Making Americans:
Transnational Call Centre Work In India

Stream 18: Postcolonial Stream Proposal

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to document developing globalization processes, and their "cracks" (Sassen, 2001), through an analysis of a newly emerging transnational labour force – call centre workers in New Delhi, India, who provide voice-to-voice service to clients dialing toll free numbers in the United States. Recent theorists have focused on the ways in which capitalism is continually under construction, and heterogeneous groups of workers play active roles in relation to transnational corporate processes. Accordingly, I argue in this paper that while many of the work processes in subcontracted call centre work resonate of imperialist subcontracting practices characteristic of "globalization from above" whereby Indian workers are trained to serve the needs of American clients, the transnationalization of voice-to-voice service work simultaneously provides the opportunity for Indian workers to construct "Americans" and situate their own jobs within global labour markets. Drawing on interviews with call centre workers, managers and trainers in India, I explore the ways in which micro analyses of the work processes within the call centre sector reveal the cracks and inconsistencies within globalized work relations.
Globalized work processes have fundamentally altered the ways in which labour markets are organized around the world. While recognizing that the globalization of work is far from a new trend, there has been much focus in the recent literature on the need to highlight the ways in which globalization is actually "achieved." Critiquing the construction of globalization as an inevitable and irreversible process by which capitalism dominates nations, labour markets and households, Bergeron, for example, stresses the need to highlight the "gaps and margins of the processes of global capitalism" (2001:999). Sassen, in a similar vein, notes the need to "shift emphasis to the practices that constitute what we call economic globalization and global control" (2001:196). Freeman suggests that such an approach would allow for a rethinking of the hegemonic "masculinist grand theories of globalization that ignore gender as an analytic lens and local empirical studies of globalization in which gender takes centre stage" (2001:1008). These theorists suggest that moving away from grand theories which characterize globalization as a "meta-myth" (Bradley, 2000), a "rape script" (Bergeron, 2001) or a "narrative of eviction" (Sassen, 2001), allows for an exploration of the incomplete and contested nature of the movements of capital and labour. It also allows for analyses of the ways in which workforces are neither homogeneous, not passive in relation to globalized work relations. Such an approach emphasizes, as Sassen (2002) notes, the "cracks" which exist in the "wobbly political architecture" of social spaces.

This paper is an attempt to document developing globalization processes (and their "cracks") through an analysis of a newly emerging transnational labour force – call centre workers in New Delhi, India, who provide voice-to-voice service to clients dialing toll free numbers in the United States. In the past three years, India has installed reliable high capacity telephone lines in most of its major cities (The New York Times, March 21, 2001). As a result, according to a research report by the International Data Corporation, India is poised to register the highest growth rate in the call centre services market in the Asia-Pacific region during 2000-2005 (Asia Times, June 9th 2001). In 2000 there were 500 foreign companies who outsourced work to about 60 call centres in India (The Economic Times, June 19th 2001). By 2002, India had 336 centres (India Today, November 18th 2002). Examples of companies which have outsourced their call centres to India include British Airways, TechneCall, Dell Computers, America On-Line, GE Capital, Cap Gemini, Swiss Air and American Express. Operators in these centers make telemarketing calls, or provide service to customers calling about issues such as their insurance claims, credit cards, computer hardware, network connections, banking and financial plans.1 Through the use of satellites, calls are seamlessly and inexpensively routed across geographical spaces.

I begin with a review of literature on the potential usefulness of micro analyses of globalized work relations. Recent theorists have noted that such analyses demonstrate that capitalism is continually under construction, that labour in the Third World is heterogeneous and that workers play important roles in relation to transnational corporate processes. Accordingly, I argue that while many of the work processes in subcontracted

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1 Call centers are either inbound (customer service) or outbound (telemarketing/sales). A significant percentage of call centers in India are outbound. The focus of the present paper, however, is on the inbound centers providing customer service.
call centre work resonate of imperialist subcontracting practices characteristic of "globalization from above" whereby Indian workers are trained to serve the needs of American clients, the transnationalization of voice-to-voice service work simultaneously provides the opportunity for Indian workers to construct "Americans" and situate their own jobs within global labour markets. Drawing on interviews with call centre workers, managers and trainers, I explore the ways in which micro analyses of the work processes within the call centre sector reveal the cracks and inconsistencies within globalized work relations.

