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## Cultural colonisation of Indian youth through outsourcing

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### Abstract

Although outsourcing brings forth opportunities for enhancing global development, it also creates wide ranging political, economic, social and cultural issues for both outsourcing receiver and outsourcing provider countries. So far the issue has been dealt with an economic point of view keeping in mind the employment losses and wealth creation in the job exporting countries. The experiences of countries that receive outsourced jobs are yet to be addressed, especially in social and cultural context. In this context the study of BPO culture in a country like India, which is crowned as the 'outsourcing capital of the world', is extremely relevant.

The tremendous growth of Indian call centers in the last few years has generated considerable social and cultural developments in Indian society. Both positive and negative impacts of outsourcing are discernable across different aspects of Indian social and cultural life, including language, identity, gender, and lifestyle. This transformation of society needs to be seriously understood. The present paper offers a critical evaluation of this 'cultural colonization of the mind'.

This paper takes into account a range of theories which have been put forward to explain the role of communication technology toward the construction of youth culture, for example Postmodernism (e.g. Wallace *et al.* 1998; McRobbie, 1994) or the Cultural Studies approach (e.g. DuGay, Hall *et al.*, 1997; Cohen, 1997).

**Keywords:** Outsourcing, youth, cultural colonization, BPOs, globalization. Popular culture, consumerism, modernization

### Introduction

In post-modern thought, youth is determined by the notion that "age-status is becoming "de-standardized and eroded" (Wallace *et al.*, 1998, p.14) <sup>[11]</sup>. Youth starts earlier, as through the commercialisation of popular culture (Postman, 1983) <sup>[12]</sup>. The perspective on consumption forms an important concept in post-modern thought. Some writers, for example, Bordieu (1984) <sup>[4]</sup> have argued that people do not construct their identity according to their social class but through the exercise of their consumer tastes. This is especially so today when young people, irrespective of their class or purchasing power, tend to acquire latest and fashionable consumer products. And the BPO Industry has contributed a lot in this economic empowerment of Indian youth. Business organizations take such consumer behavior into consideration in the marketing of new communication technologies and global consumer products. Jagdish Bhagwati opines that the 'pull of modernity', as a result of technological innovations, has in many ways been attracting people to adopt 'more alluring lifestyles'. The present paper draws its outline from these scholarly approaches.

### BPO's in India

Given the sky-rocketing cost of manpower, infrastructure and real estate in the U.S. and Europe, it was but a logical strategy on the part of the corporations in these countries to look for lower cost alternatives. India, with its vast pool of technically skilled manpower that possesses an uncanny ability to create and write software code, yes in English, just happened to be at the right place at the right time.

### BPO industry crucially depends upon four factors

1. Favorable time zones,
2. Quality infrastructure and skills in information technology (IT) and telecommunication,

### 3. Language skills for its English speaking population, and strategic government policy.

The geographical location of India is such that the time differential between India and some time zones in the U.S. is approximately twelve hours which makes round-the-clock work possible for firms in the U.S. The quality of telecommunications infrastructure in India has been improving dramatically over the years in terms of the size of main telephone lines in operation. Another driving factor behind India's high-end call centre activities is the availability of a pool of IT and technical manpower. India has built a large number of institutions enhancing technical, engineering and IT skills. It has a huge number of technical (engineering, technology and Master of Computer Applications (MCA) colleges churning out a skilled manpower which are in IT courses. In addition, specialized institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology, Indian Institute of Information Technology, National Institute of Technology and Indian Institute of Science, have a big annual intake of students, out of whom a handsome number of students opt for IT courses. The private initiatives in computer education led by enterprises such as National Institute of Information Technology (NIIT), Aptech, ICE, and ICS, and many others are also impressive.

Beside these technical and IT skills, India has the strategic advantage of language as its graduates speak English unlike those in countries such as China. Government policy has also played a facilitating role in the emergence of Indian call centers as global players. The implementation of economic liberalization covering trade and investment and technology policies during 1990's has been the most crucial. Reduction in the import tariffs on technology equipment, deregulation of the telecommunications sector, and policy initiatives to reduce the cost of broadband access and a great initiative by the internet service providers have played an important role.

All these plus points are proving cutting edge for the Indians over their counterparts in countries like China and India is able to churn out major overseas BPOs businesses.

Indian youth is displaying major success in the BPO world because of their proficiency in English, sound technical knowledge and flexibility to assiduously work for any time zone. This has made the BPO business in India lucrative and the BPO functioning cost effective. India provides with the maximum number of graduates every year and the work force agree to work at a much lower wage rate as compared to the developed countries. Hence it is advantageous for the offshore business concerns to outsource some of their activities to India.

