalore, where, one should add, many call centres are located.

As another marker of new consumption patterns, the uses of cellular phones in India over the past decade have increased drastically (Chandra and Agarwal 1996; Schuman 2003). According to statistics from Motorola (US based cellular phone company) in the year 2003 their sales of cellular phones in India had increased 200 per cent compared with the preceding two years. Smith (2007) reports that by the summer of 2006 there were five million new cellular phone subscribers each month. He also mentions that several international brands such as Lee, Levi Strauss, Reebok, Nike and Nokia had achieved considerable success among Indian consumers.

In addition to consumer durables, restaurant chains like McDonald's, which opened its first restaurant in the country in 1996, have been very successful. By 2006 there were 76 McDonald's restaurants throughout India and 26 of these were in Delhi (Smith 2007). In sum, driven by a rapidly expanding middle class, India is "experiencing a consumer boom to match the broader economic boom" (ibid.: 161). The rise of Indian consumers has already made the country one of the top ten retail markets in the world (ibid.).

3.4.3 Conspicuous Consumption and Identity among Asian Youth

Youth culture and identity discourses are related to consumption and consumer practices for those who live at the periphery of the global cultural economy, as much as for those at the "core" (Kjeldgaard 2003). In Asia, by the 1980s it was clear that status gains could no longer be made through the purchase and consumption of generic commodities alone. Ownership of traditional status symbols - automobiles, expensive clothes, jewellery, furniture and such items whose ownership had formerly indicated wealth and position - had become fairly commonplace in urban locales and hence conferred less and less status. When ownership of commodities per se declines as a status signifier, the attention of consumers turns to the relative status value of individual brands within commodity groups. Then, as Mason (1983:131) puts it, "the era of brand image and designer label had arrived". Product categories as diverse as footwear, jeans, stereo equipment and fashion accessories come to have substantial status value when the right socially approved and status-giving brands are acquired. These linkages are especially important for young adults as brands suggest a specific status symbol at a time in their lives considered one of the most impressionable (O'Cass and Frost 2002).

In discussions on conspicuous consumption concerning Asian youth it is essential to examine their lifestyle choices. Lifestyle is growing in importance as an indicator of social group membership and these group identities are secured by adopting appropriate patterns of consumption (Mason 1983). Traditional concepts of social class based on education and occupation are breaking down in contemporary societies. The new sociology of consumption significantly increases the importance of interpersonal effects on consumer demand as people with the means, in urban areas, are now increasingly

preoccupied with “lifestyle projection”, able to create personal identities in part through consumption.

Pilkington and Johnson (2003) in their discussion on peripheral urban youth argue that young people forge identities not with reference to real communities, as rooted in class, locality, ethnicity, race, but rather with regards to taste communities or “lifestyle enclaves” in which consumption is practiced in the absence of communal regulation. In this situation then, “lifestyle” can be used to understand young people’s cultural practices in the early 21st century as a vocabulary of self-expression. However, it should be realised that lifestyles do not constitute or substitutes identity, but represent them. Thus, Miles (2000: 159) in his study of urban middle class youth in Asia points out that “young people no longer depend on subcultural affirmation for the construction of their identities, but construct deterritorialised lifestyles that are as flexible as the world around them.” In Asian countries, especially among urban middle class youth a change in lifestyle is very perceptible. One such change has been the increase in young people’s mobility, away from family, especially for employment. This, in turn, often leads to a change in attitude towards life in general, as well as lifestyles.

As Pilkington and Johnson (2003) point out, it is important to recognise that the consumption of capitalist commodities is not the one and only means that shapes identity. They argue that everywhere consumption and the creation of “lifestyles” are accompanied by other identity-forming attachments. They continue that consumption itself is “shaped by larger, denser social contexts that yield specific use values”. (ibid.: 266) One such factor affecting “lifestyle” and hence influencing identity formation is the workplace, mainly for young population. Indeed, Bowlby et al. (1998) state that finding one’s first paid work is in itself of great significance to most young people. What is more, the type of employment bears an enormous influence on their identity construction. Interestingly however, regardless of the millions of new middle class youth in India, there is no literature available addressing such identity formation processes in the context of any type of skilled employment in India, including call centres. I discuss this point in detail in Chapter Nine in relation to call centre employees in New Delhi, since it is one of the crucial findings of my research.

3.5 Impact of Globalisation on Urban Young Adults in India

Globalisation has influenced the lifestyle choices and consumption patterns of all urban youth in India, although the nature of such influences has often altered according to the social position of the youth. In this section I provide a broad overview of the impacts of globalisation on urban youth in India which will help to contextualise the exclusive socio-economic impacts of call centres on young adults in India. However, it needs to be mentioned that studies to date conducted about the influences of globalisation on young adults in urban India are restricted to the upper middle class and upper class (read elite) youth, as it is believed that due to their economic and social positioning this cohort has maximum interactions with Western culture (Saldanda 2002; and Mathur and Parameswaran 2004). As Saldanda (2002) notes, one main criteria for the articulation of Westernized lifestyle practices is money. This specific cohort also forms the control group for my study, as the young call centre agents aspire to belong to this class by engaging in particular forms of conspicuous consumption, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Eight (Section 8.1.2).²⁹

Among urban Indian youth, two aspects that have been greatly influenced by globalisation are consumption choices, including consumption of culture, music, food, feature films, and clothes; and values and attitudes towards mate selection (Batra et al. 2002; Juluri 2002; Saldanda 2002; Scrase 2002; Rampal 2003; and Mathur and Parameswaran 2004). These scholars agree - media, as an agent of globalisation, plays a

²⁹ In order to appreciate the specific influence of call centre employment on the young adult employees, it is necessary to gain an understanding of the traditional socio-cultural values that are prevalent in urban India. Nevertheless, considering the ethnic and cultural diversity of India it is not possible to provide an elaborate description of these. Hence, based on my personal experience of being a middle-class urban Indian and the perception of the parents of call centre agents interviewed, I outline the gender-role behaviours that we (the interviewed parents and myself) consider “traditional” among the urban middleclass and have been used in this thesis. These self-defined traditional values act as a standard against which the activities of call centre agents are discussed. At the onset it needs to be mentioned that in Indian patriarchal society gender-roles are more specific for women than men and most such expectations are formed around the concept that women are more vulnerable. As such among the middle class in India, it is not considered proper for a woman to spend the night outside their house without any supervision from parents or other family members. Hence, it is not common for women to work night shifts, except in certain professions, such as doctors or nurses. Moreover, it is considered improper to engage in pre-marital sex and have live-in-relationships with partners before marriage. This applies for both men and women. Similarly, the consumption of alcohol and cigarette smoking are not considered appropriate for women. This partially applies to men also, who generally indulge in such activities with their peers and are discrete about it. However, with the waves of globalisation and increasing exposure of youth to Western lifestyle practices through media, these norms are slowly changing.

very important role in causing these changes. Scrase (2002) argues that satellite television is transforming cultural identities among urban youth. On the same note Juluri (2002) states that the members of this cohort have become consumers of Western culture, mainly music and satellite television. Batra et al. (2002) furthermore discuss the preference for branded clothes among this youth cohort, while Rampal (2003) notes that young women express their liberalised attitude by wearing Western clothes. Similarly, Verma and Sharma (2003) point out the changing lifestyle practices of youth through their use of leisure activities, such as bowling and playing pool. Nevertheless, Mathur and Parameswaran (2004) argue that despite such changes, stability is noticed in terms of certain cultural practices, such as values and attitudes towards mate selection. In India arranged marriages have traditionally been the norm, but this has been undergoing a gradual change and dating practices are becoming more popular. In their study of youth in Delhi, Mathur and Parameswaran (2004) note that though young people believed in dating practices and that the final decision about mate selection should be at the discretion of the children rather than the parents - the same people also stressed the importance of virginity before marriage. Based on these studies I would argue that though this segment of the population has become consumers of Western culture, mainly music and satellite television and clothes, they still like to maintain certain traits of traditional values.

3.6 Social Impacts Conclusions

Drawing upon the above discussions of the social impacts of globalisation in Asian countries, three main points that I use as the third Building Block of my conceptual framework are presented in Figure 3.1 in the right hand box. From the discussion in Chapter Two it follows that as a result of the globalisation of service industries, there has been an increase in employment opportunities in developing Asian countries. This process in turn has stimulated a rapid growth in the proportion of new urban middle class, also termed the *new rich in Asia*. Members of this class are mainly “young adults”, located in urban areas with high incomes relative to local norms. Call centre agents in India, with their comparatively high incomes and urban locale can be classified as members of this specific class. Therefore, it is essential to understand the characteristics

of the new rich in Asia to understand the socio-economic positioning of call centre employees in India.

A review of literature also suggests that this class is marked by specific patterns of *conspicuous consumption*, influenced by globalising processes. Hence, this group has emerged as important urban consumers, ready to spend a sizable proportion of their incomes on items that will ascribe them to a particular social class, namely the new middle class. Such consumption behaviours are very common among call centre employees in India, who are not only consumers of products but are also consumers of specific “trendy” spaces, such as upmarket shopping malls and fashionable discotheques. These consumption decisions are often channelled through various lifestyle practices, which are key variables for analysing socio-economic change. From the discussion in Section 2.3 it is evident that *identity* is a highly contested term. Nevertheless, in the era of globalisation, identities are increasingly influenced by conspicuous consumption patterns and lifestyle practices. This has become increasingly clear among urban new rich youth in Asian countries, of which call centre employees are an important sub-group. Hence, to provide a nuanced analysis of the changing identities among call centre employees in India it is crucial to understand how various globalising processes are facilitating such identity change.

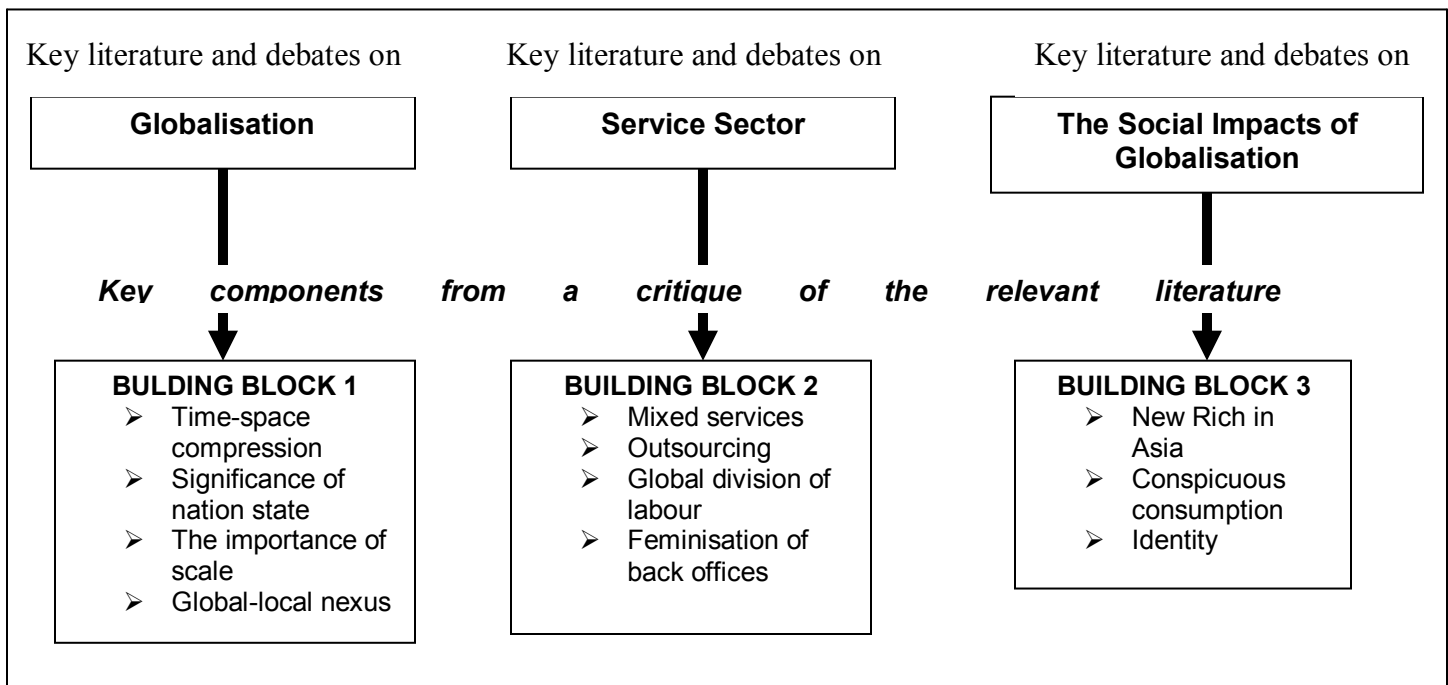


Figure 3.1 Key ideas from social impacts of globalisation literature used to develop my conceptual framework.

3.7 Discussion and Conclusions

From the above discussion it can be concluded that globalisation processes have generated numerous social changes in the developing countries of Asia. One such change has been the rise of the new middle class. Despite debates over its definition, it is widely agreed that there has been a perceptible increase in the new middle class in a number of Asian countries, with this change being exceptionally apparent in the Indian context. This change is mediated by globalisation processes that have created a range of new employment opportunities in the service sector in these countries. Thus, the members of this new middle class are white collar workers, frequently employed in the service sector, earning considerably high incomes compared with local norms. A large proportion of this cohort's income is spent on the conspicuous consumption of commodities that confer a certain status to them. By virtue of such consumption habits they tend to indulge in specific lifestyle practices and all these ultimately work to shape the identities of these people. At the same time, a large proportion of the new middle class in Asia comprise of youth who are very malleable in terms of identity formation.

In sum, drawing together the three buildings blocks shown in Figure 3.1, I have formulated a conceptual framework (figure 3.2) that I use in my thesis to better understand the aim - *the socio-economic impacts of call centres, located in the environs of New Delhi, India, on the young adults who are employed in them.*

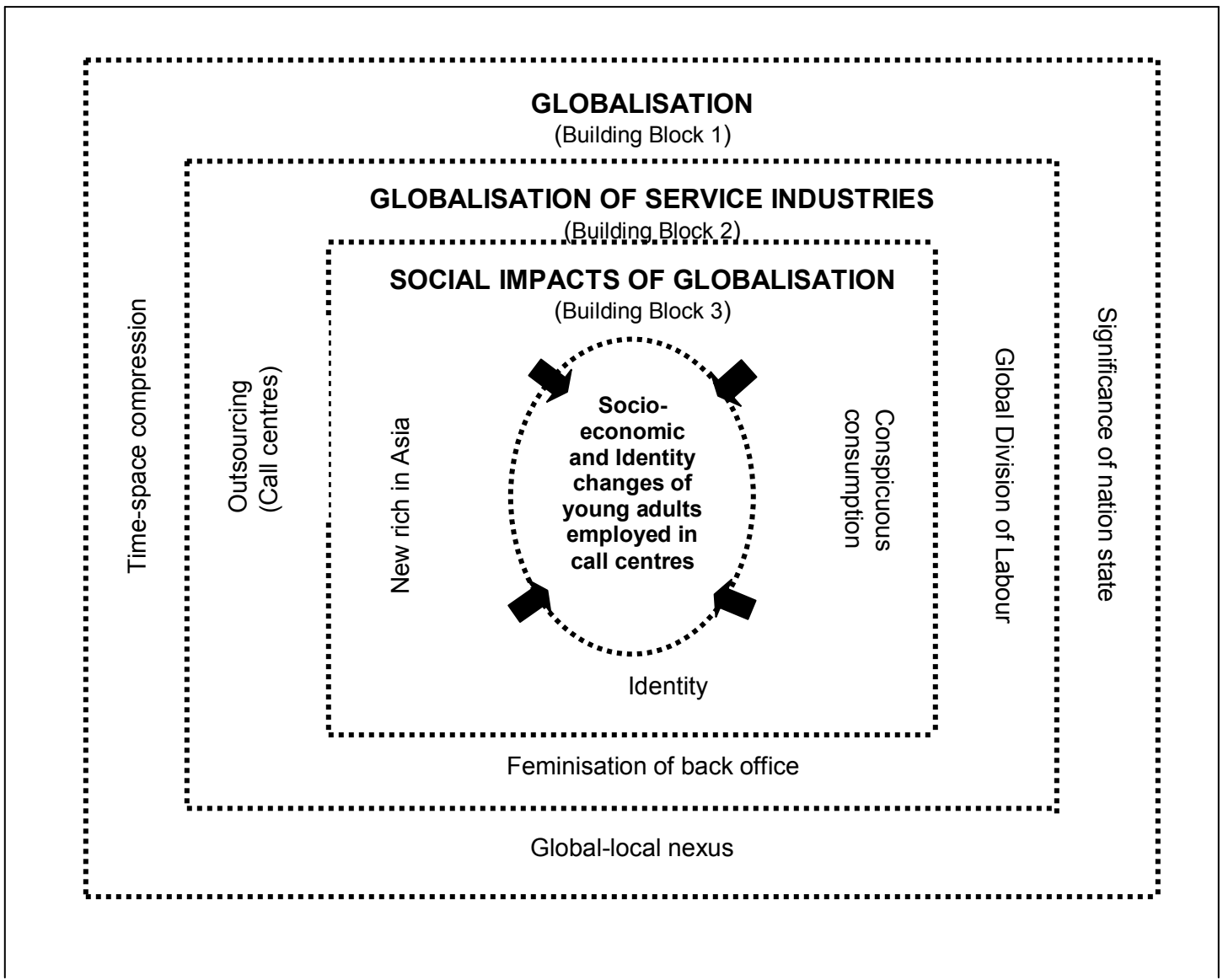


Figure 3.2 Conceptual framework to analyse socio-economic and identity changes among young adults employed in call centres in India.

In Figure 3.2, each of the building blocks is represented as a rectangle. As noted in Chapter Two, Section 2.1, globalisation has and continues to lead to the increasing

integration of the world. The globalised world is characterised by *time-space compression* which enables instantaneous communication across the globe, thus bringing more places into contact with one another. This leads to co-operation and negotiation among nation state and supra-national powers like transnational companies, often questioning the *significance of the nation state*. Despite such concerns based on discussions in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.1, I argue that the significance of the nation state cannot be fully nullified as nation states are still important in the globalisation of capital and finance through liberalisation policies, trading regulations, and FDI flows. Hence, there emerges a *global-local nexus*, which acknowledges the blend of both global and local processes.

Globalisation has a tremendous impact on the service sector. The time-space compression along with liberalisation policies of certain developing countries have increased trade in services across national boundaries. As a consequence, many IT-enabled services are *outsourced* to developing countries giving rise to new forms of labour divisions – *global division of labour*. Call centres - form of back office - are high on the list of services that are being outsourced to developing countries. One important aspect of recruitment in back office employment, including call centres, is a tendency to employ more female workers, leading to the *feminisation of back offices*.

Globalisation processes including globalisation of service industries, has led to an increase in employment opportunities in developing Asian countries. This process in turn has stimulated a rapid growth in the proportion of new urban middle class, also termed the *new rich in Asia*. Members of this class are marked by specific patterns of *conspicuous consumption*, which influence their lifestyle options and *identity* formation. Hence, using this conceptual framework I move to the next chapter (Chapter Four) to contextualise my study of call centres in New Delhi.

Chapter 4

SETTING THE CONTEXT

The work opportunities that have tended to be outsourced to India as a result of globalisation processes, as discussed in Chapter Two, can be grouped as IT-enabled services. Indeed, Chithelen (2004) observes that employment outsourced to India tend to be white collar and professional occupations, in contrast to many blue-collar jobs that are increasingly being outsourced to Mexico and China. NASSCOM (2003) categorises ten different types of IT-enabled services that are being outsourced to India. These services vary widely in terms of the skills required and value added. The ten categories overlap to some extent, but they give a good idea of the scope of the industry. They include customer interaction services, business process outsourcing (BPO)/management, back office operations, insurance claims processing, medical transcription, legal databases, digital content, online education, data digitisation/ Geographic Information System (GIS), payroll/ human resources services and website services (NASSCOM 2003). Ramani (2000) adds several other services to this list, including marketing functions, publication activities and handling the maintenance of software that has been developed elsewhere.

Call centres - forms of back office employment - as explained in Chapter Two, are high on the list of service industry jobs that have been outsourced and relocated to India. The large, eligible labour pool there combined with political and technological support and a perfect geographical location- time zone wise- has paved India's way to becoming "the world's back office." Firstly, India has the lowest cost of qualified personnel in the world (Unni and Rani 2000). As noted in Chapter One, India produces two million college graduates annually, unemployment among college graduates is as high as 20 per cent and India cannot provide formal employment for a quarter of its English-speaking college graduates (Beatty 2002). As such, India offers significant opportunities in terms of improved client services and greater productivity for multinational companies as a result of having a highly skilled, underemployed workforce (*Global Investor* 2003). Secondly, India's liberalised economy has unleashed an IT and telecommunications revolution in addition to the existence of a stable legislative and

economic framework and Government support for all IT led industries.³⁰ Thirdly, India's location - six hours ahead of Europe and 12 hours ahead of the USA - allows for smooth transitions of business to be completed before professionals in Europe and the USA arrive at their desks in the morning (*Global Investor* 2003). By taking advantage of these differences in time zones, companies outsourcing in India are able to operate around the clock, complying with the concept of "follow the sun."³¹

It follows that outsourcing of call centres is dependent on an amalgam of considerations including government policies, as well as socio-economic and geographical conditions. The former brings to our consideration that the nation state is an important actor in the process of globalisation based on the earlier discussions in Chapter Two (Section 2.1.2 regarding the role of the nation-state vis-à-vis globalisation processes; as well as that in Section 2.1.2.1 regarding scale). Thus, for an in-depth understanding of the various conditions that have opened the door to the growth of outsourcing call centres in India, it is important to analyse each of the above factors at three levels of the political hierarchy- national, state and local (city level) to provide the context for this study. As such, this chapter is divided in four parts.

In Section 4.1 I discuss the liberalisation of the Indian economy that was initiated in the mid-1980s, highlighting how the Government has created the atmosphere for outsourcing at the macro level through various policy reforms, including allowing foreign direct investment (FDI), encouraging privatisation and providing subsidies and tax redemption to these companies. While numerous policies are involved in the process of liberalisation, this section concentrates on those policies that deal with telecommunication and IT, the two major factors related to the outsourcing of call centres.

Though, at the macro level, Governmental support creates a general positive environment for outsourcing, at the meso level, states, as detailed in Section 4.2, take the initiative of providing the infrastructure needed for these call centres, including a constant power supply, a sufficient water supply, and improved roads. These

³⁰ When specifically referring to the Central Government of India, I use "Government," (capital G) and when discussing state or regional governments the lower case "government" is used.

³¹ The "follow the sun" model of customer support uses a strategically placed group of worldwide support centres so that there is always a centre open during "business hours" anywhere on the globe. Through an automatic phone and data routing system, customers are serviced "24/7" (*Wipro Technologies* 2004).

infrastructure developments hence attract call centres to specific states within India. Nonetheless, even within states there are concentration zones that are more favoured by outsourced call centres. A locational analysis of call centres in India finds that the majority of these companies are located in only a few large cities. This is explained in part by the fact that the call centre industry is labour-intensive; therefore, a major criterion of site selection is the availability and quality of human resources. At the micro level, local socio-economic and geographic conditions, such as the education and age structure of the population, become relevant. Thus, in Section 4.2, I analyse the conditions at the meso and micro levels that exert a pull on call centres and emphasise the reasons why New Delhi has emerged as one of the most favoured destinations for these call centres in India.

In Section 4.3 I delve into an examination of the more specific features of call centres, explaining the nature and types of call centres located in the study region and the management structure in these. In the discussion and conclusion, Section 4.4, I highlight the conditions encouraging the growth of call centres in India at the three different scales, with special reference to New Delhi.

4.1 Liberalisation of Indian Economy

In the 1980s, an economic crisis started to surface in India. This became a major blow to macroeconomic management. There was a high fiscal deficit, escalating inflation and an adverse balance of payments, leading to a rapid depletion of foreign exchange reserves (Bhandare 2000). At this time, India was in a state of near bankruptcy, with extremely low foreign exchange reserves and overall economic growth that had declined to 1.1 per cent (Bowonder and Satish 2003). During this period, India accepted a structural adjustment loan from the World Bank and, in July 1991, the Government launched a major stabilisation and structural adjustment programme commonly called the New Economic Policy (NEP) (Nagaraj 2002). The NEP liberalised the Indian economy and provided a stepping-stone for India to enter the global economy (Harshe 2001; Nagaraj 2002).³² The structural reforms launched in 1991 were aimed at macro economic

³²Liberalisation in India actually began during the 1980s, especially after Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister. Major industrial policy changes fostered by the new industrial policy initiatives were delicensing

stabilisation (primarily by reducing fiscal deficit); trade liberalisation and phased tariff reduction (to expose Indian industries to international competition and thereby pressure them to increase efficiency); enlarging the scope and freedom for the private sector (by dismantling the licensing/control system); and actively wooing private foreign enterprise and investment for augmenting investment and technological upgradation (Vaidyanathan 2001).

Comprehensive liberalisation followed for more than a decade and the Indian economy underwent substantial change (Dutta 2004). Almost all areas of the economy have been gradually opened to both domestic and foreign private investment, import licensing restrictions on intermediates and capital goods have been virtually eliminated, tariffs have been significantly reduced, and full convertibility of foreign exchange earnings has been established for current account transactions. Financial markets have been liberalised to a greater extent and international standards of regulation have been introduced in the financial sector, encouraging the flow of FDI into the country. Ghosh (2003) observes that India's economic reform program since the 1990s has involved two basic sets of policy reforms. The first set aims to achieve macro economic stabilisation by reducing both fiscal (budgetary) and balance of payments (BOP) deficits. The second set has been to alter the production structure by increasing the role of markets in the economy directly through privatisation, or by way of reductions in state investments and interventions, and directly through domestic deregulation and trade liberalisation.

For a developing country like India, economic liberalisation and globalisation opened access to new markets and new technology (Datt 2004). Forbes (2002) states that liberalisation changed India's relationship with foreign firms, noting that perhaps the greatest driver of change in the relationship with foreign firms was the change in perceptions of India as an attractive market and as a vast resource of quality human power. Before 1991, Indian policy saw foreign investment as a necessary evil, the price

of a wide range of industries, expansion of asset ceiling of the big monopoly houses and the regulation of monopoly restrictive trade practices (MRTP) companies, liberalisation of depreciation provisions, reduction of both corporate and personal tax rates, drastic import liberalisation, extension of broad-banding to a larger number of industries and elimination of many of the existing government controls, on industry. The main objective of this industrial policy was thus to encourage economic growth led by the private sector, with the public sector playing increasingly a subordinate role (Bhagwati 1993; Venkata Ratnam 1998). However, the pace of liberalisation accelerated only after India opted to initiate economic reforms in 1991.

for desirable technology. Correspondingly, foreign firms saw India as a place that was more trouble than it was worth. They entered India by ceding the lead role to an Indian firm, content to establish a presence in a market of future importance, but left management control firmly in the hands of the Indian partner. In any case, the Indian partner controlled the key success factor, obtaining an industrial license (Vaidyanathan 2001). Since 1991, three things changed. First, foreign firms could now invest much more freely in India, including setting up 100 per cent subsidiaries (Forbes 2002). Second, the change in competition meant that there was a demand for new technology, for new products and for more efficient processes. Third, the foreign firm's perception of the Indian market changed dramatically as there was a sudden discovery of a large qualified middle class, and what was clearly going to be one of the world's top few markets in a few years (ibid.). I would argue that these changes in perception had a positive impact upon the growth of the outsourcing industry in India.

In the context of profound economic change, telecommunications is one of the sectors that has received great attention. Virmani (2000) argues that telecommunications, as part of a broader concept of communication, was the "handmaiden" of the information revolution. According to him, the full benefits of globalisation in India can only become available if a communication revolution is unleashed. The only way to do this is to reduce costs to a minimum through intense across-the-board competition within and across all means of communication. In the 1980s, the initial thrust of reforms in telecommunications came from changes in the electronics (including IT) sector (Chakravartty 1999). Henceforth, significant efforts at reforms were under way by the 1990s, and there have been considerable improvements in both the quality and availability of services since then (Krueger and Chinoy 2002). Moreover, as Smith (2007) notes there was a drastic fall in telecommunication costs in India. He states that between 2001 and 2004 peak call rates between India and USA dropped from Rs.60 (CAD\$1.50) to Rs.10 (CAD\$0.25), while those between India and Britain fell from Rs.48 (CAD\$1.1) to Rs.6 (CAD\$ <2 cents).

Historically, the telecommunication sector in India has been dominated by the Government's Department of Telecommunications (DOT) and two other Government-run companies: Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL), which still controls a large part

of international communications; and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL), which operates local telephone services in major cities (Chowdary 2000; Krueger and Chinoy 2002). After the NEP was introduced in 1991, the private sector was invited to participate in reforming India's telecom sector (Gupta 2002). This initiated a series of policies in this regard, the major ones being the Telecom Policy (1994), the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India Act (1997), the Internet Policy (1998), the New Telecom Policy (1999), the Information Technology Act (2000), and the Communication Convergence Bill (2000). Since call centres involve the setting up of a telecommunications facility that handles large volumes of customer queries (Unni and Rani 2000), it is important to examine the different telecommunication policies that were formulated to encourage opening of call centres in India. These policies are discussed in chronological order to understand the sequence in which they were formulated.

4.1.1 Telecom Policy, 1994

In 1994, the Government announced the National Telecom Policy (NTP), which defined certain important objectives, including ensuring the availability of telephone on demand, the provision of world class services at reasonable prices, and the universal availability of basic telecom services to all villages. This last initiative supported India's emergence as a major manufacturing/export base of telecom equipment (Chowdary 2000). NTP 1994 recognised that the required resources for achieving these targets would not be available from Government sources alone and concluded that investment from the private sector was required to bridge the resource gap. The Government invited private sector participation in a phased manner from the early 1990s. The 1994 Policy made it clear that private foreign investment would supplement Department of Telecommunication's (DOT) efforts in spreading basic telephony.

The policy was unrealistic as it failed to define clearly how universal access and service goals were to be achieved (Department of Information Technology 1994; Gupta 2002). While the controversy over basic service competition raged in India, the Government took a very protectionist stance towards the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Basic Telecommunications Service Agreement and its Reference Paper.

However, this policy was one of the first major steps initiated by the Government that facilitated the outsourced industries.

4.1.2 Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) Act, 1997

The basic service controversy ultimately led the Government to promulgate the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) Act in March 1997. This act established the independent regulatory body TRAI, which had the responsibility to fix tariffs and resolve disputes. It was not allowed to issue and revoke licences, however, only to recommend them (Ministry of Law and Justice 1997). The DOT surrendered its regulatory role in principle, though it still retained policy-making, licensing, and operative powers within the same organisational boundaries. There were disputes between TRAI and DOT but TRAI was pro-competitive and was successful to a certain extent in rebalancing telecom rates (Chowdary 2000; Gupta 2002). As a result, the telecom sector provided US\$5 billion in FDI, one of the highest in the Indian economy, since the market opened in the early 1990s. This allowed transnational companies including those with call centre needs, to begin to see the increasing possibilities of doing business in India.

4.1.3 Internet Policy, 1998

The Government was successful in liberalising the IT sector. Recognising the explosive growth of the Internet in early 1990s, it decided to formulate a new Internet policy by inviting various stakeholders to participate in the consultative process (Gupta 2002). In 1998, the Internet policy was announced. It ended the monopoly of VSNL over Internet services and allowed unlimited competition with practically no license fee. The policy also included certain telecommunications issues. Internet service providers (ISPs) could link their users by telephone lines or cable lines or even build their own transmission networks. Thus, the cable industry and the ISPs started to directly compete with the telephone companies in offering multi-media services. DOT issued more than 400 licenses including national, state and city licenses. More than 100 foreign investors then invested in these companies (Chowdary 2000). With huge demand for bandwidth, domestic firms in partnership with international companies have actively taken part in competing with VSNL, MTNL and DOT to provide infrastructure and services. With

legal and regulatory flexibility, private ISPs were then allowed to create, own and share private satellite-based gateways and submarine cable landing stations to connect with international Internet gateways. Indeed, competition had already made a substantial difference in the pricing of Internet services and infrastructure (Gupta 2002). Since all outsourced services are IT-enabled, this policy provided a great boost for attracting transnational companies to choose India as a major destination for such services.

4.1.4 New Telecom Policy, 1999

It was recognised by the Government that there have also been far reaching developments since early 1990s in the telecom, IT, consumer electronics and media industries worldwide. Hence, convergence of both markets and technologies was a reality forcing realignment of the industry. This convergence now allowed operators to use their facilities to deliver some services previously reserved for other operators, necessitating a re-examination of the existing policy framework. It was also realised by the Government that a new telecom policy framework was required to facilitate India's vision of becoming an IT superpower and developing a world class telecom infrastructure in the country. Thus, the Government launched the New Telecom Policy on March 27, 1999. There was little hope that the new policy would bring profound changes as DOT members dominated the committee advising the Government on telecommunications (Chowdary 2000). However, unexpectedly, the policy took a more positive direction than its predecessor. However, this policy too had its drawbacks, such as its failure to clearly define TRAI's role (*The Gazette of India* 2000a).

After the 1999 national elections, telecommunication was a key sector in which major decisions were made. On 13 December, 1999, the Government created a committee called the "Group on Telecom and Information Technology Convergence" (GTC) under the chairpersonship of the then finance minister Yashwant Sinha. Sinha formed three subgroups to deal with various issues relating to telecommunications and IT. The subgroups had to consider and make recommendations to strengthen the TRAI through suitable legislative amendments; identify and recommend measures for the resolution of subsisting problems for expeditious implementation of new 1999 telecom policy; and to prepare the draft of a comprehensive statute to replace the Indian

Telegraph Act, 1885 keeping in view the rapid convergence of telecom, IT and broadcasting (Gupta 2002). Hence, by combining telecom, IT and broadcasting, the NTP 1999 made it easier for foreign firms to invest in India, as all these were crucial services needed for operation of outsourced services.

4.1.5 The Information Technology Act, 2000

The Information Technology (IT) Act came into force on July 9, 2000. The purpose of the act was to provide legal recognition for transactions carried out by means of electronic data interchange and other means of electronic communication (e-commerce), which involve issues of alternatives to paper-based methods of communication and storage of information (*The Gazette of India* 2000b) and was ratified as the IT Act 2000 (Lappin 2002). Under the new service tax regime implemented by the Government through the 2003 Finance Bill, certain further concessions and liberalisation measures were introduced for Business Auxiliary Services. The Bill had a direct impact on call centres, considered a part of the Business Auxiliary Service segment. The relevant clause stated that Business Auxiliary Services provided by call centres and medical transcription centres (that is commercial concerns transcribing medical history, treatment, medical observations and the like) would be fully exempted from a service tax levy starting July 1, 2003 (NASSCOM 2003).

4.1.6 Communications Convergence Bill, 2000

A further initiative to improve IT and telecommunications was taken by Member of Parliament Fali Nariman, who put forward a detailed proposal for the Communications Convergence Bill 2000 and invited all interested parties to make recommendations to replace the Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 and various other legislations relating to telecommunications, broadcasting and IT. The objectives of the bill were to develop the communication sector in a competitive manner, and to ensure that market dominance in a converged environment was suitably regulated (Department of Information Technology 2000). In addition, the bill proposed that communication services be made available at an affordable cost and suggested that the Commission promote quality, plurality, diversity and choice of services. The bill also aimed to establish a modern and effective

communications infrastructure, which took into account the convergence of IT, media, telecom and consumer electronics (Unni and Rani 2000). As well, the Commission promoted equitable, non-discriminatory interconnection across various networks and an open licensing policy. In addition, subject to spectrum, it also allowed unlimited competition and promoted a level playing field among all operators.

In addition to these various policies, the Government announced a Tax Holiday 2010, stating that outsourced service companies will be exempted from paying income tax from 2000 until 2010 (Jacoby 2002). All these developments show that India has come a long way, from a fairly closed economy to a more liberalised model, especially in terms of telecommunication and IT. The above mentioned policies indicate the Government's efforts to provide the thrust to attract outsourced service jobs to India. Due to the federal system of government in India, the rest of the responsibilities lie with the various states to make the best use of these policies and set up task forces for the growth of outsourcing in different parts of the country (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001). It is to such initiatives that I turn in the next section.

4.2 State-level Initiatives and Local Conditions for Attracting International Call Centres

In 1998, though the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, organised the national task force on IT-enabled services, not all states took similar initiatives to enforce this task force's recommendations (Chowdary 2002). A number of progressive states, especially those in the south, including Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, were the forerunners in creating an environment for attracting outsourcing companies, being among the first to provide the basic infrastructure needed for the smooth running of such companies (Singhal and Rogers 2001). Over a period of time all states in India, except seven northeastern states, competed with one another and courted foreign companies of various types, mainly IT-enabled services. They introduced simplified procedures for outsourced companies and eased many rules to facilitate the registration and growth. In addition, state governments gave land and buildings to these companies and concessions were also provided in regards to sales tax, electricity rates, import duties and other fees (Lateef 1997; Mitter 2000; Singhal and Rogers 2001; Chowdary 2002; Ramachandraiah

2003; NASSCOM 2003). State governments often built massive buildings to provide for IT companies and offered other infrastructural facilities so that these companies could start operating within seven days of their registration. For example, the Cyber Towers in the high-tech city in Madhapur and Hyderabad provided 850,000 square feet of office space in record time of one week. High speed, broadband telecom connections were part of the building's facilities that allowed companies to start operations immediately.

In this chapter I restrict my discussion to the favourable conditions generated by the government of Delhi, Noida and Gurgaon to attract international call centres. It needs to be mentioned that though Noida and Gurgaon are both part of the National Capital Region of Delhi (NCR), my study area, they come under the jurisdiction of different provinces and hence require separate attention.

The government of Delhi has been very supportive of the expansion of call centres in the region and to encourage this expansion has passed various legislative laws above and beyond federal ones. According to a report prepared by the Delhi government, IT enabled services, like medical transcriptions, call centres, data processing, back-office operations, GIS processes, revenue accounting, and so on, are considered as niche areas for the state (Government of Delhi, 2004). Similarly, over the last 25 years, Noida, which is under the jurisdiction of the province of Uttar Pradesh, has emerged as one of the largest planned industrial townships in Asia (Government of Noida, 2005). Noida has an uninterrupted power supply, and telephony in Noida is digital, provided through optical fibre cable. Also, Noida has a state-of-the art electronic exchange providing Integration Service Digital Network (ISDN) services facilitating high quality voice, data and image transfers; inter computer file transfer; high quality and speed fax transmissions; video conferencing and a variety of other telephony services. These are all conditions highly favourable for the opening up of call centres. On the other hand, Gurgaon, often nicknamed "Globalgaon" by the media (*Times of India*, 2005) is yet another preferred destination for call centres.³³ Gurgaon is under the political jurisdiction of the province of Haryana. The government of which, through an enterprise called Haryana State Electronics Development Corporation Limited (HARTRON), has been undertaking various schemes and activities for the development of the electronics and information

³³ "Gaon" is an Indian term meaning village.

technology industry in a systematic and scientific manner in the state since the corporations formation in January, 1983 (Government of Haryana, 2005). The emphasis has been on the development of modern technology and the state has offered its expertise both in infrastructure as well as project promotion to the IT-enabled companies. Some world-famous IT companies like Hughes Software, Tata Consultancy Service, Alcatel, HCL, Siemens, GE Capital, Silicon Graphics, and so on, have units located at Gurgaon. Specifically, an area designated to promote IT industries in Gurgaon is Electronic-City. This is a major hub providing all facilities favorable for outsourced industries, and is spread over an area of 40 acres. Within the Electronics-City, Software Technology Park covers an area of 14,000 sq. feet. Here, a satellite communication link has been provided for the benefit of units located in the park. Also, an Information Technology and Telecommunication Complex in the Electronics City has been planned for computer/software exporting companies with like teleconference, Internet, e-mail service and other communication services (Government of Haryana, 2005). The governments of Noida and Gurgaon believe they are both very competitive in exerting a pull on international call centres.

Clearly, many such initiatives of state governments have revolved around providing physical infrastructure. However, there are certain socio-economic factors that also play a vital role in influencing the location of call centres. Though, spatially, these call centres are located in Noida and Gurgaon, they draw their labour pool from Delhi. The city has an abundance of English-speaking young populations, a major criteria for outsourced jobs. The average literacy rate in Delhi is much higher than the national level (Registrar General of India 2001), and the city attracts young adults from different parts of the country in search of better employment opportunities and higher education.³⁴ The academic community in Delhi contributes to the vibrant nature of the outsourced industry (Lateef 1997). Delhi houses five universities, ten deemed universities,³⁵ and 114 colleges, as well as a large number of private institutions providing degrees and diplomas, at both undergraduate and graduate levels in business administration and computer applications

³⁴ The total average literacy rate in India is 65 per cent, 76 per cent for men and 54 per cent for women, compared to the average literacy rate in Delhi of 82 per cent, 87 per cent for men and 75 per cent for women (Registrar General of India 2001).

³⁵ Deemed university is a status of autonomy granted by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in India to high performing institutes as well as departments of various universities.

(Department of Higher Education 2005). These produce thousands of graduates every year ready to be absorbed into the local labour market including outsourced companies. Also realising the growing importance of outsourced jobs, various training institutes have opened up in the Delhi region to train aspiring call centre job employees, teaching them to speak with North American and West European accents. *The Times of India* (2004) reports that, since 2003, India has attracted outsourced companies from a range of European countries in addition to the UK and the USA. For these companies, knowledge of European languages like French, Italian, and German, rather than English, is an asset for the employees. In India, only two universities provide foreign language courses (at undergraduate and graduate levels) and both are located in Delhi- Jawaharlal Nehru University and University of Delhi. Also, there are other institutions that offer foreign language courses in New Delhi, such as the Alliance Francaise, Max Muller Bhavan teaching German, the Italian cultural centre and Japanese language promotion centres. This has led many such companies to choose Delhi over other places, because of the availability of people fluent in these European language(s). In addition to these factors, industry observers argue that what makes a location attractive for any outsourced industry in particular is the culture of the city. The industry, which is comprised of a young, highly educated, workforce, breeds a certain lifestyle. Specific locations, therefore, are argued to have the potential to allow this lifestyle to grow (Lateef 1997). In this context, Delhi is regarded as an open city with cosmopolitan culture. Delhi houses a large number of migrant population from different parts of the country adding to the cosmopolitanism of the city.

As this section discussion highlights, an appropriate labour force is one of the most important location decision factors for outsourcing. The socio-economic conditions at the local level create the appropriate labour pool needed for outsourced jobs and this, in turn, is encouraged by the government through various institutions, who also in the case of Delhi, Noida and Gurgaon, have provided extensive physical infrastructure.

4.3 Specific Features of Call Centres

Call centres can be categorised based on their clientele, job specifications and organisation. Firstly, focussing on the clientele, call centres that cater to customers

located within the political boundary of the same country are referred to as domestic call centres. In turn, those catering to customers located outside the country, that is, international customers, are called international call centres (Gupta 2003). Secondly, there are basically two types of call centres depending on their job specifications- inbound call centres and outbound call centres. An inbound call centre receives calls from customers, but does not make calls to customers. Usually such call centres specialise in answering different queries from customers and they often have a toll-free number through which customers call them (Chadha 2004), an example being the customer care service for Dell computers. On the other hand, outbound call centres are those from which calls are made to customers either for business transactions or to respond to queries made. This type of call centre can be further divided into business to business, and business to customer call centres, depending on the clients. Such call centres are mainly collection centres and telemarketing centres. An example of an outbound call centre is the collection centre for VISA credit cards from which agents call VISA card holders to remind them of their due payments. In my study, I consider both inbound and outbound call centres.

Thirdly, call centres are also classified according to their organisational patterns. Some companies, for example GE Capitals, have their own call centres in India, with their own office space and management. Various other companies subcontract their call centres to different vendors in India. In this case they do not have any say in the management and staff recruitment policies (HR managers of call centres, pers. comm., 20/11/04; 6/12/04). The companies that cater to more than one company's call centres are called contract centres. Wipro Spectramind is one of the leading international contract centres in India, with the largest number of employees. Indeed most call centres in New Delhi are contract centres as this is considered more convenient for the outsourcing company. In this study I use the term "call centre" for both contract centres and call centres, since the work atmosphere and working conditions are similar in both.

The size and clientele of these call centres vary greatly in the environs of New Delhi. Appendix II provides a list of a range of different call centres located in this region along with the number of their employees and clientele. It is noted that most clients of call centres in the Delhi region are USA, UK and Europe based and very few also cater to

Australian companies. While a number of small call centres employ less than 50 employees, larger ones employ more than 4000 employees. Some of the most important call centres in terms of employment generation are Wipro Spectramind, Daksh, Convergys, All Serve Systems India Ltd., and Exl Service Holdings.

Despite differences in the composition and nature of call centres, all follow a similar hierarchy in job profiles and management structure (Chadha (2004). There are various options available to the agents in terms of their career choice within the call centre, detailed in Figure 4.1. From the figure it can be noted that there are three main career path options - quality, operation and training, each with their own specifications, a point we will return to in my discussions in the analysis chapters (Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight).

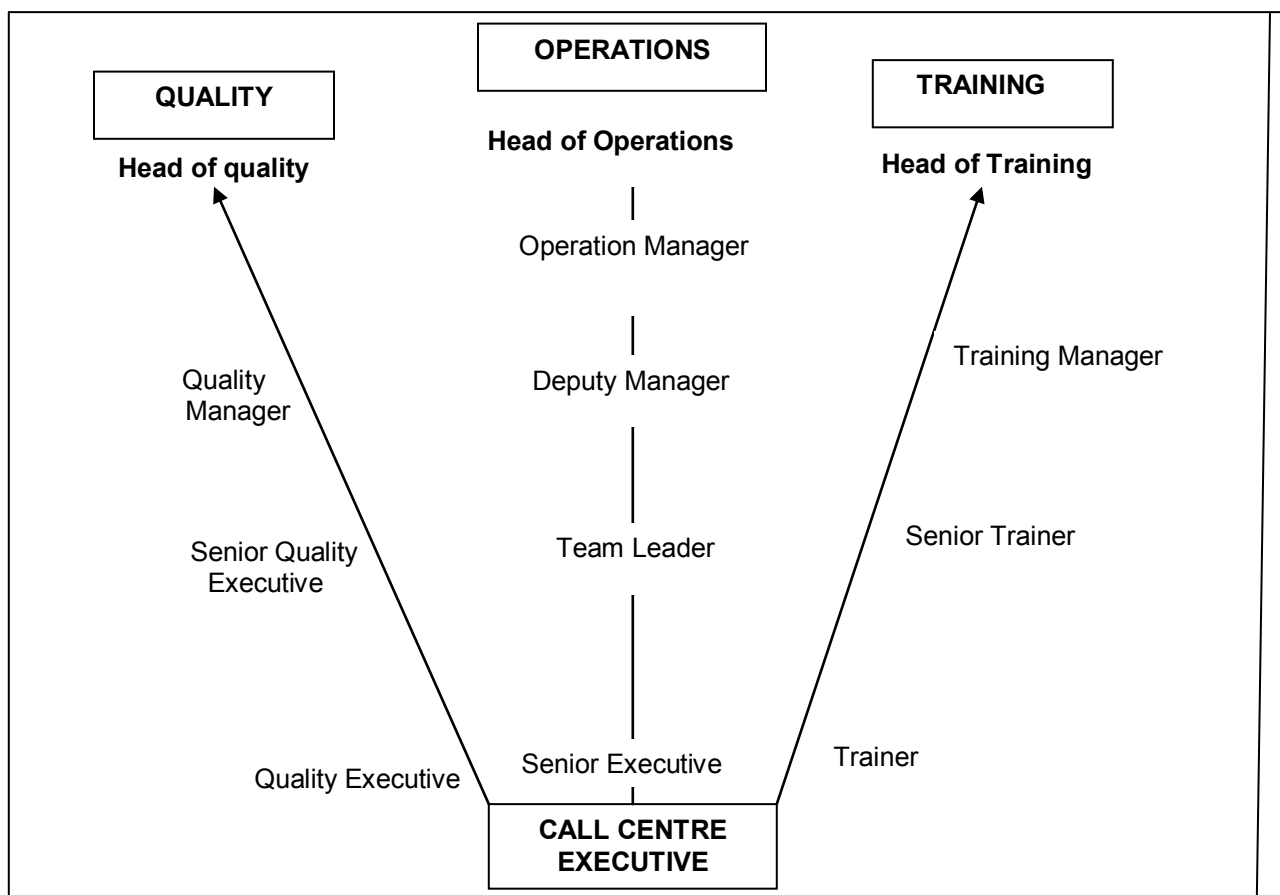


Figure 4.1 Management structures in call centres.

Source: Adapted from Chadha (2004:24)

4.4 Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter I have provided a discussion of the numerous conditions encouraging the growth of outsourcing in India with special reference to the call centre industry. With a large highly qualified, English speaking labour pool, India is one of the most favoured outsourcing destinations for USA and European companies. Yet, though the situation might look simple on the surface, outsourcing is the outcome of a range of factors acting at different levels of political hierarchy- national, state and local. The overall impetus is provided by the central Government through broad policies in the telecommunication and IT sector as discussed in Section 4.1. Subsequently, states support such initiatives by offering infrastructure, including basic necessities and employee training as noted in Section 4.2. Yet these factors alone are still insufficient to explain the prevalence and growth of outsourcing, and the main thrust comes at the local level, where a particular city provides specific socio-economic and geographical conditions, as noted in the latter part of Section 4.2.

This discussion highlights how a comprehensive liberalisation of the Government from 1990 onwards introduced several policy reforms allowing flows of FDI into the country and encouraging privatisation of telecommunications. The Government also provided certain incentives to outsourced companies, including various subsidies and tax exemptions. Inspired by such reforms at the national level, some state governments have followed suit. They have worked to lure companies to their respective states and have undertaken efforts to provide good infrastructure, including buildings, roads, and a continuous power supply. Cities like Delhi, with a large, English-speaking, young population, many of whom have migrated from different parts of the country in search of employment, have attracted various outsourced companies, mainly those engaged in back office work that is clerical in nature and does not require professional or technical labourers with specific technical skills. Thus, the socio-economic conditions at the local level play an important role in the spatial location of outsourced employment hubs. As such, Delhi has emerged as one of the most favoured destinations for call centres in the world, housing approximately 100 different call centres which vary both in nature and composition. Having now contextualised the study I move on in the next chapter to

discuss the methods that I adopted for analysing the socio-economic impacts of such employment in New Delhi and its environs - Gurgaon and Noida.

Chapter 5

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I explain the methods adopted for this study, review how I analyse my data and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. I also discuss my positionality as a young Indian scholar. I gathered data in the “field” in Delhi, from November 2004 to March 2005, conducting research using qualitative methods, and also completed an in-depth media content analysis for a period between 2002 and 2006. Two main reasons support the choice of qualitative methods for this study. Firstly, to date in India no study has been carried out looking at the “subjective” aspect of call centres, that is, an exploration of the socio-economic changes and identity formation of young adults employed in these locales. Secondly, the purpose of my research is to provide “thick description” (Geertz 1983) of the changing consumptions and lifestyles of these employees, and to give an in-depth understanding of the processes involved in such changes. Hence, a quantitative approach would not do justice to the topic, especially with regards to understanding concepts like identity, which I discuss in Chapter Nine.

The two main sources of data for this study are analyses of printed newspaper advertisements for call centre employment, and semi-structured interviews with call centre employees, employers, and other relevant individuals. For a better understanding of each method, this chapter is broadly divided into four sections. In Section 5.1, I describe the methods employed in analysing call centre advertisements in the print media. In Section 5.2, I focus on the methods used during fieldwork including interviews and other methodologies. Section 5.3 illustrates the analysis techniques. While in Section 5.4, I discuss my positionality.