(Brah, 2002)

Processes of global capital: Gaps, Cracks and Ironies

Sassen argues that understandings of global processes have traditionally been limited to analyses of cross border processes such as international trade and investment. These analyses have produced a "rather empirically and theoretically 'thin' account" of the ways in which "the global economy needs to be implemented, reproduced, serviced, financed" (2001:190, 192). Sassen notes that, "the global economy cannot be taken simply as given, whether what is given is a set of markets or a function of the power of multinational corporations (2000:217). In a similar vein, Appadurai challenges the view that globalization brings about a straightforward cultural homogenization. Rather, he argues that we live in a "world of flows" characterized by the constant movement of ideas, ideologies, people, goods, images, messages and technologies (2000:5). Appadurai notes that "if a global cultural system is emerging, it is filled with ironies and resistances" (1996:29).

The focus on the micro processes through which global economies are sustained allows for analyses of the ways in which diverse groups of workers play varied and active roles vis à vis transnational corporate and financial practices. Chhachhi notes that analysis of global relations which identify the nimble fingered and docile female woman worker in electronic and garment factories as the "paradigmatic subject" (1999:329) mask the heterogeneity of the workforce in labour providing nations. In fact, "the main reason for the entry of multinationals into India is not cheap labour but access to a vast middle class" (1999:356). Chaudhuri, in a similar manner, highlights the heterogeneity of the category of the "Third World worker" (Mohanty, 1997) and observes that "transnational companies at the beginning of liberalization led to a real possibility of young men and women [in India] entering the corporate sectors at salaries that their parents could not dream of even at retirement" (2001:376). Nanda notes that "global capital sees the Third World not simply as a reservoir of cheap unskilled (and largely feminized) labour but also as a source of (relatively) cheap skilled labour" (2000:37). The recognition of the fact that there are multiple, and sometimes competing interests amongst subcontracted labour forces serving transnational corporations suggests the need to explore the continuous work which workers do in attempting to form, influence and manage their local work relations and environments.

Carla Freeman provides a vivid illustration of worker attempts to define their work, and notes that "informatics workers in Barbados demonstrate through a variety of
practices that they are not the passive pawns of multinational capital they have sometimes been depicted to be” (2000:36). She notes that women's jobs are both a source of pride and pleasure, and simultaneously a source of stress and dissatisfaction. She challenges assumptions that women in the third world are passive pawns of multinational capital and instead focuses on the agency women enact through their work and their lives. Freeman demonstrates that global capitalism is not monolithic; constructions of the "ideal third world worker" are both shifting and context specific. While other studies have revealed, for example, that young, childless and unmarried women constitute ideal third world women workers, in Barbados family responsibilities are often believed to make women more committed to their jobs. Contrary to the assumption that multinationals seek a predefined flexible female labour force in third world Freeman argues that ideal pools of flexible labour are actively and continuously created.

Highlighting the continually contested and heterogeneous nature of global capitalism allows for an analysis of the micro processes through which transnational corporate alliances are forged and facilitated. At the same time, a number of theorists have stressed the importance of situating analysis of these "gaps" and "cracks" within broader understandings of the political economy of globalization. Ong (1999) highlights the ways in which contemporary economic, social and cultural processes are embedded in regimes of power which differently affect mobile and immobile subjects. Such an approach challenges dichotomous understandings of "core and periphery" nations, labour markets and subjects, while at the same time recognizing the power differentials between various nations, labour markets and subjects.

Following a brief discussion of the interviews I conducted, I describe the nature of subcontracted call centre work in India, and the relationships and processes which this work fosters.

Methods

The primary purpose of this project was to explore the nature of call centre work within the context of global economy relations. Interviews were conducted in 2002 with two sets of individuals in New Delhi – call centre workers and managers/trainers. All respondents were with organizations serving American clients. Call centre workers were contacted via friends and colleagues in India, and were employed by a variety of companies in the export processing zone (Noida) in New Delhi. Thirteen workers (7 men and 6 women) were interviewed. While most interviews were one-to-one, in some cases roommates or other call centre workers were present in workers homes where the interviews were conducted. Respondents were, on average, 25 years of age. One man was married, and one of the women was engaged to be married – all other respondents were single. All respondents had Bachelors’ degrees, and several had Masters’ degrees or additional Diplomas as well. None of the respondents had worked in call centres for more than one year (which is not surprising given the recent emergence of the industry). Workers earned between Rs 5,500 and Rs 10,000 (C$150-400) per month with the exception of one male worker who had seven years of work experience and earned Rs 30,000 (C$1,200). A significant portion of salaries was tied to performance incentives.
In addition to call centre workers, I also interviewed managers at 3 call centres, as well as representatives of 3 agencies which provide training for workers. These interviews with managers and trainers focused on the history of the industry, labour force demographics and work processes. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in full. Analysis focused on themes which emerged out of the interviews.

