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Macaulay's (Cyber) Children: The Cultural Politics of Outsourcing in India

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how globalization is shaping the aspirations and identities of the Indian middle class and in particular those employed by the outsourcing industry. While these aspirations do not have a clearly defined object, they cluster around an idea of the West as the locus of modernity. The West's mystique derives, no doubt as it did in the colonial period, from the fact that it is the author of dramatic change. But this also prompts a certain anxiety among the middle class that such change is somehow corrupting. Drawing on in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in India, I argue that globalization does not herald an era of unprecedented personal freedom, a belated modernity, nor does it signify a crisis of the 'traditional' Indian family. It is an Indian morality play where the pleasure principle clashes with the demands of custom and obligation, where *kama* (pleasure) and *dharma* (duty) meet in uneasy suspension.

KEY WORDS

culture / globalization / identity / India / labour / outsourcing / work

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect (Lord Macaulay, [1835]1965: 'Minute of 2 February 1835 on Indian Education').

Introduction

Macaulay's image of a class of pliable intermediaries adopting the culture and language of the colonial power has left an enduring imprint on the collective psyche, so much so that it is common to discuss colonial and

post-colonial subjectivity in terms of neurosis. Fanon (1952) explored the inferiority complex of the colonized in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and Naipaul (1967), colonialism and cultural displacement in *The Mimic Men*. The theme later resurfaced in the academic vocabulary of postcolonial studies (Bhabha, 1994). The anguished oscillation between 'modernity' and 'tradition', and the reach for cultural mimicry as a way of solidifying one's social status and identity, has been given a new twist by economic globalization, and in particular by international outsourcing.

In a striking parallel that recalled both Fanon and Macaulay, many global corporations' offshoring customer service work began requiring that Indian employees don Western pseudonyms and accents in dealing with American and British customers. What is more, workers rapturously embraced Western lifestyles and consumerist values. This article explores how globalization is shaping the aspirations and identities of the Indian middle class and in particular those employed by the outsourcing industry. While these aspirations do not have a clearly defined object, they cluster around an idea of the West as the locus of modernity. The West's mystique derives, no doubt as it did in the colonial period, from the fact that it is the author of dramatic change. But this also prompts a certain anxiety among the middle class that such change is somehow corrupting.

It is easy to see why the debate over outsourcing has so enraptured urban middle-class India. It has all the dramatic elements of a Bollywood movie: the struggle between instant and delayed gratification, arranged marriages and romantic love, consumerist and ascetic religious values, and the ominous prospect of generational rupture. While there has been coverage of these issues in the press, they are often treated superficially. The purpose of this article is to subject them to deeper empirical scrutiny. Drawing on in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in India, I argue that globalization does not herald an era of unprecedented personal or consumer freedom, a belated 'modernity', nor does it signify a crisis of the 'traditional' Indian family. Rather, it is an Indian morality play where the pleasure principle clashes with the demands of custom and obligation, where *kama* (pleasure) and *dharma* (duty) meet in uneasy suspension. That is to say, while the new global division of labour does produce tensions and even irreconcilable conflicts, it is far from effecting a generalized cultural transformation.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section provides an overview of the debates about globalization and identity and introduces the concept of *imitative counterpoint* as a way of grasping the cultural effects of economic globalization. An empirically grounded discussion of the Indian middle class ensues. Specifically, the transnational aspirations of workers and employers in the outsourcing industry are examined. This is followed by a discussion of how companies foster cultural change and mimicry through work-based identity requirements and managerial schemes. As globalization has created a rift in middle-class worldviews, the next sections explore societal perceptions of the industry and their impact on workers' self-image. The last section considers how globalization might undermine itself through the experiences of workers disillusioned with its promises.

Globalization and the New Middle Classes

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

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

It is difficult to take issue with these compromise positions for they are almost too reasonable. But while it has become fashionable to speak of post-colonial identity in terms of ‘hybridity’, the term obscures the direction of cultural change (Kraidy, 2005). The British Raj, for example, produced not an exact copy of British English in the colony but a new variant, Indian English (Krishnaswamy and Burde, 1998). Yet, one must acknowledge that it also resulted in the relative Anglicization of the subject population. Likewise with corporate globalization. However partial and contested the process, recent years have witnessed the wide diffusion of a consumerist ethos in developing societies. Terms such as ‘invidious distinction’ and ‘conspicuous consumption’ (Veblen, [1899] 1994) have acquired a renewed significance among the ‘new middle classes’. The elaboration of a culture of consumerism is not merely a superstructural consequence of class formation but is a vital component of class identity. As Liechty (2002: 7) writes, it is one of ‘the most important cultural processes through which an emerging middle class actually creates itself as a sociocultural entity’. Consumption has become a ‘privileged site for the fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 299).