#### **Youth and BPO**

The tremendous growth of Indian call centers in the last few years has generated considerable social and cultural implications, especially on the youth of India. It is a phenomenon that has taken over the young crowd of metros in India by storm. The impacts of outsourcing are discernible across every aspect of social and cultural life of youngsters working in call centers ranging from their language, identity to their overall life style.

Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is India's hottest career option that is flooding the Indian job market with substantially paid jobs for the Indian youth. These BPO activities includes outsourcing of a foreign organization's

customer services, technical support services, telemarketing services, Insurance activities, data-entry jobs, Web research etc.

With the advent of Call center jobs in India, came youth's independence. Days are gone when the college going youth use to depend on pocket money from their parents for their personal expenses. 8-hours job, good working environment, flexibility in timing and a good fat pay, all these are offered to the college going youth. Not only pocket expenses are met, you would find them with the latest gadgets, wearing branded clothes and accessories and partying out at the hippest restaurant and pub in the city. Moreover getting early entry to the job also means getting first hand practical experience of job etiquette. You will find them more professional, good command over foreign language (English primarily) and exposure to western world that benefit them with regard to new technology, development and opportunities.

Due to the variation in time zone these companies appoint only those individuals who are flexible with the time modifications. These BPO's, especially the telesales call centers recruits not only graduates but also undergraduates and college goers. It has become the hottest part time job opportunity for the college goers. With eyes dozing off, headsets fixed to their ears, placing phone calls to the foreign lands with fake foreign names that's the story of millions of Indian youth today. There is no doubt that the call centre employees get astounding pay hikes but it is also a fact that this is a cause of ruin for numerous individuals as with the increase in the disposable income of these youth they tend to adopt the foreign culture thereby frequenting their visits to disco's and night clubs and over consumption of external food and liquor.

#### **Cultural Colonization of Youth**

Cultural Colonization is a process of promoting, distinguishing, separating, or artificially injecting the culture or language of one culture into another. It is usually the case that the former belongs to a large, economically or militarily powerful nation and the latter belongs to a smaller, less important one. Cultural colonization can take the form of an active, formal policy or a general attitude.

Some believe that the newly globalized economy of the late 20th and early 21st century has facilitated this process through the use of new information technology. This kind of cultural imperialism is derived from what is called "soft power." The theory of electronic colonialism extends the issue to global cultural issues and the impact of major multi-media conglomerates, ranging from Time-Warner, Disney, News Corp, Sony, to Google and Microsoft with the focus on the hegemonic power of these mainly US communication giants. British Imperialism or Western Colonialism did not die after the end of World War II when the West gave up its colonies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, West Indies and the East Indies. Gradually it changed itself into a more subtle form which is proving to be more harmful to all non-Western cultures both in the short run and the long run.

What went by the name of Colonialism in classical history textbooks produced in the days of British Raj has been replaced today by the synonym of Globalization. The unbridled expansion of western culture has continued at an

accelerated rate along with the denigration and decline of Indian culture, civilization, religion, art, literature and customs. This new Colonization has taken on several new faces or rather put on new masks. It cleverly masquerades itself through labels and slogans like democracy, humanitarian rights, gender equality, internationalism, free trade and humanitarianism. In the name of modernization and globalization, it pretends to be uplifting people whom it is really exploiting.

The culture of BPOs has shifted the focus of youngsters from education to making quick money. Earning huge salary at a very young age encourages them to develop unwise spending habits. There are cases where the individual's whole personality has changed within a few months of taking up a BPO job. With this economic independence has come many other freedoms and that's what is the cause of worry for the elders. Sex and drugs are two terms that are synonymous to call center lifestyle, though many believe its media generated.

There were reports in the media about washroom hole jammed with used condoms, drugs pallets found during a surprise check on employees in a reputed MNC Call center and many youth arrested from rave parties where drugs were openly available. With huge disposal income and stressful/lonely life, a call center employee wants to have a taste of everything in life including drugs.

Live-in relationships are another threat to Indian culture as many treat these as a means to satisfy their sexual needs and very few convert those relationships into marriage. Socially the BPO culture has altered the way Indians have lived for years. With its operations mainly during the night, the call centers offer an opportunity for the young to live a perpetual nocturnal life, a saleable idea to the youth. The fascination of the dark and the forbidden, is tremendous for the Indian youth, recently unleashed from the chains of tradition and culture. Because of this fascination, the industry has developed an air of revolution about itself. Not only is it cool to work for call centers, it is radical and revolutionary.

Just like the bikers subculture of the 60s and the flower children of the 70s, these call centerites also have their own lingo and a unique style of existence. Most of them are happy in a well paying monotonous job, reaping the benefits of technology, enjoying a life away from rush hour traffic and local trains. The *moolah* is good, the work is easy and life is comfortable.