Call Centre Work: Understandings through the Narrative of Globalization from Above

Appadurai notes that globalization is "inextricably linked to the current workings of capital on a global basis; in this regard it extends the earlier logics of empire, trade, and political domination in many parts of the world" (2000:3). There are a number of ways in which call centre work represents an extension of the imperialist as well as economic relations of colonialism. The discussion in this section describes the ways in which the industry can be interpreted as a manifestation of "globalization from above", whereby American, British, Canadian, European and Australian organizations employ workers in India to fulfill the labour needs of their domestic operations. As "clients" and "employers", transnational corporations define the nature, timing, norms and structure of work and workplaces. Call centre work is structured through mechanisms such as scripted taylorism, locational masking, language imperialism, and the colonization of time, as described below.

a. Scripted Taylorism: "Like a keyed toy"

Workers engaged in interactive service work are often required to perform emotional labour as part of their jobs. Part of the work of providing service for a wage is the "management of feeling to create a publically observable facial and bodily display" (Leidner, 1999:82). Leidner argues that one of the central mechanisms through which emotional labour is controlled by organizations is through the development of detailed specifications of conduct (the scripting of "feeling rules"), and the close monitoring of individuals' work. Call centre workers perform emotional labour over the telephone; given the synchronous ("live") nature of their interactions with customers, considerable resources are expended to develop processes within which the appropriate emotional labour can be facilitated, controlled and monitored. As a result, the work processes in place at call centers in India can be paralleled to those in foreign-owned data processing centres in the Caribbean where "the open office is, at one and the same time, factory like in terms of its labour process and officelike in its muffled quiet ambience" (Freeman, 2001:200).

Scripted service work in call centres is ensured through both training and monitoring. Workers undergo both generic (such as accent, grammar, customer service) and process-specific (about the products) training before they are allowed to take calls. Some centers provide this training in house and pay workers while they are being trained,

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2 Although Leidner does not refer to phone-based interactive service work, voice displays, too, can be assumed to involve the management of feeling.
while others outsource the training to adult education sites where individuals themselves pay for the training they receive. In all cases, there is a great emphasis on following predefined scripts. One worker who was undergoing training at the time of our interview noted:

This is our script, we have to go through this. Thank you for choosing [name of American company]. My name is Tanya. May I have your first and last name. Thank You. May I call you by your first name? Thank you very much. How are you doing today? … These are the typical statements that we have to say – Great. Thank you. Excellent, Wonderful Job. These are the power words. We have to use those words in our scripts (Female Worker, Respondent 6).

While Leidner's (1999) research reveals that such service scripts can, in some situations, help workers to enforce their will over their customers and distance themselves from disagreeable interactions, the call center workers interviewed for the present project experienced scripts as deskilling, repetitive and tedious:

It's not that you are using your own words. You have to use these standard scripts. You have to use these same sentences….You're like a keyed toy…. We were just told that we had to do the standard scripts. Just stick to your standard scripts. (Male workers, Respondents 4 and 5 in conversation).

There are a number of mechanisms through which the correct use of service scripts by workers is ensured. Calls are monitored, both through customer satisfaction surveys and through random checks by supervisors to ensure that scripts are being followed. Workers notes,

Each call is being monitored, each call is being recorded. And they randomly pick up any call and then monitor the call, see the work you're doing. Then, they have customer [feedback] surveys on your calls. And we get scores on that… There's a sector dedicated for quality control. And another thing, our supervisors… they're auditing your calls and they're listening to your calls. So you have to be very careful and conscience about taking your calls. (Female worker, respondent #13).

There's a software which monitors every step. Like, at which moment you [are] putting him on hold, and at which moment you leave that hold, that also gets monitored. So every second is taken count of. (Male worker, Respondent #1)

In addition to call monitoring, workers are given performance targets in terms of the number of calls they are expected to handle each day. If they are unable to meet their targets, they are required to provide unpaid overtime by working on their holidays. Workers are organized in teams of eight or ten, and team targets are set; each team has a "leader" who does not take calls but instead compiles data on each worker to ensure that targets are met, and performance standards maintained. As one worker notes,
It depends on the team. If you've got ten people, if two people are on leave let's say for a week, then those targets [still] need to be completed. That is, they see it as a team (Female worker, respondent 2).