As auto-rickshaws are displaced by taxicabs, tandoori kitchens by fast food chains, and teahouses by internet cafes, the consumption of high-end goods and the emulation of Western lifestyles become a means of drawing status distinctions and marking socioeconomic position. The new middle classes exhibit many of the cultural ‘contradictions’ of modernity – the undermining of the classic work ethic by consumerism and ‘hedonism’ – that a worried Daniel Bell

(1996) discussed in his book on post-industrial America. In the South Asian context, status distinctions based on caste and ascribed characteristics are giving way to those based on education, occupation, income and wealth (Beteille, 1997). Economic liberalization is further razing the walls – the traditions of sobriety and thrift, the government sinecures and stable career paths – that have hitherto kept India's middle class in modest comfort. In their place rise ladders of corporate ascension as well as the multiplied possibilities of freefall.

How are we to understand this growing convergence of identities and lifestyles and even structural conditions? The task ahead for students of globalization is twofold. First, globalization must be disaggregated. Insofar as the relevance of classificatory devices – First and Third World, East and West – has been undermined by new forms of communication and production, the idea of a unitary 'global village' or a 'flat' world is a fiction (Coronil, 2000). The village is traversed by historical fractures and political and economic divisions that have proved more difficult to elide than geography. Moreover, social actors are positioned differently with respect to these divisions and they experience and interpret them accordingly. Attention must therefore be paid to the social location and concrete practices of particular groups. Second, the teleological notion of linear development must be disavowed. Globalization does not substitute the dynamism of modernity for the complacent solidity of tradition. Its genius and mystery lie in the balancing of diametric modes. But while its overriding principle may be hybridity, the intermingling does not occur at random or without purpose. It occurs according to a plan. But not all things go as planned.

Thus while offshore spaces of work are constructed in the Western corporate image, their content is derived partly from local realities. To take the example of Indian call centre workers: to all outward appearances, the names and accents and the identities and lifestyles resemble those in the USA and UK. Upon closer inspection, however, one sees how they diverge from the mould. As Mirchandani writes (2004: 361):

While Indian workers are taught to mimic American work norms, there is a slippage between the information they are presented about Americans and the ways in which they interpret this information. In this sense, mimicry involves not only the colonizer's construction of the Other, but also the Other's construction of the colonizer.

Moreover, as Jameson (1993: 34) argues, the appropriation of another culture means first 'inventing the culture of the other group' as an object of prestige and 'collective envy' – effectively adding another layer of mediation. Corporate globalization thus homogenizes as well as produces 'slippages'. Yet little work has been done to theorize this difference-in-similarity.

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

a practice of emulation, which necessarily takes on distinctive characteristics.¹ The notion of imitative counterpoint is capacious enough to apply to instances of resistance (i.e. using the colonizer's language and categories to undermine colonialism), ambivalence or pastiche (i.e. Bollywood movies), as well as acquiescence (i.e. out-and-out mimicry).² Thus mimicry is not a crude caricature of other ways of being; it signifies their appropriation and transformation as they are anchored in different terrain.

Research Methods

This article draws its data from a larger project in which ethnographic fieldwork and 129 semi-structured interviews were conducted between March 2005 and April 2006. Most of the fieldwork took place at four outsourcing companies in India, which were selected from a list provided by the National Association of Software and Service Companies. While I do not claim that the firms are representative of the entire industry, I do try to capture the range of diversity across the service industry. Three of the selected companies provide Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) services, which includes customer support and back office and financial services, while the fourth is the IT subsidiary of an investment bank. The firms, moreover, are located in four of India's outsourcing hubs – Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Chennai – and this diversity provides a broader view of globalization's effects on the social landscape than would a study restricted to a single location.