5.1 Media Analysis

So as to better understand one of the initial means by which youth in New Delhi come to interpret call centre opportunities and positions, an analysis of advertisements in the print media for call centre employment was undertaken. This also allowed me to address my first research question- *What are the characteristics of call centre employment in the New Delhi environs and what do call centre companies expect of their employees?* The media analysis focused on advertisements from the English newspaper *Times of India* (the most

widely read daily English newspaper in Delhi), from January 2000 until December 2005. During this period I collected a total of 1208 advertisements featuring call centre jobs and 360 advertisements featuring training institutes for call centre jobs. Hence, a total of 1568 advertisements were analysed for this study, using content analysis methods adapted from Fairclough (1995), and visual methodologies adapted from Rose (2001). The *Times of India* was chosen for several reasons. First, a preliminary analysis of different English language newspapers in Delhi revealed that the frequency of call centre advertisements was the greatest in the *Times of India*.³⁶ Second, interviews with call centre employers showed that they preferred to publish advertisements in the *Times of India* primarily due to its wide audience. This was confirmed from my interviews with call centre agents who stated they mainly searched the *Times of India* for call centre employment advertisements rather than the *Hindustan Times* or *Asian Age* (other daily English newspapers).

Though the first call centre in India was opened at Gurgaon in 1998, an analysis of newspapers from that year revealed that there were actually no advertisements for call centre jobs yet. In the initial years, such employment was filled mainly through employment consultancies (call centre employer, Atanu, pers. comm. 23/12/04). Therefore, the year 2000 was chosen as the base year for this analysis, since that was the first year to show any substantial number of newspaper advertisements for call centre employment. To understand the changes over time in the form and content of these advertisements, a quarterly analysis was conducted for every alternate year between 2000 and 2004. Thus the months considered for the years 2000, 2002 and 2004 were January, April, July and October and each day's newspaper was studied during each of these months. However, a more in-depth analysis, for a continuous period from November 2004 and March 2005 (the time when fieldwork was carried out in Delhi), was also conducted.

There were two reasons for conducting the total media analysis from January 2000 to March 2005. First, the call centre industry in India was in its infancy until 2000, after which it gained momentum. Therefore, it is important to understand the changes

³⁶ Since the call centres targeted potential employees who could speak English, the advertisements for these jobs were published only in English newspapers. Moreover, it was evident that urban middle class young adults - potential call centre agents - subscribed to English newspapers more frequently than any regional language newspaper.

since 2000, as noted above. However, as revealed from statistics (NASSCOM 2006), the industry was becoming stabilised by 2005 and hence the changes in advertisements around this time were not very drastic. Second, another purpose of the media analysis was to complement the fieldwork data; therefore, the advertisements that appeared after March 2005 were not considered in the analysis as they could not be corroborated by fieldwork data. Nevertheless, in 2008 I returned to analyse the *Times of India* again, undertaking a brief follow up search for advertisements for call centre employment, to see if these had changed at all from the time when my fieldwork was undertaken. At that time I analysed the month of April, 2008 - one of the monthly periods that I had also analysed from 2000 to 2004 (January, April, July and October). My aim at this stage was to compare these more recent advertisements with those from the earlier period, to see if any substantial changes had occurred.

While for the earlier time period from 2000 to 2004 the analysis was mainly statistical in nature considering the frequency distribution and the changing nature of the advertisements, a more in-depth analysis was carried out for the period between November 2004 and March 2005 using mainly two methods- content analysis and visual methodologies, to which I turn next.

5.1.1 Content Analysis of Advertisements

The content analysis was carried out in two parts, numerical analysis and textual analysis. In the numerical analysis, the emphasis was on exploring the changing frequency of the call centre employment advertisements as well as their physical position in the newspaper. The main features that were analysed using numerical analysis included frequency distribution, size, and position of the advertisements (on the page and in the newspaper as a whole), and also whether there was any use of pictures or graphics in these advertisements. The results from this analysis are represented and discussed in Chapter Six, Section 6.1.

For a nuanced understanding of the content of these advertisements and the specific words used to attract potential employees, a textual analysis was also undertaken for all the advertisements. Borrowing from Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis techniques, the textual analysis that I undertook consisted of "linguistic analysis."

Fairclough (ibid.) describes linguistic analysis as an analysis of textual organisation “above the sentence”, including the ways in which sentences and words are connected together and the overall structure of a piece of literature (which in the case of my study is a newspaper advertisement). Though he suggests three aspects that could be considered in this analysis, given the nature of the advertisements, I focus on two specifically: first, the particular constructions of writer and reader identities; and second, the particular representations and recontextualisations of social practice.³⁷ Therefore, I conducted a keyword analysis focusing on linguistic features of vocabulary and metaphors. In doing so, the text of the advertisements was categorised in a tabular form under various headings. Such categories were created based on the issues that were addressed in the advertisements, such as types of employment offered, qualifications needed, salary and incentives, and recruitment processes. The main findings from this analysis are discussed in Chapter Six, Section 6.2, providing a detailed account of the key themes that formed the focus of these advertisements.

5.1.2 Visual Methodologies

Graphics and photos form an important aspect of most of the call centre employment advertisements found in the *Times of India*. Such visuals were analysed by using visual methodologies, and I adapted my methodology from Rose (2001). However, I did not carry out an exact imitation of her methods but modified them according to the needs of my study. From each of the advertisements key reoccurring themes were identified. These themes were then categorised under eleven headings that emerged as key elements as I did this analysis (that is, they emerged as *a posteriori* codes), such as facial expressions of people shown in the advertisements, gender of these individuals, ethnicity, dress style, surroundings, activities being undertaken, and so on. Moreover, I also noted if there were any other comments that did not fall within these codes. Appendix III gives a snapshot of the table that was developed when analysing the advertisements in this way. This approach thus allowed me to look for any trends in the call centre employment

³⁷ The third aspect mentioned by Fairclough (1995: 58) is “a particular construction of the relationship between writer and reader (as, for instance, formal or informal, close or distant). However an initial analysis of the newspaper advertisements found that this aspect was fairly constant, with employers always adopting a fairly informal approach, as shown in Chapter Six.

advertisements and relate these to the changing nature of the advertisements over time, mainly with respect to how advertising tactics changed to appeal to youth. Also, increasing competition among call centres led them to be more innovative in their advertisements. This analysis also revealed that such advertisements were centrally concerned with the production of certain social differences through visual imagery, explained further, alongside other findings, in Chapter Six, Section 6.3.

While examining these advertisements, I soon realised that none of the people in them actually looked “Indian” to me, but rather they seemed to portray images of Western youth located in non-Indian atmospheres. Initially this led me to question whether my personal cultural bias was directing my analysis in this regard (see Fairclough 1995). Therefore, I triangulated my impressions with those of two Canadian graduate students -Christine and Laura. Christine, despite her half Phillipino ethnicity and her awareness of Asian youth culture, was unfamiliar with the Indian context, like Laura, a white Canadian. After conducting a preliminary analysis of the advertisements, 30 per cent of the total advertisements were shown to my colleagues. They reported that these advertisements gave them an impression more of fashion shows than job advertisements. Laura even mentioned that some of the advertisements looked like advertising for talent contests like “American Idol.” Their remarks, and this triangulation approach, helped to enhance the rigour I wanted to achieve in my analysis.

5.2 Fieldwork Methods

During my fieldwork in Delhi I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 70 call centre agents from 26 different call centres, along with ten employers and five parents of call centre agents. I also completed key informant interviews with three doctors who had patients from call centres, and two teachers whose, both former and current students, were employed in call centres. Moreover, I completed three focus groups, and visited ten call centres to observe the work atmosphere in these offices. Call centres in Delhi employ between 20 and 5000 employees, so I constructed my sample to include a range of centre “sizes”. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the sample of the call centres that I used in my study. Using an univariate analysis of the size of call centres, five broad categories of call centres were identified. 39 per cent of all the call

centres from the region was sampled in the study and research participants were recruited from each category, with their proportions between six and 28 per cent, respectively. This is mainly because a snowball sampling technique (explained in Section 5.2.1.1) was adopted for choosing the interviewees.

Table 5.1, Sample of call centres used in the study.

Call centre size (Number of employees)	Total number of call centres in the Delhi environs	Number of call centres where interviews were undertaken	Interviews completed with call centre employees	Number of call centres where interviews were undertaken
	% (Number)	% (Number)	% (Number)	% (Number)
Very Small (<100)	36 (24)	33 (8)	28 (26)	33 (8)
Small (100-500)	26 (17)	47 (8)	26 (18)	47 (8)
Medium (500-1000)	17 (11)	36 (4)	17 (12)	36 (4)
Large (1000-1500)	6 (4)	25 (1)	6 (4)	25 (1)
Very Large (>1500)	15 (10)	50 (5)	23 (16)	50 (5)
TOTAL	100 (66)	39 (26)	100 (70)	39 (26)

Furthermore, I spent considerable time in the localities where call centres were located observing the agents activities during non-work hours. During visits to and around call centres I engaged in non-participant observation, observing but not participating in any of the activities that were underway (Turner 1998). This gave me an opportunity to compare the behaviour of call centre agents in the office environment and outside it. Based on analysis of data collected during my fieldwork I addressed my second and third research questions- *What impacts does employment in call centres have on the lifestyles of young adult employees and their consumption decisions* and *How does employment in call centres in the environs of New Delhi affect the identities of young adult employees?* Detailed descriptions of my interview methods are discussed next.

5.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted in-depth interviews with call centre agents, their employers, and with parents of call centre agents (key informant interviews with doctors and teachers are discussed in Section 5.2.1.4). The semi-structured interviews were conducted in either English or Hindi (the regional language of the study region). Interviews with three of the five parents were conducted in Bengali (a language of east India) since they were more

comfortable in this language, it being their mother tongue.³⁸ Most of the interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewees. In those cases where interviewees felt uncomfortable with taping, notes were taken using paper and pen. The sampling procedures and interview processes for all my respondents are discussed below.

5.2.1.1 Call Centre Agents

I adopted a purposive sample approach for choosing call centre agent respondents. A snowballing technique was applied to gain access to interviewees, since this sampling process identifies cases of interest from people who know other people with relevant cases (Bradshaw and Stratford 2000). I used multiple initial contact points for the snowballing process to avoid recruiting informants from “a very narrow circle of like minded people” (Valentine 1997: 116).

The interview schedule was semi-structured, providing enough flexibility so that maximum information could be gathered. Moreover, this type of interview is a fruitful way of collecting information on topics dealing with changing lifestyle and consumption practices, while maintaining a positive rapport with interviewees (Valentine 1997 and 2001b; Berg 2004). The interview schedule for call centre agents is shown in Appendix IV. I designed this interview schedule before I went to the field based on my previous reading and conceptual framework design. Nevertheless, I conducted a pilot study with ten call centre agents upon my arrival in New Delhi and, based on a preliminary analysis of these, redesigned parts of the interview schedule.³⁹ This piloting process thus added rigour to my fieldwork design (Baxter 1997 and 1999; Bradshaw and Stratford 2000).

Having spent five years as a university student in Delhi, I had many friends and contacts in the area who were instrumental in introducing me to some of my initial contacts for snowballing. One such contact was a teacher at an undergraduate college in Delhi who also coached students privately at her home. Many of her private students worked part-time in different call centres and five of them agreed to give me interviews. However, since they knew that I was a friend of their teacher, many a time I realised that

³⁸ Since I am fluent in all the three languages (English, Hindi and Bengali) I did not need a translator.

³⁹ For example, in the initial schedule, I had not included topics related to the work atmosphere, dress codes at work, nor certain specific features of cultural training because these elements are non-existent in the literature on call centres to date. However my initial interviewees were keen to talk about these points, which highlighted to me that I should make them a more central element in the interview schedule.

they were not going to be open to discuss certain topics that were related to their sexual relationships and habits such as drinking and smoking. Despite my reassurance that all information collected during the interview would be confidential, they thought, as mentioned by two of them during the interviews, that by sharing their true opinions about these issues they might “get in their teacher’s bad books” since in India it is not very acceptable to openly discuss sexual relationships. In such situations I had to “perform” for my interviewees and restore their confidence by stating that I have liberal views about sexual relationships, since I live in Canada. Similar experiences – where interviewees doubted my positionality - were noticed among call centre agents when their employers introduced me to them. On one occasion, the HR manager of a call centre had been my colleague at high school. When she introduced me to a team of ten agents stating the purpose of my research and asking whether they would be willing to participate, eight of them volunteered. Yet again I faced similar constraints, as I believe that they tried to modify their responses, considering me to be a part of the management. Such circumstances reflect Lal’s (1996) argument, who, based on her own experience of nonparticipatory ethnographic research, posits that such situations often place the researcher in a powerful position vis-à-vis research subjects and that these inequalities are intensified by the researcher’s relationship with access providers who may have control over other research subjects. As a whole, for these 13 interviewees I was therefore careful to double-check and if necessary disregard the information they provided regarding sexual relationships and other sensitive topics. Nevertheless, the information they provided on other topics, such as socio-economic background, changing lifestyle and consumption patterns, were important and valid for my analysis.

In total I interviewed 70 call centre agents, 38 of whom were women, allowing for an analysis of the results based on gender. This sample is representative of the call centre employees, as according to NASSCOM (2005) around 40 per cent of call centre agents in India are women. All the call centre agents interviewed were between 18 and 35 years of age, were educated in English-medium schools, and had an urban, middle-class background, many being from double-income families. Near to seventy per cent of these agents had migrated to Delhi from elsewhere in India in search of better opportunities, either for education or employment. More than three-quarters of the agents belonged to

the middle rung in the caste hierarchy, many of them being *kayasthas* (a detailed breakdown of the participants' caste is provided Appendix VI). I argue that this was in part due to policies concerning the reservation system in India for the lower castes, Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). This latter section, lower caste of the population typically prefers to be employed in public sector services as they have better opportunities there under this system.⁴⁰ On the other hand, for the upper castes-*brahmins* and *kastriyas*, the most sought after professions are still medical, engineering and higher posts in the bureaucracy (Shurmer-Smith 2000). Hence, the majority of call centre employees tended to come from the “middle-rung”, between these two extremes.

Interviews with call centre agents were conducted either in a café or in another public place of the respondent's choice. Each interview lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. When interviews were conducted in cafés, I bought respondents a cup of coffee as a token of appreciation. When interviews were conducted in other locations, interviewees were given small gifts, for example, scented candles. I also carried small cosmetic items, such as lipstick, shampoo, and aftershave lotions from Montreal, Canada, as presents for my interviewees. Interestingly enough these gifts helped me in my snowballing, as when one participant received a “foreign made product” s/he would immediately give me contacts for several of his/her other friends for interviews. Through one of my key informants I learned that in fact I had become popular among various call centre agents as the “person from Canada who gives ‘foreign gifts’ to interviewees.” This made me question whether it was ethically correct to do so, yet in the course of my fieldwork, I realised this was a further reflection of this group of youth's affinity for imported consumer items, discussed in Chapter Eight (Section 8.3).

⁴⁰ In India “a major section of the backward classes have been specified in the constitution as scheduled castes (SC) and scheduled tribes (ST) because their backwardness is patent. There is no definition of SC and ST in the constitution itself. But the President is empowered to draw up the list in consultation with the Governor of each state, subject to revision by Parliament” (Basu 1960: 314-15). According to reservation policies, in public sector offices certain numbers of jobs are reserved for SCs and STs, however, this does not apply to call centres, as these are private sector enterprises. See Section 3.4.1.1, Chapter Three for a further discussion on the role of caste in India.

5.2.1.2 Call Centre Employers

In addition to call centre agents, ten employers from eight call centres located in the study region were interviewed. These employers were selected using a criterion sampling technique, which involves “picking all cases that meet some criterion” (Bradshaw and Stratford 2000: 44), namely being a call centre employer. The interview schedule for employers was structured (Appendix V) for two reasons: this method of interview is less time consuming; and most of these interviews targeted specific information dealing principally with topics including expectations of employees, quality of work, recruitment and training processes, and pay scale. As Valentine (1997) mentions, in most cases while interviewing officials there is no choice but to interview them in their own offices; an approach that I also found necessary to follow. Such interviews were between 25 and 40 minutes long. Though six of these interviewees showed interest in my research, three were more interested to know about call centres in Canada than providing information about the Indian scenario, while the other was indifferent. As a token of appreciation, employers were given small mementos from Canada, such as key rings.

5.2.1.3 Parents

A third set of interviews was conducted with five parents of call centre employees. This group of informants was chosen using opportunistic sampling, during which “the researcher flexibly follows new leads during fieldwork and takes advantage of the unexpected” (Bradshaw and Stratford 2000: 44). In the course of my fieldwork, I asked respondents who were from Delhi, whether their parents would be interested in giving an interview and from those expressing interest, I randomly selected five. Such interviews were informal in nature and the topics discussed included their perceptions of call centre work, the changing lifestyles of their children, and changing relationships with family members. All of these interviews took place in the house of the respondent, and in the presence of their child (the call centre agent) and each interview was about an hour long. As I did not want the agents to feel like I was “going behind their backs” since I had developed a good rapport with them, I allowed them to be present during such interviews. The parents were very interested in my research and two of them, at a point during the interview, suggested that I should discuss my findings with call centre managements and

the Indian Government to tackle some of the issues raised, mainly related to work schedules and health.

5.2.1.4 Key Informants

In addition to the call centre agents, employers and parents, I also interviewed three doctors and two teachers who had long term relationships with call centre agents. These individuals were key informants due to the in-depth nature of our discussions, and the fact that these interviewees were open to repeat visits for follow up information and cross checking details. The key informants were chosen based on my initial contacts in Delhi using a purposive sampling technique. The doctors (two female and one male) whom I interviewed had patients from call centres, as was reported to me by the call centre agents. One of the teachers was teaching in a university in Delhi, while the other one was a teacher at an undergraduate college in Delhi. They both had students who were working in call centres and many more who were considering call centre work as an early career option. All such interviews were unstructured and mainly conversational in nature, providing scope for detailed discussions on specific issues. The topics that were covered varied according to the profession of the key informant; for example, while talking to doctors, the main focus was on health issues, though they also provided useful insights about the changing lifestyle habits of the agents. The interviews with teachers focused primarily on the changing attitudes of the agents including their consumption habits and lifestyle options; nonetheless, they also commented on several health issues associated with call centre work. These interviews were conducted either in the office of the respondent or his or her house and lasted for 45 to 70 minutes. Moreover, I also conducted follow up interviews with two doctors and one teacher, cross checking information and interpretations based on my initial findings. Their opinions and further insights were important for my study, adding extra validity to the information collected.

5.2.2 Focus Group Interviews

As well as interviews I also conducted focus group discussions with sixteen call centre agents. I conducted three such discussions during the months of December 2004 and February 2005 and the number of participants varied between four and seven. The issues

that were addressed included the training process, work atmosphere, changing lifestyle practices, and changing consumption decisions. These topics were chosen based on my individual interviews with call centre agents, as I wanted to gain a further in-depth understanding of certain topics through group discussions. This mixed method approach also added rigour to my data collection. The structure of the focus groups was informal, leaving room for participants to discuss issues that emerged in the course of conversation. Each of the focus group discussions lasted 40 to 60 minutes and took place in cafés. Since all participants were not comfortable with their discussion being recorded I took handwritten notes. Two such focus groups consisted of both male and female agents, while one comprised only of four female employees.⁴¹ I chose the participants for focus group discussions from the agents who I initially interviewed, along with a snowballing technique. I randomly asked my participants whether they would be interested to have a follow up conversation and, if they agreed, I asked them to also invite their friends for such discussions.

Such focus group discussions not only gave me an opportunity to talk about certain topics in more depth, but they also allowed me to note the differences of opinions among the agents on issues that otherwise I thought were not so hotly debated amongst them. Moreover, as Patton (1987: 140) states, focus group discussions also allow respondents to “think about questions they may surprise themselves [with], previously unarticulated concerns, and new ideas.” Also, in the course of discussions, agents sometimes forgot my role and because of the informal style the focus groups allowed for agents to bring up certain topics that I had not anticipated, such as the management’s reaction to complaints about health. Hence this approach provided an important angle for information gathering.

5.3 Data Analysis of Interviews: Phenomenological Approach

Data collected from the interviews (both semi-structured and focus groups) were analysed using multiple methods. After carefully reading all the transcripts and notes taken during interviews, data were colour-coded and categorised into broad themes

⁴¹ The gender ratio of the last case was not intentional; rather it occurred because two of the male agents did not show up for the discussion. However this did give me the ability to focus on specific topics more.

(Maykut and Morehouse 1994; Maxwell and Miller 2002). Based on a preliminary examination of the data, the phenomenological approach (Riemen 1998) seemed to be the most suitable method of analysis. The phenomenological approach is an attempt to understand empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied. In Bruyn's (1966: 90) words "phenomenology serves as the rationale behind efforts to understand individuals by entering into their field of perception in order to see life as these individuals see it." I adopted this particular approach of analysis because, in my study, in order to ascertain essential socio-economic changes triggered by call centre employment, it is desirable to understand the call centre agents' perceptions of the various impacts of their employment.

I developed a flow chart (Figure 5.1) that explains the different steps used in this method of analysis. From the transcriptions, different broad themes were extracted and they formed the initial data for analysis (Step 1). From these, significant statements were then found (Step 2). Then meanings were formulated from these significant statements (Step 3). Based on such meanings clusters of common themes were prepared (Step 4). Finally, exhaustive descriptions of the phenomenon were noted (Step 5). An example of this method is illustrated in Appendix VII.

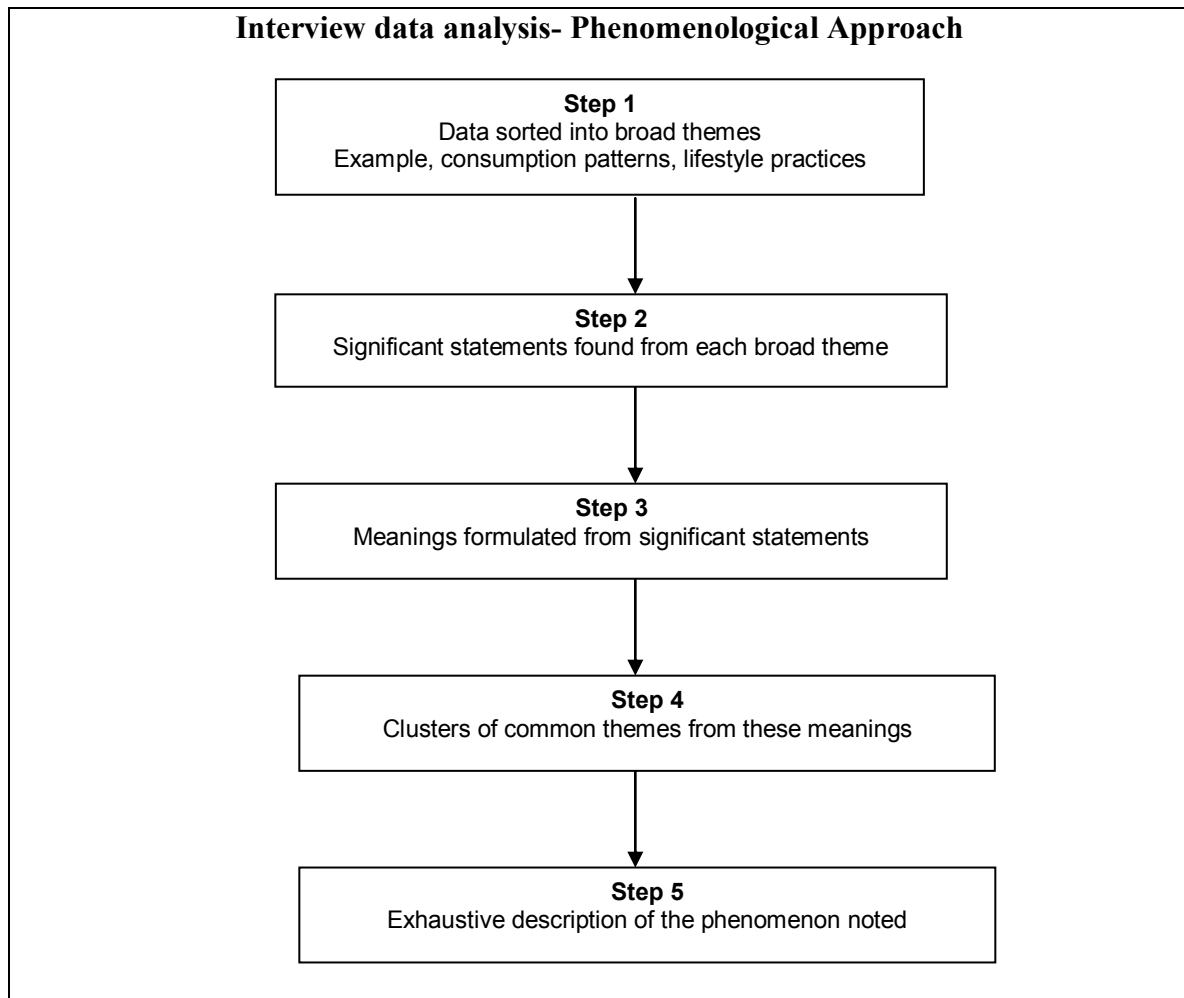


Figure 5.1 Flow diagram explaining steps used in phenomenological approach

5.3.1 Data Analysis of Interviews: Other Methods

As well as using the phenomenological approach, two other methods of analysis were used to highlight important aspects of the study; namely story writing and representation through drama. The story writing approach was adapted from Rhodes' (2000) concept of ghostwriting research, which is a textual practice for writing-up interview-based research. According to Rhodes (*ibid.*: 514), "*ghostwriting* is used to refer to a practice where a researcher engages with a research participant and, as a result, creates a new text that both tells the story of that participant and implies the involvement of the researcher." I chose this approach in particular to provide a comprehensive picture of the impacts of call centre work on employees. However, I did not follow the exact imitation of this method, rather, I modified it. Consequently, instead of focusing on a particular interview,

I took a group of key results from my phenomenological approach and presented them in the form of one story (as shown in Chapter Eight, vignette one). The main purpose of this exercise was to create a lasting impression of the important findings for the reader and also provide a means for the reader to contextualise the results.

In addition, I employed Conrad's (2002) method of drama writing to highlight the gender differences in the consumption practices of call centre agents. Drama is described as an "arts-based method of inquiry where one assumes that there are ways of knowing and making meaning beyond the traditional *word* and *number*" (ibid.: 254, emphasis in original). Though there are various dramatic styles for representing research (see Denzin 1997; Banks and Banks 1998; Saldana 1999), I chose ethnodrama. Saldana (1999: 60) describes ethnodrama as a researcher's report in which

significant selections from interview transcripts, field notes, and/or research journal entries or memoranda, are carefully arranged, scripted, and dramatized for an audience to enhance their understanding of the participants' lives through aural and visual enactment.

From my analysis it was evident that while engaging in consumption driven lifestyles there were certain gender based differences in such patterns. By presenting these in a drama form, I felt I could better emphasise my argument (as shown in Chapter Eight, vignette two). In this method, I focused on parts of the interviews and/or notes that dealt with conspicuous consumption and, from those, selected certain moments that I thought best explained the consumption patterns I was focusing on. The interviews that I drew upon for this method were conducted on different days but I clubbed them together in a single situation. This allowed me to produce a more comprehensive story of what life is like for these call centre agents as a whole, rather than via fragments of speech.

5.4 Positionality and Reflexivity: Negotiating My Identity in the Field

After two years in Canada, I was very excited to return to Delhi (home) to conduct my fieldwork. When I started my fieldwork I did not "parachute into the field with empty head and a few pencils or a tape recorder..." (England 1994: 84), rather I had certain preconceived notions about the region as well as my study population. Having spent five critical years of my life as a university student in Delhi and based on my acquaintances

and understandings of the lifestyle of the young population in the region, I also did not enter the field as a “neutral researcher.” However, soon after I started my fieldwork, many of my assumptions and preconceived ideas - mainly regarding the hangout places and lifestyle choices of the research subjects - proved to be wrong. I almost immediately realised that certain social behaviours that were considered to be taboo during my earlier time in the city, such as night clubbing, had emerged as accepted norms among this cohort that I was interviewing. Since 2002, the year I left Delhi to pursue my graduate studies in Canada, the region has witnessed enormous change, both in terms of physical appearance as well as cultural and economic processes influenced by waves of globalisation (discussed in Chapters Three and Four, respectively). The physical economic changes were observable mainly with respect to the construction of new highways, upmarket commercial buildings, shopping malls, restaurants and cafes, while the cultural transformations were perceptible in the changed social behaviour and lifestyle patterns among the younger generations. Hence, like Lal (1996:191) “... in many ways I entered a world that was completely foreign to me”.⁴²

Despite such changes I still considered myself to be an insider based on similarities with my study population, including my ethnicity, language(s), socio-economic background, age group, educational background to a certain extent, and in many cases gender and my caste affiliation. Almost 40 per cent of my respondents were Bengalis, the same ethnicity as me. All of them belonged to the same age group (18-35 years) and 60 per cent were female while 15 per cent of them were *Brahmins* (my caste affiliation). Moreover, I was also educated in English-medium school like all my research subjects. Nevertheless, I was conscious about my outsider status as well, in terms of not belonging to the same professional group. During interviews, my status as an outsider became further evident and I became more aware of my differences with the research subjects, realising that I was only a “partial insider” (Subedi 2006: 580). Thus, there always existed a dualism in my positing as an insider or an outsider, which often led me to question my positionality in the field, an issue faced by many social science researchers conducting ethnographic fieldwork (see Abu-Lughod 1991; England 1994;

⁴² Jayati Lal is an American- based Indian scholar who also returned to Delhi in the mid-1990s, as a graduate student based in Cornell University, to conduct her fieldwork with women workers and their employees and managers in fourteen garment firms and seven television firms.

Kobayashi 1994; Lal 1996; Rose 1997; DeLyser 2001; Valentine 2002; and Subedi 2006).

Furthermore, there is an important body of academic writing that discusses debates concerning the positionality of scholars who go back to their own country (often developing countries) to conduct fieldwork (see Abu-Lughod 1991; Lal 1996; and Subedi 2006). Despite differences in the experiences of these researchers, a cord of uniformity that runs through their experiences is the fact that during their fieldwork they had to constantly negotiate between the position of insider and outsider rather than being intently assigned one or the other subject position. Like me, their insider role usually related to similar ethnicity, knowledge of language(s), and, many a time, gender. However, their outsider position was manifested through differences in geographical location, social positioning and profession. Such researchers are often termed “halfie researchers” (Subedi 2006: 135). Abu-Lughod (1991: 137) notes that the term “halfie” is helpful to describe identities and experiences of researchers “whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage.” On a similar note, Subedi (2006: 588) posits, “halfie researchers can be ‘natives,’ yet they can also be outsiders on some levels.” Due to my Indian ethnicity and my present status as a graduate student in Canada, I considered myself a halfie researcher during my fieldwork stay. However, interestingly enough, unlike other halfie researchers who are not always well accepted among their research subjects in their homelands as they are considered to be “inauthentic natives” (Lal 1996: 190), my “halfie” status seemed to make me more acceptable among many of my research subjects. As will be detailed in Chapter Seven, the majority of my research subjects were call centre agents who were required to mimic Western lifestyle practices, including accents, and adopt an English language pseudonym as part of their job. For them, it was easier to accept me as the “other” as I was a part of the society in which they lived - virtually - for a large part of the day. This behaviour was not restricted to call centre agents but was common even among the call centre employers. As an example, when initially contacting these employers over the phone for an interview, I introduced myself as an Indian researcher from Canada. In these cases, I could comprehend from the conversation that they were often sceptical about my status and did not want to give me an appointment. Later, when I simply stated that I was a

researcher from Canada (without mentioning my Indian identity) they were prompt to give me an appointment.⁴³ This once again reinforced my acceptance as the “other” in the field. It needs to be mentioned that when I introduced myself as a researcher from Canada, both agents and employers had certain expectations of me, mainly in terms of dressing style and visual representation that suited their stereotype of a woman from a Western country. This was evident from certain subtle comments that they made during interviews about my dressing style and fashion accessories.

The importance of wearing the “right dress” has been recognised by other researchers (see Till 2001; Valentine 2002), and according to them, identities are often read from one’s dress. During my fieldwork I experienced similar situations. In the early phase of my interviews I dressed in *salwar kameez* (the traditional dress of the region) and would carry a folder with ethnic designs. Nevertheless, despite my dress being socially “right,” it did not earn me the trust of my research subjects as it led them to doubt that I lived in Canada. In fact, I felt I had to rework visual aspects of my identity in terms of wearing Western clothes and make up to be accepted by my participants. Also to suit their typecast, I had to carry trendy accessories like a fashionable purse and wear jewellery. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Eight (Section 8.3), this cohort of call centre agents has the latest model of cell phone replete with Internet connections and cameras. During my fieldwork, I had a basic cell phone to facilitate communication with my research participants. Many a time my respondents expressed surprise at the old model of my cell phone as, according to their expectations, I should have had one of the latest models by virtue of living in Canada.

Interestingly, though I was not positioned in the role of “inauthentic native” by call centre agents, the story was different when I interviewed some of their parents. In this case, I felt I had to comply with their cultural and gender-role expectations (Whitehead and Conaway 1986). During such interviews I dressed in Indian ethnic clothes, displayed my married status by wearing *mangal sutra* and a pinch of *sindur*⁴⁴ and conformed to socially constructed performances (Reid-Henry 2003). Thus, in multiple

⁴³ Though among my Canadian colleagues my accent is still very Indian, in India they thought that I had developed a Canadian accent with specific word usage that was not common in India.

⁴⁴ *Mangal sutra* is a necklace of black beads and gold. *Sindur* is vermilion worn in parting of the hair. These are signs of married women in Hinduism.

locations my identity was being (re)negotiated and (re)formatted to put informants at ease.

Despite the fact that my “outsider” status made me more acceptable to my call centre agent respondents, on various occasions they did treat me as an “insider,” which facilitated my information gathering and understanding of various nuances which otherwise would have been missed. One such case in point occurred when one of the interviewees explained the various time zones in North America to me, considering me to be ignorant about this. This allowed me to comprehend the various information they were given as part of their training processes and their reflections on how this was a body of knowledge that the “ordinary” Indian would not be aware of. However, there were also downsides of the sameness with my respondents and it proved to be hurdle in information gathering. Such situations were most common while discussing issues about living arrangements with partners and other sexual activities. As Valentine (2002: 123) observes, in these cases the sameness between the researcher and the research subjects “can serve to close down the expression of diverse views.”

My transnational position also posed certain negative impacts, as, for example, many a time there would be unexpected passes made at me, by my male respondents, as they thought that I would be more tolerant to their flirtatious comments as I lived in Canada. To avoid such situations I always informed my interviewees of my married status and carried a photograph of my husband, Aditya, which I showed them in case they did not believe me. Aditya accompanied me to Delhi during the first phase of my fieldwork and introduced me to many of my initial contacts for snowballing. He was also present during some interviews with male informants and this helped me to avoid any sexual comments and passes by them. Moreover, one of my male respondents during an informal discussion with Aditya mentioned his live-in relationship while he omitted this issue during my own individual interview with him. Hence, I agree with Cupples and Kindon (2003) that accompanied fieldwork has an impact on the information gathered including gaining certain extra information which otherwise would have been missed out.

It is evident from the above discussion that, in the field, my positioning with regards to my research subjects was often changing and, as a consequence, I had to constantly negotiate my identity. In fact during fieldwork I developed a hybrid identity

along multiple axes. This then led me to question just who it was I spoke for through my research and whether I was in a position to speak for my research subjects.

Questions over the politics of who can speak for whom during research have attracted the attention of feminist geographer researchers (England 1994; Valentine 2002). This question, though more prominent among “white” researchers conducting research in developing countries, also surfaces among those who go back to their own country to conduct fieldwork (see Kobayashi 1994; Lal 1996). A main concern for the latter group is the unequal power relations between the researcher and the research subjects, as usually the former are positioned in a more powerful situation based on their professional and socio-economic status. However, I would argue that my case was in some ways even more complex. Although my respondents and I were from similar socio-economic backgrounds, I was in an unusual position because I lived in that very society in which they *pretend to live* as part of their employment. Such positionality made me question whether I was in a position to critically interpret the “make believe world” in which these employees were made to live.

My positionality also made me question my role as a researcher and I disagree with Stacey (1988:3) who states that during fieldwork whatever information “fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill.” Many a time there were situations that made me feel uncomfortable, as I indeed wanted to inform my interviewees that the images of the Western world that they had gathered through the training processes were partial and should not be generalised. But where would I start? By talking to the management who designs such training modules according to the demands of the Western clients, or the agents who are at the receiving end of the training? In the course of my research I realised that the training curriculum were strong capitalist agendas and, though, as a single person I might not be able to completely change the situation, hopefully my research will highlight issues that need deeper consideration.

In sum, from a mixed method approach outlined above, supported by my reflexivity of this process and my positionality in it, I was able to gather, analyse and interpret a broad range of data, the results from which are presented in the next three chapters.

Chapter 6

FINDING A JOB: ANALYSIS OF CALL CENTRE ADVERTISEMENTS

The fact that the call centre industry is labour intensive in nature often leads to demand of labour outstripping supply in various parts of India (Batt et al. 2005) and at the same time, call centres in the environs of New Delhi have experienced spectacular growth since 2000. Hence, call centres in Delhi are constantly in need of more labour. As a result, they have emerged as one of the major employment providers in Delhi. The fact that call centres are constantly hiring can be assessed from the volume of advertisements for such employment in the daily newspapers, the main recruitment source used to entice potential employees. Through advertisements, the ability of these call centres to promise attractive salaries and “fun-filled” work atmospheres attracts a large proportion of young adults keen to join the industry. Due to the clerical nature of this employment, call centres do not require specifically skilled labour (discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.6.1), with the basic requirements for call centre employment in India being fluency in English, and minimum computer skills. In this chapter I examine the basic requirements and expectations for this employment, and also the benefits offered by call centres based on content analysis of printed newspaper advertisements for call centre employment. In doing so, I address the first part of my first research question, namely: *What are the characteristics of call centre employment in the New Delhi environs?*

To address this research question, I undertook an examination of printed advertisements for call centre employment from the English newspaper *Times of India* (the most widely read daily English newspaper in New Delhi) from the year 2000 until 2005 and did a follow up analysis for the year 2008. A total of 1568 advertisements were analysed using content analysis (discussed in Chapter Five, Section 5.1.1). In this chapter the analysis results are broadly divided into five sections. To understand the requirements and benefits of call centre employment, it is essential to evaluate the significance of this employment. Therefore, the first Section (6.1) deals with analysing the growing importance of call centre employment in the study region based on the changing frequency of advertisements for call centre employment, and their location in the

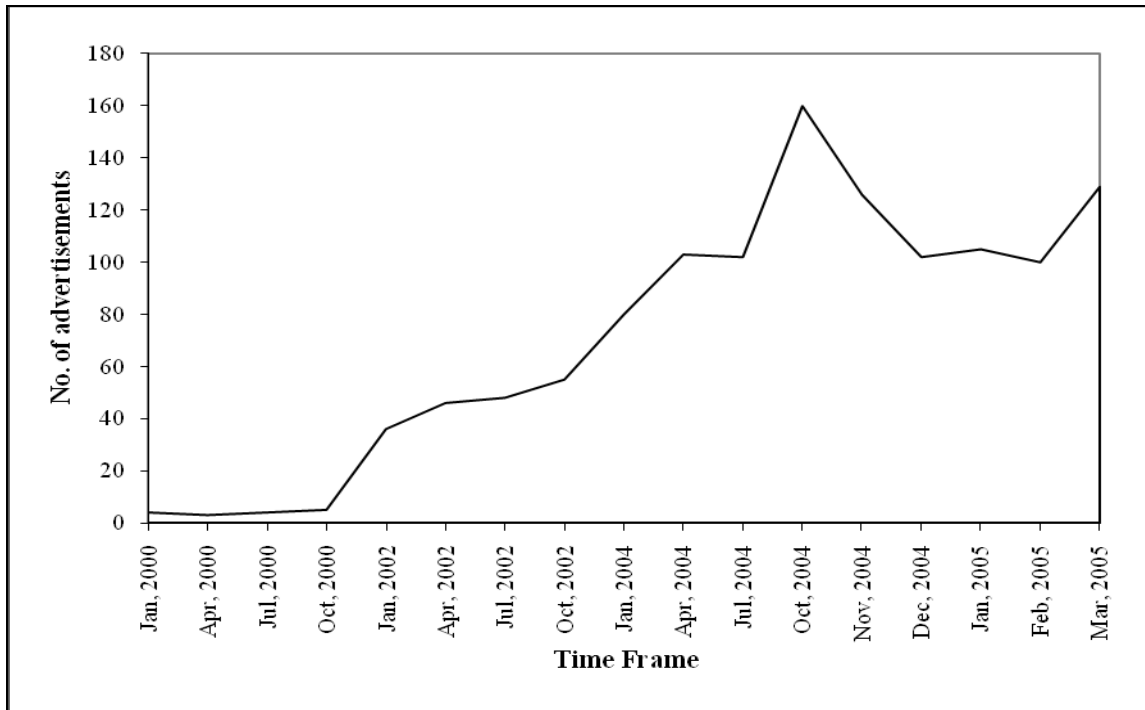
newspaper. The second Section (6.2) examines the types of employment that are offered by the call centres. In the third Section (6.3), I focus on the recent trends noticed among these advertisements. Section 6.4 delineates the specific recruitment processes adopted by the call centres. The last Section (6.5), the discussion and conclusions, provides a summary of such requirements and expectations regarding this employment.

6.1 Growing Importance of Call Centre Employment in New Delhi Environs

The growing importance of call centre employment is gauged by the increase in the frequency of advertisements for such employment and also the number of vacancies that are announced in these advertisements. For a better perceptive of this phenomenon, a numerical analysis of advertisements is carried out. Section 6.1.1 provides an understanding of the trends in the call centre advertisements through a frequency distribution over the time period 2000 to 2005 and also by analysing the variation in the size of these advertisements. In Section 6.1.2, the change in the nature of these advertisements is addressed, considering factors such as the use of colours and photographs in the advertisements. Section 6.1.3 takes the analysis a step further, examining the differences in the positions of these advertisements in the newspapers including the various headings under which they are classified.

6.1.1 Frequency of Advertisements for Call Centre Employment

A remarkable increase is noticed in the frequency of advertisements for call centre employment between 2000 and 2005. One of the main ways to attract potential employees for call centres is through newspaper advertisements; therefore, with an increase in the demand for labour in the industry, there has been an increase in the frequency of advertisements. Graph 6.1 shows the frequency distribution and hence the trend of these advertisements. From this graph, it can be gleaned that, while in the year 2000 there were less than ten advertisements per month for call centre employment, the number increased to 129 per month by March 2005. The graph also shows that the change over time has been quite steady and for every alternate year there has been an increase of about 40 per cent in the frequency of advertisements for these employments.



Graph 6.1 Frequency distribution of call centre employment advertisements in *Times of India*, Jan 2000-March 2005.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there was not a substantial variation in the frequency of the advertisements between 2004 and 2005. The main reason, I would argue, is that the call centre industry has reached a point of stability and they are no longer growing at an exponential rate. From the graph 6.1, it can also be noted that the frequency of such advertisements was highest in October 2004 and then decreased. This anomaly can be explained by a call centre employment fair that was organised during that month in New Delhi. The advertisement for this call centre employment fair, shown in Figure 6.1, advertises the various employment in different call centres, and appeared almost daily in October.

HOTTEST CALL CENTRE JOBS



Here's your chance to pick and choose from the best Call Centre jobs. Walk in to The Big Leap BPO Job Fair with 10 copies of your resumé and walk out with your offer letter. Feel the surge of excitement at getting placed in some of the leading companies from diverse industries. There are openings for junior and middle levels. Fluency in spoken or written English is a must.



PRESENTED BY



the smart move

&



niit smarterve
BPO BUSINESS SCHOOLS MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT

ASSOCIATE SPONSOR



GE imagination at work

VENUE: Guru Harkrishan Public School, Purana Quila Road
DATE: October 9th & 10th, 2004 **TIME:** 10am to 4pm

Companies interested in participating and recruiting at the fair, please write to joehilla.rk@timesgroup.com

PARTICIPANTS

















For express check-in, candidates can register on timesjobs.com and carry the print out of timesjobs.com online resumé.

Figure 6.1 Advertising call centre job fair, *Times of India*, 7th October 2004.

It is also significant to note that there have been changes in the size of these advertisements over time. Since the advertisements for the years 2000, 2002, and those in 2004 until October that year, were obtained from microfiche, the precise size of the advertisements was not available. However, approximate sizes of these advertisements were obtained by comparing the advertisements in the full page and scaling up to the paper version. Based on this technique the average size of the advertisements during 2000 was estimated to be three cm high by two cm wide. For the period between Nov 2004 and March 2005 the average size of these advertisements increased to 7.8 cm x 5.8 cm (height x width) (Table 6.1). Thus, the average size of the advertisements has more than doubled over five years. The unique change in the trend of frequency and size of the call centre advertisements suggests that the industry has gained significant importance in the region in terms of growth and hence the number of employments offered. Also, based on this data I argue that the call centre management realise that there is growing competition so they place larger advertisements to compete with each other.

Table 6.1 Average sizes of call centre employment advertisements in *Times of India*, November 2004 to March 2005

	Height (cm)	Width (cm)
Nov-04	7.5	5.0
Dec-04	7.6	5.2
Jan-05	7.7	5.9
Feb-05	8.6	7.2
Mar-05	7.4	5.8
Average	7.8	5.8

6.1.2 Nature of Advertisements for Call Centre Employment

As well as changes in frequency and size, these advertisements have also undergone modifications in their nature, mainly in terms of using photographs, graphics, and colours. In 2000, all the call centre advertisements were black and white with no pictures as shown in Figure 6.2. In 2002, however, more than ten per cent of these advertisements had pictures, and for the time period between 2004 and 2005, on average around 25 per cent of the call centre employment advertisements had pictures, indicating this is higher than the other periods. Graph 6.2 highlights these changes. These advertisements have become very colourful and bright, to attract the attention of the reader. The types of

pictures used in the advertisements have also undergone incredible change. For example, conventionally in 2002, such advertisements featured pictures of women wearing telephone headsets (typical of the call centre employment), but since 2004, the pictures in the advertisements are totally detached from call centre work. Rather, without reading the fine print, it is very difficult to assess that they are indeed for call centre employment. Figure 6.3 shows one such clearly detached picture showing instead a woman having a spa therapy, a point elaborated upon in Chapter Nine (Section 9.1.1).



INTL. CALL CENTRE

Needs graduate Boys/Girls
below 25 yrs with 0-3 yrs work
exposure+basic computer
knowledge+impeccable
English communication.
Excellent Salary, Perk,
Transport facility.

DYNAMIC PERSONNEL

J-11, Mini Mkt, Alaknanda
Shopping Comp., Kalkaji, N.D-19
Tel. 6219835, 6433246, 6433248

Figure 6.2 Typical call centre advertisement in the initial years, *Times of India*, 18th October 2000.



Our client promises wire-free communications



We promise stress-free careers

Vertex, a leading BPO service provider is a part of the \$6 bn. United Utilities Plc. having a global presence with 33 sites across the UK, USA, Canada & India. Our track record has enabled leading Fortune 500 companies to trust us with their most prized possessions, their customers & their processes, while maintaining their competitive advantage.

Our Client, **Orange**, is a telecom giant with a customer base of over 13.5 million in the UK.

We are looking for **Business Associates - Customer Service** with

- An excellent command over English (oral and written)
- A graduate degree (2+3) in any discipline
- 0-5 years of experience, preferably in customer service

If you are 'friendly', 'refreshing', 'dynamic', 'honest' and 'straight forward', walk in with a copy of your updated resume and a recent passport size photograph to any of the venues given below.



Walk-in-Interviews for Business Associates. 10 am to 4 pm.

Mar.2nd to Mar.5th '05

Megamind, P-34, South Ext. Partell, (Above Oriental Bank of Commerce), New Delhi.

Mar.3rd & Mar.4th '05

Megamind, A-95, Vishal Enclave, Near Sony World, Opp. Rajouri Garden Main Market, New Delhi

Mar.2nd to Mar.5th '05

Search International, B5-13, Opp. Eicher House, Greater Kailash Enclave-2 Near Savitri Cinema, New Delhi.

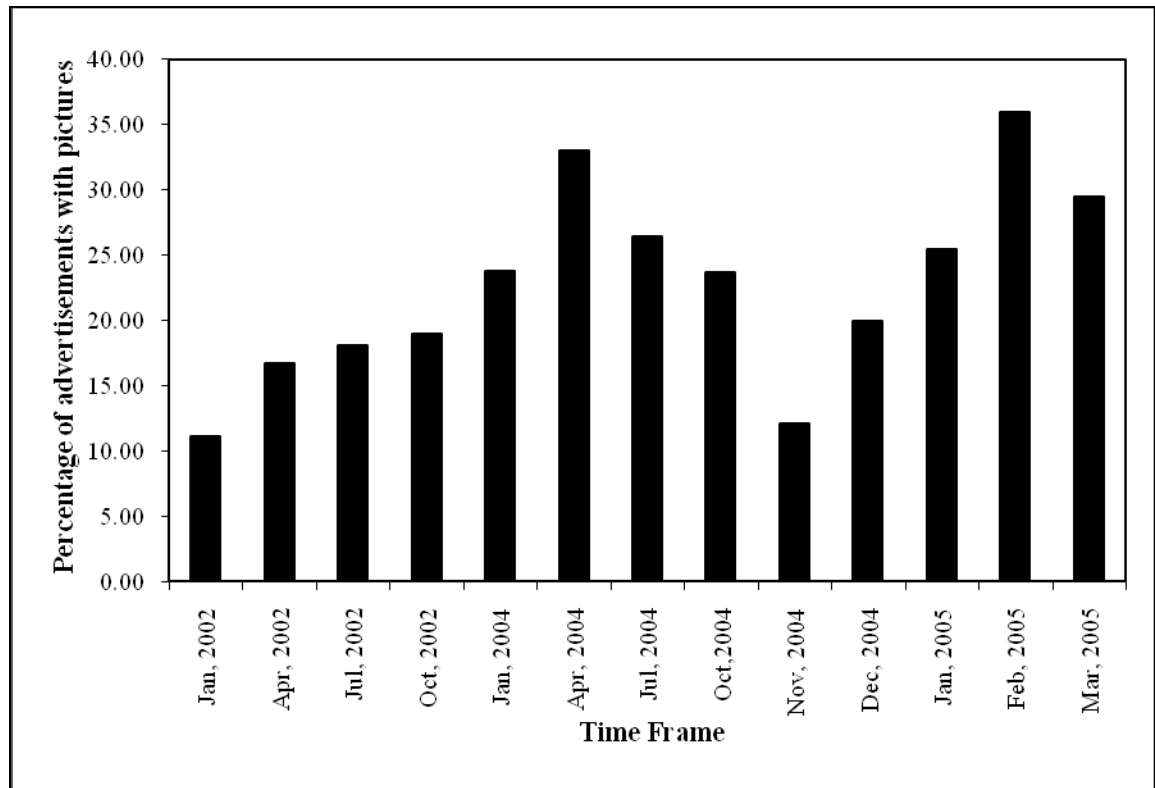
Mar. 5th '05

Search International, 38, Bungalow Road, 2nd Floor, Opp.Amitabh Banquet, Kirti Nagar, New Delhi.

Option available of company provided accommodation for outstation candidates

Brand Duty/Vertex/5890

Figure 6.3 Advertisement decontextualising call centre employment, *Times of India*, 5th November 2004.