Surveillance also occurs through a detailed analysis of customer calling behaviours, and in particular the software used tracks repeat calls from the same customer within a two day period. This is assumed to signify that poor service was provided. Workers receive significant monetary incentives if customers do not call back within two days of their initial call. While workers are paid a base salary, they have the potential to significantly increase their remuneration by maintaining high scores on all the dimensions through which their work is monitored. In this sense, their work closely parallels factory pieceworkers. As one worker notes:

In the call centre business, it's a shop or it's a factory kind of environment, where the manager is more interested in how many calls you have taken... this many calls per [worker], so this many calls should have been taken, this many number of dollars that should have earned. So they [work] by a simple logic. There is no human touch or there is no human elements build into the system (Male worker, Respondent #3).

b. Language Imperialism

A second way in which the subcontracting of call centre work in India represents a "globalization from above" is in terms of the language and cultural imperialism which is fostered through extensive training programs that workers are required to undergo. In this sense, transnational call centers are engaged in "language trafficking" which is the spread of particular types of English throughout the world (Swates, 1997). As Phillipson (2001) notes, English is a key instrument used by transnational corporations to break down national barriers. One worker describes the training program she was required to undergo:

For the accent training we were being taught by cassettes. We had a special trainer – he was singing songs and listening to some conversations. And then we were made to see some movies and stuff. We were actually taught by cassette and we had to repeat all things like they do in nursery standards [schools], repeating the Aa, Puh, Tuh, Duh, and things like that. It was, you know, a bit funny at that time, we all used to laugh our guts out. What nonsense is this! You know at times you feel so frustrated. It's OK the way we speak is the way we speak. Why do we have to learn such stuff? Then we were told, the basic idea is that those people should understand you (Female worker, respondent 13).

Many of the managers and trainers interviewed for this project objected to reports in the media that they were teaching workers to speak in American accents. As one manager notes:
Voice training is not really developing an accent, it's neutralizing it... when you are looking at servicing an American client, you do not really need to sound American, however, you need to have a clarity of speech, and a pace of speech that is understandable by the other side (Manager)

The purpose of "neutralizing" accents is to convert individuals into malleable human resources. As one trainer notes,

Many Punjabi guys are having a Punjabi accent. Other guys are having other types of accents. So we don't need any kind of accent, we need a very neutral accent so that we can train them and get them the accent that our customers ask for (Trainer)

We have a phenomenally robust training system, by which even the least common denominator we convert them into a resource, that is, the raw material, we convert them into a resource which can face the customer in any part of the world (Manager).

Workers, however, experience the training they receive as an Americanization of their English. The "neutral" in this sense contains a significant regional bias, reinforcing the "racist hierarchisation" implicit in identifying American English as legitimate and Indian English as illegitimate (Phillipson, 2001:11). One worker notes:

In India we speak English in a different, and in the States it is in a different way. [Interviewer: So they want you to learn... ] A neutral accent. [Interviewer: What does that mean?] Neutral. Means they can understand what we tell. Like [for example] 'schedule' – they say skedule... And the American accent you have more r's rolling, there's a stress on the r's. So it's sem-eye-conductor, it's not se-me-conductor...You're not supposed to speak anything except English, except American English. (Male worker, respondent 7).

They have to tell us about the pronunciation part, about how to use an American accent. They actually make us listen to CDs, and they tell us constantly to watch CNN and all these channels (Female Worker, respondent 11).

Call centre agents are therefore taught to take on a "Western persona" in order to better serve clients in the West. Alpa Shah, Research Manager, Frost and Sullivan says for example, "acting skills are required since an agent in India could be required to play the role of Colorado resident, one that skis in his free time. The goal of this strategy is to make callers more comfortable by eliminating any cultural barriers" (Sucha Vivek, Call Centers: Hello India! Monday, 27 August 2001). While one of the reasons provided to justify the extensive language training is the need for customers identification and understanding, another central purpose served through language training and scripts is that it facilitates the masking of the location of call centers.

c. Locational Masking
Part of the protocol workers in Indian call centers are required to follow is a masking of their geographical location. Workers are given Americanized pseudonyms, and these are used as their names at work. They are also trained to avoid answering questions from customers about their location. Managers note that they often sign non-disclosure agreements with their American clients, which require them to develop protocols through which their location in India is not revealed to customers. Such requirements exemplify the prevalence of "production fetishism" in the current economic order, which is, as Appadurai notes, "an illusion created by contemporary transnational production loci that masks translocal capital, transnational earning flows, global management and faraway workers" (1996:41). When asked why such locational masking is necessary and the purposes it serves, managers and trainers provide a number of responses:

Why are we using this name [pseudonym]? Because it's easier to pronounce. That's customer service. (Manager).

If we could achieve connectivity, nothing better than that. But if the guy sounds alien, you know, then my comfort levels are very low and I'm not going to impart any information. (Trainer).

