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'Cyber Coolies' in BPO**Insecurities and Vulnerabilities of Non-Standard Work**

Based on a case study of call centre agents, the paper discusses the insecurities and vulnerabilities of labour in the new economic order, which is characterised by atypical norms of work and work organisation. These insecurities include high attrition rates, increased stress at work and erosion of worker collectivity. The emergence of a new genre of workers, with distinct features and differently conceived identity, enables the firm to draw and maintain a 'productively docile' workforce within the changed frames of work organisation and human resource management.

Babu P Ramesh**I
Introduction**

Business process outsourcing (BPO) has emerged as India's new sunshine sector and the country is now one of the prominent electronic housekeepers to the world, taking care of a host of routine activities for multinational firms. The firms here handle a host of back office work which includes responding to credit card enquiries, preparation of invoices, pay rolls, cheques, reconciliation of daily accounts, writing medical transcriptions, processing applications, billings and collections. The boom in BPO activities has prompted policy planners to view this sector as one of the potential avenues to absorb the growing mass of educated unemployed. The escalating possibilities of job creation along with the scope to provide 'decent employment' enabled the BPO sector to be showcased as the one, whose promotion is most appropriate, given the bleak factor-endowments of the economy. As per the NASSCOM-Mckinsey Report 2002, BPO is the fastest growing industry, which expanded at an impressive rate of 70 per cent during 2001-2002.¹ The spectacular growth of BPO sector, in recent years,² placed India as the world leader in the business. According to the latest NASSCOM estimate, outsourcing centres in India currently employ 1,71,100 workers and it has the potential to generate direct employment for one million workers in the next five years. Notwithstanding this, of late, there are rising anxieties on the sustainability and credibility of the sector, in terms of job creation and provision of 'superior' work conditions. Despite, the growing attention on the employment potential of the booming sector, the conceptualisation of its long-term implications is still in a nascent stage. This has been further supported by recent discussions in the mass media on the uncommon nature of issues confronted by the workers in the sector. In this context, this article examines the vulnerabilities and insecurities of labour engaged in non-standard work.³ The atypical norms of work and work organisation in the new economic order imply a host of insecurities to the workforce, which include growing attrition rates, increased stress at work and eroding collectivity of workers. Further, it is explained as to how the emergence of a new genre of worker, with distinct features and differently conceived identity, enables the firm to draw and maintain a 'productively docile' workforce within a changed framework of human resource management.

The discussion in the paper is based on the findings of a field study of 277 customer care agents from six call centres in NOIDA.⁴ Customer care based call centre activities constitute for more than one third of

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the total employment and revenue in the BPO segment.⁵ Given the absence of reliable secondary data on the workforce, the sampling is based mainly on estimates provided by the respondents and through snowball technique.

II Unique Profile and Identity of Workers

All the call centres selected for the study have less than six years of experience in the business and deal mainly with international clients in the areas of customer care, sales support and help desk (**Table 1**). Based on the survey data, it is estimated that all these firms together employ a total of 6,010 customer care agents, 62 per cent of which are men. Around 90 per cent of these agents are engaged in voice-based work.

Table 1: Details of the BPOs

Number of firms		6
Experience in BPO business (years)	2-5 years	
Major activities	Customer care	
	Sales support	
	Help desk	
Profile of clients	International	
Number of agents*		
Male	3705 (61.7)	
Female	2305 (38.3)	
Total	6010 (100.0)	
Process*		
Voice	5364 (89.3)	
Non-voice	646 (10.7)	
Total	6010 (100.0)	

Note: * Estimated using the information provided by the respondents.

Source: Survey data, 2003.

Portrayal of 'work as fun' and 'workplace as yet another campus' is the central logic through which the potential workers are attracted to and engaged in the BPO sector. The superior image of work in the sector and the vibrant ambience of workplace – with sweeping glass and concrete buildings, factory row of jazzy computers, the company of smart and trendy peers – help in drawing educated and fun loving youngsters from urban middle class, who are fascinated with western ways of living and modern work environments.

A review of the advertisements of BPOs reveals that the preferred attributes of a call centre agent are that of young, fresh graduate with English speaking and comprehension ability. Normally, upper age-limits are specified for entry, which range between 26-28. The firms, in their profiles and advertisements, flag the bright ambience of workplace as the prime aspect of attraction. Modern work environment with of state of the art technology and other indoor facilities such as cafeteria, internet kiosk, recreation centre, gym, clinic and so on enables the firms to impress potential youngsters from urban creamy layer.