Graph 6.2 Proportion of call centre employment advertisements with pictures in *Times of India*, Jan 2002 -Mar 2005

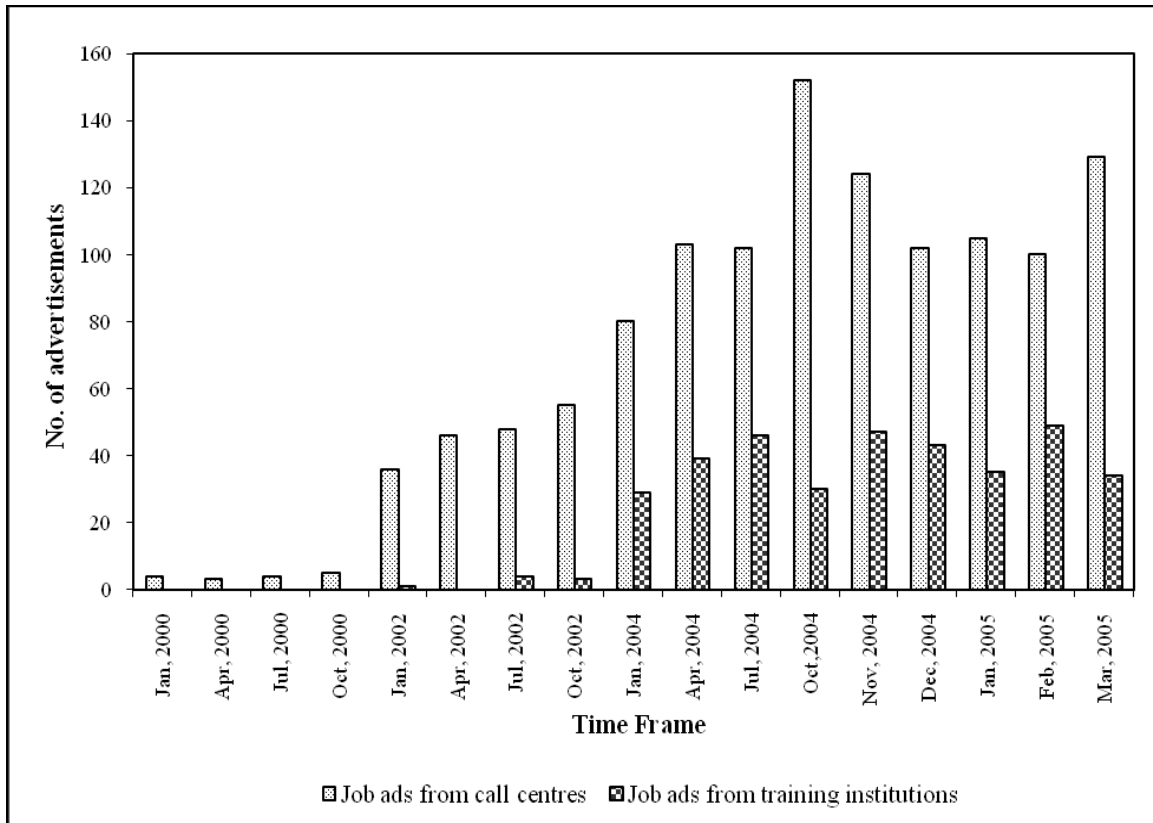
With an increase in the number of call centres, as well as their requirement for a continuous supply of labour, there have emerged different players in the recruitment processes for these positions. During the initial stages of the call centre industry's growth in India, employees were recruited by placement agencies, commonly called employment consultancies in India (call centre employer, pers. comm., 23/12/04). This was also reflected in the types of newspaper advertisements for call centre employment. In 2000, only consultancies advertised for call centre employment. Then, since 2003, call centres started their own recruitment units and hence they too directly advertised positions in newspapers. However, with the growing popularity of call centre employment and the need to attract more and more young adults to join the industry, the call centres began to target a wider audience and various training institutions opened to provide the necessary skills required for call centre employment - fluency in spoken English and basic knowledge of computers. This meant that from 2002, training institutions also started to

advertise in newspapers, as shown for one such organisation in Figure 6.4. While, in 2000, only three different companies advertised for call centre employment in *Times of India*, in 2005, just over 60 different companies (call centres, consultancies and training institutions) advertised. This reflects the substantial number of call centres that have opened in this region during this time period, and the changing recruitment procedures being used by this industry as it grows rapidly.



Figure 6.4 Advertisement of a call centre training institution, *Times of India*, 14th April 2004.

Call centre training institutions play a dual role: they not only provide training to potential call centre employees; they also guarantee them employment in a large call centre. Like the call centres themselves, these training institutes have also mushroomed in the region. The number of advertisements from call centre training institutes increased from one in January 2002, to 49 in February 2005, as shown in Graph 6.3.



Graph 6.3 Comparison of advertisements from call centres and call centre training institutes in *Times of India*, Jan 2000- Mar 2005.

One can note a stark difference between the types of advertisements displayed by consultancies and those designed by the call centres. The former usually consist of simple graphics, often with no picture or a picture of a “typical woman” working with a headset. They are not very colourful, and are smaller in size than the call centre advertisements. On the contrary, those that advertise call centres are very flashy, colourful, larger and much more attention-grabbing, with pictures portraying lifestyle practices and generally disconnected from the call centre employment as shown in Figure 6.5. Such differences can be attributed to the fact that the consultancies provide an overview of the available vacancies and since they cater to more than one call centre it is not possible for them to highlight any particular aspect specific to a certain call centre. In contrast, the main aim of the specific call centre advertisement is to highlight the particular advantages and incentives in one locale compared with other call centres.

it's a **Rocking offer**

*** MORE THAN 500 JOB OFFERS THIS WEEK!**

THE COMPANY IS ONE OF THE LEADING INTERNATIONAL CALL CENTERS OF THE WORLD AND PROVIDES PERFORMANCE ORIENTED QUICK-FIRE GROWTH, SPLENDID PAY PACKAGE, STABILITY AND GROWTH & A PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT TO ACCOMPLISH PROGRESSIVE GOALS.

The company is looking for individuals like you for the following positions for **UK / US / PART-TIME** shifts.

***BEST-FIT® Selection process**

***EXCITING SALARIES** ***TOP-NOTCH® JOBS**

Senior Executives	Customer Support Executives	Technical Support Executives
Candidates having worked in international Call Centers in Outbound / Inbound / Technical Process from 6-18 months and having a good track record. Salaries upto 17,000. Walk In to collect your offer letter.	Graduates/UGs/PGs with 0-3 yrs. of experience. He/She should have an aptitude for handling people & desire to excel. Fresher can also apply. Salary 8,000 to 14,000 (in hand). Walk In to collect your offer letter.	Candidates having BE/B.Tech/MCA/MCSE/CCNA or Diploma in computers, with an aptitude of troubleshooting. Fresher can also apply. Salary 9,000 to 19,000 (in hand). Walk In to collect your offer letter.

WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS 19 th - 25 th January (10 am to 6 pm) B-28, 1 st Flr, Shivalik, Malviya Nagar Near Aurbindo College, New Delhi - 17	WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS 20 th & 22 nd January (10 am to 6 pm) 319, Jaina Tower 1, Janakpuri District Center, Janakpuri, ND	CANDOR SERVICES
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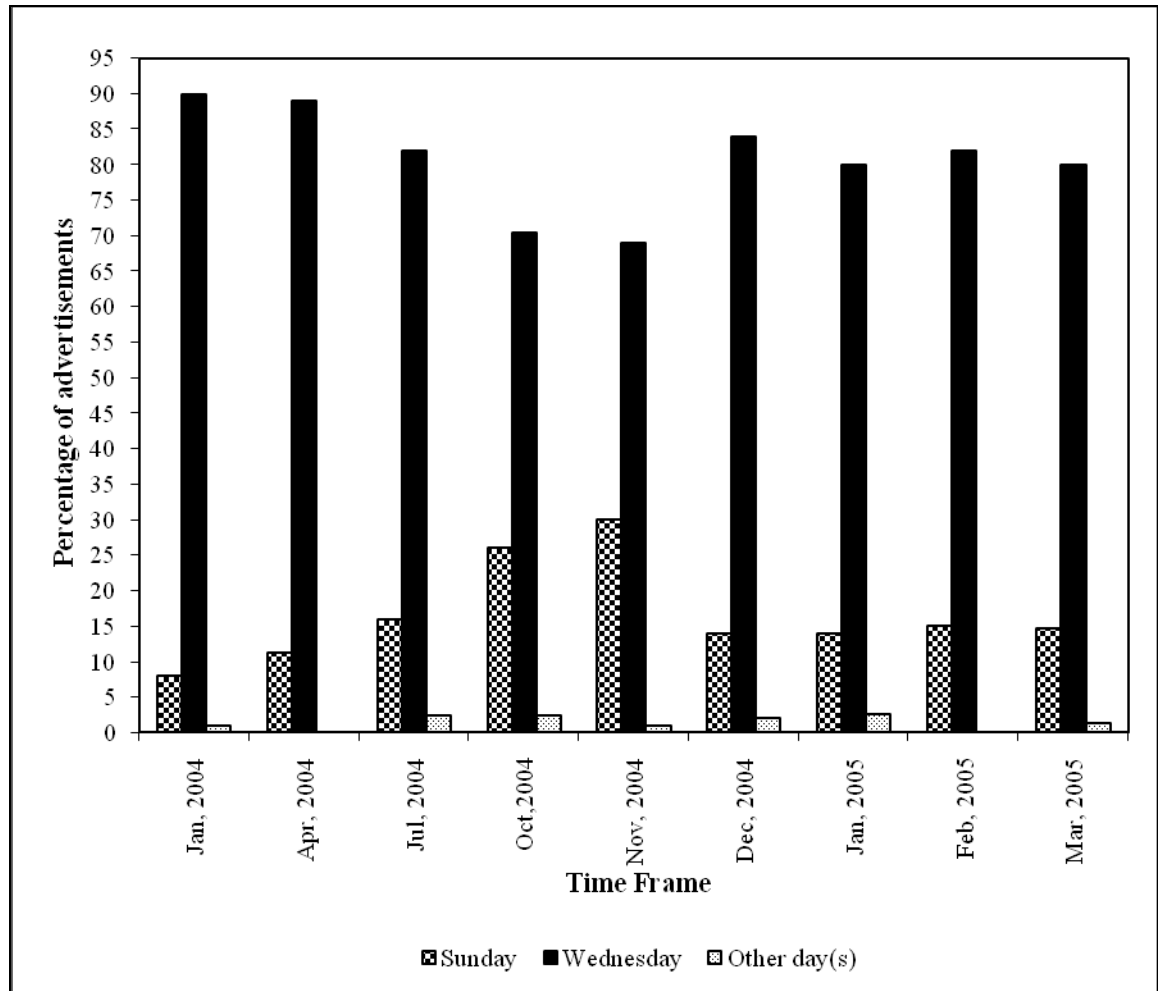
Figure 6.5 A call centre advertisement portraying specific lifestyle practice, *Times of India*, 19th January 2005.

6.1.3 Position of Advertisements

The placement of advertisements for call centre employment in *The Times of India* has also altered over the years. In 2000, the call centre advertisements appeared only in the classified sections for employment and were categorised under headings such as “Customer care executives” or “Other vacancies,” alongside a range of other vacancies.

By April 2002, however, there was a specific category marked “Call centres,” although there was only one advertisement listed under it. In the later months of 2002 and more so through 2004, “Call centres” surfaced as a significant category heading in the classified sections for employment advertisements. The trend has continued and, in March 2005, the advertisements listed under the “Call centres” category occupied almost 85 per cent of the total space allocated to employment advertisements in the classified section of the *Times of India*. Such evidence shows clearly the growing importance of call centre employment in the region.

Since 2004, these advertisements have been clustered not only in exclusive categories but are also concentrated on certain days of the week. More than 80 per cent of the advertisements appear on Wednesdays, followed by Sunday, while on other days there are far fewer or no such advertisements, as shown in Graph 6.4. On Wednesdays, in addition to the classified advertisements, the *Times of India* has a special supplementary section called the “Times Accent,” consisting of ten to fifteen pages and featuring various information about employment opportunities, including advertisements. Potential employment seekers thus concentrate on Wednesday’s *Times of India* to find out about various employment opportunities (call centre agents, pers. comm. 20/11/04; 11/1/05), with the consumption of employment advertisements maximised on this day.



Graph 6.4 Daily distributions of call centre advertisements in *Times of India*, Jan 2004-Mar 2005.

The call centre advertisements that appear in the “Times Accent” are usually large in size, with pictures and are mainly placed there by large call centres. On the other hand, those appearing in the classified section of the same day are placed there by consultancies and smaller call centres and are smaller in size. From Graph 6.4, it can also be noted that about 15 per cent of the other advertisements appear on Sundays. The reason for this is that many of these call centres conduct walk-in employment interviews on Mondays and thus Sunday advertisements act as a reminder to potential employees. Very few (less than five per cent) of these advertisements appear on days other than Wednesday and Sunday.

The escalating number of advertisements as shown in this numerical analysis is an indicator of the growing importance of call centre employment in the Delhi region between 2000 and 2005. At the same time, there have also been important changes in the

genre of these advertisements in terms of variation in size, placement in the paper and the nature. Since 2004, the advertisements have become bigger in size, many a time covering over half a page. These advertisements have also turned out to be more colourful and have gained prominent placement not only in the classified section but also other significant advertisement sections, like the “Times Accent”. Call centres are now clearly major employment providers in this region. With this in mind, it becomes pertinent to examine next the types of employment that are offered by the call centres as well as the requirements for such employment.

6.2 Types of Employment Offered in Call Centres and the Requirements

With the rapid increase in call centre labour force demand, the labour requirements have also witnessed changes, including the recruitment procedures.⁴⁵ In this section, based on textual analysis of call centre advertisements, the methods of which were discussed in Chapter Five, Section 5.1.1, these issues are addressed under four broad sub-sections. To better understand the requirements for such employment, first the types of employment offered by call centres are discussed in Section 6.2.1. Then the qualifications needed for the employment are outlined in Section 6.2.2. Finally, the third sub-section, 6.2.3, examines the salaries and various other incentives that are offered by the call centres.

6.2.1 Types of Employment Offered in Call Centres

Though the main types of employment advertised by call centres are for call centre agents, as already mentioned in Section 6.1.3, companies also advertise for team leader posts, supervisors, and voice and accent trainers. An analysis of the advertisements in the *Times of India* from 2000 to 2005 reveals that there are various names given to the position of call centre agent or customer care executive. Some of the common ones include “voice customer service executive,” “senior customer support executive,” “customer care associates,” “customer care officers,” and “quality executives.” My interviews with call centre employees showed that regardless of the title their company

⁴⁵ Since call centres are back office operations, the types of employment offered by them are clerical in nature, mainly customer care executives as discussed in Chapter One. Nonetheless, since these call centres are part of IT-enabled services in India, the industry also offers employment in technical support. However, in this section, I shall restrict the discussion to customer care executives (call centre agents), as they form the main study population of my research.

had given them they had similar employment responsibilities depending on the nature of the call centre (inbound or outbound). As such, as noted in Chapter One, Section 1.4.1, I use the term “call centre agent” as an umbrella term for these designations.

About 90 per cent of employment advertisements linked to call centres are for call centre agents. The number of vacancies for such employment in one call centre varies between ten and 3200. Usually the advertisements that are published directly by call centres report between ten and 250 vacancies, depending on the size of the call centres, while consultancies are searching for between 500 and 3200 through one advertisement. The latter high figures are mainly because, as mentioned in Section 6.1.2, consultancies advertise for multiple call centres.

At times, these advertisements also specify the countries for which employees are wanted. As an example, many advertisements clearly mention that agents are needed for UK or US processes. Some even mention the nature of the process. Interestingly, most of these advertisements (about 70 per cent) are also cautious to specify the work schedule. Captions like “willing to work in night shifts;” “prepared to work in a rotational shift;” and “must be flexible to work in a 24x7 environment,” are common, alerting the potential employees to certain expectations that are unlikely to be negotiable. My interviews with call centre agents revealed that, at the time of their employment interview, agents are asked to sign a form agreeing to work such shifts. In Chapter Seven (Section 7.2.1), I will elaborate on this point, noting how agents have little say in choosing their working shift. Nevertheless, having discussed the employment profiles it becomes essential to address what are the qualifications needed for such employment, to which I turn next.

6.2.2 Qualifications for Call Centre Employment

A textual analysis of call centre advertisements shows that there are three main criteria - age, education, and communication skills - specified as qualifications for potential call centre agents. Almost 80 per cent of the advertisements mentioned the preferred age group of the potential employees to be between 18 and 35 years, hence the age group considered in my study. Nonetheless, my participants reported that, due to the high attrition rates at call centres, the management of different call centres has recently started to attract an older population including people who have retired from their earlier

employment.⁴⁶ This was also evident in the more recent advertisements. On 1st April 2004, the first advertisement inviting older people to join the industry was published, while on 7th November 2004, an advertisement specifically mentioned that even retired people were encouraged to apply. Interestingly enough, despite such attempts, call centres have not been very successful in retaining their work force including those over 35 years. Based on my interviews with call centre agents, it was evident that a very small proportion of the work force consisted of the older generation mainly because they find it very difficult to keep up with the demanding job expectations, as discussed in Chapter Seven (Section 7.2). Rohini, a call centre agent, explained this to me: “They [older generation] try to learn the accent and even the trainers are patient with them. But at this age it is difficult for them [older generation]” (25/11/04). Sawant, another agent, noted that “the older generation are more polite to the customers and at times you have to be little aggressive to sell the product and it often hampers their performance, as they are not able to meet the target” (7/3/05). Hence, extending the age cohort of potential employees has not proven to be very beneficial for call centre management.

Turning to educational requirements, about 40 per cent of the advertisements stated that the applicants could be university graduates from any discipline, while more than 50 per cent of the advertisements mentioned that both undergraduates as well as graduates were invited to apply. This criterion is consistent with the advertised age group of the applicants. According to the Indian educational system, students complete their secondary education at the age of 18 and those qualified then to start their undergraduate degrees. They could apply for call centre employment as soon as they enter college or are eligible to do so.⁴⁷ Around five per cent of the advertisements even encouraged diploma holders from college to apply for employment, and still another two per cent stated a postgraduate degree as the required educational qualification.

My analysis also revealed that while not very explicit about any other skill requirement, around 70 per cent of the advertisements required the applicants to possess “excellent communication skills.” Also about half of all the advertisements (55 per cent) stressed the need to have English language skills, both written and verbal. Yet some other

⁴⁶ In India the official age for retirement is 60 years in both the public and private sector.

⁴⁷ According to the Indian education system, after graduating high school, students are enrolled in colleges to pursue their undergraduate degrees. Colleges are affiliated to specific universities.

advertisements preferred a certain basic or working knowledge of computers. Since some of the non-English speaking European countries have started to outsource their call centres to India (discussed in Chapter Four, Section 4.2), in 2004 and 2005 two per cent of the call centres also advertised for people with knowledge of language(s) other than English, the mainly French, German or Italian.

Considering the fact that most young adults join call centres as their first employment, the work experience requirement is very minimal. In fact, almost all the advertisements encourage applications from those with no work experience. Interestingly, those that do specify certain experience write it as “0-3 years of experience,” “6 months – one year experience.” This is indicative of the fact that experience is not one of the major employment deciding factors. In view of the practice of “employment-hopping” among call centre by the agents, some of the advertisements (15 per cent) stated that those with experience in international call centres would be preferred. Indeed, 80 per cent of the call centre agents whom I interviewed had joined their present employment with no prior experience, while 20 per cent were earlier employed in other call centres. This is coherent with the specified criteria mentioned in the advertisements. Nonetheless, very few advertisements (less than five per cent) also mentioned that applicants should have particular skills such as “pleasant voice and convincing power,” and “an aptitude for handling people.”

In sum, the requirements for call centres are minimal in terms of work experience. This is linked to the fact that the target pool of potential employees consists of young adults between the age group of 18 and 35 years, for most of whom this is their first paid employment. Similarly, these employments do not require specific educational qualifications. Another distinct feature that emerged from these advertisements was the explicit indication of monetary rewards that one would enjoy if they gain a position in the call centre, discussed next.

6.2.3 Salary and Incentives Advertised

My interviewees constantly stressed that the attractive salary package is one of the main motivations for joining a call centre. On average, the salary packages specified in the advertisements varied between Rs.8,000 and Rs.15,000 (CAD\$196 and CAD\$367).

Usually the salary appears in big and bold fonts in the advertisements; indeed in 30 per cent, the salary forms the main theme. Other monetary incentives like “daily sales incentives” are also noticed in some advertisements. Based on my interviews with call centre agents, it was understood that none of the call centre agents remain working for the same company for a long time, and this has emerged as one of the major concerns among management. Such issues have been addressed in recent call centre advertisements, as was noted in an advertisement published on 16th January 2005, in which one of the call centres announced a “loyalty bonus” as part of their incentive package. Though it was only explicitly advertised by one call centre, it was observed from interviews with call centre agents that such incentives were becoming common in other call centres also.

Some other perks that call centres promise that are evident in the advertisements include transportation, “pick up and drop facilities” (35 per cent of the advertisements), and “free meals” (20 per cent). The odd working hours of call centres make it difficult for agents to commute by public transport. Hence, call centres provide transport facilities for employees. One advertisement even offered “free/subsidised accommodation.” This is in response to the fact that about 75 per cent of call centre agents are not from Delhi, and they often find it difficult to arrange for accommodation in the city due to certain social disgraces attached to call centre employment (call centre agent, pers. comm. 18/12/04; key informant, 7/3/05), discussed in Chapter Eight, Section 8.3.

The call centre advertisements also lure young adults by portraying a fun-filled and entertaining work environment- “work- have fun and earn culture.” Thus, often the advertisements paint the position as a very successful career option- a “shortcut to success”- with a friendly work atmosphere. The position is also often presented as being very challenging and competitive (40 per cent of the advertisements) with captions like “some rides are not for the faint at heart,” and “talent search.” These comments and captions are always highlighted, appearing in colourful and large fonts. Intriguingly, almost every advertisement analysed from 2004 onwards included the word “fun,” be it related to the nature of the employment or the work atmosphere in the call centre. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of the advertisements (65 per cent) related the employment with dreams with remarks like “dream employment,” “live your dream,” and so on. I would argue that such language is one of the ways to entice young adults to join

the industry by giving an impression that it is a “cool” place to be. On a similar note, based on the analysis of the working conditions in the call centres (illustrated in Chapter Seven, Section 7.2), I posit that connecting the employment with dreams is perhaps an indication to potential employees that once they join a call centre they will become detached from their “real life” and indeed live in a time-space capsule, a new world, or a dream.

Inciting potential employees with indicators of how great the positions are occurs in the advertisements with catchphrases like “your prayer has been answered,” or “shhh... keep it a secret,” as shown in Figure 6.6, indicating that these are rare opportunities available to a selected few. Overall the position is advertised as a turning point in one’s life with an attractive salary and other appealing incentives.



*** MORE THAN 500 JOB OFFERS THIS WEEK!**

Shhhh...

RUSH FOR ON THE SPOT OFFER LETTERS

DON'T SPREAD THE WORD AROUND! You would miss out if you do...
 An Internationally renowned company that offers the best in the industry - Global practices, 'earn while you have fun' environment, the best pay packages in the industry, performance oriented quick-fire growth and **STABILITY** with **GROWTH**.
 The company is looking for the following positions for **UK/US** shifts.

***EXCITING SALARIES *BEST-FIT® Selection process *TOP-NOTCH® JOBS**

Senior Executives	Customer Support Executives	Technical Support Executives
Candidates having worked in international Call Centers in Outbound / Inbound / Technical Process from 6-18 months and having a good track record. Salaries upto 17,000. Walk In to collect your offer letter.	Graduates/UGs/PGs with 0-3 yrs. of experience. He/She should have an aptitude for handling people & desire to excel. Fresher can also apply. Salary 8,000 to 14,000 (in hand). Walk In to collect your offer letter.	Candidates having BE/B.Tech/MCA/MCSE/CCNA or Diploma in computers, with an aptitude of troubleshooting. Fresher can also apply. Salary 9,000 to 19,000 (in hand). Walk In to collect your offer letter.

WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS 2nd - 8th March (10 am to 6 pm) B-28, 1st Flr, Shivalik, Malviya Nagar Near Aurbindo College, New Delhi - 17	WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS 3rd & 5th March (10 am to 6 pm) 319, Jaina Tower 1, Janakpuri District Center, Janakpuri, ND	CANDOR SERVICES
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Figure 6.6 Advertisement highlighting rare opportunities provided by call centres, *Times of India*, 2nd March 2005.

6.3 Recent Trends in Call Centre Employment Advertisements

While every call centre has its own way of advertising for agents, my analysis shows that there are certain themes under which these advertisements can be broadly classified. Some of the important themes that surfaced include success, social concerns, and health issues. Success runs as the main theme in about 85 per cent of the advertisements, though the parameter of success varies among them. A large proportion of the call centre advertisements used monetary benefits as a major criterion for success, while a few others, mainly Wipro Spectramind (one of the largest call centres), advertised success as being related to being employed by the best BPO company in India. Convergys, another leading call centre, called upon the young adults to join “the world leaders in business”. However, a common stylistic aspect of recent call centre advertisements is to “hide” the real purpose of advertisements in catchy titles, statements and metaphors, focusing instead upon potential lifestyle changes and individual rewards, as shown in Figure 6.7. Only when one reads the finer print does the actual purpose of the advertisement become clear. This is an obvious indication that call centres advertisers have learnt that giving priority to lifestyle practices rather than the actual employment, which is often written in small fonts in the advertisements, attracts more applications. An analysis of these advertisements shows that they feature three important characteristics. First, they target a specific sub-group of the population, namely urban young adults. This is portrayed especially through the physical appearance and clothing of the people shown in the advertisements. Second, they paint the employment as a very successful career option with promises of a high salary and various other incentives. Third, these advertisements promise a distinct type of Western lifestyle to the potential agents highlighted via specific activities and images of certain items that act as wealth-indicators.

Working at Vertex
comes with a unique perk.



Friendly environment. No stress.

We're looking for Business Associates with a flair for the extraordinary.

Come be part of US\$ 6 Billion United Utilities Plc, a global group with 33 sites across US, UK, Canada & India, that service the best of Fortune 500 companies. Vertex is one of the largest BPOs in Europe and handles 34 million client customer accounts. With a 100% tech-savvy center in Gurgaon with world class facilities and high employee focus.

Business Associates-Customer Service and Collections: Graduates (12+3) in any discipline, 0-2 years experience in service industry and collections respectively.

Good command over English (written and oral) required for all the positions. Candidates should be willing to work in a 24x7 environment. We also offer 2 weeks free accommodation to outstation candidates.

Walk-in with a copy of your updated resume and recent passport-size photograph to any of the venues given below.



Walk-in-Interviews for Business Associates. 10 am to 4 pm.

Jan. 19th to Jan. 23rd '05

**Nexus, C-57, Basement,
Shivalik, Malviya Nagar,
New Delhi.**

Jan. 19th to Jan. 23rd '05

**Smart Source, L-113, 1st
Floor, Jal Vihar Road, Lajpat
Nagar II, New Delhi.**

Jan. 21st '05

**Smart Source, 319, Jaina
Tower-I, Janakpuri District
Centre, Janakpuri, New Delhi.**

Brand Curry/Vertex/39/05

Figure 6.7 Individual reward of call centre employment, *Times of India*, 19th January 2005.

6.3.1 Creating the Call Centre Agent Image

Of the 350 advertisements with pictures out of a total of 1208 advertisements analysed featuring call centre employment, all showed gender-balanced pictures of young, content,

“vibrant” people dressed in Western attire. The people in the advertisements always look like college students, between twenty and thirty years old, as shown in Figure 6.8. Surprisingly, given the target audience, none of these advertisements feature an Indian face; rather, they portray a multi-ethnic community many of whom are of Western, Sub-Saharan African or East Asian descent. This is an attempt to de-contextualise the location of the employment, conveying that once youth join the call centre they shall be working in an international environment with multi-ethnic co-workers as prevalent, it is assumed, as in the majority of offices in Western countries.



*** MORE THAN 250 JOB OFFERS THIS WEEK!**

do you have the right
attitude?

SOME HAVE IT, SOME DON'T! Do you have the right attitude to get the job you've always wanted. Join a company that provides not only **STABILITY & GROWTH** but also freedom of thought & actions. It is a company that is one of the leading brands of the world and provides performance oriented quick-fire growth, splendid pay package & a professional environment to accomplish progressive goals.

Individuals can apply for the following positions for **UK / US / Part-time shifts.**

Sr. Executives: Candidates having worked in international Call Centers in Outbound / Inbound / Technical Process from 6-18 months and having a good track record. Salaries upto 17,000. **Walk In to collect your offer letter or mail your resume at sre@candor-services.com.**

Customer Support Executives: Graduates / UGs / PGs with 0-3 yrs. of experience. He / She should have an aptitude for handling people and desire to excel. Fresher can also apply. Salary 8,000 to 13,000 (in hand). **Walk In to collect your offer letter.**

Technical Support Executives: Candidates having BE / B.Tech / MCA / MCSE / CCNA or Diploma in computers, with an aptitude of troubleshooting. Fresher can also apply. Salary 9,000 to 19,000 (in hand). **Walk In to collect your offer letter.**

Executive Assistant: Candidate should be a Graduate having 4-7 years of secretarial experience, preferably with HODs. He/She should be adept at shorthand, have good communication skills & be open to working in shifts.

Foreign language specialists: Candidates having proficiency in German can mail their C.V. to info@candor-services.com

WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS 10th, 11th, 14th, 15th, 16th & 17th Nov. (10 am to 6 pm) B-28, 1st Floor, Shivalik, Malviya Nagar, Near Aurbindo College, New Delhi - 110 017	WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS 11th & 15th November (10 am to 6 pm) 319, Jaina Tower 1, Janakpuri District Center, Janakpuri, New Delhi
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design@yawodo.com

Figure 6.8 Advertisement constructing the portrait of typical a call centre agent, *Times of India*, 10th November 2004.

The people in the advertisements are fashionably dressed in Western attire with modern haircuts that are coloured, punk-style or gelled. Indeed, such advertisements give the impression more of advertisements for model fashion agencies than for call centre opportunities. Thus, the typical, potential call centre agent is represented as an urban youth who is intelligent, outgoing, fashionable, fun-loving, and ready to be a part of the larger global youth community.

I argue that the total absence of Indian faces in the advertisements communicates that once they join the call centre industry the agents are no longer “Indian” (at least whilst at work). In the case of India, one might also suggest that such multiple ethnic representations are a subtle way of conveying that no special preference is given, based on social criteria like caste, and everyone is encouraged to apply. The global nature of the call centre agents is not only portrayed via the presence of multi ethnic people, however, and many of these advertisements contained symbols of the global nature of the work. World maps, clocks showing different time zones, various country flags, people tossing the globe on a fingertip, and captions such as “World citizen,” all stress this dimension.

6.3.2 Advertising Lifestyles or Advertising Employment?

The call centre advertisements entice young adults to the Western lifestyle that they might enjoy if they gain a position. Such promises are illustrated in the advertisements through activities as well as a number of objects and symbols. Some of the most prominent themes highlighted in these advertisements are monetary gain, glamorous Western leisure activities, and active socialisation. The promise of rewarding salaries is accentuated, in part, by expressing monetary benefits in American dollar signs rather than Indian *rupees*. Perhaps this is an effort to suggest that, although the salary will be in *rupees*, it will certainly be much higher than most Indian salaries and one will thus feel as if one is earning American dollars. Apart from the direct monetary benefits, eight per cent of the advertisements also portrayed other wealth indicators such as expensive luxury items, including high quality Western perfumes, “iPods,” and trips to Western-style health spas.

Though I found a fairly even gender balance in the visual images of the advertisements, with 37 per cent of the advertisements showing pictures of only men, 48

per cent of only women and the other 15 per cent portraying both genders, there is a stark contrast in the ways they attempt to attract men and women. Compare Figure 6.9, a typical picture in which men are represented as successfully racing to join and be part of a competitive career (23 per cent of the pictures with men were represented as such), with Figures 6.8 and 6.10 in which women pursue leisure activities (24 per cent of women in the advertisements).

Earlier studies on advertising in India have highlighted the changing role of women portrayed in advertisements stating that women are often now represented as ambitious, career oriented and empowered (see Birch, Schirato, and Srivastava 2001; Chaudhuri 2001; Mazzarella 2003). On the contrary, however, the call centre advertisements symbolised women as anything but career driven. This can be explained by the fact that, in India, urban unmarried women consider call centre employment as a short-term, fun-filled employment that they might decide to quit after marriage, a decision highlighted in my interviews with women at the call centres.

If life is a race,



Be on the winning track with vCustomer

Ranked as **America's #1 Business Services Company** by Inc. Magazine for the year 2004, vCustomer provides its Fortune 1000 clients with cutting edge technical solutions thereby occupying a unique intellectual position in the BPO space. To meet the needs of such demanding clients, we train you in the latest technologies to enhance your skill-sets and get your career moving on the right track. With over 95% of our management positions filled internally, we offer a competitive salary package and fast-paced growth opportunities. Walk-in for the interview today to secure the career opportunity of a lifetime.

WALK-IN-INTERVIEW (Time: 11:00 am to 5:00 pm)

NEW DELHI	LUCKNOW	AGRA	CHANDIGARH	JAIPUR	DEHRADUN	MEERUT
2-5 Feb (Wed to Sat) 7-8 Feb (Mon to Wed)	5 Feb (Sat)	5 Feb (Sat)	6 Feb (Sun)	6 Feb (Sun)	6 Feb (Sun)	6 Feb (Sun)
vCustomer Corporate Office, B1/G6, Mohan Co-operative Indl. Estate, Mathura Road	Hotel Goms, 6 Sapru Marg, Tel: 2611463, 2620824	Youth Hostel, Sanjay Palace, Opposite Hotel Holiday Inn	Indian Institute Of Hardware & Technology, 1st Floor, SCO 226-227, Sector 34A	Maharani Plaza, Opp. Sindhi Camp Bus Stand, Station Rd. Tel: 2371717, 2371868, 5108400	Hotel Shiva Residency, 75, Rajpur Road, Opposite Raj Plaza	Rail University, Distance Learning Center, 47/M-1 Jawahar Quarters, Begum Bridge

TECHNICAL SUPPORT ENGINEERS (TSE/0105)

- B.E./ B. Tech/ MCA/ BCA/ MCSE/ MCP/ GNIIT/ BIS/ BIT/ CCNA/ A+
- Willing to work in 24x7 rotational shifts
- Work experience: 0 - 4 years
- Good knowledge of computer hardware & networking
- Proven ability to troubleshoot for a voice based technical process will be preferred
- Excellent English language communication skills

Graduates with/without Call Center experience who aspire to work in Tech Processes are also welcome

Positions are based at vCustomer's delivery processing center in Delhi. If you can't make it for the walk-in interviews, you can avail the following options:

- Email your latest resume to Fast-Track@vcustomer.net
- Apply online at www.vcustomer.com



VCUSTOMER
Outsourcing Redefined

Figure 6.9 Gendered notion of call centre employment, *Times of India*, 2nd February 2005.



*** MORE THAN 500 JOB OFFERS THIS WEEK!**

an offer that's
music to your ears

An Internationally renowned company that offers the best in the industry - Global practices, 'earn while you have fun' environment, the best pay packages in the industry, performance oriented quick-fire growth and STABILITY with GROWTH.
The company is looking for individuals for the following positions for **UK/US** shifts.

Manager/Senior Executive Recruitments: Urgently required for an International Call Center. Candidates with 1-4 years experience in BPO recruitments may mail their resume to hr@candor-services.com

***EXCITING SALARIES** ***BEST-FIT® Selection process** ***TOP-NOTCH® JOBS**

Senior Executives	Customer Support Executives	Technical Support Executives
Candidates having worked in international Call Centers in Outbound / Inbound / Technical Process from 6-18 months and having a good track record. Salaries upto 17,000. Walk In to collect your offer letter.	Graduates/UGs/PGs with 0-3 yrs. of experience. He/She should have an aptitude for handling people & desire to excel. Fresher can also apply. Salary 8,000 to 14,000 (in hand). Walk In to collect your offer letter.	Candidates having BE/B.Tech/MCA/MCSE/CCNA or Diploma in computers, with an aptitude of troubleshooting. Fresher can also apply. Salary 9,000 to 19,000 (in hand). Walk In to collect your offer letter.

WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS	WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS	CANDOR SERVICES
9th - 15th February (10 am to 6 pm) B-28, 1st Flr, Shivalik, Malviya Nagar Near Aurbindo College, New Delhi - 17	10th & 12th February (10 am to 6 pm) 319, Jaina Tower 1, Janakpuri District Center, Janakpuri, ND	

Figure 6.10 Feminisation of call centres, *Times of India*, 9th February 2005.

These advertisements are multi-coloured in the newspapers – a trend-noted since 2002 - often with florescent shades, and commonly portray a party atmosphere, as shown in Figure 6.11. An aura of discotheques and clubs prevails, with as many as 23 per cent of the advertisements illustrating groups of young people enjoying themselves or looking ready to party - conveying the message that a call centre is a “fun place to be.”



The Best BP0's are hiring!

come be a part of the best...

We know what's on your mind, that's why we are **OFFERING YOU A PATH TO GREAT SUCCESS**. This is the job you always desired. A job that not only challenges you, but also rewards you for the right moves. The company is part of a multi-billion-dollar global major & provides a 'work, have fun & earn' culture, splendid pay package & state of art training.

We are looking for individuals for the following positions for both **UK/US** shifts.

Senior Executives: Candidates with relevant work experience of 6-18 months in international Call Centers having a good track record. **Salaries upto 17,000.**

Customer Care Executives: Graduates/UGs/PGs giving final year exams, with 0-3 yrs. of ex. He/She should have an excellent command over English & be open to working in shifts. Freshers can also apply. **Salary 8,000 to 14,000 (in hand).**

Technical Support Executives: Candidates having BE / B.Tech / MCA / MCSE / CCNA or Diploma in computers. Fresher can also apply. **Salary 9,000 to 19,000 (in hand).**

WALK-IN for SPOT OFFERS: 16th - 22nd February (10am to 6pm)

L-113, 1st Floor, Jal Vihar Road, Lajpat Nagar-II, New Delhi - 24

S.M.A.R.T. SOURCE

Figure 6.11 Advertisement emphasising the party ambiance at call centres, Times of India, 16th February 2005.

Moreover, the clothes of the young people shown are more casual and party-like than professional outfits. In 75 per cent of the advertisements, people are shown wearing trendy Western clothes, while only in 25 per cent of the advertisements they are shown in

Western professional dress. Unquestionably, in the vast majority of the advertisements, work is associated with enjoyment rather than professionalism. The playful and fun filled atmosphere of the call centres is further emphasised with phrases in advertisement captions like “It’s the time to disco,” “Walk, talk, rock,” “Freedom to live your dreams,” and “Not night shifts, just night outs,” as shown in Figure 6.12. Indeed, we have the representation here of a lifestyle where clubbing and partying are very common - a specific sub-culture attracting young people who want to enjoy life.

As noted above, 15 per cent of the advertisements show young people in mixed gender groups. Call centres are portrayed as friendly places to meet people of the opposite sex such as in Figures 6.7, 6.11 and 6.12, potentially even finding a partner. The physical intimacy between the sexes, quite contrary to mainstream Indian societal norms, is also notable in these advertisements. Most describe a liberal work atmosphere with opportunities to interact and make friends with members of the opposite sex. Indeed, the majority of the advertisements explicitly mention mixed social opportunities being encouraged at the call centres. I argue that such behavioural patterns encourage and legitimise certain values among call centre agents and create a type of socialisation that otherwise would not be acceptable.

Not night shifts. Just night-outs.



Friendly environment. No stress.

We're looking for Business Associates with a flair for the extraordinary.

Come be part of US\$ 6 Billion United Utilities Plc, a global group with 33 sites across US, UK, Canada & India, that service the best of Fortune 500 companies. Vertex is one of the largest BPOs in Europe and handles 34 million client customer accounts. With a 100% tech-savvy center in Gurgaon with world class facilities and high employee focus.

Business Associates-Customer Service and Collections: Graduates (12+3) in any discipline, 0-2 years experience in service industry and collections respectively.

Excellent command over English (written and oral) required for all the positions. Candidates should be willing to work in a 24x7 environment. We also offer 2 weeks free accommodation to outstation candidates.

Walk-in with a copy of your updated resume and recent passport-size photograph to any of the venues given below.



Walk-in-Interviews for Business Associates. 10 am to 4 pm.

Nov. 24th to Nov. 28th '04

Diallog, E-6, 3rd Floor
Kalkaji Main Road (Opposite
Andhra Bank), New Delhi.

Nov. 24th to Nov. 28th '04

Megamind, P-34, South Ext.
Part-II, (Above Oriental Bank
of Commerce), New Delhi.

Nov. 26th '04

Shri Sagar, 25, Behra Enclave,
Outer Ring Road, Paschim
Vihar, New Delhi.

Nov. 25th '04 & Nov. 27th '04

Hotel Rangoli, 9/26 East
Patel Nagar, Opposite Hotel
Sidhartha, New Delhi.

Brand Curry/Vertex/28/04

Figure 6.12 Illustration of fun-filled environment at call centres, *Times of India*, 24th November 2004.

Sports, mainly those common to Western countries, like white water rafting, as in Figure 6.13, beach volleyball, snooker, biking, and snow boarding are another common theme of these advertisements, shown in 17 per cent of the advertisements. Some of the advertisements feature other lifestyle patterns, for instance, women undergoing spa therapy. As such, all these advertisements speak to a specific lifestyle reflecting the upper middle class in India, a lifestyle more common in Western societies than in traditional Indian societies, as discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.2. In direct comparison, it was found that less than one per cent (eleven of 1208) of all the advertisements analysed, actually featured pictures of men and women *working* as call centre agents.

As noted in my methods chapter, in 2008 I did a comparative analysis of the *Times of India* classified advertisements for the month of April to see if there had been substantial changes since the year 2000. What I found was that in general the genre of call centre advertisements had not changed substantially at all. The colours being used and size of the advertisements were similar, and the faces that appeared on those advertisements with photos were - as in the past - non-Indian faces. Thus, these advertisements attract young adults by alluring them to a life where there is more fun than work, a place with lively activities to keep them entertained and amused while at the same time promising lucrative income. Therefore, these advertisements are channels of acculturation to Western culture and lifestyle practices. Hence, considering the promises made in such job advertisements, it becomes imperative to discuss the recruitment processes in the call centres, which I turn to next.

www.gvedge.com



**Some rides are not for the faint at heart...
Do you have what it takes to be a part of the Global Vantage Team?**

We are Global Vantage, a US headquartered Collections Company. We have grown consistently and multiplied manifold both in our reach and infrastructure. We are an established BPO player in the specialized space of collections. With a rich client base of Fortune 500 companies, we are poised to double our growth in the coming year.

To fuel this expansion we are looking for Executive-Operations, who shall make collection calls to US customers. You should be a graduate residing in Delhi/Gurgaon with prior work experience. We provide attractive salaries & incentives apart from facilities like free meals and pickup/drop to your doorstep.

So if you want to make your dreams come true, we suggest you meet with us. Walk in to any of the following venues of our associate consultants for an on the spot offer between 3rd to 6th November from 10am to 5pm.

Borders Moulson Arcade, DLF Phase - III, Near Ghireem School, Gurgaon. Tel.: 9811242830	Elements 510, Aggarwal Cyber Plaza, Netaji Subhash Place, (Opp. TV Tower) Pitampura, New Delhi-68 Tel.: 011-33181873	Planman Consulting C-10, Qutub Institutional Area, 5th Floor, IPRM, New Delhi-16. Tel.: 011-51799908	Search International BB-13, Greater Kailash Enclave-II, Near Savitri Cinema, Opp. Eicher House, New Delhi. Tel.: 011-55680688
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Alternatively meet us at our Global Vantage Office: 77 B, IFFCO Road, Sector 18, Gurgaon, every Monday to Friday, or e-mail hr@gvedge.com. In case you have applied in the last six months you need not apply.

If you've ever worked for Global Vantage and would like to relive that experience, call IIR at 95124-5195700.

**Part-time job option
also available**



Figure 6.13 Providing options for leisure activities, *Times of India*, 3rd November 2004.

6.4 Recruitment Processes for Call Centres

The recruitment procedures for call centre employment are quite simple. The most common recruitment processes include walk-in-interviews and telephonic interviews. While 93 per cent of the call centres advertised walk-in-interviews, around five per cent recruited through telephonic interviews, with the remaining two per cent using e-mail as a mode of recruitment. On interviewing the call centre agents, almost all reported that they obtained the employment through a walk-in-interview. In the advertisements it is clearly mentioned that the candidates should bring their resume and two passport size photographs at the time of the interview. All my respondents stated that they received an “on the spot” appointment letter after their interview, as promised in the advertisements. In addition to the recruitment process information gained from a content analysis of the advertisements, I learned more about the different stages of the interview from my interviewees. There are three steps in the interview process. First, candidates are asked to talk about themselves for five to ten minutes (in English) and then read a passage from an English text, to assess their knowledge of English. Once they are through this round with other potential employees, they are asked to participate in a group discussion consisting between five and seven people, which demonstrate their communication skills. At the last stage of the recruitment process, two or three company representatives interview them, when the candidates are usually questioned about their computer skills, educational background, and also their future career plans. Less importance is given to the candidates’ educational qualifications. Interestingly, when I asked all my respondents how they perceive themselves five years from now, so as to understand their future trajectory, one of my participants stated “you sound like our personal manager on the interview board” (Madhuri, 9/12/04). Similar to my own findings, one of the popular guide books on call centres called *Taking the call: An aspirant’s guide to call centres* (Chadha 2004) describes the various stages of the call centre recruitment process as follows: group discussion, written English test (to test the overall English communication), basic aptitude test, test of skills, and Human Resource interview. In the same book, Chadha provides a sample of an interview test, presented in Textbox 6.1. The first part of the test is quite vague and abstract. This sample test is an example of the simple requirements from the employees.

Textbox 6.1 SAMPLE INTERVIEW TEST

The test conducted by the interviewers can look like this one below. The purpose is to test your English communication skills.

- I. Complete the following sentences: (This could be part of the written or the spoken test)**
1. My father always told me ...
 2. Since December, she ...
 3. Next year, they say ...
 4. I had already eaten the cake when ...
 5. She does not know ...
 6. If I had known the movie was cancelled, ...
 7. I want to know why ...
 8. I was walking to work when ...
 9. She saw the accident and ...
 10. Customer service means ...
- II. Correct/ add punctuation marks in the following sentences where necessary**
1. The boys know its raining
 2. We know the correct way turn right then left
 3. Please bring Along the Following paper pens and scissors
 4. John she asked why did you do this
 5. I don't understand. why this need for violence
- III. Insert, delete or change articles where necessary. (A, an, the)**
1. The America is filled with the Americans.
 2. Clouds in sky look so pretty at the night.
 3. I am looking for the employment.
 4. Please sit on chair while you wait for interview.
 5. I can't imagine why you need to go to market. There is the bread at the home.

Source: Chadha 2004: 55

Call centres that utilised telephone and e-mail interviews also conducted face-to-face interviews (key informant, 8/2/05; call centre agent, pers comm. 10/2/05). Thus, all applicants had to go through an interview in person at some stage.

6.4.1 Role of Training Institutions in Recruitment Process

As mentioned earlier, training institutions served a dual role of training and placement, with some such advertisements clearly mentioning that for “good candidates [a] job within 24 hours” and for “average candidate [a] job within 24 days.” During my visit to one of the leading training institutions in Delhi, I asked about their fee structure and placement options. At this institution three types of packages are offered to candidates. In the first package, candidates pay Rs. 10,000 (CAD\$243) and the institute provides them

with a written guarantee of employment. The second package promises a verbal assurance of a employment and the candidate has to pay Rs.7,100 (CAD\$173). In this case, the candidate can pay in three instalments of Rs.2,600 (CAD\$63), Rs.2,500 (CAD\$61), and Rs.2000 (CAD\$49). In the third package offered, the candidate pays Rs. 5,250 (CAD\$128) and no special features are attached with this deal. In any case, if the candidate was not able to get an employment, then s/he would get a 75 per cent refund of the money paid. Training managers told me that usually placing new recruits was not a problem as the institute had liaisons with 150 call centres (training manager, pers. comm.18/1/05).

It thus follows that, given the relatively simple nature of the employment, most of the call centres encourage urban middle class young adults with minimal tertiary educational qualifications and work experience to join the industry that has an easy recruitment process yet attractive incentives.⁴⁸ This provides a unique package that appeals to most of the young adults, endorsed by many of my respondents. As Jatin commented, “it’s an easy employment, all you do is talk over the phone and earn money” (23/12/04).

6.5 Discussion and Conclusions

The call centre industry has made steady progress in gaining an important position among the major employment providers in the environs of New Delhi. The change in the frequency of advertisements, which have increased at an exponential rate from 2000 to 2005 and since then in 2008, is a clear indication of the growing importance of the industry. People are now more aware of the availability of call centre employment. These advertisements not only publicise the employment opportunities in call centres but also simultaneously educate people about such employment options. While in early 2000, such advertisements would comprise a negligible proportion of the newspaper, by 2005 they formed one of the leaders of advertisements occupying as much as 85 per cent of the

⁴⁸ The average educational qualification for urban middle class youth in India is a bachelor’s degree. Moreover, most of the people who apply for call centre employment are educated in English medium schools and, therefore, have a good working knowledge of English language. Hence, considering such factors, the educational qualification requirements for call centre employment are minimal in comparison with the average educational standard of this cohort.

classified sections of employment advertisements. Even the variation in the size and placement of these advertisements highlights the growth of this industry.

Based on in-depth analyses of such advertisements, in this chapter I have thus addressed the first part of my first research question- what are the characteristics of call centre employment in the New Delhi environs. I have shown how not only has the number of advertisements, and their size and position undergone dramatic transformations, but, in a constant effort to motivate young adults to join the sector, the style of the advertisements has witnessed important changes. Callaghan and Thompson (2002), in their study of call centres in Western Europe, suggest that the work of call centre agents demands them to be continually energetic and enthusiastic and this likewise applies to India, as is evident from the advertisements for such employment. The colourful and flashy advertisements highlight the fun-filled work atmosphere with numerous incentives including a striking monthly salary. These captions appear in bold and are highlighted to capture the immediate attention of the reader. The requirements for employment are made to sound minimal, while the working conditions are made to sound glamorous.

Therefore, a typical call centre advertisement portrays the position as one with a simple recruitment process where the perks and benefits outweigh the employment responsibilities. Yet based on an examination of the actual benefits and employment expectations, I would argue that such requirements and expectations as stated in the stunning advertisements are mere fantasy. The “real” employment requirements are much more demanding. Hence, call centre employment advertisements are like a mirage, and not surprisingly after a while, new employees become disillusioned. In real life, call centre employment requirements overshadow the various incentives offered by management to keep employees motivated, an analysis of which I turn to next in Chapter Seven.

Chapter 7

WORK EXPECTATIONS AT CALL CENTRES IN INDIA

Conditions of employment in international call centres located in India are unique. Principle among these is that differences in time zones require employees to work at night to cater to the needs of their European and North American customers. Thus, though these call centre employees live and work in India, they are required to organise their lives in terms of American or European time, celebrations and communication styles (Mirchandani 2003). Employees are expected, and trained to acquire an accent common to the country for which they are working, to adopt English language pseudonyms and learn Western greetings to put their customers at ease (Bach 2001). Even their holidays are scheduled to Western calendars. Apart from a generous salary package (by local standards), wrapped up with various other incentives, most of which are monetary in nature, these call centres provide an office atmosphere that promotes a Western lifestyle under the garb of professionalism. The working hours, training processes and work ethics all have a considerable impact on the daily life of employees. Hence, it becomes essential to analyse the micro-dynamics of call centre employment. Therefore, in this chapter I examine the working conditions in call centres, addressing part of my first research question- what do call centre companies expect of their employees?