As for the subjects, the majority of workers were in their mid-20s and the gender ratio was close to 60:40 favouring men, with the additional caveat that men were over-represented in management. Most employees, with the exception of those at the IT subsidiary, work the night shift so that they are able to communicate directly with Western customers and clients. I used snowball sampling, relying on worker and employer networks, to arrange additional interviews in order to test the general applicability of my findings. These included interviews with top-level executives at outsourcing firms as well as with union organizers and industry representatives. The names of the interviewees have been changed to preserve anonymity.

While the focus of the study is mainly on worker subjectivity, identities are of course relational. To understand the process of identity formation properly, one must attend to a variety of factors that influence self-perception. In the workplace, I interviewed HR managers, supervisors, and executives. As societal and familial perceptions exercise considerable influence, I spent time with workers in a variety of social settings, from homes to malls, cafes, and night-clubs. The transcripts and field notes were thematically coded. Individual subjects were chosen for inclusion in the interest of providing a balanced and nuanced account of the industry and its effects. The analytical approach was inductive in that I tried to keep an open mind to the ways in which everyday lives are altered by economic change.

Identities and Aspirations

Advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have enabled major corporations to offshore various business processes to the developing world. India's rise as the global hub of back-office and ICT services follows on the heels of its economic reforms of 1991. Experts in the ICT sector are estimated to have grown from \$10.1 billion in FY2004 to \$34 billion by the end of FY2008. The industry employs over two million workers, many of whom are recent college graduates (Nasscom, 2008).

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

The identities and aspirations of the ICT workforce are defined increasingly with reference to the 'West'. Outsourcing has emboldened a class of cultural emulators and made their protest visible. Radical in their rejection of old values, conspicuous in their consumption, workers construct an image of the West as a social utopia, which is used as a benchmark, a standard against which to measure India's social progress. According to the Chief Financial Officer of a major outsourcing firm:

This industry has empowered the educated middle class of India ... It has made them proud of themselves. It has made them much more global. They benchmark themselves against young people all over the world and they have the confidence to compete in the global marketplace ... The impact has been very deep-rooted. It's changed the whole complexion of this country.

While the West represents the highest pinnacle of individualism and consumer choice, India is at a crossroads. Should it choose the right path, it too will have its day in the sun – a view exemplified by the 2003 pro-globalization political slogan, 'India Shining'. Such were also the sentiments of Nila, a female IT worker in Chennai, a teeming city of five million on the Bay of Bengal. Unlike Bangalore, where IT advertisements line the neatly paved streets, Chennai is still a work in progress, a 'second-tier' ICT city. While outsourcing-generated wealth has altered its topography and feel, it remains a modernizing city with a conservative outlook.

'Before I wasn't using pants, I used to wear saris,' says Nila, who is wearing a floral-patterned blouse and black dress pants. 'Right now, I'm using everything.'

My parents weren't accepting to all these things, but now they're OK with it.' She adds that women are increasingly choosing to work in the IT sector, in contrast with engineering where women are not treated with respect. 'It's different with IT, which is secure and safe. Take Bangalore, it's like the US. This city is changing, too. Three or four years back it wasn't like this. There are malls everywhere. Chennai is booming like anything,' she says.

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

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

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

awkward names like Quiescent, Whispering, Serenity, and Celestial Heights. Residents dine at Ruby Tuesday and Pizza Hut.

Middle-Class Escapism

Escapist middle-class desires have raised the ire of many prominent Indian social critics. Varma (1998: xii), for instance, writes that: 'For all the achievements of the Indian State in the last fifty years, there is, for its middle and elite classes, a crippling ideological bareness which threatens to convert India into a vastly unethical and insensitive aggregation of wants.' Middle-class Indians, in their preening self-regard, desire to secede from the 'other' India that exists outside 'their narrow little worlds' (1998: xii).

The idea of the middle class carries immense symbolic and historical weight in India, however elusive it may be as a definable sociological entity. The class has played a pivotal role in modern history, whether in its incarnation as the nationalist vanguard that won independence through self-sacrifice in the public interest or later as sober civil servants powering Nehruvian state-led modernization. As against these images of civically minded discipline and frugality, the 'new Indian middle class' has few of the moral scruples of its predecessors. Following the programme of economic liberalization in the 1990s came a redefinition of national progress. Concerns about class and caste stratification gave way to a focus on wealth and consumption as indicators of progress. Consumerism fills the vacuum left by the lost sense of civic duty (Fernandez, 2000).