The comparatively easy access to job, as it does not require a lot of experience or a series of academic degrees, also pulls the youngsters. Being a computer literate, a good communicator, having good typing skills and a command over English is all that it requires. Perceptions of higher career prospect too, both within and outside the firm, motivate the youngsters to look upon the job.⁶ The atypical work hours of the BPO firms, due to their dependence on international clients, also tempt another group of youngsters to club work and studies.

Superior designations attached with BPO work also adds to its acceptability among youngsters. Though a newly recruited agent engages in somewhat slightly elevated job of a receptionist/computer operator or a telephone operator, the firms are found labelling the job with very attractive nomenclatures such as customer care officer, call centre executive, customer care executive, contact centre representative, customer support executive, call centre executive and so on.⁷ All these cumulatively lead to favourable supply conditions in the labour market and the emergence of a new genre of workers, who stand apart from the regular workers of conventional manufacturing/service sectors in terms of socio-economic and demographic attributes.

Out of the 277 respondents of the survey, 97 per cent was in the age category of 20-30. The mean and median ages of the workforce were found at 25. Educational profiles of the agents were also impressive, where 97 per cent of them had a minimum qualification of degree and the average number of years of education was 17. Almost all the respondents (98 per cent) have completed their higher education in institutions situated at urban centres. The schooling of 233 (84 per cent) was in public or convent schools with English as medium of instruction. 94 per cent of them have completed their last academic course with either first class or distinction. The survey provides certain dissenting findings on the widely conceived notion that the agents are mostly freshers, who have just completed their graduation or even under-graduates. In the sample most of the agents have entered the job after few years since their completion of graduation. Also, many of them had some prior experience in BPO, before their entry into the current jobs.

Educational and occupational status of parents also shows an impressive picture, with 94 per cent of fathers and 63 per cent of mothers with graduation. The fathers are mostly in government jobs (56 per cent), business (27 per cent) or professional services (13 per cent) in urban centres. In 28.5 per cent of the cases, the mothers are also employed, mostly in government sector jobs. Castewise segregation of respondents (**Table 2**) also confirms this creamy layer argument, where majority of the respondents (96 per cent) belong to forward castes.

Table 2: Profile of the Respondents

	Male	Female	Total
Sample size	178 (64.3)	99 (35.7)	277 (100.0)
Age			
Below 20	–	4 (4.4)	4 (1.5)
–5	110 (59.8)	71 (78.0)	181 (65.8)
–4	71 (38.6)	15 (16.5)	86 (31.3)
–4	3 (1.6)	–	3 (1.1)
Above 35	–	1 (1.1)	1 (0.4)
Caste category			
FC	171 (96.1)	96 (97.0)	267 (96.4)
BC	5 (2.8)	1 (1.0)	6 (2.2)
Others	2 (1.1)	2 (2.0)	4 (1.4)
Marital status			
Married	28 (15.7)	8 (8.1)	36 (13.0)
Unmarried	150 (84.3)	87 (87.9)	237 (85.6)
Widowed/Separated	–	4 (4.0)	4 (1.4)
Education			
Intermediate	2 (1.1)	6 (6.1)	8 (2.9)
Graduates	132 (74.2)	76 (76.8)	208 (75.1)
Post Graduates and above	21 (11.8)	8 (8.1)	29 (10.5)
Professional Training	23 (12.9)	9 (9.1)	32 (11.6)

Note: Figures in parentheses are proportions to total.

Source: Survey data, 2003.

On the whole, the picture emerges is that of a new genre of working class with strikingly different characteristics, which in turn reflect in marked changes in employment relations and institutional features of the labour market. Most of these workers identify themselves as part of an elite class of professionals and consider themselves superior to their counterparts in traditional industrial/service sector, who are mostly low-skilled, less educated and employed with lower wages and inferior conditions at work. The superior work environment, use of state of the art technology in day-to-day work, better salary structure, catchy designations, smart and young peer workers and so on tend the workers to believe that the job being carried out is that of an executive or professional. Confirming to this, most of the respondents in the survey did not find their issues and problems similar to that of conventional manufacturing/service sector workers.

One would naturally expect an increased supply of job aspirants, given the comparatively bright picture of the work and workers in the BPO sector, which is confirmed by the survey findings too. The favourable supply conditions in the labour markets allow the firms to test the candidates in several rounds (of language, communication and hospitality skills) and to handpick the best lot, through various modes. The stringent practices of recruitment followed by the firms also strengthen the cost-minimisation hypothesis, vide recruitment of aptly qualified personnel and hence, through reduced training costs.