The chapter is broadly divided in four sections. Training is an integral part of the call centre job and one has to undergo rigorous training before one can “hit the floor.” The first Section (Section 7.1) thus describes the three training processes -voice and accent training (Section 7.1.1), soft skills training (Section 7.1.2), and process training (Section 7.1.3) provided in these call centres and how they impact on employees. The working conditions in call centres are described in Section 7.2, contextualising the micro-level impacts of call centres on lives of the employees. Within this, in Section 7.2.1, I analyse the working schedules in the call centres, including working hours, holidays and paid leave, amongst other conditions. Sections 7.2.2 (surface acting), 7.2.3 (performance monitoring), and Section 7.2.4 (alias name) describe the various expectations and requirements of the agents in the call centres. I conclude Section 7.2 by examining the transportation facilities (Section 7.2.5) provided by call centres to enable the agents to

commute at odd working hours. The work atmosphere in these call centres plays a crucial role in daily life of the young adults employed in them. This aspect is illustrated in Section 7.3. Both the physical environment (Section 7.3.1) and the social ambience (Section 7.3.2) of call centres are analysed to better understand the work environment that is promoted in these offices.

7.1 Training Procedures

Training is an essential part of the call centre employment. Once an agent joins a call centre s/he has to undergo training irrespective of any earlier similar employment experience. My respondents stated that many call centres provide free training to these employees, while a few others “charge” for the training. In the latter cases, the employees do not pay as such but during the training period the company does not pay their full salary package and they are not eligible for any monetary incentives. My respondents explained that the time sequence for such training varies from two weeks to two months depending on the companies’ policies. Kamlesh, a male call centre agent employed in an outbound call centre explained, “we basically have 21 days of training, where three days are generic process training but other call centres like [X call centre] have training for two months” (27/12/04). From talking to call centre agents and managers I discovered that agents undergo both generic (such as accent, grammar, customer service) and process-specific training (about the products) before they are allowed to take/make live calls. Usually the call centre training is broadly divided into three sequential parts: voice and accent training; then soft skill training; and finally process training.

7.1.1 Voice and Accent Training

Voice and accent training is the first training stage and, in the majority of the call centres where I interviewed, continued for one or two weeks. A review of all the call centre guidebooks available on the market in India provides certain guidelines about these training processes. For example, as Chadha (2004), in his book *Taking the call: An aspirant’s guide to call centres*, stated, this training involves listening to different accents for the agents to get accustomed to and comprehend what the customers are saying. This was confirmed by all the agents to whom I talked, who reported that they are taught a

number of practical techniques to increase their own comprehensibility, for instance, neutralising the effects of the Indian accent as much as possible. It is interesting to note, however, that in comparison, Raina (2004), discussing call centre training in his guide book for training, *Speaking right for a call centre job*, states that to be in the call centre industry one need not put on a fake accent. He argues that one would be quickly exposed, impressing no one. He emphasises the importance of being one's real self rather than adopting a different persona. Nevertheless, later on in the same book he advises potential call centre employees to listen to others and "imitate" anyone whose style of speaking appeals to them. Such contradictory versions of accent training are not only perceptible in call centre guide books but are also evident among the managers, trainers and call centre agents. Interestingly enough, when asked whether they have to speak with an American or European accent, the vast majority of managers (95 per cent), a significant number of trainers (88 per cent), as well as numerous agents (60 per cent) denied it and reported that rather they are taught to speak with a "neutral accent". This was highlighted by Kakoli, a female call centre agent, as she stated "we are not given accent training. In fact, during the training we are told not to 'talk in their way.' They [trainers] try to neutralise our accent" (30/11/04). Yet, Romila, a trainer in one of the call centres, reported:

By fault and by and large in call centres in India OK, most of the major call centres will not teach you how to pronounce words the Americanised way, or how to pronounce words the UK way OK? They would rather tell you how to neutralise your accent. As in, you know, pronounce words for example how it is pronounced (18/12/04). [All speech was said with a clear American accent; emphasis added].

According to Mirchandani (2003) in her study of Indian call centres, the purpose of "neutralising" accents is to convert individuals into malleable human resources. During my interviews, two-thirds of the call centre agents stated that in India people often have heavy regional accents, commonly called the Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) in the call centre industry. Agents from all the call centres researched in this study commonly reported that it is very important to overcome these regional accent biases so that the customers can understand the agents clearly. As Rupinder, a female call centre agent, told me:

There are classes for two weeks to neutralise your accent. It's not changing your accent. It's just to cut out those sounds in which they can

catch you immediately that you are not from there. Otherwise I will tell you, agents would be sitting there, they will be speaking with such accents that are *very very* different. Someone will speak *only* in Malayalam and he or she will only be speaking Malayalam no matter how much you teach them. There would be an agent who would be having just Punjabi accent *no matter* how you tell them. So the customer gets irritated (29/11/04; emphasis added).

In his call centre training manual Raina (2004) explained the MTI as a kind of “muscular laziness” and comfort associated with one’s own language. While speaking languages other than the mother tongue, mother tongue influences are maintained. These are revealed through a certain set of signifiers and little sounds that are not common to the other language(s). For example, many people from the southern parts of India have a tendency to put more emphasis on certain letters like “h” and “d.” Therefore, when they pronounce “water” it might sound like “wader.” Similarly, people from North India have an inclination of pronouncing “w” as “woh,” for instance “what” might sound like “wohat.” MTI is common in a country like India where dialects change every few hundred kilometres, however, clearly all of us speak with some MTI. Yet it was argued by trainers and agents alike during interviews that there was a need to get rid of these MTIs in the call centre industry, a process called “neutralisation of accent.” Gupta (2003), in his book titled *Call center training course kit*, describes a neutral accent as one that is understood globally. Nevertheless, Phillipson (2001), writing on the usage of the English language more internationally, notes that “neutral” in this sense contains a significant regional bias, reinforcing the “racist hierarchisation” implicit in identifying Western English as legitimate and Indian English as illegitimate. Accents are a characteristic of a person’s identity, and a person’s native region is often identified by his/her accent. The neutralisation of accents thus erases such identity markers and homogenises the agents.

Despite their denial of “accent learning” per se, all the trainers of call centres whom I interviewed stated that during the training process they teach employees the differences in pronunciation of the vowels and particular words used in the UK and USA. Contradictions were thus clearly apparent since learning pronunciation of vowels is a large part of the accent training as was evident from a discussion with two-thirds of my interviewees. Almost 85 per cent of agents stated that they also have to relearn certain

words and idioms specific to the country to which they are calling or receiving calls. Books are now available on precisely this topic, such as *Taking the call: An aspirant's guide to call centres* (Chadha 2003); *Call center training course kit* (Gupta 2003); and *Speaking right for a call centre job* (Raina 2004). These books, produced for training prospective call centre employees, provide exercises and CDs that enable one to learn the different pronunciations of verbs for the UK and USA. These books are easily available in New Delhi bookshops and the owners of two of these shops said there was a steady demand for such books (book shop owners, pers. comm., 20/12/04; 9/2/05). Gupta (2003) clearly mentions in the preface of his book on call centre training that to make a career in a call centre it is very important to develop skills in speaking, writing and comprehending an "American kind of English." During my own interviews, an example of this USA emphasis was cited by Hiralal, a male trainer in an American based call centre:

...we teach them how to converse and then some specific details like, you know, in America, like they do not pronounce "z" (zed) they say "zee." They don't pronounce Jose as Jose (pronouncing the "j") they say "hosey" (20/12/04).

Ironically then, even the trainers are not really aware of American parlance as "j" is pronounced as "h" in Spanish and not in American English.

During this training, employees are taught the phonetics, pronunciations of alphabets, and words that are different in American and British English, examples of the latter shown here in Table 7.1. A quarter of the employees stated that, unlike in India, where the alphabet is taught along the lines of "A is for apple, B is for bat, and C for cat;" they had to relearn the alphabet the American way, which they argued equated to "A is for alpha, B for bravo, and C for Charlie," and so on. However, from my general knowledge of North America, backed by scrutiny of children's alphabet books in the USA, it is clear that this is not the "American way," and is instead the alphabet used in the military and for navigation. This gives just one example amongst many of the false notions about the country for which they are working, with which these employees are inundated. Clearly, it is such training that provides these employees with perceptions about their customers and the countries they are from. The results from such understandings are elaborated upon in Chapter Eight (Section 8.2).

Table 7.1 Examples of different British and American words

British	American
1. Fortnight	Two weeks
2. Anticlockwise	Counter clockwise
3. Autumn	Fall
4. Caretaker	Janitor
5. City centre	Downtown
6. Lavatory	Washroom
7. Mobile phone	Cell phone

Source: Selected from Raina (2004: 79-81).

As well as such training, employees are also educated in speech regulations; for example, to speak slowly so that customers can understand them accurately. Chadha (2003) also provides a “Pronunciation Dictionary” (some examples are provided in Table 7.2) to facilitate the learning of various words for the agents. Though one of the rationales provided for extensive language training is the need for customers’ understanding, as Mirchandani (2003) notes, language training also facilitates the concealing of the locations of these call centres. At the end of the day, employees have to qualify in the voice and accent training to be eligible for process training.

Table 7.2 Examples from “Pronunciation Dictionary”

Spelling	xx Error xx (INCORRECT Pronunciation)*	Pronunciation
A Academics	a-KAD-a-mics	Ak-a-DEM-ics
B Bowl	Bowl (sounds like foul)	Bole (sounds like coal)
C Cabin	CAY-bin	CAB-in
D Deliver	DEL-iv-er	dl-LIVE-er
E Emergency	Em-er-JEN-see	im-MER-jn-see

Source: Selected from Chadha (2004:131-154).

* These are common pronunciations amongst Delhi urbanites.

At all the call centres where fieldwork was undertaken, voice and accent training

was provided on site. Once a person is selected for a position, the first step is to attend these training sessions, even if they have attended other training courses either at other call centres or training institutions for call centre employment (discussed in Chapter Six, Section 6.1.2) before starting their current position. My respondents who attended such training institutions (17 per cent) reported that these centres mainly help them get the job, but every call centre has its specific training modules that are mandatory for new employees. In Nilika's words, "no matter how much training you have already got, once you get the job you have to take the training" (30/11/04). Since the call centres continuously recruit employees, from interviews it was apparent that usually each class consists of ten to 20 new employees. Initially, when call centres began to be opened in India, trainers were recruited from the country of the parent company. However, the situation has changed over the years, as Betty, a trainer from Canada explained "now they also have trainers from India" (15/3/05), a fact I also noticed during visits to different call centres. Many of these Indian trainers (68 per cent of those interviewed) have been promoted to this position based on their performance, while a few others (26 per cent) are fresh recruits from other professions and did not have any experience in call centres. Hence, as mentioned in Chapter Six (Section 6.2.1), many call centres now advertise for trainers. For example, Mitali, a trainer told me during our interview, "earlier I was an English teacher in [X] school. When I saw the ad for a trainer I applied [for the post] and now I got the job" (22/12/04). Twenty per cent of the call centre agents reported to me that there are certain trainers who are so reputed in their work that they give training in more than one call centre. Gurpreet, a female call centre agent mentioned about one such trainer, "I know this guy [X] he trains in various call centres. My gosh, he is a busy man [laughs] (16/11/04).

7.1.2 Soft Skills Training

The second part of the training consists of "soft skills training." This too continues for a week or more. This comprises a behavioural training programme conducted to help new agents understand what customer service is and to provide them with techniques on how to effectively handle customers. About 87 per cent of call centre agents and 49 per cent of trainers stated that, at many call centres, this is called "cultural training" since employees

became acquainted with the culture of the country for which they are working. This “cultural training” includes learning the geography of the country where customers are located. For example, if the call centre is for US customers, the agents need to know basic US geography, as Ranu, a female agent said “you have to know that California is on the west coast of US and New York is on the east coast and that Arizona is a desert” (7/12/04). The agents also have to know about the cities, usually including their main features and attractions. Sumanth, who was a trainer for one year in a US-based call centre, reported, “We teach them about the basic things [places and culture] of the city. For example, when they [agents] are dealing with customers from New York they should know about Central Park” (30/11/04). This training also requires the agents to learn various time zones and the ways of every day life in these places, as Mukta, an agent noted,

I dial to [customers in] London and in the training we were told that we should avoid calling anyone there [London] around 4pm as it is the tea time and they [people in London] don’t like to be disturbed at that time. I mean small things like this (1/3/05).

For US customers, the agents had to memorise the names of the US states (call centre agent, pers. comm. 4/2/05). In addition, the agents are encouraged to learn about overseas sports, mainly the names of the important teams for various sports and the major tournaments that are common in the USA and UK but not necessarily so in India, like ice hockey, soccer, skating (both ice and roller) and skiing. They are required to watch Western movies, such as *American Pie* and *American Beauty*, and are given scripts from Western TV shows - mainly American, like *Friends* and *Ally McBeal*- to acquaint them with US popular culture as well as with terms and concepts used frequently in America and the UK but which are not so common in India. As Nilanjana, a trainer observes:

Some concepts like “24/7” which very few people here are aware of. We had like somebody call up and say “is it open 24/7?” So very few people in India know 24/7 means 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. Some people think 24/7 *aarey yaar eyey kya kuchh naya hai kya?* [Hey buddy is it something new?] So some basic concepts and some basic tricks and tips which we tell them how to go ahead and talk (27/12/04).

Thus, employees are taught to adopt a “Western persona” (Mirchandani 2003: 9) in order to better serve the clients in the West and put the customers “at ease” (Bach 2001). As

Krishnamurthy (2005: 22) notes, these agents are “trained to cultivate Western popular culture in their accents and slang.” Such movies and TV shows familiarise the agents with the image of the “other” like whom they are expected to talk, think, and behave during their working hours. Bimla, a call centre agent, described her transformation for the US market: “Once on the floor I am Betty from Kansas city interested in baseball and soccer games, and my hobbies include skiing and skating, and my favourite TV shows are *Good Morning America*, and *Desperate Housewives*” (4/3/05). Bimla continued to note with a laugh, that in reality, she had never seen snow.

While a Western audience of popular situation comedies on television might realise quite quickly that such shows represent only a subset of a particular culture, it was noted during interviews that call centre employees often tended to generalise this sub-culture as being the overarching, mainstream culture of that country. Radha, a female call centre agent assumed that, “in America it’s normal for young people to go to pubs every night” (8/12/04). In further discussions she explained that this belief was based on the American TV shows that were shown regularly to them. Another agent, Dolly, remarked, “There [in the USA] people don’t cook as they only eat pizzas and burgers” (10/3/05). Similarly, Tarun, a male call centre agent, mentioned his experience of American offices based on TV shows, “In their [American] offices people don’t have to work all the time like us [in India], there is so much fun [in those offices] and they are so casual” (27/2/05). Such remarks were common among almost half of call centre agents interviewed. Clearly then, such training was not presenting a comprehensive view of the countries where customers were located, tending instead to focus on that segment of society from which customers might be targeted. This, in turn, presented the call centre workers with a very specific “take” on these overseas locations and cultures.

The progress of employees is assessed through weekly tests during the training period. In my interviews I asked both agents and trainers whether it is usual for the agents to fail in such assessment tests. Gitika, a female trainer, replied:

You know usually if someone gets very low marks in the first test we try to work with them and find out where he went wrong. Then in the next test he improves. But if you keep on giving them low marks, it lowers their motivation. So we have to be a bit considerate (23/12/04).

Similarly, Rakesh, a male agent said “it’s not really that you fail as such in these tests. I

mean you could get low marks, but it's not like school exam" (27/12/04). From my interviews with call centre agents, as well as trainers, it was obvious that no call centre agent had had to leave the job because s/he could not successfully get through the training. All these examples, therefore, bring me to question the credibility and validity of such assessments. Is it merely a tactic adopted by the management to pacify their Western clients or is it just one of the many rules implemented by call centres to keep employees on their toes? It was indeed interesting to note Atul's remark about such training

...though the purpose of cultural training is basically to customise the employees with the country for which they are working, but until you take "live calls" and talk to customers, these things do not make sense (15/1/05).

Another part of this training teaches the employees to adopt the greetings specific to the country where the customers are located so that customers do not get irritated, as customer satisfaction is always the first priority. Sucharita, a trainer for a call centre employing 5000 agents and working predominantly for US companies stated that in America it is considered acceptable to call a person by their first name while in the UK people are more formal and they prefer not to be addressed by their first name (19/1/05).

As already noted, employees are trained to conceal their location. Some of the strategies used to do this include straightforwardly avoiding telling the location; or when being questioned, they give information about the company and not the specific geographic location of the call centre. If a customer is very insistent however, then the agents have been trained by their management to say that "...since it is a global company it could be answered from any part of the world and all of them have received the same training. It's the safest way", as reported by Ruchi (24/12/04), a HR manger of an inbound call centre. Some of my respondents (34 per cent) explained that many times the agents just say "I am Indian" and try to change the topic. Due to anti-outsourcing feelings in the USA and UK the main purpose of hiding the location is to avoid customer dissatisfaction, since some customers are not happy if their calls are answered from India. The revelation that this is the case can lead to abuse (call centre agents, pers. comm. 27/12/05; 5/2/06). As Jayant (24/2/05), a call centre agent explained, "once they [customers] know you are from India they get irritated and many of them start calling you

names.” Therefore, through all the different strategies outlined above, in order to obscure the call centre location, agents act as if they belong to, and are located in the same country as their customers. Alias names and “fake” accents clearly help to facilitate this, but more knowledge of specific cultures is also required. Hence, soft skill training serves two purposes; first, it familiarises the agents with the culture and customs of the country where their customers are based. Second, it acts as an effective tool used by the agents to conceal the actual location of the call centre. Interviewees also explained that many customers felt quite unsafe providing their personal details, such as credit card numbers and banking details, to someone located at such a distance.

Such abuse and lack of willingness to devolve information on behalf of the customers can act as a de-motivating factor for the agents, many a time having negative impacts on their performances. Therefore, to overcome such incidents, agents are trained to maintain a positive attitude towards the customers at all times, and the job in particular. Divya (4/2/05; emphasis in speech), a trainer said:

We definitely ask them to have a positive attitude, if I did not have a sale today I shouldn't leave this job because I am in an outbound call centre. So basically the person has to think that “fine if I did not do it yesterday, yesterday is gone today I will do it OK” [says with a very affirmative tone]. Start with a smiling face, maybe not so much of a smiling face but “I will do it today” OK. Fine I did not have a sale yesterday OK, but *I will have* a sale today. That kind of attitude that we really like.

It thus follows that soft skill training inculcates Western cultural norms among the agents to facilitate communication with their clients.

7.1.3 Process Training

The duration of process training can also vary between a week and a few months, depending on the complexity of the process and the requirements of the client (call centre agents, pers. comm. 29/11/04; 9/12/04; 30/1/05). This part of the training is more technical in nature than the first two sections. Call centre agents explained that it includes teaching them about the process and how to take calls; teaching them to deliver whatever is expected from the agents while taking calls; how to resolve customers' concerns; what the quality parameters are; how to get customer satisfaction; and preventing repeat calls by the same customer (call centre agents, pers. comm. 9/12/04; 24/12/04; 2/2/05).

Moreover, 25 per cent of trainers interviewed mentioned that this training also involves teaching agents about the usage of specific software for the process. In the words of Ashima:

We also teach them [agents] how to use the software. I can give you an example, say they [agents] are selling a promotional package for X cell phone, so they have to know which menu [on the computer screen] will give what information. Otherwise they will not be able to deal with the customers [when asked about certain specific features of the package]. We basically teach such stuff (29/1/05).

Figure 7.1 shows that there are basically four components involved in the training processes- technical, personality, communication and acting. This figure, adapted from Callaghan and Thompson (2002: 239), includes additional features according to the specificities of call centres located in New Delhi.

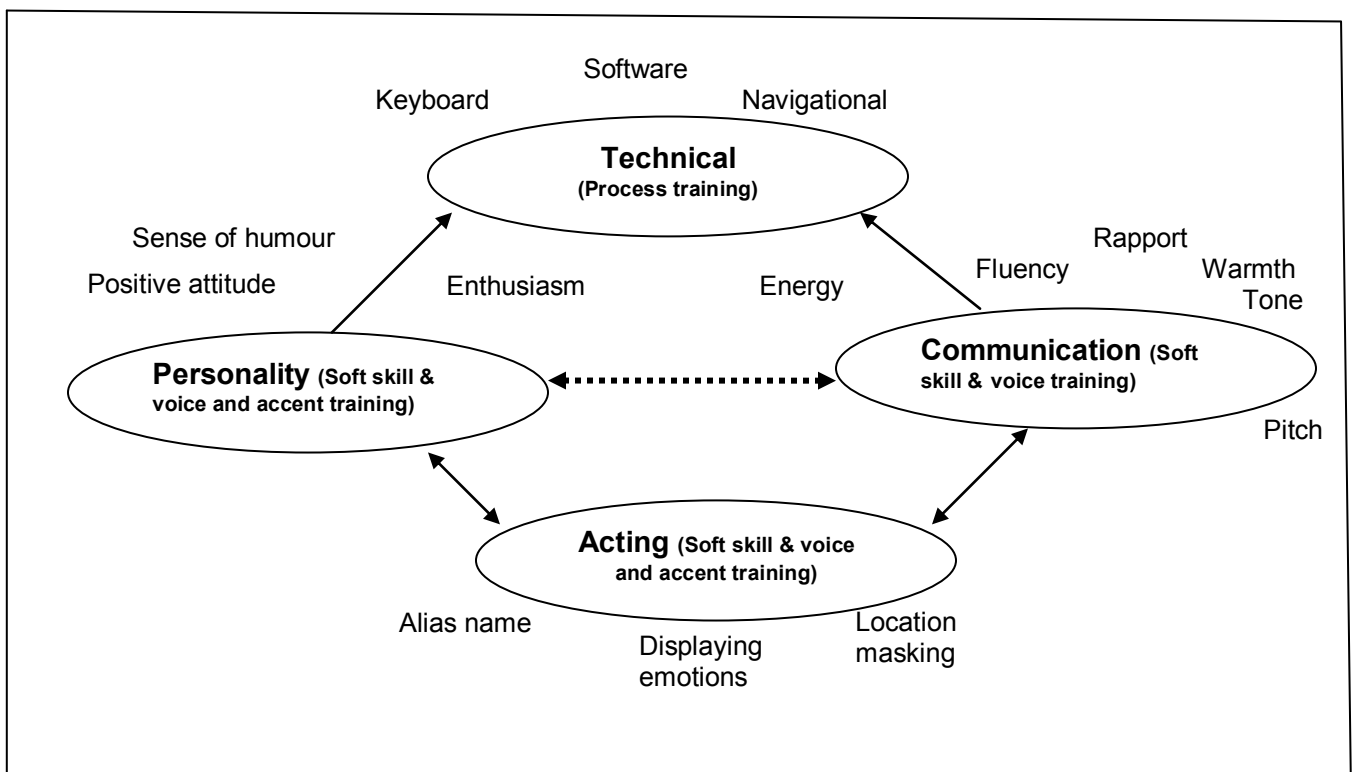


Figure 7.1 Components of call centre training
Source: Adapted from Callaghan and Thompson 2002:239.

From Figure 7.1 it follows that the technical part of all call centre training forms a

process during which agents are familiarised about the campaign, the computer skills and any other information needed for these purposes. “Acting” includes the voice and accent as well as soft skill training. The acting component not only trains agents to adopt a Western identity in terms of an alias name and location masking but also includes Hochschild’s (1983) concept of emotional labour, as these agents are taught to engage in small talk about subjects related to the country for which they are working. Thus acting, along with other soft skill training allows them to improve their personality and communication skills. Therefore, soft skill, voice and accent training are very inter-related, all complementing each other. Hence, these form parts of personality, acting and communication, as shown in the figure. Unlike Callaghan and Thompson (2002), I would argue that acting, personality and communication are very much inter-linked and are complementary to each other. All these, together with the agents’ technical knowledge help agents to perform better. The dotted arrow between personality and communication indicates that the relation between the two might be indirect and not always noticeable. For example, the sense of humour of an agent might help him or her to establish a good rapport with the customer. Similarly, a warm tone of an agent’s voice will reflect his/her positive attitude towards the customer. These links may be quite subtle but nonetheless vital for the call centre agents.

On the whole, such training procedures prepare the agents for the job by not only explaining the nature of their tasks, but also by providing an in-depth background of the country for which these agents are working even if this might be a somewhat unrepresentational image. The implications and impacts of such training on the identities of the call centre agents are far reaching, and will be addressed in Chapter Nine. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the working conditions in these call centres that provide channels to implement the traits learnt during the training programmes, to which I turn next.

7.2 Working Conditions in Call Centres

7.2.1 Work Schedules – Working to the Western Clock

Almost 90 per cent of the call centres researched for this thesis are contract centres rather than direct call centres of any particular company as discussed in Chapter Four, Section

4.3.1. This means that they deal with processes/contracts from various countries at the same time, a process in a call centre being one particular service that an agent does for a client (the company), such as working for Nokia, or American Express, or Visa. Therefore, one call centre can have many such clients and each client has different processes or types of work that they want call centre employees to carry out for them concurrently (c.f. Chadha 2004). The USA, UK and recently Australia are the most important countries with outsourced call centres in India based on the quantity of work they provide. Depending on the difference in the time zone between India and each of these countries, the call centres in India have to work to a specific time schedule. This often results in employees working night shifts or shifts starting at irregular hours. As such, the typical shifts of Indian call centres are 10am to 7pm for Australian processes; 6.30pm to 2.30am for UK processes; and 7pm to 10am for USA processes. Each shift runs approximately for eight working hours. In addition, agents are expected to arrive one and a half hours before their shift to be updated on the latest news from America or the UK - if they arrive late, they are expected to stay back after their shift. However, as noted by Betty, a trainer from Canada, this extra time is not counted as part of the employees' regular shifts and is not paid. Betty also commented that the travel times (in her words "the traffic is garbage") and wait times for the pick-up vans are time consuming, time that again is not remunerated (Betty, pers. comm. 16/1/05).

Work schedules for call centre agents change frequently, at times every alternate month. One main reason for this is that, though the shift timings are decided by the call centre management in India, these are reliant upon specific instructions from clients as to the particular time of day they want a campaign to start. This phenomenon has been described in Adam's (2002:21) words, as "colonization with time," whereby Western clock time is exported across the globe and used as the standard. This was further elaborated upon by Shweta, a Human Resources (HR) Manager, with whom I spoke:

The shift timing is decided by us. [But] it's according to the clock that they [the clients] maintain. There is instruction from the client. Yeah, the client who gives the campaign. Those who provide us the campaign they tell us "OK you have to log in at this time and log off at this time" and these are the timings for the campaigns and so accordingly we have to adjust (22/12/04).

The fact that call centre agents must constantly adjust to a changing time schedule has led, for many, to various health problems, with constantly varying work schedules upsetting the “body clock,” that in turn, takes time to adjust. Changes in shifts also hamper the social relations of employees. These impacts become part of the focus of the next chapter (Chapter Eight, Section 8.2.2 and Section 8.2.3). Not surprisingly, most employees prefer to work during a shift timed to better suit local patterns, for example, in an Australian or UK shift. In the previous chapter (Chapter Six, Section 6.4), it was noted that at the time of the employment interview, prospective employees are asked to fill out a form in which one of the questions asked is their willingness to work night shifts. About 80 per cent of the agents interviewed stated that they wrote “yes” to this question as it increases their chances of getting the position. From discussions with agents and managers of 70 per cent of call centres researched for this study, I found that it is more common for companies to move employees from morning to night shift rather than vice-versa. The latter takes place only if the employee has a serious health problem and is unable to continue to work the night shift. This was explained to me by Shiva, a male call centre agent, who noted that employees

can be transferred [from night to morning shifts]. It depends whether the person who is dialling in a USA process is facing such health problems that he cannot dial in the night shift. He might have problems such as jaundice or indigestion or that sort of thing (16/11/04).

Performance levels may also be cause for change in an agent’s work schedule. One HR manager of an outbound call centre remarked to me that if an agent is performing very well in a campaign and there is another campaign which is not doing so well, the agent might be transferred to the latter process in an attempt to increase sales (HR manager, pers. comm. 23/12/04). Thus, the bottom line is always to increase productivity and maintain the company’s profits. An employee’s personal preferences are clearly not very frequently being taken into consideration unless s/he gets sick.

Nevertheless, work schedules are also sometimes altered to maintain enthusiasm among employees. Back office jobs by nature are routinised, making them monotonous (Larner 2001, as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.2.5.2) and hence, employees often find it difficult to maintain concentration for long (call centre agents, pers. comm.

29/11/04; 7/2/05). This monotony is well known among potential employees and people joining call centres often perceive the opportunities as a short term one and are there just to earn some “extra pocket money,” a characteristic discussed in detail in Chapter Eight, Section 8.2.1.⁴⁹ As such, almost 90 per cent of my respondents reported that they do not have any attachment to the job and are willing to quit if they are not satisfied. Management, therefore, as a strategy, changes the shifts of these agents so that they do not lose interest. Jayant, a campaign team leader remarked,

...especially the team that I am with - it becomes very monotonous after maximum of six to eight months. It does, because if you are in the same campaign and you need to come every night and call people and *say the same thing* and if the customers are not interested it gets boring. And in four hours people take around 500 calls. So it becomes *very* hectic and monotonous. So what we try to do is have a change of campaigns frequently. After four months we change somebody's campaign. So that people- they [agents] have something fresh to talk about so that they will not lose their interest (26/12/04; emphasis added).

The call centres in India operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year. As such call centre agents have two days paid leave a week that may or may not coincide with the weekend. On average, each employee has three to four days of paid holidays in a year as well as his or her paid weekends, as reported to me by call centre agents (Deepti 24/12/04; Akash 17/1/05). These holidays most commonly include Christmas, New Year, and any other national holiday of the country for which the agents are working at that specific time (Rakhi, 23/12/04). It is important to note, though, that there are no holidays granted for Indian festivals and national holidays. For example, those working for USA processes have a holiday on the 4th July (American Independence Day), - quite insignificant for these agents - while they are expected to work on the 15th August, Indian Independence Day and a national holiday (Shreya, 30/12/04; Ashim, 5/3/05; c.f. *Times of India* 14th August, 2005). These agents also have to work on *Diwali* and *Dushera*, two major festivals in India. Therefore, not only working hours, but also holidays are decided upon by remote clients. Nonetheless, reflecting a modern version of James Scott's “Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of

⁴⁹ Though in the documentary *Bombay Calling* call centre jobs in India are portrayed as a livelihood option for various families, my interviews with call centre agents revealed otherwise. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter Nine.

Peasant Resistance” (1985), there is a tendency among call centre agents to be absent from work or “sick” on such Indian holidays. Thus, in order to retain the workforce on those occasions, the companies often pay bonuses. Sudipto, a supervisor for a US process notes:

Our holidays totally depend on the clients. The client says that it’s New Year [in USA] but I want my campaign to be done we have to dial. But then what we do is- what the company basically does is - if you come we give you 200 bucks extra... (23/12/04).

Even natural calamities and disasters in India are not allowed to impede call centre work. In August 2005, there was heavy flooding in Mumbai and many people were stranded for almost three days. All other offices and institutions were shut down. The only offices that did work as usual were the call centres. To cope employees were not allowed to return home and were provided lodging in the office and they worked continuously for various shifts. As a result, many of them fell sick (*Times of India* 14th August 2005).

From the above discussion it becomes evident that call centres in India not only operate according to the Western clock, but their schedules for specific shifts as well as their holidays are also controlled by remote clients. This is an excellent example of how in the era of globalisation people’s daily lives become dictated by distant events, as discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.1. There are also frequent changes of schedules for the call centre agents, either to maintain the profit level for the company or to preserve an agent’s enthusiasm for work. Yet clients’ expectations of call centre agents in India are not limited to working odd hours, and agents are also required to perform certain acts of deception to which I turn next.

7.2.2 Surface Acting

Call centre agents are encouraged to indulge in small talk on the telephones with customers as and when required. However, the golden rule is that one must be extremely careful not to divulge the location of the call centre. One of the most common topics of small talk is the “weather,” and not surprisingly agents whom I interviewed reported that it can be very awkward for them to talk about weather when it is, for example, minus 20 degrees Celsius in America and 35 degrees Celsius in India. They feel it is a “pretension”

and that they are lying to the customers. Punit, a team leader commented, “I mean just to facilitate more and more profits sometimes you even have to lie to the customers” (21/11/04). Jaipal, a call centre agent who has been working in a USA based call centre for the past two years, stated his similar concern, “it seems that telling lies [has] become part of our job and over time we have become experts in this [telling lies] (laughs)” (6/12/04). This is quite similar to what Hochschild (1983) describes as *emotional labour*, the effort involved in managing one’s emotions in exchange for a wage (also see Leidner 1993; Taylor 1998). Hochschild (1983) argues that employees in service organisations are commonly required to manage their emotional expressions toward customers- be it a positive emotion, for example, “smiling down the phone” from a call centre (Belt et al. 2000), or a negative emotion, for example, showing anger if one is a bill collector (Sutton 1991). He further contends that emotion can be displayed either by “surface acting,” with no genuine attempt to feel or experience those emotions, or “deep acting,” whereby employees actually feel the emotions. In the case of call centre agents in India, I would argue from my interviews that they adopt “surface acting” while dealing with the customers and engaging in small talk, with few getting emotionally involved.

Agents are expected to assume such acting not only to mask their physical location, but also to facilitate profit generation for the company (call centre agent, pers. comm. 24/12/04; Amitabh, 12/12/04). Many times when I was discussing these tensions with employees, the agents noted that they realised it was not ethical to do certain things that the company asked them to do, yet they felt they had no other choice and they frequently lied to the customers (Shilpa, 2/2/05; Kakoli 30/11/04; Naveen 20/11/04). For example, respondents who were engaged in telemarketing often reported that they did not tell the exact coverage of the insurance package they were selling. In fact, to increase sales, many a time they lied to customers and exaggerated certain aspects of the package, while not mentioning others negative aspects at all. Alka, a call centre agent explained the situation to me:

See if you are in this job [call centre] you can’t be very honest. Like see now I am selling a home alarm system for X company. Now if I start to explain *every detail* to the customer first it will take lot of time and he will not buy it. So our managers always tell us that just stress on few good points [of the package]. Also I have to give some sells otherwise I don’t get any incentives (10/12/04, emphasis added).

Given that their increments in salary and all other incentives are performance based (discussed further in Chapter Eight, Section 8.2.1), employees are inclined to use this “lying” tactic to meet performance targets as noted in the above quote.

About three-quarters of my interviewees reported that their employment tasks are highly scripted (call centre agents, pers. comm. 7/3/05; 28/11/04; c.f. Callaghan and Thompson 2002). According to Taylor and Bain (1998) these tasks can be compared with work performed on an assembly line. Furthering this argument, Mirchandani (2003) refers to call centre jobs as scripted Taylorism. Deery et al. (2002) state that call centre employees are often required to follow a tightly scripted dialogue with customers and also conform to highly detailed instructions. This characteristic was also evident among call centre jobs in India. In Anirudh’s (22/12/04) words, “basically all you have to do [as the main job in call centre] is to read from a text in front of you. I mean everything is in front of you and you don’t have to think for an answer [while talking to the customer]”. The close monitoring of words and manners and the limited variation that employees are often allowed in service interactions means that call centre workers have little control over their self-presentation to customers. Consequently, an employee is like a “keyed toy” (Mirchandani 2003: 6) who has to work according to others’ choices. These aspects were evident among the call centre agents that I interviewed. Almost one hundred per cent of the employees stated that there was no scope for them to be innovative in the call centre employment and hence it became very monotonous over a period of time. Rupinder, who had been working in the call centre for six months noted:

When I came [joined] to X [the call centre] I used to think oh I have done my MA so I will be better than others [colleagues]. But in just few weeks I realised it [my degree] was of no use because all I had to do was read from a given script, just like a parrot [laughs] (18/11/04).

In sum these works are highly scripted, and are very monotonous in nature. As a result, the expectations are that agents will adopt surface acting, making their position very boring. Nonetheless, another aspect of call centre employment that aggravates stress among agents is performance monitoring, which is discussed in the next section.

7.2.3 Performance Monitoring

Another important work criteria at call centres is performance monitoring, defined by Holman et al. (2002) as practices that involve observation, examination or recording of employee work related behaviours with or without technological assistance (also see Stanton 2000). It is argued that performance monitoring enables the organisations to supervise and improve employee performance and ensure customer satisfaction (also see Chalykoff and Kochan 1989; Grant and Higgins 1989; and Alder 1998). As Holman et al. (2002) observe in call centres in Europe, performance monitoring occurs through the continuous electronic monitoring of quantitative performance indicators such as length of call, number of calls, and amount of time logged on and off the system. Moreover, calls can be listened to or recorded remotely, with or without the employee's knowledge, for quality assessment. All of my respondents, irrespective of the call centre at which they were employed, reported similar mechanisms of performance monitoring, adding that calls were monitored both through customer satisfaction surveys and random checks by supervisors. The team leaders or supervisors could tape anyone's call and listen to it. Ninety per cent of employees reported that such monitoring caused them a lot of stress. As Amrita, a call centre agent said, "It is very stressful. Any time they [supervisors and/ team leaders] can tap anyone's call and you never know when it's going to be you" (30/11/04). Even Kohili, a new agent reported, "*bapre mein to hamesha tensed raheti hun* [My gosh, I am always tensed] when my line [call] will be taped" (7/2/05). Ultimately such close monitoring caused adverse effects on employees health, discussed in Chapter Eight, Section 8.2.3.2.

As well as performance monitoring, every agent I interviewed had specific targets to meet. Mirchandani (2004) refers to this as performance targets. Respondents stated that there were various types of targets- individual, group, daily, as well as monthly. Call centre agents explained that each agent is required to meet certain targets not only in terms of calls received or sales made (depending on the nature of the call centre- inbound or outbound) but also in terms of the "average call handling time," which includes the time they take to make calls, keep the customer on hold, "wrap up time" after each call

and other such factors.⁵⁰ Call centre agents try hard to meet the targets as their incentives and increase in pay depend on them. Almost 80 per cent of call centre agents interviewed reported that, on average, an agent is expected to make more than 500 calls per working shift. Based on their study of call centres in western Europe, Callaghan and Thompson (2002) state that each call lasts for three minutes 30 seconds and is split into three elements - talk time (approximately 160 seconds), post call or “wrap up time” (approximately 20 seconds) and time between calls (approximately four seconds). Respondents also stated that the number of calls expected varies depending on whether it is an inbound or an outbound call centre. Prakash, who works in an inbound call centre noted:

Like I receive call[s], O.K., so basically in one day [one shift] I have to receive no less than 350 calls otherwise no incentives for me. But you know some of my friends who work in X call centre [an outbound call centre] there they have to make [dial] about 400 calls. It’s tough (18/2/05).

On the same note, Anjana, a female call centre agent described:

You have to have a certain number of calls made. You have a target, a chart which is given to you. You have to attend that number of calls. Then in that, also you have a particular speaking time, particular call taking time. You cannot waste your time. And then the amount you keep the customer on hold. There is a customer satisfaction level you have to meet also. So all that is in the- you know talking in between calls. Whether it is your computer which has to do the work or you have to do the work, it has to be [done] - means the customer has to get satisfied at the end of the day. So it is a very fast and always on your toes (30/12/04).

Similarly, in some of the guidebooks for call centre jobs in India, for example, *Guide to call centre jobs* (2004), it is mentioned that for inbound call centres one has to pick up a call by the third ring - the fourth ring is too late. Such expectations from the agents often seem to be very demanding, as verified by Lalit, a male call centre agent who explained:

There are certain clauses like we have to answer calls in five seconds, which is not possible sometimes. Because if you are on a 20 minutes call and back to back calls and if you get the call, so you know it will be like a

⁵⁰ After each call the time taken to make notes about the call and be ready to handle the next call is called the “wrap up time.”

big thing because five seconds seem you could take a long breather and it would be five seconds (29/11/04).

Through such mechanisms of performance monitoring and specifying the target number of calls (to be received or dialled) call centres exercise strict control over the performance of their agents. As evident from the analysis, such techniques cause stress for the agents; nonetheless, these controls are exercised by the call centre managements mainly for the purpose of increasing the profit margins of the company without considering the effects on employee health.

7.2.4 Adopting an Alias Name

As already mentioned, call centre agents have to adopt English language pseudonyms, more commonly referred to as “alias names” in the call centre industry. Agents are allowed to choose their alias names (within reason) and once in the office they are known by these names; thus, for example, Surita might become Susan, and Nikhil becomes Nick. However, whenever questioned about issues regarding alias names, trainers reported that, though preferred by the management, it is not mandatory for the employees to adopt one (Kakoli 30/11/04; Ruchi, 24/12/04). Interestingly, on the contrary, all of the agents reported that the management stated it was essential for them to take up an alias name (Naveen 20/11/04; Sulagna 29/11/04; Nutan 30/1/05). The argument specified by employers for not using their real names is that they feel that Westerners (their customers) find it difficult to pronounce Indian names and it often takes a long time for the customers to understand their names. This, in turn, increases the call handling time, which has a negative effect on their performance. Bidhan, a male call centre agent describes the difficulties faced:

They are not accustomed to these types of names. They have terrific problem understanding Indian names. For example you take an Indian name such as Prithviraj Sinha, so the customer, first of all, the customer will say “*what?*”? “*What? What’s your name?*” He will take 10 minutes for that. And the call becomes unnecessarily long as you cannot proceed till he got your name right (15/12/04).

If alias names were used *only* when call centre employees were on the telephone talking to a Western client, then perhaps one might not consider this to be a very

noteworthy impact upon their daily lives. It is thus important to consider how these names are transferred to many other parts of the call centre employees' lives too. When a new agent enters "the floor," they are initially introduced to other team-mates with their alias name. As Sukanta, a male call centre agent, explained, "everyone knows each other by the alias name and not by their real name" (24/12/04). Colleagues – who often become close friends – then know and call one another by their alias names outside the office as well. Often, by the time they know each other's "real" names, they are so accustomed to the alias names they prefer to continue to use them instead. Alka, another call centre agent, commented "Now my [call centre] friends know my real name Alka, but they still call me Alice. I have no problem. In fact even some of my other friends [outside call centre] have also started calling me Alice [laughs]..." (17/11/04).

At the same time, however, this can cause tensions between call centre employees and those outside of this "world." Shilpa, a call centre agent, recalled how her alias name was the cause of embarrassment between her and her family:

One day one of my call centre friends called up at my home and asked for Sasha. My mother thought it was a wrong number as in my home no one knew my alias. I was on the other line and I told my mother the call was for me. I really felt very embarrassed and found it *so* difficult explaining to my parents the reason for my alias name (27/12/04).

Yet, despite such misunderstandings and awkwardness at times, these agents begin to identify themselves with their alias names quite readily. In one case, before I started an interview with a male call centre agent, I explained that to maintain anonymity his real name would not be used in any results. His response was to suggest that his alias name, Peter, be used instead, stating that he was more comfortable with that name anyway and could better identify with it nowadays (2/12/04). Indeed, often while interviewing call centre employees they stressed how they now identified more with their alias names, as well as with those of their call centre friends. As Aparajita, who works in a UK based outbound call centre, noted:

My alias is April, and all the time my friends call me April. So at times even I forget my actual [real] name. I will tell you what happened last week [she laughs]. I had to renew my cell [phone] account. So when she [the cellphone agent] asked my name spontaneously I said April Johnson...This [giving the alias name instead of the real name] always happens to me (9/1/05).

A similar reaction was also noticed in Subir's comment:

It might be funny but it's true you know. One day in the mall one of my high school friends called me from behind "Subir, Subir." I thought he was calling someone else [I did not see him]. I am so used to being called Sam [his alias] (16/12/04).

Hence, it is noted that the requirement of adopting an alias name for the call centre job often creeps into the daily life of the young agents. Raina (2004), in his book *Speaking right for a call centre job*, states that these "virtual names" allow the agents to bridge two realities- their real life in India and the "virtual" world of their customers in America or Europe. In India, traditionally, and nearly universally, one's family name is considered central to a person's identity. As such, adopting an alias can have an immense impact on identity (Kreig 1999), a point which I will discuss further in Chapter Nine (Section 9.1.2).

7.2.5 Transportation Facilities

Another unique feature of call centres located in India is that they offer free transport (both pick-up and drop off facilities) between the office and residences of the agents. According to the opinion of all the call centre managers interviewed, this transport is very important from both a commuting and security point of view. Nonetheless, the security aspect of the pick up and drop facilities is doubtful, since a newspaper article in 2006 reported that a call centre cab driver had raped a female employee while he was taking her home after work around 3am in the morning (*Times of India* 2006).

Chadha (2004), discussing the transport policies of call centres in India, mentions that no parent would feel comfortable about their children driving themselves around alone at 2am. Yet more than two-thirds of the agents interviewed reported that they did not have personal vehicles. So providing transportation for the agents is also a necessity due to the odd working hours as there is no public transport available during those times. From my fieldwork it was evident that call centre offices are physically located in certain official sectors in the suburbs that are not well connected with the city's public transport. These areas, such as Gurgaon and Noida, technically fall under the provincial jurisdiction of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, respectively, connected with New Delhi by road. It is very

difficult to commute to these areas using public transport, as buses from New Delhi do not have the required permits to enter these two provinces and vice-versa for buses from Gurgaon and Noida. As a result, one has to depend on inter-state bus services, which are neither very frequent nor of good quality. Even auto- rickshaws⁵¹ are not permitted to travel across provincial borders. In such situations providing free transport is necessary for businesses to operate, with call centres advertising this service as an incentive to attract potential employees.

A survey conducted in 2005 by *India Today* reveal that in terms of length of commuting time, New Delhi ranks second only to Mumbai in India. According to this same survey, the transportation costs are also the second highest in New Delhi. Furthermore, it is not very safe for females to travel alone by public transport in between New Delhi, Gurgaon and Noida, due to an increasing number of activities like teasing, sexual harassment and abuse. Considering all these reasons, the call centres have little choice but to provide pick-up and drop facilities to ensure that the employees are available to work in all shifts. Many small call centres, however, have pick-up and drop facilities only for night and early morning shifts, agents explained to me in interviews. Instead they have a policy of “go back home” with evening shift employees being able to take a cab back home and the company reimburses the money (Shiva 15/12/04; Rohini 19/12/04).

In sum, the working conditions analysed above point to a scenario whereby the agents find themselves acting in a globalised yet undetermined (and unrevealed) space. The ultimate purpose of these call centres is to fulfil all the needs of the clients and help the profit maximisation of the company. What results is a unique situation brought about by the forces of globalisation in which these young adults physically live in one geographical location, but their lives and actions are monitored according to another country that they know only through secondary sources- media and employment training, a point illustrated in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.1. Not only these, however, but a certain office and work atmosphere are also created, as discussed next, to facilitate these employees to live the life of the “other”.

⁵¹ A three-wheeler automobile that can seat three people in the back seat and the driver in the front with the two sides of this vehicle being open for passenger entry and exit. This is a very popular mode of transport in all parts of India.

7.3 Work Atmosphere

In an effort to maintain a Western atmosphere at work, these call centres provide a unique office environment, one not at all common in India. The atmosphere of call centres can be discussed broadly under physical (Section 7.3.1) and social atmosphere (Section 7.3.2), respectively. The physical atmosphere refers to the ambience created by physical attributes of the building, comprising arrangements within the office including workstations, the cafeteria and decorations. The social atmosphere refers to work ethics, dress codes, office conduct, and socialisation.

7.3.1 Physical Environment

Usually these offices are built outside the city, so space is not a primary problem. They are generally “upmarket” offices with glossy granite exteriors, emanating a very professional look.⁵² During my visit to the call centres I noticed that each of these offices operate with high security systems, employees having to swipe their identity card to gain access to the building. It could also be maintained that the interior decorations of these offices are very trendy and fashionable. It is argued by Garg (2005) that at present it is a trend in India to set up “young” offices that give an international feel. Within each building, the call centres are painted in bright colours with well-designed open cubicles, conference and discussion rooms. Indeed, every one that I visited looked “young and lively,” suitable to the profile of the agents. During my visits I noticed that there were numerous motivational colourful posters with slogans including: “Let your efforts rise above your excuses;” “Talking leads to resolving;” “Attitude- it’s up to you;” “Night breed;” and “No one can do everything.” Every employee has a small workstation, or “bay,” with a computer, headset and other accessories. On top of every workstation there are clocks showing the time for different international time zones, depending on which process they are working for. On the whole it gives a very professional yet “cool” look.

One of the managers commented to me that stylish office decoration is one of the ways of attracting young employees (pers. comm. 9/1/05). According to him, ambience is very important to keep a young population interested and motivated for the job. Another

⁵² Although some of the smaller call centres occupy only two or three floors of a building, even the buildings in which these are located are quite new and “upmarket.”

reason for giving so much attention to office decoration is due to the fact that these call centres are often visited by European and American clients and it is considered vital to present a good office environment to them. Preeti, a manager of a reputed call centre, noted, “often we have clients from abroad [USA and UK] and good office décor gives them a good impression” (6/2/05). According to a local media report (*Hindustan Times* 2005), some call centres are even trying to import comfortable chairs so that long hours of seating do not hamper productivity. Moreover, Garg (2005) observes that management often makes a conscious effort to make their agents “feel at home” by devising methods like “open-office design,” or an “open-door policy,” implying that the manager’s door is always open for the agents to come anytime and even talk about personal issues. In addition, I noted at all the call centres that I visited, the office cafeterias were also decorated in a lively manner with colourful tables and chairs, with the latest tunes of American and Indian pop music constantly playing over loudspeakers.

7.3.2 Social Ambience

The social ambience of call centres complements the physical environment. Often interviewees referred to call centres as an extension of a college cafeteria. “...it’s basically like a college canteen [cafeteria] to be very precise” (Alka, a female call centre agent, 20/12/04). Karan, another agent remarked: “When you enter the office [call centre] you will think you are in some college canteen...” (9/3/05). This view is also supported by various articles published in Indian newspapers including the *Times of India*. Nonetheless, interviews with managers revealed that they believed employees must realise that, despite a “free atmosphere,” it is a work place, and thus there are rules to be followed. Praveen, a HR manager noted, “after all they should realise that it is an office. They are here to do some serious work and not just have fun” (8/1/05). He continued to explain that the rules included that employees should speak only in English as long as they are within the office premises.⁵³ On the other hand, 37 per cent of my call centre

⁵³ This rule reminds me of my school days. In India, when a child is sent to an English medium school (most of which were missionary run in the 1970/80s, though now there are plenty of non-missionary English medium schools in India), one of the main purposes was that the child should become fluent in English. To ensure that this purpose was served, one of the rules in school was to always speak in English even with your peers as long as you were on the school premises. If someone was found to be evading the rule s/he had to pay a fine of 50 paise (CAD \$ less than one cent) each time. If these rules were broken in

respondents stated that employees quite often evade this rule, speaking “Hinglish,” a mix of Hindi and English. Call centre agents and also urban Indian youth consider this language trendy in general (Key informants, pers. comm. 29/11/04; 4/2/05). However, Dipti (30/11/04), a call centre agent said that if they were caught speaking a language other than English there were certain penalties. These penalties were not monetary, but were disciplinary action whereby the employees were issued warning letters. In Sukanta’s words “if an agent is given three letters then the management takes severe action. I mean he is not fired but, for example, has to work longer hours” (12/12/04). Interviews with HR managers revealed that the management’s argument for this rule was that since agents have to talk to the customers in English, it is better if they continue talking among themselves in English, even during breaks, as it will not only improve their fluency, but will also make it easier for them to go back to work without any mental preparation of changing language.