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

One such comprador is Atul, the Chief Operating Officer of an IT subsidiary of an American investment bank. Having spent the majority of his professional life in the USA, he is preoccupied by the problems facing the Indian ICT industry. The country's overtaxed infrastructure, particularly the poor roads and power outages, he says, could spell disaster. 'You know what we need in this country?' he asks. 'We need a dictatorship for 12 years. Then ... back to democracy.' Only an IT leviathan, in this view, can put an end to power outages, strikes, and work delays. Thus while India's entrepreneurs and their political allies have been successful in pushing an agenda of economic reform – entailing the liberalization of trade and investment and deregulation – nothing is more vexing than the bureaucratic inefficiencies of democratic governance.

They argue that the country's rapid economic growth has occurred in spite of rather than because of the state, ignoring the Indian government's critical role in developing the very pools of English-speaking and tech-savvy talent on which the industry depends.

'Women, Wine and Water'

The fruits of India's recent growth can be seen in South Delhi, a dense and sprawling settlement of middle-class homes and shopping markets, pitted with occasional slums, gardens, and Mughal landmarks. Its ethos is largely consumerist. The banner headline of a community newspaper during the Hindu festival of Diwali asks, 'Want to Get Wealthy?' The question is material but the speculations are airily religious:

What pleases Goddess Lakshmi [the goddess of wealth]? When does she bless us with all the riches and comforts of the world? Different people have different answers: some say, it is the gem that you wear, the goddess that you worship, the colour that you paint your walls in or how big is your wealth vase [sic]...

While Hinduism has always been adept at balancing opposing tendencies, religious beliefs are here explicitly pressed into the service of consumption; they are a means to a consumerist end, a way of investing the mundane with sacred significance (cf. Ritzer, 1999).

Consummate consumers, it is not unusual to find call centre workers spending their leisure time in South Delhi's upscale nightclubs or 'lounges'. At one club I visited, the dance floor was occupied by young men and women in designer clothes, all of whom, one presumes, have rather large wealth vases. Among them was Rita, a 22-year-old call centre worker, who had drunk five cocktails priced at 250 rupees apiece, approximately \$25 in total – a large sum in a country where 35% of people live on less than \$1 a day. In ordinary circumstances one goes to a bar to get away from the daily rigours of work and to renew social relationships. In this case, Rita was out with her 'team' of six call centre workers *for* work, as a morale building exercise. The outing was sponsored by the company, which employs close to 10,000 workers in India.

After a night of dancing, Rita said her head was beginning to spin. Her dizziness could only have been amplified by the kaleidoscopic whirl of strobe lights and a dance floor that undulated 'boombonically' to a Bhangra re-mix of rapper 50 Cent's *In Da Club* – a fusion of cultures familiar to BPO workers. Upon noticing her discomfort Deepak, her junior manager, decided to gather the rest of the team and drop them home. When they arrived at Rita's house, her mother answered the door and saw her only daughter leaning over a hedgerow, vomiting profusely. Some might view this as a pardonable, youthful mistake for which the company bears little responsibility. But in a country where alcohol is regarded dubiously, such behaviour only confirms the worst suspicions about the outsourcing industry: that it is a den of immorality,

tempting the young and chaste with air-conditioned offices in chrome and glass towers, with therapists and de-stressing rooms, and, of course, parties.

Seated in Cafe Coffee Day – a favourite of the middle class where the gossip takes place in a mix of Hindi and the former colonial tongue, which is ever a mark of distinction – Deepak later explained the rationale for the outing. Monetary incentives alone, he says, are no longer effective in retaining people in an industry with extremely high turnover – on the order of 25–40% annually. ‘No matter how much you give them in salary and bonuses, it’s never enough. One guy uses his money to buy a dress for his girlfriend. She’s happy. But then she wants something more, like a necklace or flowers. It never ends,’ Deepak carped. ‘Now we’re trying non-monetary incentives like, you know, packets of cigarettes, taking them out drinking.’ Then, leaning closer, he said in a tone of conspiratorial bonhomie: ‘My V.P. has a philosophy: Women... wine... and water.’