III

Modes of Recruitment and Training

The emerging profile of workforce seems to be beneficial to the firms, due to its cost-minimisation implications. Given the competition in the field and the non-viability of further slashing down labour and infrastructure costs, the only possibility for the firms to minimise production cost is to cut down the training costs. A scrutiny of the advertisements of the firms suggests that they are targeting mainly those potential youngsters, who could be fine-tuned to the job with minimal training. Unlike their developed country counter parts, the BPOs are found diverting only limited resources on the in-service training of the professionals.

Recruitment is mostly carried out vide direct selection. Here, potential candidates are short-listed through walk-in-interviews, scrutiny of curriculum vitae or vide telephonic interviews. The interviews are mostly organised in the firm's premises, though some other convenient locations (such as deluxe hotels and guest houses) are selected, during periods of pressing demand. The firms are found recruiting the workers as and when required, which largely depends on their quantum of assignments. Separate recruitment divisions are found functioning in four out of the six firms, year round.

Recruitment through placement agencies is the other prominent mode of selection. Here, the firms place orders of manpower requirement to these agencies in bulk and the latter do the recruitment and even some preliminary fine-tuning of the candidates. There are more than a dozen recruitment agencies (of varied sizes) functioning in NOIDA itself at the time of field survey. Most of these agencies do generic placement services. Normally, these agencies charge a recruitment fee, from the firms, which is equivalent to one month's salary of the recruited employee. In the placement agencies also, there is a series of tests on the language aptitudes and communication skills of the youngsters. In addition to this, some of these agencies were offering some career counselling services to prepare youngsters.

The candidates are also selected through call centre colleges/call centre training courses. In fact, one of the BPO firms studied in the survey was known as a call centre college. The firm is found engaged both in placement (for other firms) and recruitment (for the firm itself).

The label of 'college' allows the firm to attract appropriate candidates, who are keen in learning the work. Workers are recruited through various crash course-training programmes too. In some of these courses, the organisers also place the candidates. Yet another mode is referrals, where the agents are rewarded for directing suitable youngsters. The incentive package attached with the system ranges between Rs 3,000-5,000 per person,⁸ which are in some cases given in monthly installments. The firms view referrals as an ideal mode as the candidates are handpicked by the agents themselves and thus are sufficiently oriented and fine-tuned to meet the requirement of the firm. To minimise the training costs, the firms are found giving preference to candidates with some previous experience. The job advertisements of the BPOs testify this strong preference for experienced but less experienced workers. The survey findings also support these arguments, with 43 per cent of the respondents having some experience in BPO.

Irrespective of the mode, the recruitment has several rounds including written tests, group discussions, aptitude tests on language and communication skills and interviews. The tenures of engagement are normally on project basis, which allows the management to get rid of the workers, if they fall short of the expectations of the firm. The high attrition rate⁹ in the industry could also be related to this rejection of workers after the first trial.

The post recruitment training normally includes four to eight weeks of in-house orientation in voice/accent, soft skills and grooming English speaking in accents. Exposure to TV shows and Hollywood blockbusters; reading fiction and so on are resorted to train the agents and familiarise them with western culture and etiquette. Further, the agents are specially trained in their specific job tasks (processes), with the aid of process training manuals. Outsourcing of training task was hardly noticed in soft skill training and grooming of the workforce. Apart from trainers, experienced agents themselves also train the newly recruited employees.

IV Changing Paradigm of Human Resource Management

The work in call centres can be divided into two processes – voice process and e-mail process. The former category denotes customer support over phone, whereas the latter is carried out via internet. In the sample, about 85 per cent of the workers were found engaged in voice processing. Irrespective of the categorisation, the work is divided into further specific processes, which are entrusted with separate teams; the size of which mostly ranges between 8-20. For each process, the agents are given detailed training/orientation with the help of training manuals. These manuals, apart from orienting the agent on the process and serving as a reference for trouble shooting, also help the firms to inculcate and reinforce the employee on the benefits of good work and the demerits/consequences of bad work.