Another rule regards dress. All my respondents (both agents and managers) explained that the agents are allowed to wear casual clothes and jeans only on Fridays and weekends. All other days (Monday to Thursday) they have to wear formal dress, be it either Western or Indian. Also, during winter time, men are expected to wear a tie. Jayant, a male call centre agent (16/12/04), said that the main reason to implement a dress code was to maintain office decorum and to ensure that employees were decently dressed. Usha, a trainer, continued to elaborate that since these were groups of young people they often tended to wear fashionable dresses not suitable for office, and as a result the management had to take steps (10/1/05). Likewise, the management of some companies felt that wearing informal clothes made employees take their work casually too (HR managers, pers. comm. 24/12/04; 15/1/05).

Carlo (1996), writing on dress and identity in India, argues that clothing plays an important role in identity construction, with individuals commonly defining themselves through differences in attire. Despite restrictions on clothing practices at work, dress codes have generated a new fashion trend among call centre employees, a trend even discussed in the *Times of India* (8th August 2005). For example, as Mallika, a 20 year old female call centre agent explained: “Friday is the best; you don’t have to think what to

excess of a certain number in a month then the parent of the child was called in.

wear. Just grab your jeans and a T-shirt” (28/11/04). Such decisions and trends cumulatively influence the consumption patterns and ultimately the lifestyle of the agents, a point that will be discussed in Chapter Eight, Section 8.2.1. Betty (a trainer from Canada) believed that the men dress smartly and perform well to impress women, and vice versa (11/3/05). She noted that, as such, even dress seemed to enhance efficiency and productivity among the employees.

My interviews with these agents revealed that they were very fashion conscious, not wanting to wear the same clothes in the same week and, if possible, in the same fortnight. “My main hobby is shopping for clothes, I don’t like to repeat dress in the office,” Mitali, a 23-year call centre agent explained (20/2/05). Similar statements were echoed by most of the call centre agents I talked to, many stating that they developed specific dress and style preferences after joining a call centre. “I was not so fashion conscious before I joined the job. But I realised here [at the call centre] everyone is so particular about what they wear and I was like the odd man out,” commented Rakesh (11/1/05). This argument was also supported by a Canadian trainer based in Delhi who stated that “...after joining the call centres they [agents] become very particular about their dress” (11/3/05).

The social atmosphere in the work place was clearly not just based upon fashion styles however, and the working relationships among colleagues and supervisors were crucial to the formation of a particular environment. As well as specific regulations like only speaking English, and certain work ethics (detailed more below), more subtle social forces were also at play. In an attempt to maintain a relaxed atmosphere at work, some agents reported noticing a change in the general attitude and behaviour not only among call centre agents themselves, but between them and managers. According to 69 per cent of the agents interviewed, there was an increasing trend towards using physical touch as a mode of communication, irrespective of gender. They stated that, for example, it is not uncommon for a manager to put his - only male managers did this - arm around the shoulder of a team member when briefing them, or pat them on the back for good performance. Such behaviour is not very common in the work place in India; hence agents, especially women, frequently commented that they were not comfortable with these increasingly “acceptable” behaviour patterns (call centre agents, pers. comm.

29/11/04; 4/12/04; 19/1/05). Rajesh, a supervisor, stated:

So you don't know how somebody will react or how she or he will behave on the floor. Take for example if we have to- especially since that happens- if you have a female agent and you [implying supervisor] are friendly [using physical touch] with her she might not like it or in some cases if you have a female agent and you are *friendly with her* she thinks its OK he is my supervisor or he is just being friendly to me. So in these cases [when supervisor uses physical touch] if somebody is upset or agents have complained about it [physical touch by supervisor] we have to stand up and cool down the environment...(27/12/04).

Over time, however, such behaviour by managers and supervisors were legitimising a certain degree of physical touch in the office and agents reported to me that such acts were subsequently being repeated amongst agents too (Rupinder 18/11/04; Naveen 20/11/04).

Call centres in New Delhi and its environs face a very high attrition rate and, as such, managers must keep the work force enthused and motivated to increase retention (NASSCOM 2003 and 2006). It was gleaned from interviews that one of the ways to maintain enthusiasm is to organise frequent parties and other social events. My respondents explained that, though the frequency of the parties differs among call centres, it is almost mandatory to have a party organised after each "process" is over. The agents emphasised that these parties, and the food and alcoholic drinks served at them, were paid for by the companies/clients and were held in upmarket discotheques or pubs. The call centres also organise Christmas and New Year parties for all employees. These parties too are hosted in discotheques of five star hotels or upmarket pubs. Furthermore, Gopal, a male call centre agent reported "if some team performs well managers may also throw an in-house party" (5/2/04). Thus, partying takes place regularly in the call centres and at other venues, as part of motivational efforts and to overcome the monotony of the job.

Interestingly, almost 78 per cent of female call centre agents I talked to stated that before their employment at a call centre they would never go to such locations- nightclubs, pubs, and discotheques - because they would feel uncomfortable. However, after attending office parties held at such places, their attitudes changed and they felt that

“clubbing” was not as “bad” as they had previously thought.⁵⁴ Such changing opinions are a clear example of how call centres facilitate and trigger certain behaviours that otherwise would not have been as widespread among the agents.

Almost 64 per cent of the agents mentioned to me that other than parties the call centres also organised certain events on the office premises, some examples being talent contests; ethnic wear day; and having a specific colour as “the colour of the day”. As Shruti explained:

...on the ethnic wear day we all have to wear *sareers* and *salwars* [Indian dresses] and we cannot wear jeans and trousers. Like sometimes we decide that say on first Monday of June it will be “orange colour” day and we all have to wear something orange [coloured]” (19/2/05).

Other such events included agents decorating their “bays;” volleyball and football matches; and also celebrating various other events like India’s Independence Day, *Diwali*, and *Dushhera*. Many call centres organise celebrations at every possible moment, as Arup, a call centre agent noted, “we celebrate every occasion-from Holi [an Indian festival of colours] to Halloween” (26/1/05). Similarly, Dipti mentioned, “it seems as if there is something going on every day in the office” (6/12/04).

A quarter of the agents pointed out during interviews that call centres often arrange for overnight trips at the company’s expense to places like Jaipur, Simla, and Manali.⁵⁵ All these types of activities breed a certain type of social atmosphere, supporting a specific lifestyle previously little heard of in Indian society. Soma, a trainer, discussed such an event and the concerns it raised in the minds of the call centre employees:

Once our company had organised a picnic at Simla [a town 1000 km. north of Delhi] and we were supposed to spend a weekend there. Many of my female employees told me that they would not be allowed to go for this picnic as their parents do not approve them spending nights outside Delhi with young men and no adult supervision. They requested I could talk to their parents and talk to them and then they might agree to let them go for the picnic. I could not turn them down, so made a couple of phone calls at their house and said there was nothing to worry as we [the trainers] will

⁵⁴ Here “bad” referred, in the call centre agents’ words, to the type of crowd that attends such locations and the concept of consuming alcoholic drinks and dancing with the opposite sex in public places (call centre agents, pers. comm. 27/11/04; 20/2/05).

⁵⁵ These are cities in the neighbouring provinces of Delhi and are famous tourist spots.

also be there and it is our responsibility to see that no unethical events take place (1/3/05).

Nevertheless, trainers are not always able to control such situations, and incidents of physical intimacy with members of the opposite sex and sexual activities are not uncommon on these trips (call centre trainers and agents, pers. comm. 18/1/05; 7/3/05).

Social events are often organised by “speed breakers,” a group of team members chosen to undertake such planning. Each process has its own speed breakers, who organise events for the specific process. Nevertheless, all the speed breakers jointly organise some of the larger events like talent shows and volley ball matches that involve the whole call centre (call centre agents, pers. comm. 8/12/04; 11/3/05). However, often professional event organisers are given contracts to organise large-scale carnivals. Such carnivals can comprise a range of activities, including cultural shows, *mela*⁵⁶, food stalls, a variety of competitions, and dancing - accompanied by some of the best DJs in town. These events are organised for specific call centres and the number of people attending them varies between 500 and 5000 depending on the size of the call centre (call centre trainers and agents, pers. comm. 8/1/05; 14/1/05). Few call centres allow employees to invite friends and family for such carnivals; they are typically restricted to employees (HR manager and call centre agents, pers. comm. 4/12/04; 28/12/04; 3/3/05). Such events are great attractions to the young call centre agents, as Anjali (29/11/04) stated “it feels great to have *golgappa* at 3am in the morning”.⁵⁷ Employees socialise actively during such events, and close/sexual relationships often develop. As Malbon (1998) has discussed with regards to the West, the places and practices of dancing and nightclubbing are closely linked with the formation and maintenance of identities. Kalyan, a call centre trainer (28/1/05), called the call centre agents “party birds,” with Tapas, a call centre agent (15/11/04), explaining that the motto of his friends and him was “work hard and party harder.”

Nevertheless, according to a local newspaper report (*Hindustan Times* 19th Oct

⁵⁶ *Mela* is a Hindi word for a fair where vendors sell different products from food to jewellery. Traditionally these would act as a marketplace and take place in an open field during special occasions, being important sites for social gatherings.

⁵⁷ *Golgappa* is one of the most favourite fast foods among Indian youth, mainly young women. It is a hollow ball made of flour with a fine layer of dough. While serving, a hole is made in the ball and some spicy potato and peas are inserted. Then it is dipped in tamarind water and served.

2005) one of the leading call centres in Gurgaon was temporarily transforming its café to a traditional prayer room for celebrating *Karva Chauth*, one of the major occasions observed by women of North India for the well being and long life of their husband or partner. Kamlesh, a male call centre agent, described these events as part of “positive socialisation” as opposed to parties in pubs (27/12/04), highlighting that a range of opinions regarding call centre socialising remain.

In sum, overall both the physical environment and the social ambience in the call centres are very Westernised. While the Westernised effects on the physical environment are evident from the office décor, impacts on the social ambience are noted in the dress, behaviour and language used by the agents. The management of call centres implement rules to maintain this Westernised atmosphere and, through various organised events, promote certain forms of socialisation not very common in mainstream Indian culture. In sum, the unique working conditions of these call centres, coupled with a distinctive work atmosphere have an immense influence on the life of the employees, and in turn, I would argue, are bringing about certain societal changes.

7.4 Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to address part of my first research question, namely, what do call centre companies expect of their employees? The training processes in the call centres, apart from familiarising the employees with the culture of the country for which they are working, also require them to be well-versed in various etiquettes and greetings common to their clients and to act as “locals” of the place for which they are calling. Hence, such elements facilitate the agents to assume a Western personality that will better situate them in their virtual world. As evident in Section 7.1, employees undergo rigorous voice and accent training, along with different types of soft skill training that facilitate their acting as “locals.” Thus, the training processes require employees to experience a total transformation in their speech and manners to aid positive interactions with Western customers. Such requirements create stress for the employees, resulting at times in adverse impacts on their health, which will be discussed in Chapter Eight, Section 8.3.1.

A detailed analysis of the various working conditions in the call centres reveals that the management of call centres place high demands on their employees. Such

demands are not restricted to odd working schedules, but are also reflected in job requirements and acceptable, learnt behaviour patterns. While there are similarities between call centres jobs in India and those elsewhere in the world, including performance monitoring, the scripted nature of the job, and surface acting; there are also elements unique to Indian call centres. As discussed in Section 7.2.4 one of the most unique requirements is the adoption of an alias name upon joining the job.

The social atmosphere at work, in terms of dressing and behaviour codes also acts as a stimulant for the employees to create a Western ambience under the garb of professionalism. Moreover, in order to maintain and motivate the work force, these call centres encourage Western lifestyle practices whereby partying and clubbing become an integral part of socialisation. Considering the young age of the employees and given the fact that they are constantly bombarded with ideas of Western lifestyles in the media as well as in the call centres, they easily adapt to such modes of socialisation. Indeed, it was reported to me in interviews that the agents felt in the long run, that they were losing many mainstream Indian cultural norms and values (call centre agents, pers. comm. 19/12/04; 6/1/05). Many agents adopt this lifestyle under peer pressure because if they do not attend such occasions they will be considered “outdated” and not progressive, a point that will be addressed in detail in Chapter Eight, Section 8.2.

In summary, this chapter has shown that these call centres require and expect their employees to lead a lifestyle guided by specific Western values. In return for highly paid employment, employees are expected to modify their previous way of life in different ways – they change their name, they learn a Western accent, they undertake new and Western styles of socialisation, and they adopt new lifestyle practices. I argue that these expectations are often very demanding and the impacts these have on this section of society cannot be ignored, since this is an important cohort of the population. Hence, it can be concluded that though the initial qualifications for call centre jobs are comparatively minimal, as discussed in Chapter Six, the requirements and expectations of the job are unique and demanding in terms of their social consequences. It is to the impacts of these requirements and expectations that I now turn in Chapter Eight.

Chapter 8

IMPACTS OF CALL CENTRES ON EMPLOYEES

I start this chapter with a highly relevant vignette (Vignette 8.1). This story narrates a day in the life of Surita, a call centre agent employed in one of the leading international call centres located at Gurgaon, on the outskirts of New Delhi. Based on cross synopses of different transcripts (a method discussed in Chapter Five, Section 5.2.3), the story describes incidents and events that help us to understand the impacts of call centres on the daily lives of their employees.

8.1 A Day in Surita's Life

It was 2pm and Surita's alarm clock rang loudly reminding her it was time to get up. She turned off the alarm without even opening her eyes, as she wanted to sleep some more, having got to bed at 8am after returning from her call centre night shift duty. It was very difficult for her to catch any sleep at this hour of the day, the noisiest time in her neighbourhood- school buses honked loudly; the strident bargaining of the vegetable vendors with the ladies from different buildings; the constant sound of the running tap as the domestic maid tried to finish her work before the water supply stopped; all these were accompanied by the clamour of radios and noises of other vehicles. She wished the world could be silent as she desperately tried to catch some sleep, but even closing all the windows and burying her head in the pillows did not seem to lessen the sound.

When Surita ultimately opened her eyes it was already 3.30pm and her pick-up van was due to arrive at 5pm. She cursed herself for waking so late. It meant today she would not be able to complete all the other tasks she had to do- pick up her clothes from the laundry; do the weekly grocery; withdraw money from the ATM to pay her landlord-today when she had returned home. Her landlord had reminded her it was already the 10th of the month and she had not yet paid the rent- she wished she could pay her rent with her credit card like all her shopping bills! However, in this short time, all that she could do was to freshen up and get ready for the office.

She dragged herself from bed and went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. The flickering flame of the stove reminded Surita that she had to order the gas cylinder she had promised her roommate. It irritated her. Ever since she had moved in with this roommate, Arpita, who also worked at a call centre, it seemed as if Surita had to take care of every little thing in the house. Whenever asked to share chores and duties, Arpita would give excuses about her odd hours of duty and how she had to work extra hours to meet the ever-increasing demands of her company employers. As if Surita had no idea about this job! Two days before, Surita had met some of Arpita's colleagues in the consultancy office, who were discussing the selection of a ten-member team from their company to visit a call centre in Vancouver, and had noted how Arpita had tried to impress their supervisor by staying back extra hours, so that she could be part of that team.

While sipping her tea, Surita picked up her cell phone and called her mother, who

was having her evening tea in Kolkata. From Surita's voice, her mother, Sheila, could tell that she had just woken up, and became concerned, asking how long she had to work such odd shifts; was there no way to change it? Surita tried explaining to her mother that it was not so odd after all, and moreover now she was used to it. But this explanation was not enough to pacify her mother, who replied in Bengali "*Aar biyer baparey kichhu bhabli? Biyer porey jodi sasurbari thekey allow na korey*" (Did you think anything about your marriage, what if after marriage your in-laws do not allow you to work at such hours?) Surita could sense the onset of an argument for which she was in no mood. From the time her father had found out about her call centre job he had stopped talking to her despite all her arguments in favour of the job- the salary, incentives, glamour, and the chances of going abroad. According to him, no decent girl would join such a job where she had to work only night shifts. Surita could not risk even her mother not talking to her. So, without engaging into any argument, she diverted the topic and ended the conversation. However, this did remind her that she should talk to Pushpesh, her supervisor, about whether she could be transferred to the UK processing unit so that she could at least be back home by midnight. At the core of her heart even she disliked her job, it was so monotonous, but she did not want to admit it to her parents as then they would ask her to return to Kolkata, her hometown, and prepare for her marriage. In this process she would lose her independent lifestyle along with her economic independence.

More immediately, one major problem that Surita faced every day when getting ready for office was what to wear. It seemed to consume a lot of her time. Thankfully it was Friday so she could just slip into her pair of jeans without much decision-making involved because Friday was casual day. She looked at the clock, already 4.30pm, now she had to hurry up. The moment she opened her closet all her clothes fell upon her as if revolting against her dumping them so haphazardly. From this bundle she quickly picked up her newly bought Levi's hipster jeans and a pink T-shirt with low neckline. While throwing the clothes back into the closet she promised herself not to go shopping for a few weeks at least.

She was putting on her shoes when she heard the loud honking of the pick-up van. Without bothering to get up Surita shouted back in Hindi "*Aa rahi hun zara ruko*" (wait a minute I am coming) but the honking continued. This driver honked ruthlessly, even her neighbours complained, as if he was the busiest man in the world doing the most important job. Surita ran down the stairs and hurriedly boarded the *sumo*⁵⁸ scolding the driver "*Apko itna jaldi kis bat ki hai? Thora ruk nehi saktey?*" (Why are you in such a hurry, can't you wait for a few minutes). Usually six of them travelled in this *sumo* and she was the last one to board. They all worked in the same US processing unit- which was, at present, promoting one of the latest vacation packages to Disneyland. Their previous campaign had ended two days back and today the company was organising a party for all those employees who had been involved in that campaign. The party was being held at Mo Joes (one of the most famous discotheques in Gurgaon) starting at 9 pm and would continue until early morning. However, this team will join the party after 12 am. In the *sumo*, Surita sat next to Nikhil, her present boyfriend. Today, everyone was pretty excited about the party and it was the main topic of discussion on their way to the office. In the meanwhile, Nikhil whispered to Surita as he held her hand, "Did you think about the proposal?" Surita replied "I'll talk to you later about it." Surita was still toying

⁵⁸ Sumo is a seven seat minivan. Most of the call centres hire sumo for their pick up and drop services.

with Nikhil's proposal of moving in with him in the same apartment, but she did not want to hurt her parents, who would never accept a live-in-relationship.

After crossing the streets of Delhi, strewn with heavy traffic, it took around 45 minutes for the *sumo* to reach the destination at Gurgaon. Once they reached the office the atmosphere was electric as usual. Everyone seemed to be busy; one shift had just ended their duty and was waiting to go home. Many more were entering the office to start their shift. Surita and her team-mates went to "the floor" and it was time for them to log in. Now Surita "became" Susan, and as such became a young girl from Kansas city interested in baseball and soccer games, who enjoyed the jazz festival, loved to ski and skate in her leisure time, and watched shows like *Good morning America*, and *Desperate Housewives*.

After three hours of making phone calls to clients, during recess, "Susan" went to the cafeteria and picked up her dinner plate. Wow it's Chinese today! Her favourite. This is one of the best things she liked about her job. They served good food and the catering house, Taj Caterers, was supposed to be one of the best in the city. Her team-mates as well as members of other processing units joined her table sharing sex jokes and laughing loudly. "Amy" showed her new cell set that she bought yesterday for Rs.30,000 (CAD\$ 725). This was her second hand set in the last three months. This phone included a camera and connected to the Internet. In the meantime, "Rachel" joined them and she had a grumpy look on her face. Even before she sat down she started to pour out "I am going to resign tomorrow. This is too much *yaar* (buddy) I mean they just can't abuse me because I'm from India. You know he was calling me names and giving *galis* (Hinglish for swearwords)..." she burst out in tears before she could finish her sentence. She controlled herself very quickly and continued "If I complain to Jim (the supervisor) he will do a 15 minute *lecturewazi* (Hinglish for giving lecture) about how I should not be extra-sensitive and all bullshit." They all had to face it every day- abusive calls...As Susan cleared her plate she could feel a slight pain in her chest- an acid problem. She excused herself from her friends, went to the washroom and popped one of her digestive tablets, which these days she always kept handy. Almost every day she had this pain and she knew it was not a good sign. She promised herself to be more careful about her food now. From the time she had woken up until this meal all she had consumed were three cups of tea and a bag of chips. She sighed and, organising herself, went back to her cubicle.

Susan met Nikhil (now "Nick") at the smoking bay during her next short break, after another two hours on the phones trying to convince people in Texas to buy a vacation package to Disneyland. Though she herself didn't smoke she was there just to talk to Nick and keep him company. On their way back to the cubicle Nick pulled her aside to one of the allies and started kissing her. Susan was trying to pull out of his grip, as she could see Jim approaching. But it was too late. By the time Susan released herself Jim was already there. Jim warned Nick about his "indecent" behaviour inside the office and how this would have a bad impact on his career profile. Nick tried to explain that he did not have any bad intention, as all he did was just kiss his girlfriend. Before Nick and Jim embarked on a heated argument, Susan stepped in and said sorry to Jim on their behalf. This cooled the situation a little bit and Jim left, warning Nick that this was the last time he would not be reported to the higher authorities. Susan hurriedly returned to her cubicle embarrassed.

At Mo Joes, the party was in full swing and when Susan and her friends arrived after midnight – and after their shift of six hours - most of the other employees were already onto their third round of drinks. The best thing they liked about this place was the type of music they played. It was a good mix of both Western and Indian stuff. Rachel waved at Susan and called her towards the dance floor, which was pretty crowded. Susan squeezed her way through and when she reached the floor, Rachel - who was about to resign a few hours back - said “Guess what? I have made the maximum number of sales this month. Ya...hooo!” It meant an additional few thousand bucks (Indian Rupees) to be added to her salary. They both laughed loudly and said almost in unison “*Aarey yaar* (hey buddy), other than taking calls this job is *mast* (cool)!” Susan sipped her martini and started dancing, forgetting all the stress she had gone through in the last few hours. It was only 2am, no hurry to go home!

From this story it is evident that the expectations and requirements of call centre employments greatly influence the daily lives of their employees in New Delhi, India. Analysing these multi-faceted impacts as a single category would deny the reader an understanding of the various intricacies involved. Hence, an investigation into these impacts is separated here into three groups based on the nature of the influences, be they economic, social, or health related. To do so, this chapter is divided into four Sections. In Section 8.1, I focus upon economic impacts, concentrating on matters relating to salary and incentive packages, patterns of conspicuous consumption, and how these encourage a certain type of lifestyle among these young adults, thus leading to the formation of consumptionscapes. The social impacts, outlined in Section 8.2, are evident through the changing relationships call centre employees noted they had with parents and friends, changing social norms and values, and also their attitudes towards relationships and marriage. In Section 8.3, a series of the most profound impacts of call centres on the employees is noted, namely the health consequences. Due to odd working hours and frequent changes to the body clock, employees experience a range of health problems, both physical and psychological in nature. The last section of the chapter, Section 8.4 summarises the analyses, emphasising the main points discussed in the chapter. By doing so, this chapter address my second research question- *What impacts does employment in call centres have on the lifestyles of young adult employees and their consumption decisions?* In turn, this analysis draws attention to questions and issues related to the changing identity of these employees resulting from the impacts of their call centre jobs. Such questions and issues then form the focus of Chapter Nine.

8.1 Economic Impacts

This Section is subdivided into two categories: 8.1.1, salary structure and economic incentives and 8.1.2, conspicuous consumption patterns. Firstly, when analysing the economic impacts of call centre jobs it is important to understand the salary structure and monetary incentives involved. The relatively high salary package increases the purchasing power of this group, escalating their conspicuous consumption and, in the long run, allowing them to lead a lifestyle that they could not otherwise afford.

8.1.1. Salary Structure and Economic Incentives

An analysis of the socio-economic backgrounds of the employees that formed my sample set revealed that they all belonged to middle-class or upper middle-class families. Many of them were also from double-income families, indicating that they were not the main income earners of the family. Moreover, due to the age group of these employees, they were relatively free from familial responsibilities and hence could spend on themselves, as was discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.3 regarding consumption practices of Asian youth. As Beng-Huat (2000:14) states in his discussion about Asian youth, this age bracket is a period in one's life that is "a window for unlimited consumption, constrained only by financial circumstances".

Almost 90 per cent of my respondents declared that one of the main attractions of call centre employment in India is the appealing salary. The salary packages of call centres are high according to Indian standards.⁵⁹ Salaries for call centre work differ significantly, as informants explained, rates depending on the work profile, yet the minimum income was around Rs.4,000 (CAD\$97) a month. On top of this, various monetary incentives topped up their base salary. These different components are summarised in Table 8.1

⁵⁹ In India the basic salary is Rs.5,000 (CAD\$ 121) for higher division clerks in public sector offices and there are no monetary incentives. On the contrary a certain amount of the salary is deducted for provident fund and gratuity. The private sector salary for such clerical jobs are not much higher as it ranges between Rs.6000 and Rs.7000 (CAD\$145 and 169) and like public sector services there are no added incentives. Moreover these salary ranges are for full time employees and such offices do not offer much scope for part time employment.

Table 8.1 Salary structures of call centre employees

Work profile	Basic salary (monthly)		Incentives (approximately varies between)		Monthly total (Approximately)	
	Rs.*	CAD\$	Rs.	CAD\$	Rs.	CAD\$
Call Centre Executives (part time) [employees]	4000- 5000	113.64-142.05	3000-8000	85.23-227.27	7000-13000	198.86-369.32
Call Centre Executives (full time) [employees]	8000-15000	227.27-426.14	5000-15000	142.05-426.14	13000-30000	369.32-852.27
Supervisors/Team leaders	15000-20000	426.14-568.18	5000-10000	142.05-284.09	20000-30000	568.18-852.27
Trainers	20000-25000	568.18-710.23	None	-----	20000-25000	568.18-710.23
Managers	30000 (approximately)	852.27	None	-----	30000	852.27

* The exchange rate is approximately \$1 Canadian equal to Rs.35.72 (in 2005).

Source: Compiled from fieldwork information.

The incentives may at times equal or even outrank the basic pay scale, resulting in employees potentially earning up to twice the base salary depending on the incentives they earn (Table 8.1). As mentioned, all these incentives are performance based, and for outbound call centres include incentives per number of sales they make. As Amitabh, an agent in a UK based outbound call centre, observed regarding working in a process that involves selling certain packages for example, insurance or home alarm systems: “If you are in sales you have *immense* amount of money because you get incentives on everything” (12/12/04, original emphasis). Though interviews with agents from different call centres proved that the incentive schemes differed among centres, the main purpose of these incentives was - rather obviously - to motivate employees to perform better and increase their efficiency. One approach was for the agents to be given extra money based on their hourly performance. Ruchi, an HR manager, stated that “...at times we tell them OK if within an hour you give one sale or two sales we give you 50 bucks for each sale or like that” (24/12/04).

As is evident from the table above, call centre agents have more scope to gain

incentives compared with more senior employees undertaking different roles. This is mainly due to the fact that incentives are based on customer interactions- be it making a sale or resolving queries. However, team leaders or supervisors are eligible for other team-based incentives. For example, if a team is able to meet a given target or produces an extraordinary performance then all team members including the team leaders and supervisors are eligible for certain rewards (call centre agents, Kakoli 30/11/04; Gitika 23/12/04; process team leader of a process 24/12/04;). The agents noted that they were the ones that could receive individual incentives over and above the incentives provided to any other team members. Sulagna, an agent, made it clear that “as a call centre agent one can make loads of money. At times, agents earn much more than the senior managers” (29/11/04). Centres also have “employee of the month” awards, gift certificates, rolls of honour, discount coupons for shopping at malls, passes to discotheques, and many other such added incentives and perks. Shilpa, a call centre agent, proudly explained, “last month, since I made the maximum number of sales, I was declared the employee of the month. So it added few thousand extra bucks to my salary” (2/2/05). Other than performance-based incentives, call centre agents also get extra pay for working on certain national holidays such as *Diwali* and *Dussehra*. According to Nutan (30/1/05) “call centre work has to go on to meet the demands of Western clients,” and thus management has devised ways so that agents come to work on such days, as noted in Chapter Seven, Section 7.2.1.

Apart from motivating employees, these high salaries coupled with various incentives also act as a mechanism for *retaining* employees, since the attrition rate in call centres is very high. Parikh (*Times of India* 14th November 2005) agreed that, in the short term, incentives tend to retain call centre employees, most being young and hence, in his mind, swayed by cash incentives. Yet, in the long run, interviews showed that incentives alone could not reduce the attrition rate, and only 20 per cent of the time were such incentives helpful in this matter (call centre agents, pers. comm. 22/11/04; 30/12/04). As such, management was continuously expanding their “repertoire of incentives.”

With many young adults viewing these call centres as the best option in New Delhi to earn money, it is not surprising that call centre employment is often called the

“money-spinning sector” (*BPO Watch India* 2005). When respondents were asked why they joined a call centre, the financial rewards were central, with responses such as “to earn more money” (Naveen 20/11/04); “the salary is quite good” (Shiva 15/12/04); and “easy way to earn lots of money” (Rohini 19/12/04).

Interviewees described a range of immediate financial motives for joining a call centre, be it to gain funding for education, extra pocket money, or to buy some items for conspicuous consumption (call centre agents, pers. comm. 10/1/05; 25/2/05). One key informant, Vinita, who was a teacher in a college at Delhi, stated that “most of them [call centre agents], at least 70 per cent of them, they want quick money for something so they join the call centres” (1/12/04). For almost 88 per cent of agents interviewed the call centres provided an opportunity to earn some extra money that would provide them economic independence and allow them to spend on items otherwise not possible with their previous limited income, that had usually been in the shape of pocket money from their parents. The role of call centres in increasing economic independence was emphasised by almost 80 per cent of my respondents. To quote Anirudh (22/12/04):

There was a time when – you know, I was a student- and if you are not earning then [for] anything you need you have to ask [for money]- I need money for this, I need money for that.... Also what happens like if I go and ask for 1000 bucks today [from my parents] I definitely have to give some answer to my parents- *why* I need this. And if you start earning its basically you know you kind of feel independent.

Though “money” was always reported as the ultimate reason for joining a call centre, there was a slight difference noticed in the reactions from outstation employees to this question, compared to those originally from Delhi. The two main reasons noted as to why outstation youth joined call centres were either that they were students pursuing higher studies in Delhi and they needed money to support themselves in the city or they had come for job opportunities and while they were searching for other jobs they joined the call centre as a stop gap measure. Alka, a 24 year female from Dhanbad (a small town in India) explained:

When I came to Delhi I was looking for some job and then I went for a walk-in-interview and got this call centre job. I mean I didn’t come here [Delhi] to join a call centre, but I thought by the time I get some other job its better to work in a call centre and earn some money (10/12/04).

Since call centre jobs require minimal educational qualifications for the middle class youth compared to other potential employment, gaining employment in a call centre is an easy matter compared with other jobs that offer similar salaries. Bhupinder, a male call centre agent, summed this up as “easy job, fast money. All you need to do is sit and talk over the phone and they pay you handsome salary for that” (31/1/05).

Nevertheless, for Delhites, the story was often different. More than 90 per cent of them joined a call centre either to earn extra pocket money or because they needed “quick money for something” (Deepa, a female call centre agent from Delhi 5/3/05). However, for both employees from afar and in the city, economic independence was the main criteria. In Geeta’s (a female call centre agent from Lucknow, a town in North western India) words, “when you are young you need money for a lot of things, you know. [For] small things also. Economic independence becomes quite important” (15/2/05). Hence, the economic gains from working in a call centre provide ample disposable income, enabling these employees to engage in very high levels of conspicuous consumption, the subject of the next section.

8.1.2 Conspicuous Consumption

In their discussion of young people’s economic independence in Western countries, Bowlby et al. (1998) note that finding one’s first paid job is a step of great significance for most young people. It offers an independent source of income and provides their first taste of independence from parental financial control. As a result, such youth often feel free to spend on items of their choice without being questioned. An analysis of my field information suggests that, for almost all of the young adults working as call centre agents in New Delhi, this was their first experience of paid work and, with high income packages, they have surfaced as central urban consumers of certain modern goods and services. For them, consumption has become a way of life. It is noteworthy that *all* my call centre agent respondents stated that after joining a call centre there had been drastic changes in their expenditure preferences and patterns. As Mita, a female call centre agent, candidly remarked, “now if I need a particular thing I just go and get it” (5/2/05).

It was evident from interviews that call centre agents from Delhi who continued to live with their family had, in fact, their entire income to spend as they liked since they

did not have to pay rent, as is the norm for unmarried youth living at home in India. However, even though the call centre agents from Delhi spent a large amount on self-gratification and pursuing a specific lifestyle, the first few months' salary was spent on family members and this trend was noticed across gender. As Bowlby et al. (1998) note in relation to his study of young people in Western countries, the first paid job allows young people to contribute to their parents' household expenses thus allowing them to assume an adult position in the household. Almost all my respondents from Delhi reported that the first month's salary was spent on family members. Though these call centre agents do not contribute as such to their parents' household expenses they buy gifts for their parents and siblings trying to confer their economic independence and hence an adult identity in the household. In most cases, they buy gifts for the family members- mainly for their mother and younger siblings – behaviour best explained in Ketki's words:

The first salary that I got I gave it to my Mom. Second salary that I got from that, uum, I bought my sister a cell phone because that was- my sister was very crazy about that. So she always wanted to have cell phone. That's the second salary I spent (16/2/05).

These agents' economic independence in the family household also provides them with a certain degree of self-satisfaction, as many a time their roles change from receivers to providers. As Anand explained to me:

So now you know, like in the family, my Mom says "I want to go there" so I say "I will arrange it for you" or she wanted this and I got it for her so I personally feel good. Initially it was like if I wanted something I had to go there and ask them and now I feel like if they need anything they come to me and say "I need this" and I have the provision to fulfil that. So it makes me feel good you know. Like, I mean my brother says that "*mere ko yee chahiye mera birthday aa raha hai*" [I want this for my birthday]. So I am in a position like "OK if you want it you will have it by tomorrow" (23/12/04).

Hence, for almost 95 per cent of interviewees from Delhi, their entire pay packet represented discretionary funding, their "pocket money." They were helped in this regard by the fact that expenses like meals and transport were paid for by the call centres; while other household expenses were taken care of by their parents. Rupinder, a female agent

from Chandigarh (a neighbouring town of Delhi) compared the situation between those agents who lived with their parents in Delhi, and those who were outstation agents:

I will tell you, in call centres, there are two kinds of people. One who are outstation students and then there are the Delhites. Now for Delhities' consumption pattern and their level of [spending] is very high- because they pay no rent, no food, nothing because everything is taken care of by their parents (18/11/04).

However, as Rupinder alludes to, the situation is different for those from outside Delhi. This cohort has the additional expenditure component of rent and the need to pay for some of their meals. It is interesting to note amongst this cohort, however, that despite such expenditures, these agents revealed that their disposable income was still at least 50 per cent of their salary.

During fieldwork, it was clear that all the call centre agents interviewed, whether they were from Delhi or outstation, represented consumers ready to spend on items that could ascribe to them a specific social class. While spending primarily on consumer goods, this often equated to purchases for self-gratification, as well as promoting a certain lifestyle as discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.2. Impulse buys appeared to occur frequently. Thus, Kunal, a male agent from Delhi, who had joined a call centre six months before our interview, explained: "Now I buy whatever I feel like. I don't think twice" (9/12/04). Such statements were echoed by other respondents, for example, Sudipa, a 27 year female agent proudly explained her shopping experiences, "earlier [before joining the call centre] I used to first look at the price tag. But now it's not a problem" (30/11/04). Such replies were irrespective of gender. Common lists of expenditures ranged from buying expensive cell phones to brand name clothes. During interviews, I asked the respondents to list five items on which they spent the majority of their call centre incomes. In order of preference, the list included cell phones, clothes, shoes, motorbikes and cars (for men), jewellery and cosmetics (for women), and CDs and DVDs.⁶⁰ As Arup, another agent, declared candidly "I buy all the latest CDs and I have a great passion for buying different types of sunglasses" (8/1/05).

⁶⁰ An article in *Times of India* (2004) reports that, among call centre agents, average per capita consumption of sports shoes and sneakers has doubled in 2004 to three pairs.

Almost two-thirds of agents interviewed sported the latest model cell phone, replete with Internet connection and camera. Gopal, a male call centre agent, said he preferred to check his e-mails on his cell phone as it saved time. This was also evident in the opening vignette of this chapter in which Amy was flaunting her new handset to her friends. Similarly Amrita, a female call centre agent reported,

cell phones - I told you, they are a craze in [our call centre]. Everyone has the latest model [laughs]. These cell phones have *lots and lots* of features on them and they are very expensive. Today I saw a guy who spent Rs.22,000 [CAD\$ 532] on his cell phone (1/12/04).

Not unlike many Western countries, in India it is highly fashionable among young people to frequently change the model of their cell phones (*India Today* 2005). The call centre agents were in an advantageous position to pursue this trend as they received comparatively generous disposable incomes, in comparison to other youth in India. Indeed, rather astonishingly, 81 per cent of my respondents reported that their maximum expenditure was cell phone related- be it changing the model or paying high bills. Tapas, a male call centre agent, explained:

At present my maximum expenditure is on my cell phone- purchasing cash cards. Because when I am not in office most of the time I am talking to my girlfriend. I prefer to use the cell phone as it is more convenient and I can talk from anywhere, the location does not matter (28/12/04).

However, other than cell phones, these employees also spend a lot on clothes. Indeed, buying clothes is an obsession among these agents, as was confirmed by 96 per cent of my interviewees. Preeti, a call centre agent, commented passionately that “almost half my salary is spent every month buying clothes and shoes. I love to wear the latest style” (21/2/05). As mentioned in Chapter Seven, Section 7.3.2, despite rules regarding wearing formal clothes in the work place, employees adjust by wearing clothes that suit their purpose and at the same time do not defy the office decorum. This appears to involve spending a lot of money on clothes. As noted in vignette one, Surita’s closet was full with clothes yet she did not stop buying them. This consumption had indeed developed into a habit and she preferred, like her colleagues, not to wear the same clothes too often. Another reason for spending a lot on clothes was to make an impact in the

workplace and impress their colleagues, as youth are known to do elsewhere as well. Soma, a trainer explained this to me carefully, “these agents are very conscious about their dressing. It is a trend among them to wear good clothes to impress upon their colleagues, mainly of opposite sex, and get attention” (11/3/05). Yet it was not the focus on clothes alone, but the need for these to be *brand name* clothes that was striking. While 62 per cent respondents frankly acknowledged their preference for brand name clothes, others were not so open about it. They tried to portray a “cool attitude” and instead reported that, though they spend a lot on clothes, brand names were not important to them. Nonetheless, when asked about their favourite shopping places, these same respondents mentioned *Metropolitan*, *Shoppers’ Stop*, and *Greater Kailash I Market*- all malls that sport a considerable number of Western brand name clothes, such as Lee Cooper, Tommy Hilfiger, and Calvin Klein.

The office atmosphere was fundamental in instigating this consumption pattern. Role models to replicate were abundant, from senior management to frequent visitors from abroad, all in Western brand name clothes. Shopping, then, was clearly one of the favourite pastimes of call centre agents. These shopping patterns portrayed an affinity towards conspicuous consumption, with goods bought not so much for their utility than for their social value (discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.2). Following Giddens (1991), consumption plays a central role in constructing a new sense of identity based on and around the possession and ownership of status-conferring goods. People thus create, mold and alter personal identities through consumption, a point returned to in Chapter Nine (Mason 1998).

Call centre employees’ choices of shopping sites provide an interesting angle to this discussion. As mentioned, their favourite shopping places include the upmarket shopping malls in the city. These multi-storeyed malls closely resemble North American malls and house stores displaying expensive items, many imported. About 38 per cent of my respondents reported that these malls are frequented by call centre employees not only for shopping purposes but as ideal places to “hangout,” even for dating. These locations are preferable to traditional market places because of the ambience, complete with Western music and air conditioning that attracts a young and vibrant fashionable crowd. It is with such locations that call centre employees want to identify. According to

a representative from one such mall management company (pers comm. 6/3/05), call centre agents prefer world class shopping experiences that not only include upper-class shops but also intangible features like ambience, as well as tangible traits like mall management, facility management, and hassle-free parking.

What it is important to note in this regard is that such sites would not have been instantly chosen by these youth as places to visit before starting a call centre job. While in the past these agents might have visited such malls once in a while, and only to “window shop”- now they were able to change this behaviour to actually consume in these sites. In Madhuri’s words, “previously [before joining the call centre] I used to go to Janpath and Sarojini Nagar [not very expensive markets]. But now I prefer to shop from Ansal Plaza [a very upmarket mall]” (19/12/04). Though the choices of shopping places for call centre agents are influenced by their high incomes, peer pressure also plays a significant role in deciding their shopping choices. Anjali, a female call centre agent explained this to me, “all my friends [other call centre agents] shop from Greater Kailash and Ansal Plaza. Now I can’t tell them I get my clothes from Lajpat [an inexpensive market]. Also, when I go with them [call centre friends], for shopping, you just can’t come back buying nothing” (29/11/04).

Clubbing and partying also form important aspects of these young adults’ conspicuous consumption behaviour. Malbon (1998) states that night-clubbing is a form of “experimental consumption” for young people. He links the places and practices of clubbing with the formation and maintenance of identities and identifications. New Delhi society in general refers to call centre agents as “party birds.” Their motto is “work hard and party harder” (Kalyan, a trainer 20/1/05). Over four-fifths of the agents interviewed frequent pubs and discotheques and they reported that a large part of their income was spent on such activities. Their favourite sites are upmarket clubs and discotheques located in various parts of Delhi, including Mo Joes, Buddha Lounge, Take Your Chances, Sahara and Floats. Nearly half of my respondents stated that initially, if they had joined a call centre in 2002, they used to frequent pubs and discos located in downtown Delhi, but, since 2004, many such places, in fact the “better ones” (Rohini 19/2/05) are in Gurgaon. They prefer to visit the latter as they are close to their place of work with good music and ambience.

Almost two-thirds of the agents declared that odd working hours contributed to their frequent visits to these locales. They felt that after a stressful period at work, a few hours of dancing with friends acted as a relaxing mechanism. As Shreya illuminated, “you know after such hectic work it feels good to go to the disco and dance. It’s kind of relaxing” (7/3/05). Thus, as Malbon (1998) notes, with regards to UK nightclubs, dancing can provide a release from many of the accepted norms and customs of the social spaces of every day life, such as social distance, conformity, and reserve or inattention. The key point is that the club-goers temporarily forget aspects of their lives that they find stressful and “experience a state of ‘inward emigration’ ...” (ibid.: 275). In clubbing they find a unique blend of pleasures and an escape route from the rigours and stresses of the “real world,” a real world that provides very few opportunities for releasing such stresses. This was noticed in vignette one as Surita and Rachel forgot about all their stresses as they enjoyed the captivating music at Mo Joes and started dancing.

Almost half of the outstation agents interviewed, mainly women (88 per cent of women) stated that initially, upon starting their call centre employment, they would not frequent these types of places- nightclubs, pubs, and discotheques- as they would feel uncomfortable. However, after attending some of the office parties, held at such places as noted in Chapter Seven, Section 7.3.2, these individuals felt that after all, clubbing was not as “bad” as they had initially thought. Such actions, it is important to note, are still not very common in mainstream Indian culture. What we find here are certain behaviours, triggered by call centre employment, that otherwise would not have necessarily been experienced by these individuals.

Parties are not limited to nightclubs and pubs however, and very often agents also organise parties at their homes. Interviews revealed that 57 per cent of call centre agents believed that the call centres had initially made these youth comfortable with entering nightclubs, and then, because of that, the idea of having such a party at home became more acceptable. Often these are theme parties, ranging from Hip Hop to Hawaiian. These parties also include alcoholic drinks, and overnight stays are not uncommon. This behaviour- not considered acceptable by older generations - is one of the reasons that call centre agents find it difficult to get rental accommodation in New Delhi, a point elaborated upon in Section 8.2.2.

In addition to all these different conspicuous consumption activities noted above, call centre employees also spend a lot on eating out. Indeed, interview data revealed that dining out has become quite “a fad” among the call centre agents. Dining out twice a week was quite normal among these people as reported to me by more than half of the agents, at times even exceeding five times a week. Though there were no fixed preferences for any particular restaurants, interviewees suggested that their favourite locations for fast food were McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Subway, Domino’s Pizza, and Nirulas (a chain of Delhi-based fast food joints serving Western fast food like pizza and hamburgers).⁶¹ Alternatively, for more refined dining they preferred to switch places as “it depends on mood” (Gurpreet, a female call centre agent 9/3/05). All these restaurants are expensive compared with the regular Indian standards, all attracting an upwardly mobile crowd. Interestingly, when I asked for a venue to conduct my interviews, most respondents suggested *Barista*- a very upmarket café chain where you can order café lattes, cappuccinos or coffee mochas (at a significant cost compared with any ordinary café in India). I subsequently learnt that *Barista* was a favourite call centre employee hangout, primarily because of its style and ambience.

Considering their age group, the call centre agents interviewed were also great movie lovers. More than 70 per cent of them mentioned that, although they love to watch the “homemade” Bollywood hits, their inclination was more towards Hollywood movies. One of my respondents said that after joining a call centre job he was able to better understand the Hollywood movies, especially in terms of the accents and specific word usage, not to mention some of the locations that the agents have to learn about. However, even their choice of movie theatres reflects a specific trend of consumption. According to four-fifths of my respondents, they prefer to watch movies in any of the Priya Village Roadshow (PVR) theatres (a chain of multiplex cinema complexes that house shopping malls and different restaurants including McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Subway and Domino’s Pizza) and the location was not important. The price of tickets at these theatres is almost ten times that of other theatres in the city. Yet, to explain her choice, Nutan, a female call centre agent, remarked: “Whatever the movie might be, I go to PVR and watch a movie.

⁶¹ Though there is a large volume of literature on the export of obesity from North America via fast food infiltration (see Friedrich 2002; Prentice 2006) interestingly, obesity was not noticed among my call centre interviewees.

At least you have a decent crowd and even if the movie is not good the experience of sitting in the AC [air-conditioning] for three hours is great..." (30/11/04).

This analysis shows clearly that call centre employees are not only consumers of goods and services, but rather, to use Massey's (1998) words, they are also consumers of space. Their preferences of specific shopping malls, nightclubs, restaurants, and even movie theatres reflect this attitude. Moreover, these agents use consumption practices-interchangeably with "lifestyle"- to serve to differentiate between social groupings and thus help to reinforce and reproduce social hierarchies, as argued by Crompton (2003) and discussed in detail in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

While both genders consume conspicuously, there are differences in spending behaviours. It was observed that despite giving in to excessive consumption there is a tendency among men to try and save some money as well. When they do so, they tend to invest in property and cars. Indeed, the *Times of India* (2004) reports that the real estate residential sector's performance grew by 20 per cent in 2004 primarily due to an increase in disposable income among call centre agents coupled with easily available home loans. These agents also spend a considerable amount of money on cars and motorbikes. However, such targets for consumption were not noticed among their women counterparts. The reason behind such differential spending patterns might be due to the fact that in Indian society, even today, men are considered to be the main "bread winners" in the family, and the status of a family is gauged by the male income, displayed conspicuously through possession of certain items such as the house and cars. As such, there is a lot more social pressure on men to perform well economically.

Social norms regarding marriage must also be factored into this analysis. When a young woman's parents look for a potential groom (as is still common throughout India) they generally want the man to be well-established economically and be able to provide well for their daughter. In such cases, the man's capability or potential is measured in terms of his material possessions, including a house and car(s). However, this is not the case for women, with many earning either to be economically independent or to be engaged in some productive work; however, they are not considered the primary "bread winner" in the family. Nonetheless, it needs to be mentioned that these "images" are not always the norm. Based on my experience in India it can be stated that the bride's

material possessions and job are not so important for marriage purposes, rather it is her father's and brothers(s)' possessions and economic status (if any) that act as a parameter for marriage. Being aware of such social systems, women in the urban middle-class realm have a tendency to spend all or most of their salary on self-gratification or personal needs rather than investing in property or cars. During more than half of my interviews this trend became very perceptible among the call centre agents. Vignette Two below, explains the gender differences in consumption patterns among call centre employees in a drama form.⁶² Here, it is noticed that Lalit is eager to buy an apartment as he is trying to settle down, while Shilpa just has Rs.100 in her bank account, having spent her income on shopping and partying.⁶³

8. 2. Gender Differences in Consumption Patterns

It was Monday, the first day of work after the weekend, and the call centre agents were in the pick up van going to their night shift. They were catching up with each other. Lalit is male, while Shilpa and Rohini are female.

Lalit: So how was your weekend?

Shilpa: Good. I did some shopping as usual- bought a couple of pieces of clothes, a pair of shoes. Then on Saturday night I went to the disco with my friends. They've opened a new one near PVR, it's so cool! What about you?

Rohini: Did you go to Shoppers' Stop? They're having some jewellery exhibition. I wanted to check on it. *Aur Lalit, tu ne kya kiya* [And Lalit what did you do]?

Lalit: I had to go to the property dealer again, as he wanted to show me some new apartments in Mayur Vihar.

Rohini: You're planning to buy an apartment? [says in a surprised tone]

Lalit: Yeah. Since I'm preparing to get married sometime early next year, it's better that I buy a house now.

Rohini: Good *yaar* [buddy]. I spend all my money buying clothes and jewellery.

Shilpa: Me too. I'm not at all in the habit of saving. [She laughs] You'll be surprised to know how much I have in my bank account! Make a guess...

Lalit: How much? Rs. 10,000 (CAD\$300) [said after thinking for a few seconds and wrinkling his eyebrows]

Shilpa: Are you crazy? I just have Rs.100 (CAD\$3) [again she laughs out loudly].

Rohini: Lalit, you just bought a bike [motor bike] last month, isn't it? And now an apartment, *woh lag raha hai achha savings ho raha hai* [seems you are saving a lot]. [said mockingly]

⁶² A method discussed in Chapter Five, Section 5.2.3.

⁶³ Though the situation is created, the conversation is directly extracted from original transcripts, highlighting clearly the gender differences in consumption decisions among call centre agents.

Lalit: It's not like you girls OK? I have to save; I am a man *yaar* [buddy]. *Aur sadi wadi bhi karni hai* [I have to get married also]. Who will marry their daughter to me if in my bank account I just have Rs.100 like Shilpa?

Distinct gendered consumption patterns were also expressed with regards to spending related to one's partner. Over half of the male respondents reported that a large part of their income is spent on their girlfriends. Indeed, call centres are "breeding grounds" for dating couples, an aspect elaborated later in the chapter (Section 8.2.3), and in order to impress their girlfriends, these men shower them with gifts accompanied by frequent trips to restaurants and clubs. Since it is regarded inappropriate to share the bills for such expenses, and considering the traditional Indian male ego, men bear all these costs, which ultimately increase their expenditure. Moreover, since these call centre agents lead an extravagant lifestyle and, as noticed, their "hangouts" are quite upmarket, this can be a considerable expense and portion of their salary. Though spending on partners is a gendered phenomenon, general spending on friends is quite common among call centre agents, regardless of gender, with sizeable spending on treats for friends and partying. Analysed interview data revealed that this behaviour can be related to an attempt to forge their position and membership among their peers and in return gain their peers' faith and loyalty. Karan, who had been working in a call centre for five months at the time of her interview, explained, "when you go in a group and you are ready to spend even for your friends, it gives you a good rapport with them" (20/11/04).