However nonsensical and off-putting the ‘philosophy’, it illustrates the lengths companies will go to retain (at least male) workers. Because of a labour market in which demand far outpaces supply, even companies must make a gesture toward indulging workers’ bacchanalian instincts. The CEO of a call centre firm says that parties are a necessary ‘motivational tool in BPO culture. Everyone has to do it.’ And much to the chagrin of employers, the industry’s reputation for promiscuity has even earned it visits from the health ministry’s AIDS awareness programme. But aside from such ethically questionable ‘perks’, there are other ways that companies shape the identities and behaviour of the emergent ICT workforce *within* the workplace.

‘Neutralizing’ Accents and Identities

‘Are you calling from India?’

‘No, I’m calling from Modesto, California.’

‘Well, you sound Indian.’

‘I’ve only been here for two months and haven’t got the accent right.’

Thus transpired a conversation between an American customer and a 22-year-old call centre worker. ‘Sean’, like many other ‘telecallers’, is very insecure about his accent and was both fibbing and telling the truth. True, he was not calling from Modesto but South Delhi. But he has only been at the call centre – his virtual Modesto – for two months and has not had sufficient time to ‘neutralize’ his Indian accent. He speaks with a tortured Americanized twang. The son of an industrialist, Sean considers his employment to be short-term; in a few years he and his brother, who is seated at the adjacent workstation, plan to join the family business. As he introduces himself, he says, ‘Sean is my work name but I go by it now. Everyone calls me that now’ – including his family and friends. In what can be construed as either a remarkable instance of cultural alienation or youthful insouciance, Akhil is Sean in and out of the workplace.

A communication-based industry, Indian call centres frequently require their employees to don Western identities in providing in-bound (customer service) and out-bound (telemarketing) service. Workers also undergo training in Western accents and popular culture and are discouraged from disclosing their geographical location on the phone. The rationale for these practices, according to managers, is that they allow agents to serve the customer better. But another reason, less discussed, is to mute the political backlash in the West about the morality of offshore outsourcing. Initially, workers were trained in specifically American and British accents, but the preference is increasingly toward a 'global' accent as it allows workers to be shifted around to serve various markets without additional training (Mirchandani, 2004). At best, the resulting speech is not so much neutral as measured and devoid of the local inflections that would conspicuously mark it as 'Indian'. At worst, it is a *mélange* of British, American, and Indian English. In either case, it serves the purpose of obfuscation.

The demand for globalized speech has led to the creation of specialized institutes for accent neutralization. Although the jobs pay well, 'those with extremely good skills,' namely the upper-middle class, 'don't want BPO,' says Kiran Desai, a veteran accent trainer in Mumbai. This is largely because of the mandatory night shift and the rote yet intense nature of work. 'What you get is a lot of people that don't speak very well and aren't from best schools in Bombay. Lots of drop outs from college,' she adds in a crisp British-Indian accent. Schools do not concentrate on phonetics enough 'and so they pick up sounds from their mother tongue. We teach them to get rid of mother tongue influence.'

Furthermore, to sensitize trainees to the subtleties of American culture, they sit for viewings of popular movies, such as *American Pie*, *Independence Day*, and *J.F.K.* The serial *Friends*, Doshi says, is 'a soap that works. It provides insight into American culture through the jokes they crack.' They even show trainees videos of pet shows to convey Americans' intense fondness for pets – so that they understand that, to an American, 'a cat is like his baby'. For Desai, these are purely technical issues, mere business requirements; she is adamant that these practices do not lead to a 'loss of culture'.³ Yet, she says uncomprehendingly that there is sometimes 'resistance' to training: 'They say, "I'm an Indian and I speak fairly well. Why do I need to change?" I don't know why [they object]. Maybe it's a fashion.'

There is thus more at stake than phoney identities and neutered accents. As opposed to physical labour, service work involves emotional labour, wherein workers are called on to amiably display a particular emotional repertoire (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1999). In call centres, these management technologies penetrate to the very core of one's identity. During training sessions, employees are told that the customer can see their smile and sense their mood through their voice. Workers must be able to 'pass' as American or British. Maintaining one's composure in the face of sometimes racist abuse by an irate customer is simply part of the job. 'What is of importance,' writes Aneesh (2006: 93–4), 'is the very endeavour to erase from view the disjuncture of different worlds, different time zones, different subjectivities, languages and accents.'