The organisational structures of the firms were more or less similar, with slight variations across firms, and the agents come in the lowest rung of hierarchy. In its simplest form, a BPO has a chief executive officer, who is being assisted by one or two vice presidents; managers and team leaders are reporting to vice presidents. While team leaders are given process specific assignments, the managers are given generic assignments, which also includes monitoring of different processes. Trainers in the BPOs are also more or less on a par with the manager or team leader. The structure of workforce in BPOs is essentially dualistic, with the simultaneous existence of core (permanent) and periphery (non-permanent) workers, similar to the popular model of work organisation in 1980s. The agents are the periphery workers, who are easily substitutable, where team leaders/managers constitute the core staff. Agents are either recruited for a specific project-based appointment or more prominently, as probationers for 6-12 months. Only a smaller proportion of the recruited employees will be eventually confirmed as permanent staff. The

observance of a dualistic pattern of workforce, allows the firms to regulate the workforce. Some 62 per cent of the respondents were 'regular' (Table 3). However, this status is only titular, as the agents themselves know that they could be thrown out at any point, if the firm wants to do so. The only differences are some additional benefits such as leaves, provident fund and so on. The duration of engagement of the agents in the present job also support the argument against the fallacy of the 'regular' status. Only 13 per cent of the agents were found working in their present job for more than two years. Further, 57 per cent of the respondents had only less than one year experience (Table 3).

Table 3: Employment Details of Respondents

	Male	Female	Total
Status			
Regular	105 (59.0)	67 (67.7)	172 (62.1)
Project based/probationary	73 (41.0)	32 (32.3)	105 (37.9)
Salary (in Rs)			
5000-6000	18 (10.1)	14 (14.1)	32 (11.6)
6001-8000	37 (20.8)	9 (9.1)	46 (16.6)
8001-10000	29 (16.3)	23 (23.2)	52 (18.8)
10000-20000	48 (27.0)	32 (32.3)	80 (28.8)
12000 and above	46 (25.8)	21 (21.2)	67 (24.2)
Duration			
Upto 1 year	100 (56.2)	59 (59.6)	159 (57.4)
1-2 years	56 (31.5)	27 (27.3)	83 (30.3)
More than 2 years	22 (12.3)	13 (13.1)	35 (12.6)
Process			
Voice	149 (83.7)	85 (85.9)	234 (84.5)
Non-voice	29 (16.3)	14 (14.1)	43 (15.5)

Note: Figures in parentheses are proportions to total.

Source: Survey data, 2003.

Fifty three per cent of the respondents were found receiving a monthly salary above Rs 10,000 and another 19 per cent has a salary between Rs 8,000-10,000. This is quite impressive and even comparable with the salary of much qualified hands in alternative jobs in manufacturing or service sectors. The work organisation in BPOs is atypical and flexible in terms of working hours and work patterns. A typical BPO operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. To enable this, the firms are practising flexibility in working patterns where the agents' work schedules do not have any fixed days as weekly offs. The same flexibility is practised in the case of shift patterns, where the agents are expected to be flexible in adapting the hours of work if the firm requests them to change. The firms covered in the survey normally practice a 48-hour work-week for all the employees. Excepting one firm, which follows a three-shift pattern (with 8 hours duration), all the firms are with two shifts of nine and a half hours duration. To avoid any disruption in work, the agents are encouraged to avail transportation facility arranged by the firm. During the working hours agents are entitled for a 30-40 minutes lunch/breakfast break and two small breaks of 10-15 minutes duration for tea and refreshment, for which records are maintained.¹⁰

The agents are allowed to avail leave¹¹ only with prior consent of the team leader/manager, to ensure that the work is not disrupted. The agents reveal that there have been situations where they find it very difficult to manage even a few days' leave. Availing of leaves without prior consent is treated as unauthorised absence, which is a sufficient reason to terminate the services of the agent.¹² Even if the agent is sick, it is mandatory to get the consent of the team leader at least four-six hours before the shift, failing which the leave would be considered as an 'unscheduled leave'.¹³ All leaves (except casual leave) are not

applicable for probationers. Further, as the call centers are functioning according to the time-schedule of the clients of the firm, the employees are not eligible for national holidays.

The design of the workplace is also unique. As per the organisational hierarchy, there are separate floors or wings for top executives, managers and process teams. The entry of the employees are strictly restricted to their work area and the common spaces earmarked for recreation and refreshment. Within the work area of process teams, the space is organised as factory row of clean, bare cubicles, each of which houses a computer, a telephone with designed headsets.¹⁴ The team leaders are usually positioned in a central point, which allows easy supervision. To help dealing the customers, international timings are displayed on the monitor of the PCs or vide electronic boards positioned at central locations.