A comparison of consumption behaviours between employees from Delhi compared with outstation agents also revealed differences. The latter, away from home and often living on their own, have to bear extra costs of living including house rent (though they might share accommodation), which is not the case for their colleagues from Delhi. Also, many outstation call centre agents interviewed were students pursuing part-time studies, adding additional costs. Rakhi, a female call centre agent from Punjab (a neighbouring province of Delhi) and a student, explained this difference:

Now for [call centre] Delhites' consumption patterns and their level of spending is very high- because no rent, no food, nothing because everything is taken care of by the parents. My boyfriend is a Delhite, so he could save a lot. Because he is like in his mom's house. After six months he had Rs.50,000 (CAD\$1210) in his account, I had zero (30/11/04).

Other than salary and incentives, another factor that allows call centre employees in general to be great consumers is the availability of credit cards. Once an agent joins a call centre they have the opportunity to open an account in one or several private banks, for example, HSBC (The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Limited), ICICI (Industrial Credit and Investment Corporation of India), HDFC (Housing Development Finance Corporation Limited), or Citibank. Though each bank has different credit policies, on average all offer to give call centre agents a credit card either a few months after they gain employment or once they have reached a certain salary. Usually the prerequisites are quite low in both cases and as a result most agents have credit cards that make spending easier.

During my visits to call centres, I noticed that outside four of them, agents from different banks stood and solicited employees with attractive offers on their way to and from the office. On interviewing one such credit card agent, he replied that it was very common for these young people to accept such offers and that daily there were almost 80 to 90 call centre employees in New Delhi subscribing to a credit card service. Jaya, a female call centre agent confirmed that now she owned many credit cards, making shopping easier for her (8/2/05). Likewise, in vignette one, Surita wished that she could pay her rent using her credit card.

Hence, based on their consumption decisions and lifestyle practices, I argue that call centre agents are one of the major groups of conspicuous consumers now of increasing importance in urban India and that this cohort can be categorised as part of the “new rich” in India. Studies conducted in different Asian countries (including Bocock 1993; Robinson and Goodman 1996; Lett 1998; Chan 2000; Talib 2000; Embong 2002; Clammer 2003; Schuman 2003) maintain that this class is characterised by a lifestyle that places great importance on conspicuous consumption, as discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.1.1. This phenomenon is on the rise in Asian countries undergoing economic transformations and becoming more integrated into globalised consumerism, as is India. Nevertheless, these scholars also argue that the trend of conspicuous consumption that is so apparent among the new rich in Asia is not only because of easy accessibility of commodities, but also due to the availability of the means to buy them. My study of call

centre agents clearly demonstrates that the disposable income available to these employees enables them to spend freely on everything from fashion to food, and entertainment to electronics, placing them in the category of world-class consumers (c.f. Schuman 2003; *Enroute* 2004). The ready accessibility of credit cards encourages such purchases, as does the fact that, for many of these middle and upper-class urban youth, remittances back to the family appear to be a minimal part of their incomes, if a part at all.

The recognition of such aspects leads me to argue that call centres in India have produced a new “consumptionscape” as proposed by Ger and Belk (1996).⁶⁴ They argue that the global consumptionscape adds to the resources available to people and reflects how consumers with the financial means draw from all available global and local, new and old sources as they use products to (re)position themselves in local age, gender, social class, religion and ethnic hierarchies. A review of literature on call centres in developed countries as discussed in Chapter One, Section 1.1 suggests that call centre employments in these countries do not provide high salaries according to the local standard. Under such circumstances the agents might not be able to engage in high levels of conspicuous consumption based only on their income from call centres and hence call centres might not produce consumptionscapes in developed countries. However, based on my analysis, I would conclude that call centres in India form consumptionscapes that provide resources- monetary as well as lifestyle options - for the young adults employed in them that enable and encourage constructions of Westernised consumption behaviour among this cohort.

8.2. Social Impacts

The varied and multiple economic impacts of call centre jobs, including changing consumption patterns and lifestyle practices, have precipitated a range of societal impacts. These include an increasingly unbalanced work-life equation, shifting relationship norms and changing lifestyles. Due to their work schedules, call centre agents explained that they were often unable to manage a balance between work and life,

⁶⁴ The concepts of various “scapes” in relation to this thesis are discussed in detail in Chapter Three, Section 3.2.

which in turn led to straining relationships not only with family members but also with their partners and friends. An analysis of the data shows that the most often noted social impacts were centred on relationship issues. In this section these concerns are addressed under three broad headings: changing lifestyles (Section 8.2.1); changing social relations and social norms (Section 8.2.2); and societal acceptance of call centre jobs (Section 8.2.3).

8.2.1. Changing lifestyles

“Ever since I joined [the call centre] my lifestyle has changed completely,” explained Tapas, a male call centre agent (6/12/04). Indeed, the lifestyles of call centre agents were influenced by a variety of employment-linked factors. Most notable were the office atmosphere, changing consumption patterns and, as a result, employees’ shifting views of the world. In turn, these were leading to a renegotiation of identities amongst these youth. The above section interpreted the consumption decisions of these employees, noting that such consumption practices were directed towards leading a specific lifestyle- one that represents, particularly, the lifestyles of the upper middle class and the new rich in India, while strongly guided by Western influences (as introduced in my Conceptual Framework, Chapter Three, Section 3.1.1). I argue that the Western influences on their lifestyles is a combined product of the office atmosphere where they work, as well as interactions with Western clients as part of their employment. It is also a result of the increased availability of Western goods, that employees now have the financial means to purchase- goods now available in India as the country continues to globalise. As a result, these emerging lifestyles are often in direct contrast to the lifestyles of these employees’ parents and older generations in India.

In general, employees lead a very “fast life,” as Mahua, the mother of a call centre agent lamented (30/11/04). Another of my respondents, a supervisor in an outbound call centre, elucidated, “these people [call centre agents] want to enjoy life. Once they join a call centre they come here with the mindset that they are going to enjoy over here” (15/1/05). Thus, even if some agents did not initially approve of certain activities of their colleagues, ultimately over a period of time, they tended to be influenced increasingly by

actions occurring around them, with even so-called “orthodox agents” starting to believe that these new ways were “fun.”

Earlier I would feel like- Oh I was from JNU,⁶⁵ what I was going to talk to them [my colleagues] about? I am here for a short time and I am not going to talk to these people. If I talk to them what do I talk about? Because our wavelengths won't match and they are, like, getting happy over sexual jokes- silly sexual jokes- I am over that age. But then at a point, at some point, you feel like that *you are* out of place. I mean, you feel that you're a snob. You will get to the point that they are not [stupid], they are fun loving people and you know, I mean, they are enjoying their life. It's a way, I mean, they are just here and between the breaks they get to see each other and all. But it was – the first two months were *really* hard for me. (Bimla, a female call centre agent 11/12/04, emphasis in original speech).

Agents explained how, during their period of employment, they started to develop various Western hobbies and practice certain habits that were not common in mainstream Indian culture but were considered to be increasingly fashionable among call centre employees. Nearly three-quarters of the agents noted that their ultimate aim was to enjoy life; their concept of enjoyment lying in the pursuit of certain habits. Some of the prominent of these were the regular consumption of alcoholic drinks and cigarette smoking, having relationships with colleagues, and engaging in pre- and also extra-marital sexual activities. All such behaviours are considered acceptable in the call centre industry by the majority of employees, as Sawant stated “in call centre *sab kuchh chalta hai* [everything is justified]” (9/12/04).

Often, to overcome stress at work and to cope with the odd working hours, agents started cigarette smoking, with adverse effects on their health (discussed in Section 8.3.1). Not being allowed to smoke inside the office, small outlets, like balconies, called “smoking bays” were provided at the call centres. Mainly men - including Nikhil in vignette one - hustle to these smoking bays in short recesses (usually five minutes) every two hours, during their shifts. Madhuri, a female call centre agent said “during the breaks mainly the guys rush to *fag* [slang in India for smoking]” (20/12/04). Though smoking is more common among men, many women working at call centres also start smoking. The

⁶⁵ JNU is the acronym for Jawaharlal Nehru University, located in New Delhi and is internationally known for high academic performance.

women I interviewed who smoked argued that it was a trait of modernisation and it also helped to negate gender differences.

This contrasts with general societal norms. In India, smoking among middle class women is not generally viewed in a positive light.⁶⁶ The *India Today* (2004) reports that 55 per cent of men in night-shift call centre job smoke, compared with the national average of 25 per cent, while the figure for women is 51 per cent compared with national average of 21 per cent. My own findings were more gender-divided than this, with about 70 per cent of men and 20 per cent of women I interviewed reporting that they are regular smokers.

Consuming alcohol regularly had also become very common among call centre workers. Again, these habits were considered by call centre interviewees as marks of being “modern” and a characteristic of belonging to the upwardly mobile middle class (call centre agents, pers. comm. 21/12/04; 11/1/05; Key informant 30/11/04). Drinking habits among these agents can be attributed partly to the culture promoted by the call centres. As discussed in Chapter Seven, Section 7.3.1, the parties organised by the call centres were hosted in discotheques and pubs where serving alcoholic beverages was standard. However, alcohol drinking is not a very common part of the Indian culture, and those who did consume alcohol occasionally would be very discrete about it. Moreover, traditional gendered norms mean that it is even less acceptable for women to consume alcoholic drinks. Nevertheless, from interviews it was obvious that these office-organised parties offer avenues for these young people to experiment and indulge in such drinking. Indeed, 62 per cent develop a habit of over-indulging on a regular basis consequently hampering their health (as discussed further in Section 8.3.1). Over four-fifths of my participants responded that before they joined the call centre they were not in the habit of consuming alcohol, and after initially joining the call centre they would avoid alcoholic drinks at work parties. Yet now, they explained, after an average of three months, they felt drinking was not “so bad” after all. Peer pressure also played an important role, since

⁶⁶ Based on my personal experiences I would suggest that middle class values in India impose certain restrictions on moral grounds against tobacco consumption by women. In India, many women belonging to the lower classes are addicted to different types of tobacco, mainly *bidi* (indigenous cigarettes) and *tambaku* (raw tobacco). However, cigarette smoking is considered to be a trait among rich, “high society” women who frequent clubs and pubs, or women who are not in respectable professions, like nightclub dancers, and prostitutes.

among call centre employees alcoholic drinks were considered to be an essential part of “enjoyment.” Kamlesh, a call centre agent, explained the situation to me:

When you go to [office organised] parties and you say “no I don’t drink” for the first time it is OK. But then your colleagues will say “*chal thora taste karley kuchh nehi hoga*” [come taste a little nothing will happen]. Then you also feel OK let me have some [alcohol] and *thora thora karke* [little by little] it develops in a habit (20/12/04).

Such drinking practices were not limited to pubs and nightclubs. As Gitika, a female call centre employee stated, if a shift is over near midnight then it was quite common for call centre agents to visit the nearby *dhabas* (road side restaurants) for drinking.⁶⁷ These were convenient for call centre employees, located on their way from work. Indeed, over half the employees interviewed utilised alcohol and tobacco products to overcome the strain of being awake the whole night. After such a shift, they were partial to sitting at such *dhabas*, eating and drinking with friends rather than going directly back home. However, this practice was more common among men and was rarely noticed among women. In sum though, the “bar culture” promoted by the call centres and actively pursued by the call centre agents, along with odd working hours, legitimised the habits of smoking and consuming alcoholic drinks.

Though going to *dhabas* might have been restricted to men, other nightlife activities were not as gender specific. Aparajita, a female call centre agent, stated that instead of going home when her shifts were over at midnight, she preferred to go to a discotheque or pub and enjoy few drinks and dancing with friends. Thus, in Usha’s (a trainer of an USA-based call centre) words, “funky hours” of work provided scope for developing a specific lifestyle among these agents (4/2/05). One could suggest that if these same groups of people were working regular shifts (9am to 5pm) then they would be back home by the evening and perhaps would be less likely to frequent night clubs or pubs at the such regular intervals. On the other hand, with call centre jobs, they often visited discos and pubs more than four times a week (call centre agents, pers. comm.

⁶⁷ This call centre is located in Gurgaon, within the state of Haryana. The laws for selling alcohol are very flexible in Haryana unlike in Delhi. Alcohol is available at these roadside restaurants popularly called *dhaba* at a very reasonable rate, and these sites are open through-out the night because they are on the Delhi-Jaipur highway, a busy expressway. Call centre employees often stop at these eating sites to “grab a bite” or have dinner. It is also a trend among youths to go to such *dhabas* and have a few drinks. These *dhabas* serve both beer and hard liquor, some stocking imported brands.

6/3/05; 18/1/05). Additionally, these odd hours of socialising were often accepted by parents, who believed instead that their offspring were at work, given the odd working hours at the call centres. These working shifts thus acted as an alibi to engage in an active nightlife and foster a particular lifestyle, which otherwise would not have been so easy for this cohort of youth to follow. Around 39 per cent of my respondents reported that even when they have holidays, sometimes they tell their parents they have to go to work, so that they can spend the night either at a pub or at a friend's place. Interestingly, since agents are not allowed to take calls on their cell phones while on duty, there was no way to trace them on occasions when they lie to their parents, as they would not answer the calls.

As well as serving as a pretext to frequent nightclubs and pubs, the odd working hours also provided an excuse to stay at a friend's place and, most of the time, at their partner's place. This was a common ploy used among the agents who were from Delhi. Since these workers lived with their family, it would usually be difficult for them to stay at their partner's place at night due to societal disgrace. In cases where one of the partners was from outside of Delhi and had a place of his/her own it became easier for the other partner to stay over, lying to the parent that they were at work. Kalpana, a female agent from Delhi, said,

...due to my work and then family [expectations] I don't get to spend quality time with my boyfriend [who works in another call centre]. If I tell my parents I'm going out with him [my boyfriend] they are not happy about it. On my off days I'm expected to be with my family, so I have to lie to them (10/12/04).

However, if both partners were from outside of Delhi, then such tactics were clearly not needed, being away from family without supervision. This was explained to me by Shiva, an agent from Pune (a city in western India), "to save on rent and spend some good time together now, my girlfriend and I stay in the same place [apartment]. But our parents don't know. Since we [each] have a cell phone it's not a problem to keep this secret" (19/1/05). Such activities facilitate pre-marital sexual activities, not traditionally accepted in Indian society.

As noted from more than 80 per cent of interviews with call centre agents, pre-marital sexual activities were becoming quite common amongst call centre employees.

The agents did not consider it improper to show physical intimacy with their partners even at the work place. As in vignette one, Nick tried to argue with his supervisor Jim, that he was not doing anything terrible when he was trying to get physically intimate with his girlfriend, Susan. Similarly, Ritika, a female call centre agent, reported:

I would say though, people in the call centres, they are *very* acceptable to ideas and they are not bothered in any of our lives but we [she and her boyfriend] became a kind of talk for *everyone* on the floor because we hugged each other and kissed. I mean just kiss, he won't be obviously indulging in the kind of *the act*. But if it's just a peck and all. Even the team leader came up to me and he said it's not a professional behaviour even giving a peck. So it was like *shock*, a big shock to me because I thought in call centres it would be like acceptable... (18/11/04, emphasis added).

Physical intimacy among agents was not just limited to kissing as noted in the above quotation, rather 37 per cent of my respondents reported that sexual acts in call centres were on the rise and that the topic had become an issue that management had decided to comment upon. According to a recent newspaper report (*Times of India* 6th September 2005), about 80 per cent of call centre employees stated that there was physical intimacy between employees in offices, including hugging, and kissing. Based on interviews I would argue that there are a number of rationales that explain such behaviour. First, in the call centres, these agents try to imitate Western social life which they gather glimpses of from viewing soap opera television shows and sitcoms that make up part of their training. As a result, they feel what is accepted in the West could also be accepted in India. Ekta, a trainer, mentioned "their [agents'] mindset changes. They feel like they are Americans and everything like –they talk like them, they act like them" (29/12/04). Second, due to long working hours, most employees develop close relationships with their colleagues. About 20 per cent of the agents interviewed even reported that, despite having a boyfriend/girlfriend outside work, they also had a partner at the call centre as well, primarily due to the lack of time they were able to spend with their outside partners. About 36 per cent respondents reported that often agents date their colleagues and develop intimate relationships with them, it being far easier to maintain the relationship if they are working in the same process at the same time. However, this too is not foolproof, as 15 per cent of respondents said that it is not unusual for some of

the agents to change partners with changing shifts and processes. Sukanta, a male call centre agent, explained:

In call centres everything happens very fast. Even relationships start and break up in no time. Suppose you get a girlfriend from your shift and say after three months your shift changes but your girlfriend is still working in the same shift. In that case it gets difficult to maintain relationships, so it is no big deal to get a new girlfriend. Here everything is according to your convenience (20/2/05).

Primarily for shifts that start after midnight, commonly called the “graveyard shifts,” sex is considered a “stress buster” after the tiresome and stressful work (*Times of India* 6th September 2005). Nonetheless, other shifts are not completely “sex free.” Mohit, a team leader, explained, “some of them [agents] forget they are in office. I mean it’s quite common to find people sneaking and doing all stuff [sexual activities]. It’s quite disgusting” (27/2/05). One must not forget too that these are young people, many of whom are just out of high school, experimenting with sexual relations and acts in an office environment that encourages or at least permits a certain type active socialisation among employees:

...there is active socialisation among guys and girls that could not happen otherwise. They sit together in the cab, work together and are also together at the cafeteria without any adult supervision at such funky hours (Naina, a trainer 11/3/05).

Managers to whom I spoke reported that such relationships hamper performance and hence productivity. Sarvesh (10/1/05), one such manager, noted that there had been cases where two employees were constantly looking at each other and flirting through calls. However, when management had tried to put them on different shifts the agents found excuses as to why the new shifts were unsuitability. Worse still, he noted, there was the risk that if one employee left, the company could end up losing two. He continued to explain that frequently management would overlook such incidents because of the risk of losing an employee, a concern because of the high attrition rates at call centres.

In this regard, and despite these concerns, it was interesting to note that a manager at a different call centre explained that his company tried to maintain a gender balance while recruiting to increase efficiency and productivity. He elaborated that if there was an

almost equal gender ratio then there was a tendency for employees to perform well in order to impress members of the opposite sex. This increased their work efficiency. He continued to clarify that in such cases employees also tended to be well behaved, and this helped maintain discipline in the office. However, this strategy had its own loopholes. For example, it provided an atmosphere where, indirectly, agents felt encouraged to develop relationships with their colleagues and instead of maintaining discipline this often led to physical intimacy among these agents, against office regulations (call centre agents, pers. comm. 21/11/04; 6/3/05).

Nonetheless, sexual intimacy was not only noticed among colleagues but often extended to management and was used as a tool to get rapid promotions and better placements. As in vignette one above, Surita mentions that her roommate Arpita was trying to gain favour from her supervisor so that she could be a part of a team that was to go abroad for a few months' training. Likewise, Sudipa, an agent noted "there was this girl in my team and we all knew about her boyfriend, who was in [X call centre]. *Then* she started to flirt with our supervisor and told us he [supervisor] has proposed to her" (20/12/04; emphasis in speech).

In a somewhat extraordinary statement, according to a *Times of India* report (6th September 2005), 90 per cent of call centre agents surveyed by the newspaper reported that sexual favours are given for career advancement. These incidents of sexual conduct are so frequent in call centres that often parents are not comfortable with the idea of their children working in such an atmosphere. So, to maintain certain decorum and promote a healthy social work ambience, a familial atmosphere, such as addressing the supervisor as an elder brother, is often generated, with the initiative of trainers so that "things don't get worse" (Soma, a trainer 19/2/05).

In sum, the call centre agents I interviewed were leading a non-traditional lifestyle, one termed "fast" by their parents as well as society in general. Saswati, the mother of a call centre agent, commented: "They [call centre agents] lead a very fast life. You tell them anything they will say 'you are old-fashioned you don't know'..." (6/2/05). While this changing lifestyle has become one of the most discussed topics regarding call centres in the media, both in India and abroad, it has painted a tainted view of call centres and has stigmatised these jobs (as discussed in Section 8.2.2). Many Indian parents are

becoming aware of these issues and are not very open about the idea of their children joining this industry. As an example, Mrs. Anjali (9/2/05), my landlady, when I was undertaking fieldwork in New Delhi, commented that she would never allow her daughter to work in a call centre since it provides “easy money” and promotes a fast lifestyle. Likewise, one of my key informants, a teacher in an university at Delhi (30/12/04), stated that the call centres are spoiling the young generation in Delhi. These circumstances necessitate a discussion of the changing social relations and social norms, to which I turn next.

8.2.2 Changing Social Relations and Social Norms

Working in a call centre has an adverse effect on relationships and family life. Due to the odd working hours - detailed in Chapter Seven, Section 7.2 - the call centre agents develop a reverse daily routine compared with non-call centre employed youth. As was noticed in vignette one, Surita tried to get some sleep when her whole neighbourhood was actively engaged in their daily deeds. These working conditions hamper meaningful interactions with family and employees are able to spend “quality time” with them only on weekends. However, even this is not always very feasible. These agents’ weekly two days off work need not be necessarily on weekends; they could be on any weekday (as discussed in Chapter Seven, Section 7.2). This makes it even more constraining for them to keep up with family life, a problem amplified on national holidays and major festivals, as already discussed. As Shruti, a female call centre agent from Delhi, living with her parents, said:

Personally when I am working in the night shift I meet them [parents] in the weekends only. [Laughs] When I return home I just sleep. When I get up it is time for me to go again. So yes, the relation does get hampered. The relationship does get hampered (25/1/05).

BPO Watch India (2005) has observed that family life is completely “haywire” for call centre agents. As an example they explain that while, in the evening, these young people want to be with their family, enjoying their dinner, tea and chatting and jostling around the television to watch the daily sitcoms or news, they are instead busy talking to strangers in distant countries trying to either sell packages or solve computer problems. Rakesh, a male call centre agent from New Delhi living at home, remarked, “I am not

able to talk to them [parents] or meet them, you know like my dad leaves when I am sleeping, then when I come back like he would be in bed. So we are like hardly seeing each other” (18/1/05).

Though these circumstances were common to most of the agents I interviewed, the impact of call centre jobs on family life varied according to their marital status as well as their place of origin- whether outstation or Delhi. The agents who were not married generally had fewer familial responsibilities and hence were able to cope with odd working hours better. Shreya, a female call centre agent, stated “if you are a spinster or a bachelor probably it’s very easy to manage because you don’t have a family hang up as such. But if you are a married person then you *have* to give some time to your family” (30/12/04). For outstation agents (more than 90 per cent of whom were unmarried), these problems were also not very crucial since they were away from their families and visited them only during vacations.

On the other hand, the situation was more critical for those employees originally from Delhi since they lived with their families, as it the tradition in India for non-married children. In such cases they were often not able to provide the expected time commitments to their family, as Joginder, a male call centre agent explained: “My mom says that I am staying in a guest house now [laughs]. Because I spent most of my time outside” (23/12/04).

Marriage added additional responsibilities and interviewees noted that call centre work definitely hindered such responsibilities. With marriage, one’s social responsibilities changed and at times one had to attend certain social functions such as weddings and family gatherings, which could not always be avoided. In Anjali’s words, “at such times it becomes quite difficult to adjust to the shifts if they coincide with the timings of these functions since both start in the evening time” (28/2/05). Moreover, due to differences in the shifts, spousal communication was often minimised, many a time allowing for the “sowing of the seeds” for extra-marital affairs. In a nutshell, maintaining a balanced family with a call centre job was not considered easy. Nineteen per cent of married agents lamented that the problem got compounded if the couples had children. Children require more time and care than it would be possible for call centre agents to provide with their work schedule. One female respondent, Rita, who was married and had

a four year old girl, stated that it was very difficult for her to manage a work-life balance. She was not able to spend quality time with her daughter and also there was the problem of baby-sitters when she was at work. To add to this problem was the gossip of the prying neighbours who tended to be inconsiderate of call centre agents. Rita said that, depending on her work schedule, most of the days she returned home in the morning and had to leave in the evening or night. Since there are certain social stigmas attached to women spending the night outside the house, her neighbours would not allow their children to play with Rita's daughter because they considered Rita to be unconventional. According to her neighbours, if their children would be friendly with Rita's daughter they might get bad influences from Rita (25/1/05). Difficulties in managing a work-life balance among call centre employees had also been noticed in the UK (Hyman et al. 2003) and New Zealand (Copas 2004), though the above-mentioned situations were fairly unique to India due to specific cultural norms.⁶⁸

Those on the other side of the spectrum - unmarried or without partners- were not totally blind to these issues. Though all my call centre respondents agreed that the most important factor in their choice of a partner was the person's inner-self, there was a gender difference noticed in the preference of profession for potential partners among call centre agents. Two-thirds of the women agents preferred their partner to be from the call centre as they believed that it would enable him to understand the demands and working conditions of the industry and hence he would be understanding and accommodating of her work schedule. As Asha stated, "I think it would be better if my husband is also from call centre then he will be aware [of the working hours] and there will be no problem in adjusting" (16/1/05). On the other hand, over half of the male agents reported to me that they preferred their partners not to be from the call centres. Kunal told me, "I don't want my wife to work in call centre. It [call centre] has such odd shifts" (20/11/04). At the time of being interviewed, many of these men (more than 65 per cent) were engaged or had girlfriends with whom they were planning to live in the future, working in call centres. They mentioned that after marriage they would convince their wives to leave the call centre job as these men felt it was difficult to adjust family life if the wife was a call centre agent because of her odd work schedules. Anirudh, a male call centre agent said, "I

⁶⁸ To date there is no information regarding whether these situations are occurring in other Asian countries.

mean with call centre job it's difficult to settle down with marriage. It hampers your married life. Someday or other it does hamper" (23/12/04).

Call centre jobs not only disrupted family life but also had a great impact on the friends these agents choose and spend their time with. Due to unusual working conditions, the socialisation of call centre employees became restricted to other call centre employees. Though some of my respondents (about 15 per cent) initially stated that their friends were not limited to the call centres, more in-depth probing revealed that after a period at their call centre jobs they tended to have more friends from this industry, one of the main reasons being work schedules. Radhika, a female call centre agent, confirmed that "after working for few months in the call centre I just meet people who are working in the call centre" (30/11/04). These agents switched into a "different kind of life" due to their schedule and often it became difficult for them to maintain relationships with people from other professions.

Other forms of relationships also developed in call centres. These young call centre agents not only changed partners frequently but they also practiced "speed dating," a new concept in India (and different from the North American version), where people met at a pub or disco and exchanged phone numbers and started to date each other. Very often, such dating practices led to sexual relationships. Speed dating was considered to be very trendy among call centre agents. These relationships were very sporadic and did not materialise into long term relationships. For such dating practices, cell phone numbers were used so that parents or family members were not aware of these practices.

Thus, short-lived relationships were quite common among call centre agents. Due to the lack of time that they spent with their partners, many of them were even open to the idea of live-in-relationships and statistics from newspaper reports show (*Times of India* 2005) that such living arrangements were increasing among these agents. These types of living arrangements, though gaining popularity among youth, were not well accepted in Indian society and often lacked parental approval. As an example, Surita (vignette one) was hesitant to discuss this issue with her parents, as she knew they would not support her decision. A recent study (*Times of India* 18th September 2005) debates whether Indian society is yet ready for live-in relationships. Interestingly enough, most of these agents are very confident about their decisions, including those made in relation to

dating. Based on interviews, I argue that this confidence is related to their job, especially due to their interactions with strangers thousands of miles away. In fact, when I asked my respondents what they thought was the best thing about their job, all of them, despite their job positions, mentioned that call centres have made them very confident. Sailaja (18/12/2004), a key informant in New Delhi, who teaches in an University in Delhi, and some of her students work in call centres, endorsed this opinion when she mentioned that these young call centre employees are so confident about themselves that they know exactly what they want in life.

Call centre jobs also led to divorce. When both married partners were working in call centres it became difficult to manage both family and work, mainly for women, who have the greater responsibilities for household chores in India. Such events initiated arguments and misunderstandings among partners, as noted by Arup, a male call centre agent (6/2/05). Besides, if only one of the partners was working in a call centre, then there were incidents when they had a tendency to develop a relationship with their colleagues, mainly due to the time that they spent in the office. However, it may be argued that such happenings are not restricted only to call centres and could be observed in any workplace. Based on interviews, I would argue that the difference here was that such situations were on the rise in call centre industries due to various factors. First, these were groups of young people who were ready to take risks in life and a lot of their decisions were guided more by emotions than logic (key informant, pers. comm. 29/12/04); as such, they failed to be far-sighted and indulged in relationships that did not last long. This led to rapid judgments even regarding marriage and most such marriages unfortunately did not work in the best interests of both (parent of call centre agent, pers. comm. 8/2/05). Second, as discussed earlier, they did not consider it unethical to maintain parallel relationships as, to them, it could be justified according to “their” social values. Third, the working hours provided a socialisation pattern that would otherwise not be possible in other industries.

This analysis showed that call centre agents were changing various social norms; these included changes to relationships, such as entering into sexual relationships outside of marriage, some of which may become live-in relationships, both frowned upon by traditional Indian society. In addition, speed dating, a new phenomenon in India was

increasingly popular amongst this cohort. If married, the call centre environment also led to a range of stresses, and ultimately a proportionately high rate of divorce. Such actions, while of immediate importance to those directly involved, also had a cumulative impact on society as a whole that I turn to next.

8.2.3 Social Acceptance of Call Centre Employment

In order to understand the social acceptance of call centre employment, people who were not employed in this industry, from various spheres of life, were also interviewed. This section was analysed broadly from two perspectives- parents whose children were working in call centres and those who did not have direct connection with call centres, such as doctors and teachers (a detailed account of these respondents is discussed in Chapter Five, Section 5.2.1). Almost all of the parents reported to me that they were not happy about their children working in the call centres. There existed various discomfitures towards call centre jobs. According to nearly half of them, the atmosphere at work was promoting certain habits that were not in compliance with Indian values and therefore it was indirectly encouraging these young people to be engaged in a lifestyle where monetary gain seemed to be the ultimate motive. Another 40 per cent of parents also suggested during interviews that the high salaries paid by call centres were providing a lot of disposable income for these young adults allowing them to spend carelessly. Moreover, more than three-quarters of the parents are yet not very open to the idea of night shift duties, mainly for girls. As observed in vignette one, Surita's father was not on speaking terms with her as she joined the call centre against her father's wish as, in his opinion, no decent girl would be in a job where she had to work only odd shifts. Ujjala, an HR manager, summarised call centre worker parents' reactions in the following words:

They [parents] are really not open to the idea that they [their children] will work at night. It's very difficult to make them understand that it's OK some work is going on at night. Then people come over here, they work, get the money in their hand and you know they spend too much. That is one complaint we have received from parents (28/12/04).

Mahua, a mother of a call centre agent, while expressing concern for her daughter, said that:

Everything is becoming opposite now for them. We have to work according to nature. But now they are not able to work according to nature. I only think about all these things. So fast is life. When I see all these things I think really these days kids have so much burden they lead such a fast life, never did we think that it will be like this [laughs] (23/11/04).

Similar concerns were also noticed by Surita's mother in vignette one, when she persuaded Surita to change her work schedule. All parents were worried about the working hours and there was little difference in their perceptions of the job between parents of outstation employees and those from Delhi as observed from interviews. Rohini, a female call centre agent, who originally belonged to Haryana (a province in northwest India), described this different attitude in the following words:

I think most parents have problems with night shifts. Very rarely you will find- in fact I will tell you one thing - outstation students' parents they do not have so much problem...[but] People who are from Delhi are different *they know what it is* so they don't allow their girls to go um [out] in the night (20/12/04, emphasis added).

However, parents from Delhi were also concerned about their own positions and statuses in the society. Despite handsome salaries and attractive incentives, the call centre employment was not viewed as one of the sought after professions in India. On the contrary, it contained certain social stigmas. Many times parents did not like to disclose to their friends and extended family if their children were working in call centres. One of my key informants, Disha, a reputed doctor in Delhi, who had patients from call centres, mentioned (21/1/05) that in their building where they lived, the daughter of a high ranking bureaucrat had joined a call centre, a fact that Disha has discerned from the pick-up van that honked its horn at odd hours. However, she said that the girl's parents did not disclose her job to their neighbours and colleagues, as a call centre work is not considered very prestigious. A similar reaction was also noticed among parents of one interviewee, who earlier worked in a call centre but at present was employed in a private bank. When I called her home to speak to her, the phone was answered by her father, who emphasised that it was a long time ago when his daughter worked in a call centre for very short time and now she was employed in a reputed bank. However, I had information from authentic sources that his daughter actually worked in the call centre for two years and had joined

her new position only the previous month. Thus, the father's attempt to conceal the fact that his daughter was a call centre employee was based on the negative social acceptance of call centre employment in the society. Two other incidents during my fieldwork reflected similar views about call centre employment and indicated that one would join a call centre only if s/he did not have a better option in life. For example, one of my cousin's friends worked in a call centre and lived in my cousin's locality. Kankana (9/12/04), my aunt, commented that she would never allow her daughter to work in a call centre since they had to work at odd hours and she might pick up bad habits, like smoking, and drinking. During my conversation with Indrani Nag (19/12/04), a well-known columnist in Bengali newspapers and magazines, she said that her daughter, who was brought up in Baroda, capital of Gujarat and one of the biggest cities in India, had to take admission for her undergraduate degree in a small college at Panipat (a very small town in Haryana) due to certain reasons, which she did not disclose to me. The daughter was so upset about this fact that she told her parents she would rather join a call centre than go to this college. On the same note Shreshta (3/3/05), another key informant, who is also a doctor and is the mother of two young boys, commented, "If my child will say I want to join call centre then definitely I will try my level best to you know stop him."

The above mentioned discussions point to the fact that call centre employments were not well accepted in the Indian society and there was a certain disgrace attached to them. Pulak, a HR manager, narrated another event which further strengthens this argument:

There is one incident that I should tell you. At 2.30 in the morning the cab went to pick up one of our agents. And there the neighbours got *so* angry they said "like what kind of work are you doing at 2.30?" And they were trying to, you know, they really, they were trying to beat him up and then one of our employees, he went and told them OK we are working here, showed them the ID cards and then the neighbours cooled down a bit. It's very difficult. Until now they are not able to understand that it's OK, they are working. There is some kind of work going on in the night. So sometimes it's very difficult (21/12/04).

There were distasteful comments by prying neighbours especially for women employees who comprised nearly 50 per cent of the call centre work force (Doshi and Ravindran 2004). One-third of my respondents mentioned that it was not very easy for

agents from elsewhere to find housing in Delhi if their landlords came to know that they worked in call centres. This was mainly due to the lifestyle associated with call centre work - odd hours of work and partying - both somewhere else and at home- and disturbance due to call centre pick up vans. Landlords believed that such habits would have a bad influence on their own children and bring disrepute to themselves. Complaints about the loud honking of the call centre vans coupled with their rash driving seemed to be common among people of Delhi (*Hindustan Times* 28th December, 2004). In fact, this was also one of the major problems faced by Surita's neighbours as mentioned in vignette one. However, the employment opportunities provided by call centres cannot be neglected and, despite sour feelings towards such jobs, residents of Delhi acknowledged this fact. Perry, a friend's husband, was an event manager and he organised various shows for call centres in Delhi as well as in other cities. While discussing my research he stated that "call centres are good for those who cannot do anything else, but not good for those who can do better" (11/12/04). Since it was "easy money" in call centres, many people who had the potential to join other industries or perhaps seek higher education were not doing so, as they were satisfied with the amount of money they received, leading to, as the *India Today* magazine argued (2004), underutilisation of their intelligence.

Perry's statement was very much supported by one of my respondents- Rakhi, an HR manager in one of the leading call centres. A class junior to me in high school and a below average student, Rakhi stated that:

Call centres give jobs to many people who otherwise would have remained jobless. Especially in this competitive age students with lower grades and without any professional qualifications do not stand any chance for a high-quality job with high salary, but a call centre is like the angel providing so many jobs. As you know I was not a good student in school and somehow I managed to complete my graduation with poor marks but then I joined this call centre and based on my performance I am the HR manager with a very good pay scale, something I would have never imagined (23/12/04).

A few others I interviewed, who were not working in call centres, had similar views- "at least call centres are keeping these young people busy who otherwise would have indulged in anti-social activities or spent their time just fooling around" (Mihir, his

nephew was a call centre agent, 7/3/05). According to these respondents, with call centres, these people were engaged and doing something productive. Though call centre jobs had not yet been able to make a dent among the high ranking jobs in India, their increasing popularity cannot be denied. The daily Indian newspapers and magazines (*The Times of India*; *Hindustan Times*; *India Today*) frequently featured columns about call centres. In such columns, the lifestyle and consumption habits of call centre agents were commonly highlighted (For example, see *The Times of India* 11th December 2004; 8th August, 2005; 4th September 2005; 6th September, 2005; and *India Today* 7th March, 2005). They also brought forth certain aspects of their work culture and office atmosphere. According to some of the higher officials of call centres whom I interviewed, such news was to some extent responsible for people's negative impression about call centres.

An examination of the social impacts of call centre employment in New Delhi reveals that these call centres act as catalysts of socio-economic and cultural change. They have profound impacts on the daily lives of the agents and in a variety of ways encourage them to live a particular lifestyle increasingly guided by principles of consumerism and Western values. The habits and characteristics that employees learn or adopt at the call centres as part of their employment become reflected and even accentuated in their every day lives. Through rigorous training, the call centres socialise their agents in accordance with the culture of the country for which they are working. The call centres also encourage a Western culture at work, which is not in compliance with mainstream traditional Indian culture, and, as a result, the social ambience legitimises certain social behaviours which otherwise would not be accepted in the Indian society at large. Due to such factors and despite the comparatively high salaries, call centre employments have failed to gain the recognition of being prestigious jobs in India. On the contrary, these forms of employment come with certain social stigma, a fact often highlighted by the Indian media. However, though the media might be "over hyped" about the social impacts of call centres, the health impacts of these jobs were commonplace talk among them all, which I discuss in the next section.

8.3 Health Impacts

The odd working hours and the extreme stress at work coupled with their lifestyle practices had a negative impact on the health of call centre agents. Mainly due to change in the 24-hour biological clock, these agents faced various psychosomatic disorders⁶⁹ and health-related issues, which were often much fewer or non-existent in normal daylight-hour work routines. Like in other call centres in the UK (Taylor et al. 2003), the two main complaints of the agents interviewed in Delhi were physical tiredness and mental fatigue, reflecting, in turn, physical problems and psychological problems. Physical problems were mainly related to frequent changes in their body clock due to changing shifts, which in turn hampered their eating habits. Together, these led to sleeping disorders, and various digestive problems that ultimately took a toll on their health. Psychological problems were also directly work related- be they due to the demands of their work or customers' behaviour. Such psychological problems often created tremendous stress for these agents who were not always equipped with the best mechanisms to cope. As a result, these stresses and tensions often surfaced as physical health problems. Baldry et al. (1997) argue that there are certain social processes that generate occupational ill health in call centres, and such processes can be understood by examining the degree of fit between three interrelated components of any work system- the social environment (work organisation, job design, managerial control systems, industrial relations context); the proximate environment (work technology, workstation design); and the ambient environment (work building, lighting, temperature, air quality, acoustics). Based on this argument and adapting from Taylor et al.'s (2003) model of perception of ill-health and injury, various forms of ill health in call centres in Delhi have been illustrated in a matrix (Table 8.2) locating them in terms of immediacy and measurability.

⁶⁹ Psychosomatic simply means that the state of the mind (the *psyche*) can influence the biological mechanisms of the body (the *soma*), (www.emedicine.com/neuro/topic655.htm)

Table 8.2 Perceptions of health problems among call centre agents

<i>Invisible</i>	Stress	Burnout
	Sick building syndrome, example, headache, tired, fatigue, lack of enthusiasm	Breakdown
Visibility		
<i>Visible/measurable</i>	Fever, colds, viral infections, acidity, insomnia	Chronic ill health, example, peptic ulcers, gastrointestinal problems, cardiovascular diseases
	<i>Immediate</i>	<i>Long Term</i>
	Time	

Source: Adapted from Taylor et al. 2003: 439

Some of the health problems in call centres were immediate and invisible, stress being one such problem (Table 8.2). There were also certain sick building syndromes like headaches, tiredness, fatigue, and lack of enthusiasm, which might be invisible but ultimately resulted in various sicknesses, including fever, infections and so on. Some of the invisible health problems that can result over a long period of time are burnout and many times breakdown. Other long-term health problems can be more clearly measured including peptic ulcers, gastrointestinal problems, and cardiovascular diseases. It can be summarised from the matrix that most of the invisible problems were primarily psychological in nature compared with the visible problems which were more directly associated with physical health.⁷⁰ This model is applicable to call centre agents in New Delhi as all my respondents reported some type of ill health that was job related. Against

⁷⁰ WHO defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

this background, the section is broadly divided into two sub-sections- physical health and psychological health.

8.3.1 Physical Health

Just look at her [her daughter] how she has become weak she looks so frail while this is the age when she should look fresh and healthy. There is so much change that even her health is getting affected (Sikha, mother of a call centre agent, 19/1/05).

Such concerns as those of Sikha were echoed in nearly four-fifths of interviews with parents of call centre agents. One of the main reasons for this frail look was lack of sleep. Indeed, when call centre agents were asked what they would prefer to do in their leisure time the answer was unanimous - they all wanted to catch up on sleep. Surita, in vignette one, like the majority of workers interviewed, was not able to get enough sleep during the day when others were busy with their activities. Indeed, sleeplessness was one of the most chronic problems among these agents. All my respondents stated that they were not able to get enough sleep and hence they always felt tired. Mithu (30/1/05) who has been working in a call centre over the last eight months complained, “it feels as if I never get enough sleep these days.” Similarly, Anilesh (8/12/04), another agent noted, “by the time I go into deep sleep, it’s time to get up. I don’t feel very fresh.” Purie (2005) in his editorial note of a special issue of sleep in *India Today* noted that there were serious consequences of shrinking sleep time. He stated that getting very little sleep accumulated in “sleep debt” (ibid: 1) and research showed that those who accumulated a large amount of sleep debt functioned at only 80 per cent of their capability. This also weakens the immune system and might be the reason for various heart diseases (ibid.). Similar studies conducted in various parts of the world strengthen this argument and contend that sleep deprivation also reduces emotional intelligence and often leads to hormonal changes, neurological problems and even obesity (Killgore et al. 2008; Meerlo et al. 2008; Mueller et al. 2008; Schmid et al. 2008). The behavioural consequences of less sleep were translated into making people irritable, prone to bad decision making and memory loss. Dolly, a 20 year old female agent, noting her lack of sleep, confirmed that “these days, little things irritate me” (28/11/04). Call centre agents undergo tremendous sleep debt and were often victims of burn out, popularly called the BOSS amongst themselves (Burnout

Stress Syndrome or BOS- Back Office Syndrome) (call centre agents, pers. comm. 29/11/04; 11/2/05). Apart from sleeplessness, the change in the biological clock also led to high blood pressure and there had been a rise in the case of abnormal heart rhythms, which may result in gynaecological problems for women (Balasubramanian 2005). Disha, a doctor in Delhi with patients from call centres explained, “there are many patients [from call centres] who complain of irregular menstrual cycles. Some of them have dark circles under their eyes and tell me that they feel very tired always, have lost appetite...their health really suffers” (key informant, 10/12/04). Su et al.’s (2008) study of female workers in Taiwan also suggests that shift work has an impact on the menstrual cycle. Thus, working against the body clock and sleep deprivation triggered a host of health problems as also noted by Doshi and Ravindran (2004) in their study of call centres in India. Some of the most common health problems reported by call centre agents during interviews were tiredness, fatigue, experiencing lack of enthusiasm and insomnia, depression, falling sick more often, experiencing weight loss, eye strains and headaches, stomach acidity, gastrointestinal problems, changes in menstrual cycles, and cardio-vascular disorders. Govinda, a male call centre agent reported, “these days I am always tired and so often I have acidity problems also” (8/3/05). Kundan, a 24 year call centre agent recalled “earlier [before joining the call centre] I was quite healthy. You know, like I wouldn’t fall sick every now and then. Now I’m not very energetic and almost every day I wake up with a headache. Perhaps I’m getting old [laughs]” (25/11/04). In addition, Doshi and Ravindran (2004) note that higher obesity and diabetes rates occurred among call centre agents, though none of my respondents reported such problems. According to their study (ibid.), call centre employees in India have a 40 per cent higher heart disorder rates compared with other employees in other industries in the country. Also, they are two to five times more susceptible to peptic ulcers. Indeed, Jayati, a call centre agent revealed, “I’ve developed chronic acidity problem. Almost every day I take a *digen* [an anti-acid tablet]. I should go to the doctor now” (20/12/04). According to Mihir, a doctor interviewed in Delhi, this segment of the youth is ageing faster as cardiovascular diseases will afflict them much earlier than their parents (30/11/04). Moreover, working long shifts at a computer with only three to four 10 minutes breaks

and a half hour “meal break” in an eight hour shift also strained their eyesight, as noted by the call centre agents interviewed.⁷¹

During interviews it became clear that agents commonly did not realise the significance of such problems and were neglecting to take action about them. Not only that, but about half of the interviewees stated that if agents reported such concerns to management there was the risk of either losing their job or being passed over for promotion. Moreover, many a time call centre agents believed that management turned a deaf ear to such concerns, considering such problems to be excuses created by the agents. Bimla explained, “it’s no use telling my supervisor [about health problems]. He will say it’s one of my *bahanas* [excuses] to get transferred to another shift” (16/1/05). Nutan another agent noted, “Once I was very sick and wanted leave for few days but John [my supervisor] said ‘I know this is your trick to get a vacation.’” (15/2/05). Similarly, Swasti, a female call centre agent, stated:

In fact our manager was talking about it [health issues] today. He was saying that if the health is not good at this age and if you start saying that we are having health problems- it is not very natural. I tell you, people ... can stay up whole night, dance around up till 5 o’clock. And when it’s work your health suffers. [he said] it is because you are not – you do not want to work. That’s why you say you are not well (15/12/04).

Health problems were one of the main reasons for absenteeism among these agents. Interestingly therefore, management often provided a bonus to employees if they worked a full month without taking leave. Hence, as noticed in Section 8.3.2, the agents therefore did not report their ill health to the management. Though, Ruchi, an HR noted, the routine nature of the job hampered these agents in such a way that there was no scope for physical exercise (9/2/05). As stated in vignette one, Surita woke up in the afternoon, hardly ate anything, went to work where she consumed a lot of fast food (as call centre cafeterias usually serve fast foods), and drank a lot of tea and coffee, which killed her appetite. As discussed in Section 8.2.1, a lot of employees at call centres smoke and were addicted to alcohol, accompanied by night clubbing on the weekends. Thus working conditions coupled with lifestyle practices acted as double jeopardy for their health.

⁷¹ For more literature on impacts of shift work on health see Akerstedt et al. (2008); Atkinson et al. (2008); Biggi et al. (2008); Morikawa et al. (2008); Santhi et al. (2008); and Suwazono et al. (2008)

Interviews with 46 per cent call centre agents confirmed that it was a common phenomenon to take many allopathic drugs to cure minor illnesses like colds, viral infections, and acidity (as Surita took medicine after her dinner to get quick relief from the chest pain). Even on their holidays call centre agents had a habit of eating out, which might not always be healthy. About 80 per cent of call centre agents interviewed said that on their holidays they did not feel like cooking and hence ate out. However, those who lived with their families in Delhi were less likely to eat out on holidays.

Based on interviews, I conducted an analysis of the agents' food intake that showed that they lack nutritional diets, frequently surviving on fast food devoid of nutrients. Besides, these agents also had an increased level of caffeine intake mainly through tea and coffee to counter sleep and stimulate their minds at work (c.f. Schwartzhaupt et al. 2008). Disha, one of the leading physicians in Delhi, commented (30/11/04) in an interview:

[For every human being] in the morning the steroid level is high in the body so you feel good and by the evening it drops down so you feel a little, you know, not ... so good. So this rhythm takes at least two to three months to set in. So in the initial three months [when they join a call centre] they will be just fine with it. So late in the night they will do all kinds of things like smoking, indulging in all kinds of nicotine products, eating all kinds of nonsense - all the fast food and tons of coffee and tea, just to stimulate their energy. I find most of the problems are mostly related to work.

Garg (2005), in his study of lifestyle practices among call centre agents in India, noted that, according to nutritionists, eating small and frequent meals, higher in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and lower in fat content, was recommended in order to prevent health hazards associated with upsetting/changing one's biological clock, but many call centre companies were ignorant of the importance of such nutritionally balanced snacks (also see Morikawa et al. 2008). On the contrary, interviewees noted that the call centres serve snacks that were favourites with young people- burgers, *dosas*, *puri-aloo*, *chholley bhaturey*, *pav bhaji*, noodles, and so on. These foods were generally greasy and spicy and lacked nutritional value. A study by the International Labour Organisation had found that poor diet on the job was responsible for causing illness and a loss of 20 per cent productivity among employees around the world engaged in any type

of activities (*Times of India* 19th September, 2005). Suchitra, a mother of a call centre agent, while discussing her daughter's diet, commented, "say for example, having juice in the morning or breakfast – in the sense they are not getting proper diet at the proper time" (20/11/04).

Thus, there was a change not only in the timing of the call centre employees' food intake but their food habits also changed. Many respondents (over half) stated that they had a loss of appetite and they did not feel hungry after starting their jobs. As a cumulative effect of all these factors, their entire digestive systems were disrupted and they suffered from indigestion, acidity, peptic ulcers, and jaundice, which were common among call centre employees I interviewed. Ketki, a female call centre agent, said that now often she has acidity problems (21/12/04). According to her, when her shift changed the first few days she had such problems and then she got used to it. This was basically because once the shift changed the whole body clock underwent a change and it took time to adjust to the new habits of sleeping and eating and in turn caused these problems. She continued to say that now it was like a regular phenomenon for her and she was not much bothered about it. The neglect of these symptoms aggravated the health problems and had adverse effects, a common trend noticed among all my interviewees. The doctors who I interviewed, who were working with call centre employees in Delhi, also supported these observations.

Lack of exposure to sunlight also had a negative effect on the health of call centre employees (Santhi et al. 2008). Salooja (*Times of India* 7th September, 2005) stated that those who were perpetually working in night shifts sometimes could not deal with daylight and they behaved aggressively and became intolerant. Though my participants were not aware of such problems, they did develop a certain degree of aggressiveness, as I observed, and it was partly related to their work schedule. Another factor that had an impact on their health was the air-conditioning in the office. Many of them reported that, especially during the summer when it was very hot outside, it became difficult for these agents to manage with changing temperature inside and outside office. As a result they fell sick quite frequently. In Joginder's words:

In the summer when the temperature is 40 degrees [Celsius] outside and in the office you have AC [air conditioning]. So when you come out during breaks and start to sweat and you enter the office which is AC. This

change in temperature is a big problem for me and I get terrible headaches (20/1/05).

Moreover, ill health due to poor air quality and air management within various call centres had also been reported by Taylor et al. (2003). Another common health problem of the call centre industry as noted by Taylor et al. (ibid: 436) was “voice loss.” This included pain, smarting, burning, and swelling in the throat, coughs, and crackling of the voice. This was caused by prolonged use of vocal cords in repetitive patterns. Though Taylor et al. found that this was more common among call centre agents who had been undertaking such work for a long time (more than three years), it was not very frequent among agents in India, perhaps because few stayed on the job for that long. Nonetheless, about ten call centre agents interviewed, who had been working in the industry for over two years did report throat irritation problems.