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

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

'The Sweatshop Has Become the Boudoir'

The term mimicry should not be taken to imply that workers mindlessly ape Western culture. At times they can be highly critical, describing Americans and British customers as 'rich but stupid' (Mirchandani, 2004: 361). This suggests that the identities and practices of workers are composed of a variety of influences – not just corporate impositions on an amorphous Indian mass, as the term Westernization implies. Hence the point about imitative *counterpoint*. Nonetheless, Western popular culture exercises an irresistible fascination on the minds of ICT workers and gives form and implicit coherence to their desires. Thus after five years of managing an Indian workforce, a young American BPO executive could ask despairingly, 'Why does everyone want to be American?' Workers, he says, 'are so psyched about scooters and sunglasses. Everyone wants to be American in terms of blue jeans and freedom.' These admittedly ill-defined aspirations lead some workers into casual affairs, binge drinking, and hard rock music competitions sponsored by whisky companies. By relaxing familial and pecuniary constraints, high-paying outsourced jobs give workers the ability to act on their wishes.

In the beginning, Indian society was not very kind to BPO workers. Despite their comparatively high salaries, the transgressive combination of graveyard shifts, conspicuous consumption, and partying cast workers in a dubious light.

Reports flourished in the press, suggesting that workers were not only adopting Western accents but promiscuous lifestyles as well. An article in the *Times of India*, titled 'Sex in the City', described the call centre demimonde:

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

Such depictions have caused many a middle-class tongue to click in consternation, including that of Mohandas, the owner of a domestic telecom company. Of call centre workers' penchant for partying, he says excitedly, 'And you know, there was an article in the – the *Economic Times* – that mentioned an HR manager who was giving out condoms to her workers! It's terrible.' The HR manager did no such thing. But the actual text is irrelevant. The larger point is how easily rumours of the lasciviousness of workers spread, which is in part due to the over-representation of urban middle-class issues in the mainstream press (Chopra, 2003). The outsourcing debate is now the subject of a best-selling novel (*One Night at the Call Centre*) and even a television series (*India Calling*).⁴ It is not an issue of promiscuity per se; the often sensationalist stories of romance and rebellion are symptomatic of a gradual shift in gender relationships wherein women have increased mobility. Nightshifts and BPO lifestyles are allegorized as struggles between purity (knowing one's place in the family and social structure) and contamination (dating and drinking) or freedom and constraint, depending on one's ideological leanings.

For women, the night shift is a source of considerable stigma (Patel, 2006). Risha, a secretary at a call centre, says that initially people in the community used to look down on her. 'You were no longer seen as marriageable,' she says softly. 'Nobody directly questioned you, but you could tell what they were thinking ... by the look in their eyes,' remarks Usma, an assistant manager at a BPO, who is dressed conservatively in a red *shalwar kameez*. 'When I first joined five years ago, there was no boom. I had no clue what a BPO was. All I knew was that they paid more than the standard. The shift job wasn't famous in India. This is something new,' she continues. It is not seen as 'respectable, especially for women. If a girl wants to get married, the first thing they ask is, Does she work at night? They don't like it.' Wilson, a 23-year-old call centre agent, emphasizes that the stigma applies to male workers as well. 'Nowadays you can't get married because you work in a call centre,' he says. 'The name BPO shouldn't be written anywhere in your offer letter. Arranged marriages are complicated. Prestige, money, and property all matter. Love marriages by comparison are simple.'

According to workers and managers, the freedom and mobility provided by the jobs fostered amorous relationships between workers. When parents found out about the clandestine romances, they often pressed marriage upon their children. Inevitably, the charm faded and many unions were dissolved. But not all call centre romances end in divorce. 'Tracy' met her husband at a call centre and

feels that they are 'the best place for females to work. It's cushy. For a guy it's not a great career, but it is good for people like housewives.' Because of the 'weird timings', however, 'the girls are getting Western.' For example: 'Girls smoking in the open wasn't common before. But this is normal at a call centre. Here you'll see every girl smoking. They tend to stay away from the family. Society's changing.'

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

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

The fear is that outsourcing, to quote a senior police officer, is causing a 'breakdown in the fabric of Indian family life' (Nelson, 2006). What is threatening about globalization is its emphasis on individualism, the sense that personal skills and achievement, not family, caste, or class, are what make a person. As Sennett (1998: 139) writes, 'the social bond arises most elementally from a sense of mutual dependence'. Economic independence can therefore mean freedom from family. Statements like 'I'm my own boss' exemplify the more egoistic aspects of the new ethos.