The development of call centres represents a major change in which many office-based jobs are structured and undertaken. The old and often chaotic nature of office life has been replaced with a new discipline in the workplace, imposed by the demands of automatic call distribution (ACD) technology,¹⁵ on which call centres are based [Bibby 2000]. The use of ACD technology, along with use of standard scripts to facilitate the agent's response, allow the firms to keep the 'free time' between calls to the bare minimum. The technique such as predictive dialing¹⁶ alone enables the firm to dump 'a day's work in an hour' to the agent.

The technology-induced efficiency at work requires the agents to submit to a highly controlled work regime, which is more akin to assembly-line manufacturing associated with Fordism or Taylorism [Standing 1999]. Unlike a conventional office, a typical call centre will see their staff spending their days seated at consoles, receiving calls through headsets and inputting information on to the PCs or terminals in front of them. Work is monitored on the spot and after the working hours, with the help of specially designed softwares,¹⁷ computer networks and closed circuit cameras. The degree of surveillance required at work is even comparable with the situations of 19th century prisons or Roman slave ships.

Workplace interactions are continuously recorded/taped, which are randomly checked by the manager/team leader. The agents are to meet daily targets, which are stipulated in terms of number of calls/e-mails successfully attended. These quotas are often fixed at a higher level that the agent has to burn out to fulfill it.¹⁸ The performances are rated in terms of productivity (quantum of work done) and quality.¹⁹ Mistakes in work invite immediate warnings and other corrective measures. Track cards/warning cards are maintained to record the daily ratings of the agents. Normally, three errors a day could lead to a warning and zero points and three consecutive zeros to counselling or termination notice.

Keeping daily track card/ warning card off from red marks is a difficult task as for any mistakes, including those done outside the work area and out of control of the agents, would be treated as 'defects'. For instance, reaching the pick up point late for more than five minutes would be marked as 'transport defect'.²⁰ Similarly, taking more than stipulated time for lunch break is also a 'defect', despite the fact that during many occasions the agents loose considerable time in queuing for lunch.

The daily performances are consolidated from time to time (either weekly or monthly), and the cumulative scores are displayed on a flip chart or a white board.²¹ A commonly followed system is that of a five-point rating, where an agent who scored excellent throughout the year gets the maximum point of 5. A fair monthly score is linked with incentives in cash and kind.²² The annual increments in salary as well as the vertical mobility of the agent in the firm are also linked to this rating. A cumulative score of five points lead to a total yearly benefit of

Rs 20,000-30,000 in the salary; four points to Rs 15,000-20,000; and so on. For promotion purposes, the annual scores carry 70-80 per cent weightage. Linking performance with incentives/punitive actions forces the agents to stress continuously. An overall five points score, thus, implies yearlong stress and extra alert work.

The task of camouflaging work as fun is vested with human resource (HR) managers. A main object of HR division is to detach the workplace feeling from the workers and to provide situations to air out workers' grievances with least damage to the firm. It pays attention to a host of issues, varying from hiring the right people to providing them training to charting out their career options. Planning and implementing employment relations (both intra-employee and employer-employee²³), organising get together/parties, providing counselling, designing 'recreation activities' and even the designing of the firm.²⁴ Provision of intranet discussion forums and organisation of 'empowering' situations also needs to be seen from this angle.²⁵

Space management is yet another aspect where HR plays a crucial role. Alongside defining entry limits for each category of the employees within the firm, HR enables the employees to organise the allotted space to their tastes. The employees are free to keep wallpapers of their choice in their monitor of the PCs or to clip photographs of their kith and kin on the flip chart. In e-mail processes, the employees are even found allowed using Walkman. However, using the process computer for personal internet surfing and telephone for personal calls are found restricted inside the work area. In these ways, the HR enables the employees to make their small, clean cubicles 'virtually spacious'. Insisting a strict dress code in paper and permitting the workers to wear outfits of their choice is found to be one of the widely adopted HR strategies for making the workers happy with no additional costs. Similarly, HR designs several codes of conducts, which are actually meant for violating than complying, thereby enabling the workers to enjoy the freedom and flexibility at workplace! Thus, providing 'illusionary freedom and flexibility' is found central in manning the agents.

On the whole, the HR strives to ensure that the creativity and productivity of the workers are effectively tapped²⁶ to strike the 'right' balance between work and fun, thereby creating a 'productively docile' workforce. All these, indicate a marked shift in the HR paradigm vis-a-vis that of personnel management in conventional-manufacturing/service sectors.