Interviews with 20 per cent of managers showed their awareness of these health problems, though they did not act positively to agents who complained of problems as noted earlier. These health problems had also raised concern among the government sectors as the Health Ministry of India undertook an official study of how yoga sessions in call centres can help employees cope with stress and long working hours (*Times of India* 7th September, 2005). A few companies were trying to overcome these health problems, starting to provide counselling as well as providing fully equipped gymnasiums for the agents. In spite of this, the irony was, as these agents stated, that they did not have either the energy or the time to take advantage of such services. Punit, who worked in an inbound call centre explained, “recently our company opened a gym and it is free for us [employees]. But after being awake the whole night all I need is some sleep. Once the shift is over I don’t have the energy to go to the gym, I’ve worked out enough [laughs]” (24/12/04). Thus, when the shifts finish, workers were in a hurry to head back home and get some sleep so that they can cope with the next shift. Alternatively, those still with energy, “party hard” to overcome the work shift’s stresses, which itself had related ill effects. In Shiva’s words, “it’s quite stressful to meet your targets and perform well, so we need some relaxation. We prefer to go to a disco and spend some time, have few drinks and enjoy” (25/2/05).

8.3.2 Psychological Wellbeing

The negative impacts on the psychological wellbeing of these call centre agents were related to stress caused by emotional exhaustion, one of the vital components of job burnout (Deery et al. 2002). In their discussion about health effects of call centre jobs, Moore (2000) observed that emotional exhaustion was characterised by feelings of tiredness and fatigue, a lack of energy and the depletion of an individual's emotional resources. Similarly, according to Jackson et al. (1986), burnout can be defined as a state of emotional exhaustion caused by excessive psychological and emotional demands made on people. This burnout syndrome was a distinctive type of stress resulting from working conditions that feature high levels of interpersonal contact (Cordes and Dougherty 1993).

Based on interviews with call centre agents it was found that, though a major part of the stress that call centre agents experienced was dependent on the change in the body's biological clock due to odd working hours, it can also be attributed to other pressures of working in a call centre. Some of these reported by the agents included an increased level of competition, peer-pressure and performance-related incentives. Along with these, over half of my respondents reported various other aspects of call centre work processes that increased pressure for the employees and led to emotional exhaustion, such as work overload; work pressure, including lack of time between calls; repetitiveness of calls; call monitoring; meeting targets; and having to keep to scripts. This was supported by a review of the literature on health effects of call centre employment in developed countries (including Jackson et al. 1986; Lee and Ashforth 1996; Deery et al. 2002; Taylor et al. 2003). Moreover, Schwab and Iwanicki (1982) and Jackson et al. (1986) noted that even role conflict (the extent to which incompatible expectations were communicated to the employee) had a great impact on emotional exhaustion. Such expectations are highly applicable to call centre agents in India who not only had to "fake emotions" (that is, remain positive to clients), but also had to work with an alias name and constantly struggle to conceal their location.

A review of literature on call centres in developed countries suggested that the very nature of the job was monotonous and repetitive. Since this employment was a form of emotional labour, meaning agents had to fake emotions in exchange for wage, as noted

in Chapter Seven, Section 7.2.2, it led to a lot of stress.⁷² This phenomenon was common among call centre industry workers across the globe. However, what made it even more troubling in the case of India, was the fact that call centre agents had to work at night, adding even more stress due to the changes in the biological clock. Obviously, night shift work was not exclusive to the call centre industry, yet call centre agents often changed their shifts more routinely than in other professions, between, for example, the evening, night and graveyard shifts. Moreover, since call centre employment provided incentive based on performance, this increased stress levels further. Another aspect that needed attention in this regard was the age-group of the call centre agents. They were young adults belonging to the age group of 18 to 35 years, and they led a specific lifestyle that was perhaps not recommendable for healthy living. Furthermore, there was an added component of lack of social and family interactions due to the reverse time schedules for these agents in India as discussed in Section 8.2.2. Studies in developed countries show that social isolation due to shift work has a negative impact on health of individuals (see Berkman et al. 2000).

It was observed that for students who were still pursuing their studies, call centre employments were a double jeopardy. They attended classes during the daytime, which further reduced their sleeping time and was a cause of additional stress. Thus, for them a typical 24 hours meant spending 10 to 12 hours in the office and about five to six hours in college/coaching centres/libraries. About one-third of my respondents were part of this category and they complained about how difficult it was for them to manage a work-life balance. Mallika (18/12/04), a part time call centre agent who was also pursuing her undergraduate degree in commerce, noted, “I return home at 4am and my classes [in college] start at 9am, then I have to go for my accounts coaching at 2pm. By the time I get back [home] it’s time to go for work. I mostly bunk [slang for skip] my first class. I need to sleep.” Initially they were very enthusiastic and the temptation of the “big bucks” made them ignore such issues, but after a few months of work the novelty of the job wore out and reality set in as they started to realise the adversities.

⁷² A review of literature on health suggests that there is no unanimously agreed upon definition of stress, because what is stressful for one person might not be stressful for others. However, the term “stress” as is currently used was coined by Hans Selye in 1936, who defined it as “the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change” (The American Institute of Stress 2008).

Performance monitoring was another factor responsible for the lack of wellbeing of the employees. Holman et al. (2002) noted that performance monitoring in call centres was threatening to employees, and placed a high demand on them, as their remuneration depended on it. Consequently, it negatively affected employee wellbeing. Holman et al. (2002) also stated that monitored employees are generally found to have higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction than non-monitored employees. This was also supported by other studies (including Irving, Higgins and Safeyeni 1986; Aiello et al. 1991; David and Henderson 2000). Sixty-eight per cent of call centre employees in India reported higher levels of boredom, depression, anxiety, anger and fatigue. During a visit to one of the outbound call centres I observed a board with name charts on it in each hall accommodating various workstations. The location of the board was such that each agent could view it from their respective position. When asked about the significance of the board, the supervisor explained to me that whenever an agent makes a sale it was written on the board. Interviewees from other call centres confirmed that this was a common tradition. While supervisors stated that this practice helped to motivate the agents, discussions with agents on the contrary, revealed that this practice often increased their stress and caused anxiety among those who were not able to make any sales that shift.

As mentioned in Chapter Seven, Section 7.2.2, call centre agents represent emotional labour. Hence the effort involved in managing one's emotions was thought to have an adverse effect on their wellbeing as it was linked to emotional exhaustion, a feeling of being used up emotionally, worn out and hence irritable in personal interactions (Brotheridge and Lee 1998; Holman et al. 2002). Bandura (1997) concluded that continued feelings of surface acting (mainly faking and feeling false) might also result in depression and such feelings (particularly "being a fake") can also damage one's self-worth. This feature was also observed by Taylor et al. (2003) in their study of call centres in Europe. Shreya, a female call centre agent, stated that, initially when she had joined the call centre, she was so stressed that even in her sleep she would repeat the

script of tape disclosure and talk in English so that when at work she was able to perform well (15/12/04).⁷³

Customers were obviously one of the most important components of call centre employment, a source of considerable work satisfaction as well as a cause of great anxiety and stress (Deery et al. 2002). Customers might be abusive, irritating and their demands unreasonable. Taylor et al. (2003) pointed out that difficult customers contributed to increased pressures for the agents. A review of the literature (including Maslach and Jackson 1981; Maslach 1982; Deery et al. 2002) revealed that interactions between the service provider and the customer were a critical determinant of emotional exhaustion leading to stress. This phenomenon can be explained by the demand-control and effort-reward imbalance models, which analyse the relationship between work and health. According to the demand-control model, there are two aspects of work situation affecting health of employees - job demands and job control (Doef and Maes 1998). Karasek and Theorell (1990) had defined job demands as task requirements and workload; while job control had been defined as the person's ability to control his or her work activities. Studies suggested that employments with high demand and low control had an adverse effect on employees' health. In the 1990s a similar model, the effort-reward imbalance model, was developed to better understand the relationship between work and health (Ostry et al. 2003). This model suggested that jobs characterised by a perceived imbalance between high effort and low rewards were stressful and lead to negative health outcomes (Peter and Siegrist 1999; Siegrist et al. 2004; Ota et al. 2005). Based on my fieldwork data I would argue that call centre employment in India fits well within these two models. First, call centre employment was characterised by high demand and low control. While the high demands of call centre work were in terms of meeting specific targets, the scripted nature of the job reduced the employee's control over his or her work. Such situations had a negative impact on the health of employees as discussed above. Second, there existed a high imbalance between the effort and rewards of call centre employment in India. The agent's constant effort to conceal their actual location and act as "locals" of the country for which they were working were very high compared

⁷³ The tape disclosure (TD) was the script that every agent had to repeat before they started conversation with their clients. Generally TD included a script saying that this call might be recorded and monitored for the purpose of security and to serve you better.

with the monetary incentives offered for “good performance”. The condition got more critical when customers were not cooperative.

Many times customers tend to be very abusive. A study reported in the *Guardian* (1997) stated that one of the main reasons for such abusive behaviour was an apparent insincere tone of voice from the person handling the call. Though this phenomenon of abusive calls was noticed across geographical locations, in India it was compounded as such abuse was commonly racist and sexist in nature. This was mainly due to the outsourcing of jobs to India, which had raised serious protests in America and Europe and a feeling among many people that Indians were responsible for their loss of employment. Irrespective of their job profile, all my participants agreed that abusive calls were quite common.

Deery et al.’s (2002) study of call centres in Europe showed that call centre agents were actively discouraged from arguing with the customer and were expected to be polite and maintain calm behaviour in all circumstances. Jimit, a supervisor in an inbound call centre, explained, “we try to tell them [agents] that it is not possible to know the mood of the customer. So he [customer] is not angry at you, he is just not in a good mood” (21/12/04). Hiralal, a trainer tried to justify the misconduct of the customers, stating “if you call somebody at his dinner time, it’s natural he will be irritated. But we have to do our job” (24/12/04). The behaviour of the agent was thus central to service transactions. As a result, these agents were “readily available targets” (Deery et al. 2002: 489) for abuse. Hence they were the subjects of customer irritation when they were neither the cause of the problem nor in a situation to remedy the customer’s complaint as noticed in the above mentioned quotes. In fact, three-quarters of my respondents reported that the management had instructed them not to take such calls personally as they were directed more towards the company than any individual. Moreover, during training sessions, these agents were repeatedly asked to maintain a positive attitude no matter how the customer reacted. Since these agents did not reveal their real names and dealt with the customers with alias names, about 37 per cent of my participants reported that they were taught by management to think that such abuse was directed to “Susan” and not to “Surita”- the real person. Thus, the alias name was sort of a refuge that might console these agents against such abuse. Abusive calls were on the rise in these call centres in India and were

regularly reported in newspapers (including *Times of India* 4th August, 2004; 13th January, 2005; 17th January, 2005; *Guardian Weekly* 24th June, 2005). Ruplata, an agent, mentioned, “due to anti-outsourcing feelings [among Americans] these days such [abusive] calls are more” (9/3/05). The agents had started to accept such calls as one of the characteristics of the call centre employment. Sawant, a male call centre agent, said, “These days abuses are increasing so much that it seems that hearing abuses is part of our job” (11/2/05). Most of this abuse was racist and sexist in nature and the use of swearwords like “fuck you;” “fuckers;” “bastards;” and “bitch” were very common (call centre agents, pers. comm. 7/12/04; 20/2/05; 1/3/05). The *Times of India* (4th August 2004) had similarly reported certain abusive calls that were very derogatory in nature.

Though the call centre agents interviewed stated that they were trained to deal with such calls and given directions to terminate the call if, after three warnings, the customer still continued to be abusive, nonetheless, such comments caused high stress levels resulting in emotional exhaustion. Kakoli, a female call centre agent, mentioned, “after one such [abusive] call it becomes very difficult to take the next call and act normal. After all we are human beings” (4/1/05). Sixteen per cent of respondents stated that customers might be insensitive even without using abusive languages. Once they realised from the agent’s English language accent (despite the rigorous training of accent neutralisation) that the agent was not a native of the country they became very sarcastic and tried to humiliate them even without being abusive. Some customers made comments such as “I want to talk to a real American” (Swapan, 29/11/04). According to my respondents, such derogatory comments were more common from American customers than British or Australian customers.

One of the reasons for customer dissatisfaction has been reported to be the lack of knowledge among agents; as reported in the *Guardian Weekly* (24th June 2005: 29), “call centres don’t have the knowledge available in a local bank branch or shop.” However, one could argue that this does not justify customers becoming abusive to the call centre agents. In India such abusive calls were reported to be one of the main causes of stress among the agents. Hochschild (1983) argued that those employed in jobs with sustained customer contact and little opportunity to depressurise was at risk of having high levels of stress. This was an evident trait among call centre agents in Delhi.

Nevertheless, the call centre agent-customer relationship was not one-way. From nearly two-thirds of the interviews it was noted that these agents also formed their own opinion about the people and culture of their customers. As for example, Anjana, a female call centre agent stated:

Though people have a notion that you know in US they speak very hi-fi language but they do not understand English very well. They understand very simple terms. You know if I go and talk to them with a heavy accent and use lot of hard words [vocabulary] they do not understand (24/12/04).

They also commented on the intelligence of their customers as Dipti noted, “if they have some problems with cell phones, and they call us, some of the times they don’t even know how to switch the phone, so we have to tell them which one to press to switch it on. They are very stupid” (20/11/04). Interestingly, while for the customers, a “real American” meant a person born and brought up in the US, the agent’s version of “real American” could be best explained in Jayant’s words: “Real American in the sense that they have lots of money [so] if you can convince them they will take everything from you; if you cannot convince them they will not take a single thing from you so they won’t take anything” (29/12/04). Some of the agents who have worked for both US and UK companies even compare their customers, as Hemant noted,

UK customers are very intelligent customers. If you have to tell them- if you have to sell them anything you have to be very clear and very strict. You cannot play with your words with UK customers, they will come to know. But American customers, if you want to sell anything to the American customers you tell [about] the product, you explain the product and put some spice on it and put some package on the product they will take it (20/1/05).

These quotations reflect that call centre agents, based on their employment experience, developed certain notions about their customers and used them to form a hierarchy of them. More so, it revealed that, despite the attempts of some customers to insult these agents, the latter did not consider themselves to be inferior to the customers. On the contrary, the agents felt that they were in a better position in terms of knowledge and hence were superior to them.

Customers not only tended to be abusive but many times lengthy, problematic calls inflated average call handling times, making it difficult to meet targets and

consequently increased pressure in a multitude of ways. Nutan, working in an inbound call centre, said, “at times the calls are *so* long that you could have answered three calls in that time [period]. Then it becomes difficult to meet targets” (10/2/05). Taylor (1998) noted that in most telephone call centres there were constant efforts to increase the number of calls taken per employee and reduce both customer call time and wrap-up time. As discussed in Section 7.2.3, one of the reasons given for acquiring an alias name was that it will shorten the call time as well as facilitate communication. From the discussions with call centre agents it was understood that if the calls were longer and the agents were not able to meet the targets often they became more stressed as all their remuneration and incentives were performance based. While talking to a group of new employees during their meal break in an outbound call centre, I noticed their anxiety as they mentioned that, until that time, on that specific workday, none of them were able to make a sale and were worried that it might bring down their performance rankings. These high levels of stress had serious consequences as they often got translated into physical health problems.

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the working conditions and nature of employment at call centres generated various physical as well as psychological health problems, which aggravated over time. Some of the most common problems reported by the agents included sleeping disorders, digestive problems and high level of stress. However, it was evident from interviews that the management did not react in a positive manner to such health problems, rather employees were discouraged to report any health issues, as it might be considered detrimental to their performance and hence promotion. This brings to light the irony of their employment. On the one hand, the job trained them to be confident and talk to strangers, convincing them either to buy the product or resolving their problems, and in daily life they were not afraid to take bold decisions about their social relations and lifestyles. On the other hand, these same agents lacked confidence to convey and discuss their work related problems with management. As such, this analysis revealed that the very confidence and positive attitude promoted by call centres had its own clear boundaries and limitations.

8.4 Discussion and Conclusions

An examination of the micro-dynamics of call centre employment in New Delhi demonstrates that these call centres act as catalysts of socio-economic and cultural change. They have profound impacts on the daily lives of the agents and in a variety of ways encourage them to live a particular lifestyle increasingly guided by principles of consumerism and Western values. The analysis undertaken in this chapter shows that the habits and characteristics that employees learn or adopt at call centres as a part of their employment, become reflected and even accentuated in their daily lives. Based on these interpretations, in this chapter, I have thus, answered my second thesis research question- What impacts do employment in call centres have on the lifestyles of young adult employees and their consumption decisions?

The economic impacts of call centre employment are obvious, in terms of the economic gains offered by call centres. This economic independence, in turn, provided a lot of disposable income to these employees, thus enabling them to engage in very high levels of conspicuous consumption. This consumption, frequently played out in modern, air-conditioned shopping malls, included shopping for goods such as Western branded clothes and the latest cell phones, and enjoying eating out in a number of Western-style fast-food chains, cafes and restaurants. Come night time, partying and clubbing become a prime focus, again in specific sites with “just the right” ambiance. Spending was noted to be a gendered activity, with men spending more on property and significant sized investments, such as a car, far more than women, in part because of Indian gendered norms.

The social impacts of call centre employment cannot be overestimated. This analysis shows that call centre agents are changing various social norms, including changes to relationships, such as entering into sexual relationships outside of marriage, frowned upon by traditional Indian society. Working in a call centre also has an adverse effect on relationships and family life. The agents develop a reverse daily routine due to the odd working hours. Such changing work habits (sleeping during daytime and working at night) have profound impacts on their social life, as these situations hamper their meaningful interaction with family. Clearly though, the impacts of call centre employment on family life varied according to the marital status as well as the place of

origin of the employee- whether from Delhi or elsewhere. It was noted that agents who were not married generally had less familial responsibilities and hence were able to cope with the odd working hours better. Marriage added additional responsibilities and interviewees reported that call centre work definitely hindered a successful relationship. Rather, if married, the call centre environment led to a range of different stresses, and ultimately a proportionately high rate of divorce. Such evidence shows clearly that the call centre agents are leading a lifestyle that is not common, nor traditional, in India. These individuals are thus often considered “fast” by their parents as well as the society in general. Though their changing lifestyle has become one of the most discussed topics in the media, both in India and abroad, it has painted a tainted view of call centres, stigmatizing these jobs. Many Indian parents are becoming aware of these issues and are not very positive about the idea of their children joining this industry.

Call centre employment also had profound impacts on the health of the employees. The odd working conditions and nature of the employment generated various physical as well as psychological health problems, including sleeping disorders, digestive problems and high level of stress. Though the agents were not acutely aware of all such adverse health conditions, the analysis showed that in the long run these conditions had lasting effects.

Interestingly, it was noted that call centre management are sensitive to these social issues stemming from call centre employment. One of the strategies adopted by call centre management is to address them in their advertisements, as was evident from a discourse analysis of these advertisements in Chapter Six. For example, from the discussion in Section 8.2.2.1 it was noted that due to the working conditions employees find it extremely difficult to maintain a work-life balance. Vertex, one of the leading call centres, emphasised the way in which it helped employees to maintain a good family life and hence “family” became one of the main themes in some of their advertisements. Similarly, this same company also addressed the issue of the increasing amount of stress in the call centres by promising a stress-free career in a few other advertisements.

Many call centre advertisements also focused on sleeplessness and deteriorating health – two major concerns among the agents and the media. As a consequence, captions like “your child does not have to spend a sleepless night,” and “how about a day shift in

international call centre,” became common. This is an indication to show that the call centres try to keep up with the changing needs of their employees, at least in their advertisements, and to convey that they are not totally unaware of the emerging issues concerning call centre employments.

Based on the examination of the socio-economic impacts of call centre employment in India, it is irrevocable that such influences are very unique in nature. First, while call centres in developed countries have a salary package considered rather low compared to many other jobs in the same country (Duder and Rosenwein 2000; Buscatto 2002; Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Taylor et al. 2002; Broek 2003; Glucksmann 2004; Taylor and Bain 2005) in India, call centre employment is considered one of the highest paid employment opportunities. Second, call centre employees are not “pampered” and showered with incentives in developed countries to the same extent as they are in India (Callaghan and Thompson 2002; Taylor et al. 2002; Taylor and Bain 2005; per comm. Canadian call centre trainer in India 10/3/05). These incentives are in part due to the necessity of night working hours in India. Indian management therefore needs to make these positions much more attractive to lure young people to join this industry. Third, call centre agents in India are trained to acquire a Western persona while dealing with the customers and every day they are made to live in a time-space capsule injected with the culture of a Western country. This has a tremendous impact on their daily lives and is a typical feature not occurring in call centres located in developed countries. Thus, the analysis here clearly illustrates that these specificities to Indian based call centers have multi-faceted influences on the lives of the agents. These impacts are so profound that they subtly change the social lives of these agents ultimately bearing a tremendous influence on their identity, which undergoes certain transformations. I turn to these issues in Chapter Nine next.

Chapter 9

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: RE-EXAMINING IDENTITIES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE AMONG CALL CENTRE AGENTS

In the preceding chapters of this thesis, I have analysed the labour expectations of call centres based in the environs of New Delhi, India, and their consequences on the young call centre agents employed therein. From this in-depth analysis it was found that the labour expectations in call centres have important impacts on the everyday lives of their young employees. This in turn influences their consumption decisions, lifestyle practices, and social behaviour. As such, I argue that call centres influence the identities of the young adults who work in them, via a fairly step-by-step process and through what one might call a “Westernised lifestyle package”. I argue that each component of this package acts in different ways, at different stages of the job experience, and gradually influences and reshapes the identities of the agents.

To investigate this claim in more depth, this chapter is divided into two sections- discussion and conclusions. In the first part, Section 9.1, I engage in an analysis of the role of outsourced call centres as vehicles that have a great impact on the identities of young adults in New Delhi. This addresses my third research question- *how does employment in New Delhi call centres affect the identities of young adult employees?* In the final section, Section 9.2, I then turn to the major conclusions drawn from the thesis. These include the role of call centres as engines of social change in New Delhi (Section 9.2.1) and the changing identities of call centre agents (Section 9.2.2). In Section 9.2.3, I situate Indian call centres within globalisation debates and address my fourth research question - *how are international call centres in India situated within broader debates regarding globalisation?* At the end of the chapter (Section 9.3) I sketch out the road ahead for research on call centres in India.

9.1 Discussion- Re-examining Identities

Based on the discussion of identity in Chapter Three, Section 3.3, it follows that identity is a highly contested term. Despite differentiations in the definition of identity it is

accepted that identities are formed along multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, nationality, religion, generation and sexual preference. They surface at the individual as well as at the societal level and give meaning to life. Hence, more contemporary theorisations understand identities as a reflexive project, emphasising their multiple, fluid and unstable nature (Valentine 2001a). Identity is thus a socialised sense of self, a self-perception of how one perceives oneself, and how one is seen by others. Against the background of such definitions and based on the analysis of the socio-economic changes among call centre agents, in this section I re-examine the impacts of call centre employment on their identities.

Scholars from various fields of the social sciences argue that identities are often negotiated during the coming together of traits of more than one culture. At times this might mean people try to adjust to a new milieu while at other times people adopt certain traits from a specific culture to which they are exposed (see Hutnyk 1997; Arnett 2002; Bolatagici 2004; Kraidy 2005). Prior to extensive writings on the globalisation phenomenon, as was noted in Chapter Two, literature on concepts of identities being influenced by other culture(s) - often termed as hybrid, negotiated, situated or transnational identities - concentrated mainly on members of diasporic communities who had to negotiate between the cultures of their homelands and that of their new host societies (Barker 1997 and 1999; Sanders 2002; Yeoh et al. 2003; Raj 2007). However, a review of literature shows that with the revolution in media and information technology such concepts are no longer limited to diasporic communities, rather they have gained prominence among numerous communities, including those in developing countries. Indeed, focusing on developing countries, through the media – print, television, and movies - people are increasingly exposed to the cultures of the Western world which mingle with their daily life activities. Such mingling, blending and/or fusing often impacts on identities (McMillin 2001; Arnett 2002; Scrase 2002). It has been argued that under these circumstances, the two most prominent channels through which identities are then expressed are through music and fashion (see Sadanha 2002; Lukose 2008). It must not be forgotten however, that such factors – focusing here on those most connected with globalisation forces – clearly affect identities of different people, communities and social

groups in different ways. In the case of globalisation influences, Sadanha (2002) notes that one of the main criteria for the articulation of such changing identities is money.

Based on my preceding analysis in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, I argue that the cultural politics of call centres manifest a new and emerging framework for examining identities. Call centres have a significant role in influencing identities in urban India, by offering Western lifestyle options at different stages of the employment cycle which, in turn, allow the agents to “cultivate” Western cultural elements in their daily lifestyles. I suggest that this process is facilitated by three highly influential sources: advertisements for call centre positions; the training processes; and the social atmosphere in the workplace. Each of these factors acts individually as well as in a cumulative manner that gradually has impacts on identities among the call centre employees. Moreover, in agreement with Sadanha (2002), I propose that income is the “lynch pin” for shaping these identities. As noticed in Chapter Three, Section 3.4.3, lifestyle is growing in importance as an indicator of social group membership and these group identities are secured by adopting appropriate patterns of consumption. Based on this I argue that the call centres provide salaries that are comparatively high by local standards, and such incomes allow these young adults to pursue a particular type of consumerist lifestyle that would be nearly impossible to gain locally otherwise. Hence, in this section I discuss how both individually and collectively these factors facilitate the young employees’ engagement in specific consumption decisions and lifestyle patterns that in turn, over time, remould identities.

9.1.1 Employment Advertisements: A Kaleidoscope for Influencing Identity

In the discussion of identity formation, discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.1, Lodziak (2002) suggests that sources of identity increasingly dwell in the world of images, symbols and signs, and that advertisements in modern consumerist society play a central role in providing a spectrum of possible identity formation triggers for youth (see also Dunn 2000). On a similar note Appadurai (2003: 42) contends that in the era of globalisation “the consumer has been transformed through commodity flows (and the mediascapes, especially of advertising, that accompany them) into a sign.” The advertisements for call centre employments are important examples of these

“mediascapes”. As examined in Chapter Six, in the *Times of India*, not only are such advertisements the most colourful among those for employment opportunities, but they are visually distinct from all others. A common stylistic aspect of the call centre advertisements as noted earlier in Chapter Six, Section 6.3 is to “hide” the real purpose of the advertisements in catchy titles, statements and metaphors, focusing instead upon potential lifestyle changes and individual rewards. Only when one reads the finer print does the purpose of the advertisement become clear. From a detailed discourse analysis of these advertisements in Chapter Six, two distinct features were observed. First, these advertisements create an image of a potential call centre agent as an urban youth who is intelligent, outgoing, fashionable, fun-loving, and ready to be a part of the larger youth community across the globe (discussed in Section 6.3.1). Such representations of the call centre agents are endorsed by the presence of multi-ethnic faces and the absence of Indian faces in the advertisements. I argue that the total absence of Indian faces in the advertisements communicates that once one joins a call centre industry an agent is no longer “Indian”. At work, at least, one instead assumes a Western identity, one legitimised by adopting an alias name and talking with a Western accent. Sanders (2002) in his discussion on ethnicity and identity formation in the various diasporas suggests that living in multi-ethnic societies – such as these call centre agents do “virtually” when they are at work - has an enormous impact on an individual’s identity.

Second, as noted in Chapter Six, Section 6.3.2, these advertisements lure the young adults by promising a certain Westernised lifestyle that they might enjoy if they gain a position in one of these companies. Aneesh (2006: 52) in his discussion of recruitment strategies for multinational companies in India states that through advertisements the companies use “fantasy as a recruitment strategy”. My analysis of call centre advertisements suggests a similar function. In sum, the call centre advertisements attract young adults by enticing them to consider a way of life where there is “more fun than work”, where there are opportunities to dress in Western clothes, share Western tastes in leisure and sporting activities, meet potential partners, and hang out in Western style nightspots: all these at the same time as promising lucrative incomes. As such, I argue that these advertisements are the powerful first step towards the acculturation of

call centre employees to specific Western cultures and lifestyle practices which ultimately prove to be instrumental in influencing identities.

9.1.2 Call Centre Training: A “Tool Kit” for Identity Negotiation

Training is an integral part of call centre employment, as was noted in Chapter Seven, Section 7.1. What I want to emphasise in this section are the training characteristics that I believe have the most important impacts on reshaping and renegotiating the identities of the agents. Indeed, as Prasad and Prasad (2002: 65) also argue, Indian call centre training programmes are “organisational locations for the construction of otherness through the systematic transformation of images about self and the other...” Based on my interviews, three aspects of the training emerged as strongly influencing the identity of the call centre agents: gaining an alias name; training to speak with a specific accent; and in-depth familiarisation with Western culture.

Upon beginning their new positions, call centre agents have to adopt an English language pseudonym, more commonly referred to in the call centre industry as an “alias name”. Aliases or “virtual names” overcome the “hassle” for Westerners to understand Indian names and facilitate rapid communication. While placating the customer’s cultural references, the pseudonyms allow call centre agents to bridge two realities- their “real life” in India, and the “virtual” world of their customers in North America or Europe (see, Raina 2004).

Traditionally, the family name is considered as central to a person’s identity in South Asia. As such, adopting an alias name can have an immense impact on these young employees (Kreig 1999). Unquestionably, there is a powerful connection between name and identity in India where a person’s name and especially their family name gives important clues as to the person’s religion, caste, original family home, and the community to which they belong. In many cases names are so elaborate as to identify the specific family village. Take for example the name Nandita Chatterjee. This signifies a Hindu (religion), Bengali (linguistic community), *brahmin* (upper caste) female, with roots in West Bengal, in the eastern part of India. Similarly, the name Vishnu Balmiki represents a Hindu (religion), Telegu (linguistic community), Scheduled caste (lower caste) male, who has roots in Andhra Pradesh in the southern part of India. In a call

centre when Nandita Chatterjee “becomes” Nancy Carter, and Vishnu Balmiki “becomes” Victor Baker, many aspects of their identities are masked including religion, region, caste and native language. As noted in Chapter Seven, Section 7.2.4, these agents begin to identify with their alias name quite readily. Indeed, often while I was interviewing call centre employees they would stress how they now identified themselves more with their alias name, as well as relating more promptly with the alias names of their call centre friends.

While adopting an alias name is the first step within the training process towards developing a “Western persona” (Mirchandani 2003: 9), it is soon followed by rigorous training to learn to speak with the “right” accent as discussed in Chapter Seven, Section 7.1.1. Yet, accents learnt for the job are not completely abandoned at the call centre door. During interviews off the premises, call centre agents commonly spoke to me with American accents. Rohit, a call centre agent explained that “even in daily life while talking to friends at times the accent comes. Then they say *jantey hai call centre mein kam karta hai, jada style mat mar* [we know you work in a call centre no need to show off]” (28/1/05). Ruchi, a manager further described how “they [call centre agents] always talk like them [Westerners], even when not on shift. They do not seem to be normal”. She explained that at times she wanted to say to these employees “OK, you have finished your calling for eight hours, now be normal” (23/12/04). Shweta, another manager, added that “it becomes very difficult for these agents to switch roles. I mean when Harish becomes Harry at work, he finds it difficult to resume his Harish character after work” (8/12/04). Accents are characteristics of a person’s identity (Shome 2006), and a person’s native region is often identified by his/her accent. Therefore, as Shome (ibid.: 108) states in her discussion of call centre training in India, such accent training works to give call centre agents “an American linguistic identity”.

During working hours the call centre agents are encouraged not only to speak like their customers but, if possible, also to think like them (*The Economist* 2000). To facilitate this, the final part of the training process constitutes “soft skills training” (discussed in Chapter Seven, Section 7.1.2). As noted, this serves two purposes, first, it familiarises the agents with the culture and customs of the country from which the company for whom they are working is based or serves. Second, it acts as an effective

tool used by the agents to conceal the actual location of the call centre. From a detailed analysis of the cultural training it was apparent that the agents are required to watch Western movies and are given scripts from Western TV shows - mainly American, like “Friends” – to read. The main purpose of such training is to acquaint them with US popular culture as well as with terms, idioms and concepts used frequently in America and the UK but which are not so common in India. As Krishnamurthy (2005: 22) notes, these agents are thus “trained to cultivate Western popular culture in their accents and slang.” My interviewees reported that after successfully passing such training, they are often referred to as “converted Americans” by their senior colleagues (c.f. Shome 2006: 112).

As noted with regards to call centre agents’ alias names and accents, “acting” as a Westerner is not restricted to working hours either. Ekta, a trainer, explained how “the personality is completely changed. Sometimes I like- I cannot understand how a person can be changed so much. How only talking to a person over the phone...their [call centre agents’] mindset change. They feel like they are Americans” (27/12/04). As Shome (2006: 113) writes and as I saw during fieldwork, such roleplaying becomes the spatial ground around which identities are negotiated by the call centre agents. The social atmosphere of the call centres that I delineate in the next section legitimises these new characteristics, as well as attitudinal shifts and changing lifestyle practices.

9.1.3 Social Atmosphere at Work Influencing Identity

Call centres provide an office atmosphere that promotes a Western lifestyle for professionalism. A specific social ambience is expressed through the work ethic, dress code, office conduct, and socialisation. As noted in Chapter Seven (Section 7.3.2) the agents are allowed to wear casual clothes and jeans only on Fridays and weekends, having to wear formal dress from Monday to Thursday, either Western or Indian.

Tarlo (1996), writing on dress and identity in India, argues that clothing plays an important role in identity construction, with individuals commonly defining themselves through the improvisation of attire. Despite restrictions on clothing practices at work, dressing style have generated a new fashion trend among call centre employees, a trend even reported in the *Times of India* (8th August 2005). My interviews with call centre

agents confirmed that they were very fashion conscious, not wanting to repeat wearing the same clothes in the same week, or if possible even every two weeks. Moreover, their passion for Western brand named clothes was significant.

The social atmosphere in the work place was clearly not just based upon fashion styles. Professional relationships among colleagues and supervisors were crucial to the formation of this particular environment. In an attempt to maintain a relaxed atmosphere at work some of the agents reported noticing a change in the general attitude and behaviour not only among call centre agents themselves, but between them and managers. According to respondents there was an increasing trend towards using physical touch as a mode of communication, irrespective of gender. As noted in Chapter Seven (Section 7.3.2) such behaviour is not common in other work places in India, hence agents, especially women, frequently commented that they were not comfortable with these increasingly “acceptable” behaviour patterns. Over time however, this behaviour by managers and supervisors was legitimising a certain extent of physical intimacy in the office and such acts were subsequently being repeated among agents too.

In the call centre industry socialising and partying takes place regularly as part of the motivational efforts on behalf of the management to overcome the monotony of the work. Not surprisingly such activities are reported to breed a certain type of social atmosphere that, in turn, supports a specific lifestyle not previously part of mainstream Indian workplaces. Many of the call centre agents, mainly women, stated that before their employment at the call centre they would never go to nightclubs, pubs, and discotheques because they would feel uncomfortable. However, after attending office parties held at such places, their attitudes changed and they explained that they felt increasingly comfortable at these places. Such changing opinions are a clear example of how call centre employment facilitates and triggers new behaviour patterns that otherwise would not have been widespread among these individuals.

My analysis of this data, gained from talking to a range of call centre agents and managers, their parents and even their doctors, shows that there are three clear factors contributing to influence identity change among call centre agents. Even before joining call centres, potential employees form specific ideas and images of the employment and develop certain expectations based on newspaper advertisements. After they join a call

centre, the training processes acculturate the agents, with a Western alias, and then more gradually via accent training and studies of Western culture, customs, greetings and communication styles. In turn, the social atmosphere at work - and at organised social events - enables and encourages these agents to actually live the life that they have been promised in the advertisements. Slowly identity negotiations are influenced. However, there is one crucial element that remains to be discussed – income - which is instrumental in the impact it has on identities of these young Indians.

9.1.4 Income: The Lynch-pin of identity

One of the main attractions of call centre employment in India is the appealing salary, comparatively high according to Indian standards, as discussed in Chapter Eight (Section 8.1.1). Based on their consumption patterns it can be concluded that these call centre agents represent a group of consumers ready to spend on items that can ascribe them to a specific social class as discussed in my conceptual framework in Chapter Three (see also Veblen 1992). Their list of expenditures discussed during interviews ranged from buying the latest available brand of sophisticated cell phone to designer label clothes, on which they spent heavily, often to the point of obsession. Shoes, jewellery, and cosmetics were also considered necessary luxuries.

Near the end of each interview with the call centre agents I asked them directly if they felt their identity had changed at all due to their employment at a call centre. Most interviewees without delay responded by commenting on their new financial situation, stating that their economic independence was a powerful factor in shaping what they considered to be their new identity. As Radhika, a call centre agent explained, “now I have my own identity because I am earning, otherwise people would just know me by my parents” (9/3/05). Similarly, Joginder commented “I feel now because of my job I have developed my own identity...” (27/12/04). Other call centre employees noted that one of the main ways that they expressed their identity was through consumption decisions. Thus, while reflecting on their decisions and changes, these agents considered income to be the most important factor in shaping and remodelling their identities.

9.1.5 The Processes of Identity Change

Drawing from these analyses, I deduce that three main factors are working towards influencing identities among call centre agents in the New Delhi environs. These include – the advertisements for call centre employment and the ways of life that are portrayed in these; the training processes with the adoption of an alias name, accent preparation and Western cultural training; and the work environment, with specific forms of socialisation and interaction. In turn, these factors, working in an iterative and aggregate fashion, and mediated by a substantial income by local levels, play crucial roles in changing the perceptions of the call centre employees regarding themselves, their appearance, the forms of socialisation that they are at ease with, as well as the public spaces that they feel comfortable interacting in; that is, these factors play crucial roles in influencing their identities.

The expressions of changing identities among this cohort are identifiable in large part due to their consumption patterns, especially those involving conspicuous consumption that has become integral to the call centre agents' way of life. As examined in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.1, consumption is a principal means by which we construct, maintain, reconstruct and display our identities (Lodziak 2002; Dunn 2000), and it has been argued that young adults, a malleable group with regards to their identity, are most affected by changing consumption patterns, fashions and trends (Beng-Huat 2000; Kim 2000; Kjeldgaard 2003).⁷⁴ Consumption plays a central role in constructing new senses of identity based on and around the possession and ownership of status-conferring goods (Giddens 1991; Mason 1998). An affinity towards conspicuous consumption was clearly obvious among the call centre employees, with goods bought not so much for their utility but rather for their social value (discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.2, also see Bocock 1993). These youth were not contributing to the greater family household to a large extent as was noted in Chapter Eight, and through their consumption behaviours these call centre agents demonstrated that they wanted to belong to a particular social class – “the new rich,” a term that even the media in India has picked up on (Bobb 2005).

⁷⁴ The psychology literature on identity also confirms this (see for example McGowen and Hart 1990; Lloyd 2002).

Despite the fact that consumption is one of the avenues through which call centre agents articulate their identities, it needs to be mentioned that there are two key elements - acculturation and deculturation (Raj and Raj 2004) - that distinguish this cohort from other urban middle class youth in India who engage in similar types of consumption practices. I argue that as well as the factors mentioned above, the shifting identities of call centre agents are in part influenced through two closely intertwined processes, namely acculturation of Western culture and deculturation of traditional Indian culture. The call centre agents I talked to, no longer perceived themselves as typical Indian youth, but instead preferred to be identified as part of the global (read Western) youth community (Dipti, call center agent, 11/11/04; Ashmita, call centre employer, pers. comm., 21/12/04; c.f. Kjeldgaard 2003). It could thus be argued that these agents fit into the category of “peripheral youth”, trying to model themselves on, and acquire characteristics of, their counterparts in Western countries who form the “image bank” for the identities of the former (Beng-Huat 2000; Pilkington and Johnson 2003). These images are conveyed not only by the media in urban India, but more specifically in the advertisements for call centre employment, as well as in the various American TV shows that they view and study as part of their training. Cumulatively, all these factors add important dimensions to this acculturation process.

The acculturation process is not straight forward, however, and it is clear that while in Western cultures public displays of affection among people of the opposite sex are common, this does not sit comfortably in Indian society. Among the call centre agents, physical intimacy both in the work place and outside, has become an increasingly normalised phenomenon influenced by the social atmosphere at work. Yet, as noted earlier, not all respondents were comfortable with such changes, as one explained with some distaste that “dating is so common among the agents and even in the office they tend to get intimate with each other” (Ritika 27/11/04). Other examples of acculturation of Western culture working alongside the deculturation of traditional Indian culture appeared less controversial amongst the employees - albeit not necessarily approved of by their parents - reflected in the call centre employees’ changing dress patterns, hairstyles and daily activities as well as leisure activities; all changes facilitated by their new incomes.

In accordance with Hutnyk's (1997) debate on cultural identity I would contend that even prior to the phase of identity change this cohort was exposed to Western culture, having encountered Western cultural symbols and ideas in the English-medium schools that they previously attended and through television.⁷⁵ Thus, call centres are not the first point of their exposure to Western culture. However, despite this fact it was apparent, based on my interview data, that before they joined a call centre, such Western lifestyle practices were considered to be kept "in the cupboard" and that they were not pivotal to these youths' everyday life. A case in point, as delineated earlier, is that before call centre employment, partying and going to nightclubs were occasional events restricted to special celebrations, while after these youth joined call centres such activities were legitimised by the ethics and atmosphere at the work place and became part of their daily lifestyle. Hence, I would argue that the call centres act as sites for "virtual migration" for these agents where, as part of their employment, they are expected to live - at least virtually - in Western society adopting a Western persona. As a consequence, they are encouraged to execute hybrid performances at work which then spill over into their daily life outside the physical space of call centres. This is supported by Kraidy's (2005) argument that such processes can be best described by mimicry. Bhabha (2004: 122) states that mimicry "emerges as a representation of a difference... as a process of cultural repetition than representation...". I argue that these call centre agents by performing such mimicry live in the "third space" as proposed by Bhabha (ibid.: 56). He posits that the third space or *inbetween* space is the "way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*" (ibid.: 56 original emphasis).

I argue that the performances that the call centre employees make - at one level during telephone calls, using their alias names, and while talking with neutral accents; and at another level with regards to the daily routines of their shifts, and their social activities linked to the centres - through their constant iteration, work to represent an embodied notion of what it is to be a young urban call centre agent working in India.

⁷⁵ In 1991 the liberalisation of the Indian economy initiated the opening of Star TV and other global channels in India (McMillin 2001). Ever since, media, especially television, has played a dominant role in introducing the Indian middle class to the Western world (Fernandes 2000; McMillin 2001; Scrase 2002).

These renegotiated remoulded identities are constantly reinforced through repetition, week after week, month after month (Turner and Manderson 2007). This discussion thus works towards addressing my third research question - how does employment in New Delhi call centres affect the identities of young adult employees?

9.2 Thesis Conclusions

From the preceding analysis it can be concluded that call centres have important impacts on the social lives of their employees, influencing their consumption decisions, lifestyle practices, and social behaviour. All these ultimately lead to reshaping identities among call centre agents. As such, in this section I discuss the major conclusions drawn from the thesis.

9.2.1 Call Centres- The Engines of Social Change

In the recent past call centres have emerged as one of the most important industries in the environs of New Delhi. Based on a content analysis of call centre advertisements since 2000, examined in Chapter Six, it is evident that this industry has expanded rapidly and as a consequence has generated numerous employment opportunities. Considering the characteristics of call centres, the majority of such employment is clerical in nature, with a high salary according to the local standard. The call centres have succeeded in highlighting this high salary through the glamorous job advertisements portraying glimpses of Western lifestyles. Thus, the industry has lured large numbers of young adults to join this segment of the labour force.

Though these agents live and work in India, their work schedules and working conditions are specified by the parent company located in North America, Western Europe, or more recently, Australia. Hence, the expectations and requirements of call centre employment have a great influence on the daily lives of call centre agents in New Delhi as discussed in Chapter Seven. An in-depth analysis of the micro-dynamics of call centre employment, detailed in Chapter Eight, shows that such influences can be broadly categorised into three categories- economic, social and health. The economic impacts are reflected in the high salary offered by call centres coupled with various other monetary incentives allowing the young adults to engage in a consumption-driven lifestyle which

otherwise they could not have afforded. Consequently, they have emerged as major consumers in India. Interestingly the consumption decisions of call centre agents are guided by their inclination to belong to a specific class in the society, the “new middle class” discussed in Chapter Three, Section 3.1. Hence, they indulge in conspicuous consumption and tend to live a lifestyle in which gaining certain social status is of prime importance. Such economic impacts not surprisingly, generate various social impacts.

First, the odd working hours disrupt the social life of the agents, who often find it difficult to maintain a work-life balance. This leads to changing relations with family and peers. At the same time, the socialisation of call centre agents becomes restricted to other call centre agents leading similar lifestyle and especially working similar shift times. In turn, it is apparent from my analysis that the lifestyle choices of call centre agents are not influenced by consumption practices alone, but that the social atmosphere at work also plays a significant role. The call centre management encourages a Western culture at work which is not in compliance with mainstream traditional Indian culture (see Footnote 29, Chapter Three). As a result, the social ambience legitimises certain social behaviour which otherwise would not have been accepted in Indian society at large. This also impacts on the daily lives of the agents, resulting in social behaviours and practices that are not part of mainstream Indian culture. These include regular consumption of alcoholic beverages by men and women, frequenting pubs and discotheques, public displays of physical intimacy with the opposite sex, increases in the number of dating practices and also live-in-relationships. Such behaviour is not widely accepted by the older generation in India who term call centre agents “fast”. Thirdly, the odd working conditions and labour expectations also affect the health of call centre agents. To cope with irregular working schedules many of these agents become addicted to caffeine, alcohol and smoking frequently develops as a habit. They also suffer from other physical and psychological problems including excessive stress, and digestive disorders.

Thus, the first main conclusion of this thesis is that **the economic impacts of call centre employment are of great consequence: they have resulted in notable increases in conspicuous consumption - leading to a number of specific social and health impacts, many of which are unprecedented in Indian society.**

Intriguingly, due to such impacts, and despite the high salaries, call centres have failed to gain recognition as a form of prestigious employment in India. Call centre agents, themselves not wanting to stay in the position for a long time, acknowledged this. It is interesting to note therefore, that since 2005 call centres have attracted the attention of the Western media who have tended to portray call centre employment in India as a long-term career option. Indeed, various documentary films have been produced to highlight the life of call centre agents in different Indian cities, including *1-800-India* and *Bombay Calling*. In these, call centre employment has been portrayed as a source of important livelihood and a lucrative career option for young adults who in turn financially support their families. For example, in *1-800-India*, a female interviewee and call centre agent, Santosh Kohli, comes from a rural low-income family and the documentary argues that call centre employment allows her to provide economic stability for her family. Similarly, in *Bombay Calling* Ekta, from a small town near Mumbai, supports her family with her call centre employment. However, all the call centre agents I interviewed were from urban middle class families, as discussed in Chapter Five, and their income *did not* contribute to the family income; rather, after buying small gifts for other family members, they spent it on themselves, indulging heavily in conspicuous consumption as discussed in Chapter Eight, Section 8.1.2. Moreover, one of the main criteria for joining call centres is knowledge of spoken English, attributed to having had an education at an English medium school. All such schools in India are privately owned, receive no government subsidies, and according to Indian standards have high tuition fees. Hence, I would argue that Santosh Kohli in *1-800-India* or Ekta in *Bombay Calling* are anomalies and should not be cited to generalise the impacts of call centres in India. Instead call centre employment still remains a easy option to earn and indulge in conspicuous consumption for the young adults joining the industry.

9.2.2 Influencing Identities

It is also important to note that the impacts of call centre employment on everyday lives of their agents ultimately lead to influencing their identities. As discussed in the first part of this chapter (Section 9.1), I argue that the call centres influence and reshape the identities of their young employees by promoting a Western lifestyle package, with each

component of this package acting at different stages of the job experience. An analysis of my data indicates that there are three clear factors contributing to influence and remould identities among call centre agents, as mentioned in Section 9.1. Before even joining a call centre, newspaper advertisements provide specific ideas and images of the employment to the potential employees. These represent the call centres as fun-filled places, with a Western ambience and handsome salaries that would allow employees to purchase luxurious items. After they join a call centre, the training processes acculturate the agents with Western culture. In turn, the social atmosphere at work enables and encourages these agents to actually live the life that they have been promised in the advertisements. The high incomes that come with these positions act as the lynch-pin that brings these preceding factors together: it allows these agents to live the life promised in the advertisements; and for which they are trained.

Therefore, the second main conclusion of my thesis is that **call centres in India are influencing, reshaping and moulding the identities of their young adult employees via a step-by-step process, which starts even before the agents join the call centre.**

9.2.3 Situating Call Centres within the Globalisation Debates

As noted in Chapter Two differences in conceptualisations of globalisation have led to a range of discussions and debate. One central issue in these debates, especially for economic geographers, is the question around the role of the nation state in the contemporary global world. The stances in this specific debate have been broadly categorised under three groups, the hyperglobalists, the sceptics and the transformationalists, as noted in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.2. First, the hyperglobalists, assert the end of the nation state and believe that everything - from the economy to culture – is being shaped globally. Second, the sceptics concede that globalisation is a “myth” since it is characterised by a highly internationalised economy, but one that is not entirely unprecedented. The third group, called transformationalists, argue that globalisation transforms the power-relations between the nation state and international powers, but the state remains an important agent. However, when using such

categorisations, I find it difficult to fully agree with any one of them in the case of international call centres in India and their place in the global economy.

I argue that call centres in India present a unique situation involving a range of important actors at both the global and local levels. At the global level, transnational corporations (TNCs), based mainly in North America and Western Europe, outsource their call centres to India. At the local level, the National Government, state governments and labour come together to facilitate the goals of global actors. Thus, there evolves a global-local nexus (Peck and Tickle 1994). Based on my analysis of call centres in India, I argue that power-relationships between the global and the local in this situation are not constant. There are situations when the local plays a very vital role in policy formulations and their executions; while many a time the global assumes more significance over the local, such as deciding labour requirements. Hence, while reflecting upon the importance of scale in such an analysis, as discussed in Section 2.1.2.1, I agree with Dicken (1997) that this case is not about one scale becoming more important than others, rather it is about changes in the very nature of the relationship between scales.

Details presented in Chapter Four showed that the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the early 1990s encouraged the flow of FDI into the country. As a result, TNCs took advantage of the situation and started to outsource their call centres in India. Moreover, incentives were offered to such companies at the state level and the local level by the Indian Government. All these together created an atmosphere that attracted TNCs to open their call centres in various parts of India, with Delhi being one of the most favoured destinations. If we situate this case within the broader debates around globalisation, under these circumstances I would agree with the transformationalists whom we met in Chapter Two (Luke 1994; Peck and Tickell 1994; Mittelman 1996 and 2000; Cox 1997; Dicken 1998; Knutsen 1998; Yeung 1998; Kelly 1999) and argue that the nation state – in this case India - is still a powerful actor in the processes of globalisation, as the state grants freedom to market actors through liberalisation initiatives (Helleiner 1995). Before liberalisation of the Indian economy these TNCs were not able to open call centres in the country despite the availability of other favourable conditions including productive and cheap labour. Hence in the Indian case, financial integration has occurred not because of the *decline* of the nation state, rather because of

the *willingness* of the nation state to take advantage of the opportunities presented by globalisation (Yeung 1998). Given this situation I would argue that the opening up of international call centres supports the arguments of the transformationalists that globalisation transforms the power-relations between the nation state and international powers, but that the state remains an important agent (Luke 1994; Dicken 1998; Yeung 1998; Kelly 1999).

While analysing the working conditions of call centres my perspective differs from those of the transformationalists. I argue that, at this scale, this labour situation can be best explained by the hyperglobalists (Ohmae 1990; Held 1991; Appadurai 1999). Though these call centre agents live and work in India, their work schedule and working conditions are determined by a parent company in a distant location for which they are working. Thus, the role of the nation state is restricted to allowing these companies to open their call centres in India and thereafter, it has little say in the working conditions of these call centres. The TNCs are so powerful that they even impose elements of Western culture on the call centre agents through the various aspects of training programmes already detailed. These call centres operate with the sole motive of profit maximisation, translated into unnatural labour expectations including working at odd times and meeting stressfully high targets. Thus, I am in agreement with the hyperglobalists that in this case, TNCs are free to act solely on the basis of profitability without regard to national or local consequences as they are not bound to particular places or communities (Korton 1995).