### Changing Consumer Patterns

On one hand, the burgeoning outsourcing market has reached its peak on account of the various call centers and help desks outsourced to India. On the other, it has led to a sea change in the lives of Indians, their life style, priorities and motivational factors. The Indian youth is compelled to work unearthly hours while the rest of the world is sound asleep. The constant interaction with Western counterparts has not just influenced his or her English accent, but has also transformed their outlook in life. They are more comfortable with parts of the Western lifestyle like junk food, English television programs and dating, to name a few, as compared to a more traditional Indian lifestyle.

So one can see the number of imported bikes is on an increase, though they cost a fortune. Multiplexes, discos, pubs are mainly thriving because of the BPO workers of

today. The rise of BPO sector has brought in its wake enhanced standard of living, high purchasing power, flamboyant lifestyle, etc. which were hitherto out of reach of the average Indian youth.

The emerging consumption profile of our people indicates, on the one hand, the cultural resilience of the past and the present aspects of our tradition, on the other hand, it also suggests as to how susceptible is our consumption behaviour to temptations of gross and unmindful consumerism. Even though relatively small, a substantial section of the upward mobile population in our society may be a victim of the consumerist temptations

They provide technical support 24x7 to the foreign customers, more or less western culture seems to be accepted in today's society; Restaurants, Night clubs and every other place you can think of is full of smarties from BPO's flaunting off in English.

### The Role of Media & Globalization

Media has played a vital role in encouraging these cultural and consumption habits related changes in the youth of India. The global media culture has become an independent force in the lives of young people, influencing behavioural and value patterns that differ from those of their elders. Some argue that ICT carry a "cultural package" of values associated with Western popular culture. Facilitated by ICT, media culture can sometimes conflict with more traditional concepts of how youth should behave.

In urban centres, media culture and its predominant messages permeate almost all aspects of young people's lives. Increasingly, access to ICT influences youth's education, personal relationships, employment opportunities, and more. Whatever its future, the call center industry has taught Indians a lot about Americans and Americanization, opening now not only their wallets to us but also their minds and offering a peek into their lives. It has shown Indians the hidden west and unleashed all its secrets. How far are these call centers involved in influencing a young generation into a westernized life is debatable, but it does open channels for discussion.

Thus, the urban youth of India is earning reasonably good income at an early age and can afford all the material luxuries. But this raises a few questions:

- Have they retained their individuality?
- Is there optimum utilization of their intelligence?
- Do these low-end jobs add value to their professional experience?
- Do they learn valuable lessons from their career in such interactions?

To find answers of these questions is a difficult task. But to reach on some conclusion we need to review the other side of this shining coin too: Though the call centre culture has helped a lot in improving Indian economy and helping Indian youth in self-sufficient and assertive and quite modern in their terms, but this success has brought some negative by products with her.

The call center workers, looking pleasant outwardly are suffering from lots of problems, both physical and mental. Besides, the harms to Indian culture and values are countless.



The typical problems tend to be depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse and relationship-related problems.

Beyond the above issues, one problem which worries them the most is the health problem. Heart diseases, Stomach Disorders, Sleep Disorders and back-ache problems are common. Many of these young workers report loneliness, depression and monotony in life. Especially for night shift employees, they hardly meet any new people because of their odd working hours. They, in fact, end up meeting their parents/friends once a week. Indeed, the high degree of dissatisfaction that is fast dawning on Indian back office employees is getting to be a major cause for worry in India's back office sector, which is billed as one of the country's most important sectors for economic growth.

Even work related ailments are reality. Sleeping disorders, digestive system disorders and eyesight problems are prevalent. Unprotected sex with multiple partners among young staff in India's call centers has emerged as a new HIV/AIDS threat in the country. On the flip side, the long and odd working hours, work pressure, tough deadline, eating disorders, sedentary lifestyle and lack of physical exercise are taking an early toll on the health of BPO employees.

In many cases, the individual is either not aware of the problem or is too scared to report it, fearing loss of job or denial of promotion. Many switch jobs thinking it will help, but that too seldom makes a difference. Finally, they land up in innumerable health clinics and fitness centres. Though many youth tend to ignore this problem because of bad race for money, but in few months/years they realize the ill side of working in a call center, especially at night.