Female workers often find the loosening of family bonds especially bracing, particularly as it leads to a recasting of gender roles and control over one's sexuality. Gainful employment is not synonymous with 'empowerment', but in a social setting where women are often considered repositories of family honour, being able to work at night with men is no small matter. (While 118 out of 133 workers whom I surveyed gave 'housewife' as their mother's profession, 40–50% of BPO employees are women.) That they may use this freedom in ways that middle-class moralists disapprove of is somewhat inevitable. The domination of the patriarchal family is replaced by the burden of public disapproval.

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

One must view the disclosure of such intimate details with caution, however, as the young workers seem almost too willing to boast of their rebellion. Take Vikash, a 23-year-old call centre worker with pomaded hair. When asked what he does in the small hours of the morning after returning from work, one

might expect him to say that he has breakfast, takes a nap, or watches television, something that would suggest an attempt to connect with the normal course of things. But his conversation is strictly limited to the rebellious transgression of social mores. 'Me and my friends, we go back to one of our apartments and we take shots of vodka,' he says. Moreover, he says he likes working at the call centre as he is able to flirt with female employees without rebuke. But even if one takes Vikash at his word, it remains an open question whether this transvaluation of values is an instance of youthful exuberance, a generational dynamic, or a serious reappraisal of Indian culture.

Social Status and Invidious Distinction

As we have seen, while many welcome outsourcing for the increased employment opportunities, the infusion of new money feeds popular anxieties that stretch virtue into vice: too much personal freedom, too much consumerism. To understand the extent of the stigma one need look no further than Krishna, an executive at an IT company. Krishna is of the upper-middle class and has spent most of his working life in the USA – something many BPO workers would like to do but often lack the means. Returning after such a long absence, he is alive to his native culture's faults and is vocal about the vices of the BPO parvenus, mostly their tendency to imitate fantasy Americans. He casts a worried eye to the future:

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

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

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

But not all outsourcing is the same. Societal perceptions distinguish between the IT and BPO industries, as reflected in Krishna's musings. Whereas the social rank of BPO and call centre workers is uncertain, particularly because of the night shift and the perception that the work is low-end, IT and software workers are publicly admired. Employment in BPO can endanger one's marital prospects but has the opposite effect in IT, because of higher pay and the possibility of emigrating to the West. BPO workers occupy an inferior position in a privileged social universe. The 'positional suffering' that results is no less real because it occurs among a relatively well-off group in class terms (Bourdieu, 1993: 4).

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

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

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

Despite the growing acceptability, however, Jayesh says his friends in finance and accounting ask him why he is still at a BPO. According to Wilson, a call centre worker, such perceptions reflect ‘government thinking’:

You work 50 years and then you quit. They don’t understand that as you grow, you don’t have to do the nightshift. But how to explain this to people? When you tell them this, they ask how long? But those that say it earn ten times lesser salaries. They work like dogs, we don’t work like dogs. We work in an air conditioned facility.

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

‘Power Words’ and ‘Bonded Labour’

Not only can the work be rote but there is the added element of tight surveillance and heavy-handed management (Taylor and Bain, 2005). Two workers, Archana and Anil, explain how an exciting opportunity to earn a good income at one of the city’s larger call centres turned sour. Anil quit because of poor management; Archana, an anomaly in the industry at 40 years of age, has filed a lawsuit against their employer for wrongful termination. Nonetheless, they show a passionate fondness for their work as booking agents for the British rail system.

‘Oh, I absolutely loved it,’ says Anil. ‘How may I help you Mr. Brimsley?’ he exclaims in a British accent. And then with mock concern: ‘What seems to be the matter, Mrs. Grant?’ While the daily rigours of emotional management can be very taxing, they also have their rewards. A successful booking, the proper handling of an inquiry, can be intensely satisfying. There were proud moments. Archana’s company received an appreciative call from a British customer in which she was described as a ‘treasure’. She also won accolades for achieving the highest sales in a week: 53.85%. ‘It was great fun for a time. But there were problems,’ Archana says. ‘If you haven’t taken the person’s name, you haven’t taken “ownership” of the call,’ she says with heavy irony. ‘We were told to use “power words”. You’re going from Leeds to London – fantastic! Oh, you’re going with your family – great! Going to a funeral – fantastic! For six to seven hours you’re expected to talk like this,’ Anil adds.