Similarly, the impacts of call centres on the lives of the agents can also be explained by an argument of the hyperglobalists that in a globalised world there is a common consumer culture that unifies all people (Appadurai 1999). It is clear from discussions in Chapter Eight that call centre agents live a lifestyle which is driven by Westernised consumer culture, with even their choice of places for shopping and leisure activities reflecting this trend. Influenced by Westernised socialisation at work and from TV shows and movies that they see as part of their training these young adults get a glimpse of the life of the “other”. As a consequence, in their daily lives they replicate such lifestyles, including regular partying, having live-in relationships and engaging in pre and extra marital sex. They are so engrossed in this Westernised lifestyle that it has lead to changing social norms in India. Hyperglobalisation is at work here: even the daily

lives of these agents are changed to suit global needs and ultimately these workers turn into agents of cultural globalisation.

From the above discussion it follows that call centres in India represent a complex phenomenon, difficult to categorise under any particular rubric of the globalisation debate. Most notably this is because there are multiple actors involved and the scales at which they operate are numerous. Based on my analysis I would argue that if one were undertaking a macro level analysis, the call centres could be seen to represent the arguments of many transformationalists, as the opening up of call centres in India were facilitated by various liberalisation policies of the nation state, making the latter an important actor in the process of globalisation. Nevertheless, at the micro-level, TNCs are the ultimate decision makers for the operation of the call centres, influencing the daily lives of the call centre agents and thus at this scale have a greater direct impact on individuals. The TNCs exemplify the arguments posed by the hyperglobalists that everything - from economy to culture - is shaped globally. Yet my findings reflect the argument posed by Woods (2007), discussed in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.2, that the politics of globalisation cannot be reduced to the domination or sub-ordination of transnational actors or the nation-state in a dualistic nature; instead it is a politics of negotiation and configuration. His argument is supported by Phillips' (1998) opinion that with globalisation the state is stronger in some realms and weaker in others. Hence, considering these distinct circumstances at different scales I answer my last research question- how are call centres situated within the broader debates regarding globalisation.

Based on this discussion the third main conclusion of my thesis is that **scale is a vital element to consider in discussions regarding globalisation and the call centre industry. As such, this study has shown that at the meso scale, the nation state has played an important role in the growth of the call centre industry in India. At the same time however, after their establishment in India, call centres and their globalised TNC operators dictate the working conditions for their employees. A global-local nexus has emerged with important on-going negotiations and configurations across scale.**

However, apart from such conceptual debates, it is apparent that call centres are channels of globalisation that are responsible for dynamic and diverse economic and

social changes in India. These call centres are affecting the lives of millions of young adults who are employed in them and are active participants in the process of globalisation. This leads us to question the future of the call centre industry in India.

9.3 The Road Ahead for Call Centres in India

When the first call centre was opened in 1998 in Gurgaon, it was a new phenomenon for India. The vast pool of eligible educated urban middle class youth provided a ready labour market for this industry, which gained momentum after 2002 and by 2008 there were more than 100 call centres located in the environs of New Delhi alone. From my analysis it is evident that the labour requirements and work ethics of this industry are unique and unprecedented in India. As a consequence call centres generate various socio-economic changes that are having considerable impacts on the identities of the young adults employees in them. However, after a decade of sustained growth, the call centre industry in India has matured over time, while facing competition from other industries within the outsourced sector that target a similar labour pool. Hence, call centres are required to be more innovative in their tactics to attract young adult employees, who now have more options to choose from, such as medical and legal transcription work, on-line education, publication activities, and so on. Hence, the call centre industry is always in a state of flux, due to the changing nature of globalisation processes and technological changes. As a consequence there are more opportunities for call centre diversification. While this thesis has focused on one particular set of outsourcing employment opportunities, it would be interesting to examine the impact of other outsourced industries on lives of their employees. This is of particular importance because of the large numbers of young adult employees who are currently, or are soon to be employed in such outsourced industries.

Like call centres, medical transcription services - part of the healthcare business that can be outsourced - are gaining great importance among the range of services that are being outsourced and relocated to India. According to statistics provided by NASSCOM around 1,600,000 people were employed in this industry in 2008 (NASSCOM 2008). Upon appointment, all employees are required to undergo rigorous training of American accents and to understand medical words and phrases to facilitate transcribing medical

records, which are usually sent as electronic voice files. Though, unlike call centre agents, these employees are not required to directly interact with customers in other countries, they are acculturated with the culture of the country to facilitate their work. Hence it would be interesting to study this dynamic and rapidly growing segment of the service sector in India, concentrating on the broad ranging possible implications on employees, their families, and the local economies and compare them with the results from my thesis.

Another possible area for future research that could branch off from this thesis is to gain a more nuanced understanding of the sexual health behaviour of the young adults employed at outsourced call centres. From my thesis it is evident that workplace cultures affect the daily lives of employees, but what remains unknown at this time is how the workplace culture at Indian call centres in combination with other socio-cultural influences affect the sexual health of young call centre workers. Therefore, it would be interesting to analyse the perspectives and experiences of call centre employees regarding how the office culture and socialisation processes at call centres affect young adults' conceptualisation of their sexual selves and how the call centre industry's culture interacts with perceived norms within broader Indian culture to develop specific socio-cultural dynamics that influences the sexual health of young adult employees.

Mistreatment of employees by customers in the call centre industry has gained prominence since 2006 and it would be fascinating to conduct an in-depth analysis of such mistreatment in outsourced call centres in India and how the nature of such mistreatment varies according to the nature of the call centre. The present economic recession is leading to a loss of employment for many in India, including among outsourced industries. Hence, the impacts of the recession on the outsourced call centre industry in India could be analysed from a socio-economic perspective. Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct a follow up study on the employees who leave the call centre industry and analyse their post-call centre employment or career trajectory to understand whether their identity transformation had an impact on their careers post-call centre.

In India call centres have generated a trickle down effect. A large and vibrant informal sector thrives in and around the call centre industry. Two important activities

that have gained prominence within the informal sector are food and transportation. As the call centres operate at odd hours numerous food stalls, selling tea, coffee, snacks and cigarettes have opened outside the office premises to cater to the growing number of employees. These stalls are mostly owned by rural migrants from different parts of India. Similarly, the pick up and drop facilities provided by call centres for their employees have provided impetus for the growth of car owners who operate informally to support the industry. Research agendas could be developed around these informal sector activities to examine the characteristics of the labour force within this sector. Thus, there are a number of interesting research ideas that could be explored concerning call centres in India and for all such future research, this thesis will act as a building block.

This thesis has examined the socio-economic impacts of economic liberalisation among young adults in India with a case study of call centres located in the environs of New Delhi. From the preceding discussion it can be concluded that call centre employment, which is facilitated by the processes of globalisation, has major impacts on the daily lives of employees in terms of increasing conspicuous consumption, and changing lifestyle practices, ultimately leading to a transformation of the identities of these young workers. Hence, this thesis examined the impacts of globalisation in India at three different scales. Firstly, at the micro scale, it detailed a range of lifestyle changes and shifting identities among the young employees in call centres. Secondly, at the meso scale, it documented impacts of call centre employment on social relations and families, and thirdly, at the macro scale it contributed to ongoing debates over the local socio-economic impacts of globalisation on youth in developing countries. Finally the study was situated within broader debates concerning globalisation and the role of nation state. Therefore, this thesis makes an important contribution in terms of presenting a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic impacts of globalisation at various scales as played out in relation to the call centre industry in India.

Appendix I

CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

The word “caste” is derived from the Portuguese word *casta*, signifying breed, race or kind (Sheth 1999). Caste is an institution, which is often said to be the predominant feature of Hindu social organization. A great deal has been written about caste and most of it regards caste as an institution of a simple and single origin. But caste appears to be an institution of highly complex origin. No comparable institution elsewhere has anything like the complexity, elaboration and rigidity of caste in India (Hutton 1969). One of the views on caste in India is presented by Bougle (as in Dumont 1970). He mentions that the caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: *separation* in matters of marriage and contact, whether direct or indirect (example, food); *division* of labor, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits; and finally *hierarchy*, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another.

There is debate about the nature of castes between two main sets of protagonists, who respectively, endorse a materialistic or idealistic conception of history (Quigley 1999). According to the materialistic conception of history caste is simply a rationalization and obfuscation of more basic inequalities. It is observed that high castes are wealthier than low castes. Thus, the concept of purity and impurity, which expresses caste differences is only a means of legitimizing and obscuring the true nature of social divisions. On the contrary, according to idealist interpretation, caste is a cultural construct and a product of religious ideas. The higher or lower position of castes is in relation to religiously conceived notions of purity and impurity. Caste is essentially an ideological framework for explaining universal problems of social order and material considerations are irrelevant.

According to Hindu traditional theory, the caste system owes its origin to the four *varna*. Mention of *varna* system appears in the hymns of Rigveda (Quigley 1999). In this hymn four *varnas* are presented: *brahmana*, *rajanya* (normally referred to as kshyatriya), *vaisya* and *sudra*, each of them originated from a particular part of the body of Purusa-‘the lord of beings’. Brahman sprang from the mouth of the deity, the Kshatriya was formed from his arms, the Vaisya was born from his thighs, and the Sudra was born from his feet. Manu lays down that the Brahman were assigned divinity and the six duties of studying, teaching, sacrificing, assisting others to sacrifice, giving alms and receiving gifts to the end that the Vedas might be protected. While the Kshatriya were assigned strength and the duties of studying, sacrificing, giving alms, using weapons, protecting treasure and life, to the end that good government should be assured. The power of work and duties of studying, sacrificing, giving alms, cultivating, trading and tending cattle were allotted to the Vaisya, to the end that labor should be productive, and to the Sudra was given the duty of serving the three higher *varna* (Hutton 1969).

Other than the traditional theory of caste there also exist certain other theories, which tries to explain the origin of the caste system, viz., social, religious and racial theories of caste, respectively. The racial theory of caste recently has certainly been the most widespread (Dumont 1970). This theory derives the institution of castes from the encounter between the two populations: the invaders sought to preserve the purity of their

blood by the creation of closed groups or by a more subtle but equivalent mechanism. Andre Beteille (2001) states that racism or ideas of innate, biological superiority is a “plastic” concept. The British were puzzled by the phenomenon of caste when they conquered India. This was the time when the racist concepts were full-fledgedly flourishing, so they thought to interpret caste in terms of race (*The Hindu*, 10th April 2001). For this purpose linguistic similarities among many of the languages of India and European languages were linked to groups, such as the Aryans, identified as racial types. The Britishers used the notion of an “Aryan conquest” and argued that the upper three *varnas* descended from the Indo-European “Aryans” while the Sudras and Adivasis from non-Aryan indigenous people. The “Aryan theory” of interpreting caste in terms of race proved attractive to Indians. This is because caste like race, is based on the concept that socially defined groups of people have inherent, natural qualities that assign them to social positions and make them fit for specific duties and occupations. However, though the theories justifying caste were similar enough to racism allowing a racial interpretation of caste, it is to be noted that caste is not based on race.

Risley, who claimed that he found a simple correlation between the castes and the nasal index of their members, systematized the theory, which had the advantage of calling on the contribution of physical anthropology. It has been discussed and modified till the present day. Thus, according to Risley, caste is “a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name, claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are component to give an opinion as forming a single homogenous community” (Hutton 1969).

The definition given by Risley provides a generalized idea about caste. But caste as a system operates only within a limited locality- single village or a few linked villages. In reality caste is a number of groups of different status interacting with each other, and this interaction is restricted to particular locality. As one moves away from a place the configuration of caste may differ: some groups may be missing, some new groups may be present, some of the groups may have a different status in one locality than in another, groups with same ritual function may be known by different names and refuse to recognize each other as status equals. There might even be change in the language spoken by some groups and they might perform their rituals differently. Other cultural aspects, such as, dress, jewellery or architecture among some of the groups might also change according to locality (Quigley 1999). Such situation is due to the fact that in any society where majorities are peasants local affiliations are extremely important.

Some of the other characteristics that are typical of caste system are that a dominant caste or a dominant family or set of families typically has preponderant political and economic power over everyone else in the locality. Dominance is rooted in monopolistic control over aerable land and physical force. Each caste has an occupational speciality and offers this to other castes in exchange for food products, or services. Especially important is the food grain provided by the land controlling dominant caste or families to the landfills servants, artisans and mendicant caste. This exchange of food, goods and services is a ritual system. It functions so that the highest caste remains pure while the lowest caste absorbs pollution for them. Castes within a local caste system tend to be mutually ranked according to their respective degrees of pollution in this ritual system. Apart from these, caste affiliation even determines the settlement pattern in rural

areas. Each caste segment tends to live in its own quarter. Universally, untouchables (who are unclean) live in isolation from purer caste, either in separate hamlet or on the outskirts of the village.

However, there were several social and religious movements in India and reformers like Buddha, Nanak, Kabir, Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayanand, Narayana Guru, Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar who tried to rid the Hindu society from the evils of caste system as caste is exploitative, discriminatory and anti-developmental. After independence the Indian society underwent certain major changes both in economic and social spheres and it also influenced the caste system. Some of the major causes that contributed to the changes in caste were industrialization and urbanization; adoption of Indian constitution, which declared India as a democracy; rise of bureaucratic state taking away some functions of family and caste, especially by promoting modern education, policies of planned changes (for example, changes in agrarian relations and agricultural technology); development of transport and communication, leading to monetization and growth of market economy in rural areas. But these measures have not been fully successful to change the caste system as even after 52 years of independence caste discrimination continues to afflict millions in the country. Moreover, caste is no more restricted only to Hindu society but has spread its tentacles also among other religions-Islam and Christianity (Srinivasan 1997). Thus from the above discussion it follows that caste affiliation is a major social factor affecting the life of an Indian in every aspect.

Appendix II
LIST OF CALL CENTRES LOCATED IN NEW DELHI AND ITS ENVIRONS

S.L.	Company Name	Location in India	Number of Employees	Clients
1	<u>24x7LiveChat</u>	Gurgaon	1200	US and UK corporations
2	<u>A TO Z Data Solutions</u>	Delhi	35	Barcklaw Mowlem, Australia
3	<u>Abstract eServices (P) Ltd.</u>	New Delhi	50	Telecom(US,Canada & UK),Financial Services(UK&US)
4	<u>AllServe Systems India Ltd.</u>	Gurgaon	3400	Teleco-ISP, Energy and Utilities, Banking Finance and Insurance,
5	<u>Alpha Thought</u>	Noida		US based companies
6	<u>Analyze-It Technologies</u>	New Delhi	20	Indian, European and US based Clients
7	<u>Arvato Services India</u>	Gurgaon	150	
8	<u>Axion Consultancy And Outsourcing (P) Ltd</u>	New Delhi	100	ABB Ltd, AFL Logistics (P) Ltd
9	<u>Beatnik Information Technologies Pvt Ltd.</u>	Gurgaon	100	
10	<u>BK ONE Corporate Training Pvt. Ltd.</u>	Gurgaon, Noida, New Delhi & other cities	160	Top Fortune 500 companies
11	<u>Brigade Management Services (P) Limited</u>	Delhi	11	USA, UK
12	<u>Colwell & Salmon Communications (India) Ltd.</u>	New Delhi (NCR)	500	Leading US, European & Australia clients
13	<u>Consulting Geo Info Systems</u>	New Delhi	10	USA, Argentina, Uruguay
14	<u>Continuum Systems</u>	Gurgaon	25	US and European markets
15	<u>Convergys</u>	Bangalore, Gurgaon	2000	
16	<u>CybizCall International Ltd.</u>	Gurgaon	150	UK and USA based companies
17	<u>Daksh eServices Pvt. Ltd.</u>	New Delhi (NCR), Mumbai	5000	Intuit, Bigstep, Yahoo, Amazon, PayPal / Customer Interaction
18	<u>DPS Technologies India Pvt. Ltd.</u>	New Delhi & other cities	600	Clients based in USA, UK, Australia, Philippines.
19	<u>E Value Serve</u>	Gurgaon	500	Spread across North America, Europe and Asia
20	<u>Ebix-India</u>	Noida	500	Leading US , UK and Canadian Companies (Insurance , ReInsurance, Banks,

S.L.	Company Name	Location in India	Number of Employees	Clients
21	<u>eFunds Corporation</u>	Chennai, Mumbai, Gurgaon	6,000	Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 companies
22	<u>eMR Technology Ventures (P) Ltd.</u>	Gurgaon	600	Leading US based Clearing houses, Third party administrators & a fortune 100 financial corporation.
23	<u>Ephinay (Formerly AcFin)</u>	Gurgaon		
24	<u>Espire Infolabs</u>	New Delhi, USA, UK, Australia	750	IndyMac Bank
25	<u>ExlService Holdings, Inc.</u>	Noida (3)	4600	IndyMac Bank, Fortune 500 and Global 2000 clients
26			10	US based companies, Global vendors
27	<u>Global vantage</u>	Gurgaon (2)		
28	<u>Hartron Communications Ltd</u>	Gurgaon	200	Hospitals, Physicians and Mortgage companies
29	<u>HCL Technologies BPO Services</u>	Noida [Delhi] & other cities		British Telecom
30	<u>HeroITES</u>	Gurgaon	500	Fortune 500 client in US, UK and Australia
31	<u>Hewitt Outsourcing Services (India)</u>	Delhi & other cities	210	Philips, IBM, ICI, Pfizer, BASF, Nokia, MindTree, Bank Muscat
32	<u>Hughes BPO Services</u>	Gurgaon	300	Leading Telecom and Technology companies
33	<u>i2iEnterprise Ltd.</u>	Delhi & other cities	1800	Large Indian / US based companies
34	<u>iEnergizer, Inc</u>	Noida	750	6 Fortune 500 companies, Chain of MNC Retail Banks, world leaders in Hardware
35	<u>Infiniteoutsourcing</u>	Gurgaon	15	US, UK and Australian Clients
36	<u>K.R & Associates</u>	Gurgaon	15	Confidential
37	<u>Keane Worldzen India Private Limited</u>	Gurgaon	400	Confidential
38	<u>KNM Services (P) Ltd.</u>	New Delhi	120	Top foreign Pvt., Nationalized banks and reputed organisations
39	<u>KRD INFOTECH PRIVATE LIMITED</u>	New Delhi	65	Clients of US, UK and India
40	<u>Ma Foi Outsourcing Solutions Limited</u>	New Delhi & other cities	100	Servicing top corporates
41	<u>Mantas Group</u>	Delhi	100	Multimedia, NESTOR Pharma Ltd., All India Biotech Association, Boston Technologies, Virtual Web Solutions,

	S.L.	Company Name	Location in India	Number of Employees
42	<u>Med-Dox Solutions</u>	New Delhi	12	US-based and UK-based clients
43	<u>MTportal</u>	Noida	80	Phoenix, Arizona bases clients
44	<u>NetSutra</u>	Delhi	30	US and Europe based
45	<u>NIIT SmartServe Ltd.</u>	Gurgaon	700	MisysFinancial Services Ltd., U.K (\$10 mn for 5 yrs for Quality assurance services for Independent Financial Advisors), Media / Entertainment sector, Education
46	<u>OKS Group</u>	Chennai, New Dehli, Noida, Canada, and US	2000	Fortune 1000; Business Information companies, Telco's, IT, and Healthcare.
47	<u>OKS SpanTech (P) Ltd.</u>	New Delhi	175	Leading European and US companies
48	<u>Pan Business Lists Pvt Ltd</u>	New Delhi	75	In UK, Germany, Austria, Italy
49	<u>ProLease India Pvt Ltd</u>	Delhi & other cities	500	
50	<u>Provestment Services Ltd</u>	New Delhi	35	UGS PLM Solutions, Flex Industries Ltd, Printotech Global Limited, Prakash Hospital
51	<u>Pyramid Consulting Inc</u>	Gurgoan	330	GeCIS, Accenture, UPS, BellSouth, Georgia Pacific
52	<u>R Systems International Limited</u>	Noida	150	Independent Software Vendors / Billing Companies
53	<u>RICO Softech Ltd.</u>	Gurgoan	100	USA, UK and Canada based companies
54	<u>Rightangle Technologies Private Limited</u>	New Delhi	5	Lexdata International (USA), Scicom Infotech (India)
55	<u>RSB Systems Pvt. Ltd</u>	Gurgaon	85	Clients in USA, UK, Canada and India
56	<u>Sand Martin Consultants Pvt. Ltd.</u>	New Delhi	75	Retirement Companies & Accounting firms based in US & UK
57	<u>Service1ne Global Business Solutions</u>	Delhi,	1000	Mortgage brokers, Mortgage bankers and Banks
58	<u>SGRJ & Associates</u>	Delhi	20	UK and USA
59	<u>SMTELE Sys Ltd</u>	New Delhi, Noida		-
60	<u>Staffing Solutions (India) Pvt. Ltd.</u>	New Delhi	50	BPO/TPA units operating in US & UK who outsource their clients work to India.

S.L.	Company Name	Location in India	Number of Employees	Clients
61	<u>Subset Services</u>	New Delhi	10	US and UK based CPAs
62	<u>Suntec Web Services Pvt. Ltd.</u>	New Delhi	50	US & EU based clients
63	<u>TechBooks</u>	New Delhi	2100	US and European based publishers, information aggregators, professional societies, government agencies and major corporations.
64	<u>Timon Global</u>	New Delhi	10	
65	<u>Trinity Partners Inc.</u>	Gurgaon	500	Largest privately held mortgage bank in US
66	<u>United Sourcing, INC.</u>	New Delhi, Bangalore	200	Mortgage Banks, Healthcare: Medical Billing and Coding Companies, Collection Agencies
67	<u>Varshyl Professional Services</u>	New Delhi	175	SBC, SGI, City of San Jose, Inow, DMS, RaggeSun, CalChips, Berkeley labs, Ugen and many others- Hi-TEch, Bio Tech, facilities, ISP and Financial Institutions
68	<u>vCustomer Services India Pvt. Ltd.</u>	New Delhi (3), Pune	3500	Hi Tech, Retail, Hospitality Clients.
69	<u>Wings Customer Care Pvt Ltd</u>	New Delhi & other cities	27	GECIS,eFunds, eXL, vCustomer, Bharti,Travelpack,Career Launcher
70	<u>Wipro Spectramind</u>	Delhi & other cities	14,400	<u>Delta Airlines, Netscape/AOL</u>
71	<u>WNS Global Services Pvt. Ltd.</u>	Gurgaon & other cities	4000	British Airways, Royal&Sun Alliance, WPP Group, Federal Express, SITA
72	<u>DevelopAll Inc.</u>	Gurgaon & other cities	1800	Industries: Business Services, Software & Programming, Computer Services, Communications Services, Scientific & Technical, Financial.

Source: Adapted from <http://www.bpoindia.org/companies/>

Appendix III

ANALYSIS OF ADVERTISEMENTS OF CALL CENTRE EMPLOYMENT USING VISUAL METHODOLOGIES

Facial expression	Gender	Age group	Activity type	Surroundings	Westerners	Wealth indicators	Dress style	Hair style	Others	Comments
stern face	female	18-25	on the move	other young people	Asian (not Indian)	well-to-do	western	short	funky style with head scarf and chocker	do you have the right attitude
no face	male hands		shaking hands	other young people in a computer framework	yes	well-to-do	western	not shown	global connectivity	global scenario, cell phones, thumps up
smiling	family	all ages	riding bike	forest/woods	sort of	well-to-do	western	short	family spirit	out team spirit can be compared to only one thing
smiling	female	20-25	working with headset on	computers, broad glass windows through which clock tower can be seen	yes	well-to-do	western	short	enjoying work	bye job, hi career
not really smiling	male	20-25	spinning ball on finger tips	cloudy skies	yes	well-to-do	western	red hair	as if the world is on his finger tip	play the game
smiling	2 males & 3 Females	18-25	posing for photo	colourful background with bubbles	yes	well-to-do	western-funky & formal dress	short, some are blond	smart people with intelligent looks	come to be a part of the best

Facial expression	Gender	Age group	Activity type	Surroundings	Westerners	Wealth indicators	Dress style	Hair style	Others	Comments
no face			marked folders	file cabinet	western office				professionalism	we have got everything you were always looking for
smiling	female	18-30	playing guitar	very colourful	yes	well-to-do	western-funky dress	medium hair with hat	gives a cool look	an offer that will rock your mind
Not smiling	female	22-30	meditating on a high rock	sky	yes	well-to-do	western	tied back	composed look, full control	stress free job
no face	clock		showing time	world map					comparing time zones	world citizen
Not smiling	female	18-30	putting finger on the mouth asking for silence	colourful, sitting on a chair	Asian (not Indian)	well-to-do	western	stylish hair	demanding secrecy	shhhh
no face	aeroplane		flying high on the sky after take off	sky						winners on board
no face	expensive perfume bottle			white						individualistic
smiling	1 male & 1 Female	22-30	biting a watermelon		yes	well-to-do	western	short-cropped stylish hair	enjoying life, intimacy between opposite sex	comes with a unique perk LIFE

Facial expression	Gender	Age group	Activity type	Surroundings	Westerners	Wealth indicators	Dress style	Hair style	Others	Comments
smiling	female	22-30	playing guitar	very colourful	yes	well-to-do	western	blond	funky style, enjoying	rocking offer
no face	burger with an American flag			white					burger served on a plate	All American serve
smiling	female	22-30	showing direction	bright colour	yes	well-to-do	western-professional	black hair	an arrow showing direction with American dollar sign on it	Are you moving in the right direction
picture of back from below waist	1 male & 1 Female	22-30	painting holding hands	white wall and paint boxes	probably	well-to-do	western-casuals	not shown	intimacy among opposite sex	paint an exciting career for yourself
smiling	female	22-30	hand posture as if achieved something	bright colour	yes	well-to-do	western-professional	blond	look of satisfaction & professional	It's the time to disco
smiling	male	22-30	perhaps listening to music & gesturing as if that's the right thing	bright colour	yes	well-to-do	western-casuals	not clear	wearing a funky sunglass	

Facial expression	Gender	Age group	Activity type	Surroundings	Westerners	Wealth indicators	Dress style	Hair style	Others	Comments
picture in sketch form	male & female	not clear	each one holding a point of a net	it is within a frame	not clear	well-to-do	western-professional	not clear	sort of binding through the net with each other- some solidarity	we are growing in number
not seen	females	22-30	climbing on a ladder	bright colour	yes	well-to-do	western-casuals	stylish hair	looking in an upward direction	you grow faster
no face	flying bird		flying bird	cloudy sky					flying in the westward direction	fly in a different sky
smiling	male	22-30	thoughtful gesture	bright colour	no	well-to-do	western	short-cropped hair	thinking seriously	are you smart enough
smiling	2 male	22-30	shaking hands	some building ceiling	yes	well-to-do	western-professional	not clear	professional-making a business deal- the picture is kind of upside down	make a world of difference to your career
smiling	male	18-25	smiling and posing for the picture	white	no	well-to-do	western-stylish	normal	look of satisfaction	I want to start a the top

Facial expression	Gender	Age group	Activity type	Surroundings	Westerners	Wealth indicators	Dress style	Hair style	Others	Comments
smiling	3 female & 1 male	22-30	forming a human pyramid & throwing up hands in exhilaration	white	yes	well-to-do	western-trendy	funky hairstyle-some blonde	as if enjoying a lot and want to show others-physical intimacy among opposite sex	walk,talk,rock
smiling	2 male & 2 female	22-30	huddling with each other and posing for picture	fireworks	yes	well-to-do	western	stylish hair	physical intimacy between opposite sex-showing a cosy atmosphere	not night shifts, just night outs
no face	birds		flying birds	clear sky					flying high	birds of a feather flock together
no face	4 male hands & 1 female hand	not clear	playing billiards-all targeting the same ball	bright colour	yes	well-to-do	not shown	not shown	upper class lifestyle	everyone sets the goal but few achieve it
sort of smiling	female	22-30	posing to punch	concentric circles	yes	well-to-do	western	coloured-mix of blond and red	showing confidence	knock out your competition

Appendix IV

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (CALL CENTRE EMPLOYEES)

Broad Topics

1. Name: (optional)
2. Age
3. Sex
4. Employed in which company
5. Country of parent company
6. Job position
7. Educational level (completed) & Name and place of educational institutions attended
8. Place of origin (Delhi / others)
9. If not from Delhi, reason for migration, and when.
10. When did you come to know about call centre jobs?
11. How did you apply for this job: - did you go through any agency; replied to advertisements; your friend(s) told you; through campus interview; others.
12. Is this your first job? Y/N
13. If no, where were you employed before & reason(s) for leaving the job?
14. Why did you apply for this job?
15. Have you taken the call centre job by choice or to fill in time?
16. What attracted you to join call centres? (Probe if necessary- just wanted a job and did not care where; have friends working in call centres; good payment & incentives; did not get job anywhere else; others.)
17. If not by choice what is your preferred profession and why?

Job related information

1. What is the nature of your job in call centre?
2. What is the range of your pay scale (below Rs. 10,000; Rs. 10, 000-15, 000; above Rs15, 000)
3. What incentives do they offer you, if any?
4. In which shift do you work (night, day, evening, etc.)
5. Does this shift vary or is it fixed? (Detailed idea about work schedule)
6. Did you get to choose the shift?
7. If work at night, how do you feel about it? How does this impact upon your life in any ways? (Leave scope for the respondent to answer as much as s/he wants)
8. Do you have pick up & drop facilities available for you, to and from work? Do you use it? Why/why not?
9. Do you wear a uniform? What's the dress code?
10. Do you have a pseudonym at work? Did you choose it? How do you feel about this? (If probing necessary: Would you prefer to use your own name, or it doesn't bother you?)
11. Do you have to speak with a foreign accent? If yes to accent, with which accent do you have to speak?

12. Did you undergo some training to get this accent? From where did you get the training (present office, previous call centre job, private institution)?
13. What did you feel about the training? Was it difficult/easy? How did they teach you to speak with the accent? How long did it take you to learn?
14. How do you feel about having to work with this accent? (If needed to probe: are you happy to use this accent, it doesn't bother you/ you are indifferent to it, or does it annoy you at times, and why?)
15. Who trained you to do the voice call job? (If relevant question: same people who did the accent training or different?). Are they Indians or foreign nationals? Are they from the country of the parent company?
16. What did you learn in the training period? How long was it?
17. Did you have to undertake any test that certified your training was successfully completed?
18. After you start working do you know if there any methods by which you are monitored to ensure that you are actually speaking like foreigners (in terms of accent)?
19. If yes, what are the consequences you face in case someone fails to speak in the foreign accent?
20. What do you think about this? (eg probing: Does it bother you that you are monitored, or you see it as part of the job)
21. If you have a pseudonym and the customer can make out from the accent that you are not a native, are you allowed to disclose your identity to the customers?
22. If no, how do you handle a situation when a foreigner guesses you are calling from India? If this has happened to you, what are the most common things the foreigner says?
23. If you disclose your identity does it affect dealing with your customers? How?
24. How did it first feel to have a new name at this age?
25. How do you feel when you work with a pseudonym?
26. Are you very conscious when you have to disclose your name to customers or are you at ease with it? Ask as much detail as possible.
27. Have there been instances when talking to your customers you were about to say your real name?
28. How do you feel when you talk with a foreign accent?
29. Are you very conscious about it or you feel confident enough? How was it the first few days talking with a foreign accent?
30. There are certain words that have different meanings for people in India and in Europe and North America (for example words such as 'freak', 'turnover'), how do you manage this- I mean using the same word with two different meanings at work and outside work?
31. Does this have any impact on you when you are not at work?
32. Before going to work do you mentally prepare yourself to act as the 'other' or it comes automatically?
33. Do all these changes affect your daily life? I mean when you are with friends or family do you try talking with a foreign accent as you do at work or try to act like the 'other' whom you mimic in way of dressing or eating habits, etc.?

34. Does your family and friends (other than those at work) know your pseudonym? How would you feel if your friends and family call you by your pseudonym? Will you like it or not? Reason(s) for both answers.
35. Then who are you? (This question will lead to various sub-questions according to response of the interviewee).

Changing lifestyle and consumption pattern

1. What do you do in your leisure time?
2. What are the recreations you like to be involved in?
3. Ask questions on reasons for any recreation or entertainment mentioned according to responses.
4. Before you joined call centres were your recreation and entertainment preferences the same as now?
5. Ask reasons for any answer. Are there new recreation activities that you undertake now because of contacts you've made at your work, or new activities you heard about via work?
6. What are the items that you buy you think you spend the most on?
7. Approximately what amount for each item: clothes, music, movies, books (or subscriptions), computer stuff, and cosmetics (if females) over last 12 months.
8. The items you mentioned that you spent most on were they always at the top of your consumption list or have there been some change(s)?
9. Why do you think is there a shift (if any)? Try to ask whether it is because of working in call centres?
10. What type of clothes you like to wear (for formal wear as well as casuals)? Reasons.
11. Are you very particular about brand names while buying clothes and/ cosmetics (for females)? Have these changed at all from before you started work at the call centre? If yes- in what way? If no, why do you think this is the case?
12. Have the brands of clothes that you wear changed since you started to work in the call centre? Yes/No, if yes, in what way?
13. Where do you generally go shopping for clothes? Do you go with friends or family? Are these friends from the call centres too, or outside your work?
14. How regularly do you go for such shopping?
15. Are you an impulse buyer or you buy something only when you need it?
16. What type of food you generally prefer (Indian or Western fast food)
17. How often do you dine out? Reasons.
18. Which are the eating-places or restaurants you visit most frequently? Reasons. Is this any different from before you worked in the call centre?
19. How much generally do you spend once you go out to dine?
20. Do you think this has changed at all since you started working at the call centre?
21. Do you like to watch movies?
22. What are the most recent five movies that you have seen?
23. You mentioned that during leisure time you are engaged in reading/ watching TV/ listening to music.... Ask about their preferences in such activities.
24. Do you go for parties (night clubs, discos, concerts, get together with friends)?
25. How often, where, organised by whom?

26. Tell me more about such parties: - the types of people, activities, venue, etc.
27. Are your parents aware that you go to such parties (events)?
28. What is their reaction to it?
29. Do you stay with your parents, relatives or are you on your own?
30. Where do you live (which part of the city)?
31. If living away from family- do you share your accommodation with anyone? How long have you lived here?
32. If yes, what is your roommate's occupation?

Changing relation with parents and friends

1. Do you think that the working hours and the nature of your work has affected your relationship with your parents, or not?
2. Tell me more about it. (How?)
3. How do your parents react to your working in call centres: (probing examples- Happy, satisfied, want you to quit, or any other reaction.)
4. Do you think they are justified in whatever way they react?
5. Some information on their parental background to analyze their previous exposure
 - a. Parent's occupation
 - b. Parent's educational qualifications
6. Do you think your working in call centres have affected your relationship with your friends?
7. If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?
8. How many, if any, of your friends work in call centres? And total number of friends.
9. Tell me more about your friends, their background, occupation, etc.
10. Are you married?
 - a. If yes, what is the occupation of your spouse?
 - b. What opinion does s/he have regarding your job?
 - c. Does s/he wants you to quit the job or is happy about it?
 - d. What about your in-laws? How do they react to it?
 - e. Do you live with your in-laws (if female)?
 - f. Personally do you think that working in call centre is affecting your married life in any way? Explain.
11. If no, do you have a boy/ girl friend?
 - a. How long have you been in relation with him/her?
 - b. Does your job affect this relationship in anyway, currently? Explain.
 - c. Do you think it might at all in the future?
 - d. How are you going to deal with any impact?
 - e. Do you think that your job is going to affect your marriage?
 - f. Would you prefer your spouse to be employed in call centre or not?
 - g. Reason for both answers.
12. For others, how do you think you will seek a partner?
13. Would you prefer someone from the same profession? Reason for any answer.

14. Do you think that your employment in call centre will provide avenues to seek a compatible partner, than it would have been if you were not employed in call centre (Probe if necessary).

Wrapping up the interview

1. On the whole are you satisfied or not being employed in call centre?
2. Reasons for any answer.
3. Do you feel any perceptible change due to working in call centres: - mention if any.
4. Do you plan to continue with this job?
5. Reason for any answer – and for how long?

Appendix V

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (CALL CENTRE EMPLOYER)

1. Name:
2. Name of the company:
3. When did this office start here?
4. Do they have branches in other cities of India and in other developing countries?
5. What are the natures of jobs in other branches of India (if any)?
6. Reasons for choosing this particular location?
7. Name and location of parent company:
8. Nature of the parent company (type of business they are involved in):
9. How long have you been working in this company?
10. Position within the company:
11. What are the skills and requirements you need from your employees?
12. Do you require different groups of skill for slightly different positions? Please give details...
13. How do you recruit your employees? (If probing required –do you advertise in leading newspapers or contact consultancy agents?) – Which newspapers, how often, who writes the advertisements?
14. Are these specifications provided by parent company or you have a say in it, i.e., decide according to labour availability?
15. Who are generally given preferences for such jobs (different positions)? [Probing questions will follow related to gender, qualifications, background experience, local or from other parts of India etc]
16. Are most of your employees new graduates or they have some job experience(s)?
17. If job experience, generally where were they earlier employed?
18. What is the most common reason for leaving that job?
19. When you recruit a new employee, what are your expectations from him/her?
20. What is the general interview process for recruiting these employees?
21. What are the expectations that you have while interviewing candidates for jobs? (Discuss in details).
22. What is the pay scale for these jobs?
23. What other incentives do you offer them?
24. Do you give some training to your employees, once you recruit them?
25. What is the nature of such trainings?
26. Who trains them- some senior from the company or special staff are recruited for the purpose?
27. Ask their skills /expertise.
28. After training is complete, do you monitor the employees in regards to their efficiency? If yes, how do you do this?
29. As an employer are you satisfied with the output of your employees? If yes- why? If not, why not?
30. Do your employees work with a pseudonym?
31. Do they talk with an accent (European or North American, as applicable)
32. Do you think working with pseudonym has an impact on personalities of employees at all?

33. Do you think that talking with an accent has an impact on personalities of employees?
34. If yes, how (change in attitude, behaviours, dressing pattern likewise)?
35. Do employees wear some uniform while at work or not?
36. If uniform (ask about uniform- type of dress for males & females: any particular reason for it).
37. If no uniform, what type of dress do they generally wear at work?
38. What are the work schedules for these employees? Do you create these schedules or do they come from the parent company? Do the employees seem happy with these schedules or do you have complaints?
39. Do you have pick up and drop facilities for the employees? Can you tell me more about it?
40. How do you encourage your employees to perform better?
41. Do you often have parties? If yes- why? If no – I've heard that other call centres sometimes have parties, what has made you decide not to have them?
42. If yes, are they in-office parties or else at other venue?
43. What type of work culture do you try to promote among your employees?
44. Do you feel your employees are satisfied with the work atmosphere and the work in general?
45. Reason for any answer.

Appendix VI

Table I: Characteristics of call centre employees and employers

Pseudonym	Gender	Approx age	Marital status	Caste	Education (completed)	Local ‘Delhite’ or Migrant*	Time worked in call centre (if known)
Call center employees							
Sawant	M	25	married	Brahmin	BA	D	6 mths.
Rohini	F	22	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	M	Not known
Madhuri	F	20	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	M	9 mths
Jatin	M	22	unmarried	Kayastha	BSc	M	8 mths
Kamlesh	M	18	unmarried	Kayastha	High school	D	4 mths
Kakoli	F	18	unmarried	Brahmin	High school	M	2 mths
Romila (trainer)	F	26	unmarried	Rajput	MBA	D	3 yrs
Rupinder	F	mid-20s	unmarried	Khastriya	MA	M	7 mths
Hiralal (trainer)	M	27	unmarried	Kayastha	BSc	M	2 yrs
Nitika	F	19	unmarried	Kayastha	High school	M	6 mths
Betty (trainer from Canada)	F	Early-30s	unmarried	NA	BA	M	Not known
Mitali	F	23	unmarried	Kayastha	BSc	M	> 2yrs
Gurpreet	F	26	unmarried	Khastriya	M.A.	D	14 mths
Ranu	F	mid-20s	unmarried	SC	BA	M	9 mths
Sumanth (trainer)	M	28	unmarried	Kayastha	BSc	M	1 yr
Mukta	F	Early-20s	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	M	1 yr
Nilanjana (trainer)	F	Early-30s	married	Brahmin	M.A.	M	5 mths

Pseudonym	Gender	Approx age	Marital status	Caste	Education (completed)	Local ‘Delhite’ or Migrant*	Time worked in call centre (if known)
Bimla	F	21	unmarried	ST	BCom	M	Almost 1 yr
Radha	F	Early-20s	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	D	>6 mths
Dolly	F	20	unmarried	Rajput	BA	M	Not known
Tarun	M	24	unmarried	Brahmin	Engineering	M	10 mths
Gitika (trainer)	F	27	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	D	2 yrs
Sucharita (trainer)	F	Early-30s	unmarried	Kayastha	MA	M	15 mths
Rakesh	M	22	unmarried	Rajput	BA	D	7 mths
Atul	M	Mid-20s	unmarried	Kshatriya	BSc	M	1 yr
Jayant (team leader)	M	Mid- 20s	unmarried	SC	BSc	M	11 mths
Divya (trainer)	F	Early-30s	unmarried	NA	MA	M	Almost 2 yrs
Ashima (trainer)	F	Late-20s	married	Kayastha	MBA	D	> 18 mths
Shiva	M	26	unmarried	Kayastha	Engineering	M	< 1 yr
Deepti	F	23	unmarried	Brahmin	BA	M	7 mths
Akash	M	20	unmarried	SC	High school	M	Almost 1 yr
Rakhi	F	32	married	Brahmin	Ph.D.	M	< 6 mths
Shreya	F	25	married	Brahmin	BCom	D	10 mths
Ashim	M	19	unmarried	NA	High school	M	Not known
Sudipto (supervisor)	M	Mid-20s	unmarried	Kshatriya	BA	D	Almost 2 yrs
Punit (team leader)	M	24	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	M	> 1yr
Jaipal	M	25	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	D	2 yrs

Pseudonym	Gender	Approx age	Marital status	Caste	Education (completed)	Local ‘Delhite’ or Migrant*	Time worked in call centre (if known)
Amitabh	M	25	unmarried	NA	MBA	D	Almost 1 yr
Shilpa	F	21	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	M	Not known
Kakoli (trainer)	F	mid-20s	unmarried	Brahmin	MCom	D	> 2 yrs
Naveen	M	21	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	D	5 mths
Alka	F	24	unmarried	Rajput	BSc	M	< 1 yr
Rupinder	F	25	unmarried	Kayastha	MPhil	M	6 mths
Anirudh	M	19	unmarried	Kayastha	High school	M	4 mths
Amrita	F	21	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	M	11 mths
Kohili	F	18	unmarried	Kayastha	High School	M	3 mths
Prakash	M	Early-20s	unmarried	NA	BA	D	> 1 yr
Anjana	F	23	unmarried	NA	BA	M	Almost 2 yrs
Lalit	M	28	unmarried	SC	BSc	M	9 mths
Sulagna	F	Early-20s	unmarried	Kshatriya	BCom	M	1 yr
Nutan	F	22	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	M	Almost 1 yr
Bidhan	M	20	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	M	1 yr
Sukanta	M	24	unmarried	NA	BA	M	> 1 yr
Aparajita	F	27	married	Kayastha	BCom	D	> 2 yrs
Subir	M	Early-30s	unmarried	Kayastha	MBA	D	Almost 1 yr
Rohini	F	mid-20s	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	M	8 mths
Karan	M	22	unmarried	NA	BCom	D	5 mths
Dipti	F	Late-20s	unmarried	Kshatriya	BA	D	2 yrs
Usha (trainer)	F	29	married	Kshatriya	BA	D	3yrs
Mallika	F	20	unmarried	Kshatriya	BA	M	> 6mths
Rajesh (supervisor)	M	27	unmarried	Rajput	MSc	M	Almost 2 yrs
Gopal	M	19	unmarried	Brahmin	High School	M	Not known
Shruti	F	22	unmarried	NA	BSc	D	2 mths

Pseudonym	Gender	Approx age	Marital status	Caste	Education (completed)	Local 'Delhite' or migrant*	Time worked in call centre (if known)
Arup	M	29	married	Kayastha	Doctor	M	<1 yr
Soma (trainer)	F	Late-20s	unmarried	Kshatriya	MBA	M	Almost 2 yrs
Anjali	F	mid-20s	married	Rajput	BA	D	> 3 yrs
Kalyan(trainer)	M	Early-30s	unmarried	Kayastha	MCom	D	< 2 yrs
Kamlesh	M	21	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	M	Almost 1 yr
Tapas	M	24	unmarried	Brahmin	MBA	M	< 1 yr
Anirudh	M	25	unmarried	NA	BSc	M	> 2 yrs.
Geeta	F	31	unmarried	ST	BA	M	1 yr
Bhupinder	M	22	unmarried	Kshatriya	BCom	M	10 mths
Kunal	M	21	married	Kshatriya	BCom	D	6 mths
Sudipa	F	27	married	Kayastha	BCom	D	Almost 2 yrs
Deepa	F	34	unmarried	Kayastha	PhD	D	> 1yr
Sawant	M	26	unmarried	Kayastha	MBA	M	Not known
Kalpana	F	Late-20s	unmarried	Kayastha	MSc	D	< 2 yrs
Ritika	F	mid-20s	unmarried	NA	BA	D	8 mths
Ekta (trainer)	F	32	married	Brahmin	MA	M	Almost 3 yrs
Mohit (team leader)	M	25	unmarried	NA	BSc	M	> 1 yr
Joginder	M	21	unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	D	< 6 mths
Rita	F	Early-30s	married	Kayastha	BA	D	3 yrs
Radhika	F	20	unmarried	Kayastha	BA	M	7 mths
Employers				Kayastha			
Atanu	M	Mid-30s	married	Brahmin	MBA	M	> 3yrs
Ruchi	F	Early-30s	unmarried	Kshatriya	BA	D	> 2yrs
Shweta	F	Early-30s	unmarried	Brahmin	MA	M	>2yrs

Pseudonym	Gender	Approx age	Marital status	Caste	Education (completed)	Local 'Delhite' or Migrant*	Time worked in call centre (if known)
Preeti	F	Late-20s	Married	Rajput	MBA	M	Almost 3yrs
Praveen	M	Mid-30s	Married	Kayastha	BSc	M	4 yrs
Sarvesh	M	Early-30s	Unmarried	Kayastha	BCom	D	>3yrs
Ujjala	F	Late-20s	Unmarried	Brahmin	MA	M	>3yrs
Pulak	M	Early-30s	Unmarried	Kayastha	BA	D	Almost 4 yrs
Annapurna	F	Early-30s	Married	Kshatriya	MBA	D	>2 yrs
Ashmita	F	Mid-30s	Unmarried	Kayastha	MBA	M	>3 yrs

SC- Scheduled caste, ST-Scheduled Tribe, NA- Not applicable if the person is a Muslim or Christian

* D- Delhite, M- Migrant

Table II: Characteristics of parents

Pseudonym	Gender	Approx age	Occupation
Mahua	F	Late-40s	Homemaker
Saswati	F	Early-50s	Homemaker
Suchitra	F	Early-50s	Manager in a bank
Sikha	F	Late- 40s	Homemaker
Mukesh	M	Mid- 50s	Officer in Indian railways

Table III: Characteristics of Key Informants

Pseudonym	Gender	Approx age	Occupation	Relationship with call centre agents
Vinita	F	Mid- 30s	Teacher in a college at Delhi	Many of her students were aspiring to be call centre agents
Sailaja	F	Late- 30s	Teacher in an university at Delhi	Many of her students were employed in call centres
Disha	F	Early- 40s	Doctor	Had patients from call centres
Mihir	M	Early- 50s	Doctor	Had patients from call centres
Shreshta	F	Mid- 40s	Doctor	None

APPENDIX VII

PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

An example of the phenomenological approach is explained below using “consumption patterns” and “changing lifestyle” as two broad themes. After extracting significant statements for each of these themes, duplicate statements were eliminated. Tables 1(a) and (b) show the list of significant statements (Step 2). Based on these tables, meanings were formulated (Table 2; Step 3) and these meanings were categorised into themes (Table 3; Step 4) and ultimately an exhaustive description of socio-economic change was produced, drawing from this information (Table 4; Step 5). Table 4 provides a comprehensive description of both consumption and lifestyle patterns.

Table 1(a). Significant statements: Consumption Patterns [Step 2]

Significant statements being drawn from the transcripts on consumption patterns: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Loads of money2. Highly capitalistic mindset3. Delhites’ consumption pattern and their level of spending is very high4. Buying clothes5. Buying expensive mobile phones Example of transcript section that provided such statements: Statements 2-3 are from the following transcript “And about the consumption pattern? I would say <i>highly highly capitalistic mindset</i> of people over there. I mean highly capitalistic OK? I was in JNU so I had so many socialistic ideas OK. Once I stepped into (this call centre) slowly, slowly, I am recognising. I was like, see JNU has a way like you are bred into ideas, fed into ideas of socialism and left communism// And people are like, say, um they quickly um very quickly I will tell you um in call centres two kinds of people come; one who are outstation students, and then there are the Delhites. Now for <i>Delhities consumption pattern and their level of spending is very high-</i> because no rent, no fooding, nothing because everything is taken care of by the parents. They <i>spend a lot</i> mainly <i>buying clothes and mobile phones.</i> ”

Table 1(b). Significant statements: Lifestyles [Step 2]

Significant statements being drawn from the transcripts on lifestyles: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Booze parties (cocktail parties)2. Parties organised by company3. Outstation picnics4. Go to discos and clubs every week Example of transcript section that provided such statements: “There are lot more parties now. We have both <i>booze parties</i> at friends’ place or sometimes there are <i>parties organised by company</i> , they also serve drinks. Whenever a process goes out or new process comes we have such parties. Usually we also <i>go to discos</i> when we have free time. Company also gives money to teams for out <i>station picnics.</i> ”

Table 2. Formulated meanings of significant statements [Step 3]

<p><i>Consumption patterns</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The call centre agents earn a lot of money and this often leads to a capitalistic mindset among these people. 2. Delhites (people who are original residents of Delhi and not migrant population) tend to spend more than their migrant counterparts mainly because they live with their parents and don't have to pay for rent and food. This means they can save a lot of money. 3. Most of the call centre employees spend a large amount of money buying clothes and the latest mobile phones. <p><i>Lifestyles</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. These people frequently have parties, some of which are alcoholic drink parties. Such parties are either organised informally at a friend's place or officially by the company. 2. Often teams of call centre employees are sponsored by the company to go for picnics organised out of town. 3. Going to discos and night clubs are some of the favourite recreational activities of these employees.

Table 3. Clusters of common themes [Step 4]

<p><i>Consumption patterns</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Money earned <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Call centre employees earn handsome salaries 2. Expenditure <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Most of them spend a lot of money on clothes and mobile phones <p><i>Lifestyles</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recreation and entertainment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (a) For call centre employees recreation and entertainment mainly consists of partying, (mainly cocktail parties) and going to discos and night clubs.

Table 4. Exhaustive description of socio-economic changes [Step 5]

<p>There are considerable socio-economic changes noticed among call centre employees in New Delhi. Changing consumption patterns and lifestyles are the two major spheres where these changes are very perceptible. These employees earn high salaries according to the Indian standard and this often leads to an increase in conspicuous consumption among them. The items on which they spend the most are clothes and electronic gadgets like mobile phones. Unlike in traditional Indian societies, clubbing and parties have become an integral part of the lifestyles of call centre employees. The companies encourage such a lifestyle as many of these parties are organised by the companies themselves. Thus, call centres are one of the agents igniting socio-economic change in New Delhi.</p>

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