Most of the companies want to outsource their services to improve their productivity. There are various, I would say, concerns in [American] people [who may] say that they may lose their jobs. We want to minimize those effects. Because for sure when they're moving their work outside there are people who are losing their jobs there (Manager).

Some of the customers are wary about such things, because for example, there was a famous case of a multinational opening shop in India and they were not providing them with the right environment here. It was more of a sweatshop…customers may think [we are] a sweatshop, so that's one thing they want to avoid. It's bad publicity (Manager).

These explanations and assumptions about American customers who are calling Indian call centers are used to justify the need to train workers in American accents and cultures, and to require them to use pseudonyms. Revealing that service work has been subcontracted to India may give rise to customer dissatisfaction for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from racism and ignorance towards Indians, concern about local jobs, and assumptions about exploitative transnational corporate practices. These concerns are not unfounded; workers and managers report, for example, that they frequently face racism in their interactions with customers:

One day a person went, you know. I don't want to speak to you. You have broken English. Please give me someone American. (Male worker, respondent 7).
They call up, they say, I want to speak to an American. (Female worker, respondent 2)

I know a lot of people who don't even know what India is, they still think India is a place where bullock carts are around and snakes are around (Manager).

They may ask you, I bought a [product] and I should get support from an American, why should I get support from an Indian?

Locational masking, which as the quotes above suggests is only partially successful, serves to protect the interests of American corporations in light of the racism of their local customers. In fact, in attempting to reveal little about themselves, workers often reinforce negative stereotypes about Indians. One worker recounts the following incident where an US customer of Indian origin knew that he was likely taking to someone in India:

[He asked] how is your relationship with Pakistan going? And things like, has Kashmir improved? You can't say anything. I told the … person, I'm not much involved in the politics. I don't read newspapers (Male worker, respondent 4).

Workers are taught such strategies to minimize customer knowledge about the location of their work. In being asked to follow scripts, and not reveal anything about themselves, however, workers are forced to reinforce notions of themselves as "keyed toys".

d. Colonization with time

A final form of "globalization from above" embodied in Indian call centers relates to the time-sensitive nature of synchronous customer service work. As Adam notes, time is a "quantifiable resource that is open to manipulation, management and control, and subject to commodification, allocation, use and abuse" (1998:14). Indian call centers providing service to American customers are required to operate primarily during American daytime hours, and with the time difference of between 12 and 15? hours between the US and India, this means that call centres operate primarily in the night. Adam notes that such an arrangement signifies a "colonization with time" (2002:21) whereby Western clock time is exported across the globe and used as the standard.

Typical shifts at Indian call centers are from 8pm to 4am, midnight to 8am, and 4am to noon. Workers are sometimes picked up and dropped off in vans, which many workers greatly appreciate even though the vans operate on schedules which sometimes add between one and three hours to workers' time at the call centre. Working in shifts has a significant impact on workers' health, families and unpaid activities:

When I went [for this] job, I was very jubilant. I thought, OK, I'll study a lot, daytime is mine, so I'll be able to do anything. That's not possible. You're so tired. You're not able to do anything. Whatever time [you have] you sleep, even if you sleep for ten hours you don't get enough…you can never compensate a night's
sleep… It's taxing, it's taxing, it's taxing on your social, it's taxing on your health, it's taxing on everything (Male worker, respondent 1).

Call centers in India also operate seven days a week, through weekends and on Indian holidays. Workers' have two days off per week, but these days only occasionally fall on weekends. Workers often mention feeling cut off from families and friends.

I don't get time to talk to them [friends and family]. They all complain… If we work in the night shift, at least you get six and a half hours of sleep. You get up in the afternoon. You have three to four hours to do your work. But actually that is not possible. Because you get so damn tired after work. It's difficult to work in the night, that's what I'll say. (Female worker, respondent 2).

Worker shifts also change every few months, so they are constantly adjusting to new work times. As one worker notes:

You need at least three to four hours of sleep in the night. That's what makes the big difference… That is what is making it difficult. I'm losing my appetite, I'm losing my weight… suddenly we were told we would be having our [shift] from twelve [midnight] to eight. It was very difficult to adjust in the first few weeks. Then I got adjusted to that time. Then again we were told that you're having your shifts from 7:30 till 4am. And this shift, I find it very difficult to adjust. That is because I get home around 7am, and it's very difficult to sleep in the morning because people wake up, they go around here and there. (Male worker, respondent 4).

Indian call center workers, in these ways, live and work in India, but are required to organize their lives in terms of American times, celebrations, and communication styles. Workers are expected to speak with American accents, take on American names, adopt American holidays and greetings, and work on American time.