Pedantic company decrees, overweening management, and dispiriting scripted dialogues – what Mirchandani (2004: 359) calls ‘scripted Taylorism’ – cut at workers’ sense of self-respect. Moreover, due to the necessity of working the night shift, BPO employees are often exhausted, however much they are able to recalibrate their internal biological clocks to the intent rhythms of the global economy. ‘We were conditioned to say certain sentences. Otherwise, you’re marked down on quality. On top of this, an agent never gets seven or eight hours

of undisturbed sleep. But when they come into work tired they have to be on in terms of accent, quality, and timing. 'You just can't be "on" every day,' Archana remarks. The nightly negotiation of accents and language is particularly difficult. 'Indians don't speak English very well. We know Hindi, Marathi, and other languages but agents make grammatical errors and translate into English very literally. It's impossible to keep this up for seven hours a day,' says Anil.

Just as the contradictions inherent in colonialism turned agreeable subjects into nationalists, Archana and Anil's enthusiasm for globalization has been irreparably diminished by their perceived mistreatment. 'We're treated as a bonded labour,' Archana says with a catch in her voice, referring to the high levels of surveillance in the workplace. All calls are recorded and 'downtime' between calls is minimal. One of Archana's 'lapses' was returning from the bathroom one minute and fifty seconds late. Employees also complain of unpaid overtime and managerial favouritism (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2006). 'Today we are given into the slavery of the foreign powers. And this in India, a country that achieved freedom without violence,' she says. Nonetheless, collective resistance is lacking and the major trade unions have shown little interest in organizing workers.

Conclusion

Is globalization akin to colonialism in some of its cultural effects? Can certain middle-class Indians be meaningfully described as today's 'mimic men'? To ask these questions is to answer them. In their accents, speech ('bucks'), and dress, in their comportment and aspirations, they bear the imprint of Macaulay's vision. But the paradoxical aspect of colonial Anglicism was that the social class it ushered into being eventually used the language of British liberalism – self-determination, constitutionalism – to question and undermine colonial rule. To what extent will the tools of corporate globalization be used to sabotage its machinery?

The tentative answer is that any such stirrings are incredibly faint at the moment. While Appadurai's (1996) point about the contested nature of globalization is well-taken, one finds little resistance to Western hegemony in the Indian ICT industry. There is scattered disenchantment but it is far from coalescing into a movement that could challenge the rules of globalization. Even the rare worker that delights with *schadenfreude* at the prospect of 'stealing' jobs from developed countries often conceives of the matter in terms of 'beating the West at its own game', consistent with the theme of imitative counterpoint. And, as the comments of Atul, the COO who casually proclaimed the need for dictatorship, suggest, the Indian middle class and its political allies are willing to do whatever is necessary to play the game better.

Furthermore, these workers, managers, and employers exert a cultural influence that extends beyond their small numbers (as a percentage of the population). In the cases here described, austere family values are buffeted by the open celebration of relative affluence. That workers sometimes earn more than their parents shifts household dynamics, and this reversal can unsettle parental

authority. As India continues to liberalize, the cultural changes occurring among ICT workers prefigure those which will likely take place among the broader middle class. Yet, despite these changes and certain surface resemblances, one should be chary of words like Westernization. Outsourcing has unleashed its own drama in the Indian context in which the values of ‘modernity’ – as exemplified by worker fantasies of a Western-style utopia or executives’ desires for something other than India – clash with those of reinvented ‘tradition’. It remains to be seen whether the dramatic tension will build toward a breaking point, or whether it will eventually find the neat resolution of a Bollywood film.

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Notes

- 1 Globalization is of course a two-way street. The purpose of the article is to illuminate the cultural effects of corporate globalization on developing countries.
- 2 The idea may also be profitably applied to large-scale processes like industrialization and modernization: i.e. how they differ from and resemble processes prior and elsewhere.
- 3 Conversely, one call centre manager describes his workers disparagingly as neither Indian nor American, but ‘half-baked’.
- 4 As one executive says, ‘even the *Economic Times*, a business paper’, is obsessed about ‘these culture issues’.

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