Multiple Personality Disorder and other psychiatric problems are increasing phenomena. The cultural impact of outsourcing is not as rosy as described above. Call centers have a profound impact on the cultural and social behavioral patterns of young Indian people and their families. Many call center workers are reconstructed in terms of western culture, accent, language, and identity (i.e. western pseudonyms) during their ten to twelve hours long work in the odd work shift. At the individual level, this creates a problem called Multiple Personality Disorder. The same person is divided between Sulochana and Sally, Krishnamurthy and Chris, Hari and Harry, etc. The remaking of Sulochana into Sally in the image of their customers' requirements entails severe personality costs, as a person's name is very important to his or her identity, self-respect, and confidence. Using a different name, copying a foreign accent, and adopting an alien persona for a prolonged period of time can have negative impact on the personality of large number of young people and when the person starts enjoying the benefits of his other self it can even lead to a Multiple Personality Disorder. Workers enjoyed the experience of being another person and making calls as they felt that when there are call failures and abusive calls, it is their professional identity that is being traumatized while their personal identity still remains intact. A rising number of Indian call centre and software workers are complaining of stress, panic attacks, depression, relationship troubles, alcoholism and eating disorders. They are hardly able to exchange more than a few words with their families. On days off, most of them do not even read the newspaper or watch anything more than mindless programmes on TV. Many of them

show symptoms of bipolar disorder with going to work each day as the "high" and when they are at home, they are listless, bad-tempered and depressed". Even while stress and burnout are severely debilitating the workers in the sector, they are forced to live with it. Most often, workers do not relate their problems outside the family as it would be considered a sign of weakness in personality. But more importantly, it could even put their employment in jeopardy. Often firms treat these problems as the worker's individual problem.

Racial and Cultural Abuse are another major problem associated with BPO culture in India. When the call center employees are working for wealth creation in developed countries they are being constantly attacked with racial and cultural abuse from these countries. The very outsourcing that inspires a large youth population of a country to adopt the western culture and lifestyle is beginning to render them culturally rootless. They are being labeled as 'terrorists', 'racially inferior', etc., ultimately deeply affecting them psychologically and culturally. The call center workers in India are increasingly becoming victim to hate calls by overseas customers that include rudeness, racial and cultural abuse and sexual harassment. These stress factors generated by clients' rude and abusive behavior are triggering call center employees to quit their jobs and is affecting their normal social behaviors. Many firms are faced with the unfortunate prospect of high attrition rates due to the psycho-social costs to the employee. To cut down turnover rates, many firms have started counseling classes for their employees to deal with irate callers. The another, most important negative impact that call centers have generated is the wide-ranging social division within family and outside.

First, call centers are contributing to creating a category of middle-class youth who are slowly being culturally alienated from the rest of the crowd in the urban area. The new working habits and patterns of lifestyles, like working in the night, smoking, drinking, and pub culture, are in complete contrast to the ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs still nurtured by the urban middle-class. These young people have little time to spare for their family members, relatives or friends due to a long duration of work estimated to be somewhere between ten and twelve-hours per day.

The fear of someone always waiting to take his or her job makes it necessary to work hard. As they earn more than their parents ever did, finance is not a problem for them as they adopt the lifestyle that they pretend to represent in the call centers. These issues are creating family and social tensions in the urban area. Alarmingly, the well-paying job in the call center is widening the social and economic divisions between a booming middle class and an impoverished class of urban poor.

India is definitely 'shining' for Indian middle-class young men and women who have all the things that their parents could not have dreamt of buying in their lifetime, cars, televisions, computers, cell phones, western clothes, etc. A growing number of shopping malls, coffee shops and nightclubs for the new richer Indian urban middleclass are fast changing the Indian urban landscape. On the other hand, the ever-growing urban poor, surviving in slums, are being continuously pushed into darkness by slum demolition drives, neglected in sanitation, power, and water.

## Conclusion

Youth culture of today determines the destiny of society tomorrow. The culture should be healthy. What we need is a young population who are rational in thinking may or may not be westernized in their attitude but should not forget the age old time tested values our society.

The big money, the night-shifts, the contact with the "western world" creates a kind of call centre culture, even best-selling novels about it. The experiences of the new proletarianised middle class generation are characterized by a call centre job straight after school or university, the night shifts, the technological control and general pressure, the shared flats, the purchasing power, the expensive food in the neighbouring shopping malls, the long hours in cabs, the frequent job changes, the more open gender relations at work, the burn out, the difficulty to keep the perspective of an academic career or to find jobs as academics.

Globalization is interfering with the life India has lead for hundreds of years. In a short amount of time, outsourcing has lead to people abandoning their beliefs in order to benefit Americans. Outsourcing is destroying years of culture and identity for millions of people in India. Even though, it has resulted in jobs and education for much of the population that would have been inaccessible without globalization.

The question remains pertinent for the policy makers, intellectuals and at most for the civil society, that how are we going to meet the demand of the economic challenges and at the same time saving our youth from wasting their capabilities for some money and all the more importantly, how to preserve our culture and values? Can we bear the pressure of the 'cultural colonisation of the mind'. Remember the 'cultural genocide' can awake from its ashes but the 'colonisation of mind' takes more than century to awake and that's what Indian Independence struggle has taught us in the 'history of India in making'. The key is to adapt to changes as required and, simultaneously, to not allow superficial values to control our lives. When India's intrinsic values, intelligence and rich heritage come to the fore, we gain insight into the respect and admiration we command across the world.

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