Cracks in the Global Order

The discussion in the section above suggests that the transnationalization of call centre work represents a "globalization from above". At the same time, as many theorists have noted, "the great transnational corporations that straddle national boundaries and link the global system are themselves internally much more diverse and fluid culturally" (Hardt and Negri, 2000:153). Accordingly this section highlights the ways in which workers in Indian call centers disrupt the narrative of "globalization from above" revealing the "cracks" in the movement of capital and labour across national boundaries. Specifically, there are two ways in which workers' understands their work allows for an analysis of the gaps in the rhetoric of globalization described in the previous section. First, while gaining knowledge about the US which allows them to provide better service, Indian workers also find ways of learning about labour markets and clearly situate themselves in the globally stratified labour market, within which they name nationality as the primary determinant of the value of labour. Second, while American customers and
employers mandate the behaviour of Indian service providers in many ways, call centre workers themselves constantly construct and re-construct the notion of "an American," suggesting, as Bhabha (1994) has noted, the "slippage" which occurs in the process of mimicry.

a. Situating Subcontracted Jobs

Ong argues that worker resistances extend beyond direct confrontations with employers; "in manipulating, contesting, or rejecting claims [about their status] working women reassess and remake their identities and communities in important ways for social life" (1991:296). The dominant rhetoric adopted by government, trade organizations and media reports on call centre work in India is that this industry provides highly desirable jobs. Workers evaluate these claims, and in doing so develop and share common understandings of the place of their work in the global order. The following argument about call centre work is made in a recent report by the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASCOMM) in India:

Let’s go back to the basics. A customer calls with a complaint or query specific to the product or service of the client company. The customer may get impressed with the speed or manner of response, but what he really wants is a satisfactory answer. That does not come from technology – it comes from knowing, not just the product, but the customer need, the market scenario, the real end benefit that the customer is looking for, and a familiarity with the marketplace… A call centre handling a tourism product must be manned by people familiar with the tourism industry, and in the same way, one handling process control instrumentation systems must be manned almost exclusively by qualified electronics engineers (NASCOMM, 2001:C28).

In this way, call centre work is promoted as desirable and highly skilled occupation. Transnational centers are housed in clean, well organized structures which often have entrances decorated with glass and marble. Van services for workers adds to the prestige of the work. Workers employed to serve multinational corporations are paid up to twice the salary they would receive in local organizations. Accordingly, media and government outlets have identified call and back office centers as "India's new sunshine sector" (India Today, November 18th 2002). In particular, the notion that call centre work as a privileged occupation is created through the extensive screening process in place at the recruitment stage. Workers (all university graduates) describe being selected from hundreds of applicants, and interviewed for hours before being offered the job. Workers reported:

I was interviewed for six rounds with [the career consultant], then with [the call centre] I interviewed for three rounds. Then I cleared the final interview, then I got the call (Female worker, respondent 6).

Around 200 people were shortlisted. And out of that 17 people were selected. (Female and male worker in conversation, respondents 11 and 12)
[The interview took] seven or eight hours… one was the TOEFL test, and then they gave me a small objective type technical test, after than I was also given a one to one round, and then she gave me something to read out, maybe to see my accent, to see how I speak. Then I have a detailed questionnaire…I had again a one to one round with the technical people. Once I cleared that one, then I had a HR interview. After that HR interview in our company we get to be interviewed by a vice-president or the CEO of the company… maybe a hundred people apply and only seven or eight or maximum ten are accepted (Male worker, respondent 1).

Managers reinforce the rhetoric the call centre jobs are highly skilled jobs by referring to the different class position of call centre work in India compared to the West:

One thing is there, in India, people take this job very seriously. I was abroad, so I know how seriously people take this job in the West. People take this job very, very seriously. They see a career path in this job, because it is a new industry, and in a new industry people move very fast. (Manager).

Despite having undergone a long process to obtain their jobs, call centre workers are unanimously unconvinced by the arguments about the quality of call centre jobs. Workers are aware of the fact that telephone work, particularly telemarketing, is often regarded as one of the most repetitive and mindless jobs in the West. Most of those interviewed for the present project noted that they do not anticipate remaining in the call centre sector but had taken their jobs due to the lack of other job opportunities. Workers note,

Quote – call centre work in the west

What happened with IT was that the balloon burst one day…Now if you just pick up yesterday's paper… observe the four page ads, around 85% are for call centers…[People] tend to think it's a very glamorous job. In fact in my hometown [they say], OK you're working for a call centre? Great! That's great! You're talking to American clients. But they actually don't know how tedious it is (Female worker, respondent 10).

I know that call centre is not going to last for long. It's very short term. I don't have any future plans with this call centre. Not more than a year. Because there's no future. You can't sustain the taking calls throughout your life. It's just not possible. And this is no career. It's just a short term kind of job (Female worker, respondent 13).

Despite the fact that workers were repeatedly told that they were fortunate to hold clean, white-collar, professional jobs with a multinational corporation, and that they are paid high salaries, the women and men interviewed for the present study repeatedly drew attention to the benefits which both American companies and Indian subcontractors extract from their labour. Many of the workers interviewed talked about the results of
their mathematical calculation of the differences between their salaries and the amounts companies would need to pay if customer service was provided within the US. A common set of figures was mentioned by various respondents, suggesting that this information was exchanged and discussed amongst workers. It was noted that the American company allocates $30 for each call handled in the US, the Indian subcontractor receives $18 per call, and workers take an average of 20 calls a day. As one worker calculates:

If you count yourself, within a single day you give your whole salary... So this is the call centre industry - they're earning a lot. Exploiting, I can say, ninety five percent of the labour from the people... If you think about the jobs there [in the US], call centre [jobs], they would be paying at least ten or fifteen dollars per hour for a fresh person. So per hour means, if you work eight hours you can calculate, you know, it would be like hundred and fifty dollars per day that they have to pay... (Male worker, respondent 5).

Appadurai notes that we are living in a "world of flows" characterized by "objects in motion"; these objects include ideas, people, goods, images, and technologies (2000:5). Indeed, while call centre workers in India are trained to take on American persona, learn about American society and live on American time, they also gain an awareness of their connection to American labour markets and the global economic relations within which their jobs are situated. Such an awareness allows workers to challenge employer definitions of their work as privileged, skilled and desirable.

b. Constructing Americans

While in some ways transnational call centre work extends relations of colonization and imperialism, such power relations do not flow in one direction alone. In providing frontline service to American customers, Indians also provide the corporate "front" of American corporations. Workers are taught to learn about and emulate American culture, yet, as Appadurai (1996) has noted, globalization does not bring about a straightforward cultural homogenization. Bhabha notes, in his often cited essay, "Of Mimicry and Man" that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1994:86). Refering to the ways in which the English construct the Anglicized (that is emphatically not English), Bhabha notes that "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (1994:86). In this sense, mimicry, in producing a false copy of the original, makes a mockery of the colonial enterprise of engendering post-Enlightenment civility. Bhabha focuses on the ambivalence of colonial authority; the analysis in the section below suggests, however, that while Indian workers are taught to mimic American work norms, there is a slippage between the information they are presented about Americans and the ways in which they interpret this information. In this sense, mimicry involves not only the colonizer's construction of the Other, but also the Other's construction of the colonizer. Specifically, through their discussions of their customers,
workers construct Americans as rich but stupid. This rhetoric allows workers to pity rather than revere their American customers.

**Workers construct Americans as "stupid" by making frequent reference to the lower value placed on higher education in the US:**

*Being a graduate in US can be a matter of prestige but being a graduate in India is just below average. Because average, average is even a post-graduation.* (Male worker, respondent 3)

Workers note that nationality overrides class boundaries which are being crossed with call centre work whereby highly educated Indian workers employed in middle class, white collar occupations are serving often lower class, poorly educated American callers:

*Some Americans, they call [and] say, I want to talk to an American. Oh man, go on! You got an Indian and you are telling an Indian that you want to talk to an American!… Some of them, they really speak very very fast and that is a bit difficult… In any case we have to handle the calls. We can't say that, you are an American, we can't talk to you. Like they have the freedom to say anything but we can't say anything* (Female worker, respondent 2).

The notion of Americans as less educated than Indians is also reinforced through the training which workers are provided. One worker says, for example,

*Our CEO says that an average American is uneducated.* (Male worker, respondent 3)

Another worker describes scenarios provided during their training to illustrate responses workers should expect from American customers:

*They don't know anything about computers… If you say to them, just go to the start button, they will not be able to find the start button. Where is the start button?.. And sometimes people are… talking about the trouble shooting steps and they're not sitting in front of their computers. [They say] I'm not able to see anything. And then we ask, Are you sitting in front of your computer? He said, No I'm not sitting in front of my computer. My God! One time [someone] called up and he said, you sent me a coffee mug tray and it was broken, send me another one… We asked our supervisor, was there any such scheme of sending in a coffee tray along with the thing?… Then [we realized] it was the CD drive! He used to put his coffee mug! We have so many examples like that. My God!* (Female worker, respondent 6).

Many workers refer to the fact that while customers have little knowledge they have high disposable incomes:

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3 A few workers noted positive perceptions of Americans (such as that they were more patient, more willing to solve issues via the telephone) but these were by far the exception.
They don't know anything about computers. They put the [CD] upside down… We ask, OK how are you putting it in? The shiny portion should be down…

Previously before we started interacting with Americans I basically had what I might refer to as [pause] it was in my mind, they are really good, they are really very intelligent, they have a lot of knowledge, nobody can beat the Americans. That was what my perception was. When I started handling calls they type of questions they ask, I said, Oh, it's bad. They only have money. They don't have brains. (Female worker, respondent 2).

Workers thus draw attention to the uneven development (which privileges national origin rather than education or intelligence) fostered by global capitalism (Wright, 2001). Indeed, many of the ways in which Indian workers are "marketed" by Indian media and business advocates refer to the class transgressions which subcontracting allows. As noted in a report by the National Association for Software and Service Companies:

Instead of those hordes of young ladies, think for a moment about call centre manning by some very different kind of people. Think of doctors and pharmacists for medical services, architects and structural engineers for construction materials, chemists and agriculturalists for pesticide formulations and automotive mechanics and driving instructors for automobile after-sales service… India has a vast reservoir of domain expertise across industries and businesses. Our educational institutions turn out millions of qualified people in a large number of disciplines (NASCOMM, 2001:C28).

In this context, while workers are often told that they need to speak in American accents so that Americans can understand them, they interpret this of a sign of parochialism and inconsistency:

The basic idea is that people should understand you… So that was the main motive behind learning all accent skills… Many a times people are very happy, and those people [say] how is it possible that staying in India you can speak such good English… But at times people are so rude – Oh, let me talk to someone who can speak English! I cannot understand you. We get customers like this also. One call, the customer is saying, oh you have fabulous English, you speak so well. And other call you get, oh my god let me talk to someone who can speak English. You know, it's a variety. You just can't understand what to do (Female worker, respondent 13).

Not only are Americans "rich and stupid" in these ways but the male workers in particular mention that they also have a blind respect for authority:

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4 As mentioned earlier, locational masking is not always successful and customers sometimes guess the location of work.

5 For a complete analysis of gender differences amongst call centre workers, see Author 2003.
Good point in Americans [is] that when we call the supervisor that are going to obey whatever this person says. (Male worker, respondent 3).

Then there are customers who says, the first thing they say is, I don't want to talk to any person. I just want your supervisor. [Sometimes] what I do is, OK Sir, be on the line, I'll call my supervisor. I hand the phone to Nanda [roommate, also a call centre worker pretending to be the supervisor]. So now when Nanda speaks to him there is a voice difference, he says, OK the supervisor has come. Now he's cool, he's talking to Nanda, and Nanda resolves the issue at that time (Male worker, respondent 8).

This reverence for corporate hierarchies provides a justification for the need for formalized, scripted service. One worker, for example, notes the following "cultural difference" between Americans and Indians:

It was Christmas time. I just remember his name was John. So I said, Hi John, how are you doing? And he said, I'm doing fine and Merry Christmas to you. You didn't greet me Merry Christmas. I said, I was about to greet you… Their sensitivity is different… Americans are more sensitive towards all those things. We were also made to listen to a few calls [by call centre agents in the US]. I'll say that's the cultural difference… Sensitivity… We are sensitive, however we are sensitive in a different manner. They say "sorry", "please", "thank you" a lot of times. (Male worker, respondent 1).

Another worker describes the different social norms in India and the US; implicit, however, is the construction of Americans as isolated and individualistic:

Americans, what I have heard of, what I have learned, they don't consider social life in their work environment. They have their mobile phones, when they go to office, either they switch it off or put them away. They won't accept personal calls. But we cannot be such. We are social animals. We have to be in touch with our society, at any and every point of time. My parents can call me even at twelve o'clock in the night. But if the parents in the US call their child at twelve o'clock, they might be angry with them. So those are the difference. We cannot be Americans by nature. So if my work environment demands me to be American then obviously, being a human being, I'll fail. Because I have been growing up in an environment that asks me, which demands me, to be social. (Male worker, respondent 3).

As noted earlier in this paper, work processes and structures in Indian subcontracted call centers privilege the needs and the often racist perspectives of American customers. Workers note that "customers are Gods for us" (Respondent 2) and "you have to be humble to the customer" (Respondent 4). At the same time, workers' description of customers as stupid, uneducated, socially isolated and superficial allow workers to pity

6 Not his real name.
rather than revere Americans. In these ways workers attempt to "live with industrial systems without losing [their] human dignity" (Ong, 1991: 296).
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