V

Insecurities and Vulnerabilities

Employment in BPOs implies a host of insecurities and vulnerabilities, which are partially reflected in the high attrition rates. Despite the salaries and facilities an ordinary graduate in India could never imagine at any other job, the average attrition rates in the industry is quite high and there are various estimates that suggest it in the range of 40-60 per cent.

In the survey, push attrition is found as a significant feature. The separation from the firms is mostly due to the expiry of contractual term, increased stress and lack of career prospects within the firm. Growing push attrition rates clearly indicate the employment insecurities associated with short-term employment contracts, demanding/stressful nature of the work and lack of bright career paths in the sector. On the one hand, workers are being thrown out regularly, due to the firms' strive for retaining only the most productive hands and to get rid of long-term commitments towards employees. Alongside, the nature of work is so stressful and demanding that the agents themselves opt to quit. Further to this, several others quit the job after an initial trial, as the chances of vertical mobility are bleak, given the pyramid structure of manpower organisation.²⁷

Agents, especially those who work on voice processes, are forced to live as Indian by day and Westerner after sundown. Further, it is fairly demeaning as some call centre operations demand acquisition of even new persona.²⁸ Work can get frustrating at times, especially when dealing with irritative and abusive customers. Even the most positive and alert agents report that there were times when they lost their temper and had to cry or curse for airing out the frustration. Many of them agree that this frustration is one of the prime factors that force the workers to think about quitting the firm. The close monitoring and continuous work assessment followed in BPOs also add to the frustration and agents often find it fairly demeaning. In performance assessment, the past track record of performance of the agent is not reckoned; it is often done objectively with the aid of computers/software.

As working times are artificially created, it obviously conflicts with the natural rhythm of human body.²⁹ Unearthly hours and over-exertion take a heavy toll in terms of health (both mental and physical) and job performance. The results are then two-fold – increased healthcare costs on the one hand and frustrations at the workplace, on the other hand. Odd working times usually leads to disturbances in personal and social life. There are problems related to maintaining friendships, keeping in touch with relatives, accomplishing household duties and finding time for sound family relations. Employees are not even entitled for national/religious holidays, as the firms work with clients' calendar.³⁰

The respondents reported several symptoms of mental and physical ill health such as nervousness, chronic fatigue, body ache, insomnia, nausea, anxiety, restlessness, irritability and even depression. Some of them pointed out that working in shift even causes psychoneurotic disturbances such as depressions. The respondents also reported frequent occurrence of gastrointestinal problems, with digestive problems such as constipation, peptic ulcer, indigestion, diarrhea, excessive gas formation, abdominal pain and heart burn. It was also noticed that workers do develop poor eating habits, overeating, smoking, excessive drinking of coffee and so on to cope up with the psychological and physical stress.³¹

The other blatant insecurity is the complete absence of organisational activities, as the philosophy of work organisation is based on individualisation. Workers are moulded to act as individuals who reports to and are monitored by another individual. Even in project-based teamwork, this is the core principle that binds the work relations. It is widely internalised among the call centre agents that salary is a personal matter, which should not be shared with peers in the workplace. The firms in their code of conducts highlight that discussing salary and related matters with fellow-workers would invite warnings and disciplinary action.

The absence of collectivity could also be attributed to the distinct characteristics of agents and atypical form of work. The short-term approach of the agents towards the work too makes them consider their job as a transitory engagement and, thus, organising irrelevant. In many cases, in their endless run after work targets, they do not even find any time for thinking of collectivity and trade unionism. Promoting individualised situations in turn lead to greater isolation and lower likelihood of establishing networks of information and support. The scope for the agents to interact among themselves and similar employees outside is limited and the employees often do not find any chance to mingle with outsiders, as their entire move right from the doorstep of homes till return are planned by the firm.³² Even within the firm, the world of the agents is mostly confined to the process in which they are involved.

The firms are keen in reiterating among the agents that the decision of management is final and more or less irreversible. It is accepted among the agents, that their vertical mobility in the job career is more

linked to their healthy relation to the management than their performance ratings. Any move from the agents against the interest of the management is viewed seriously and followed with punitive measures. The intranet discussion forums in these firms are mostly used for circulating jokes and tips for 'productivity improvement'. Sharing and discussing workplace issues are strictly discouraged through the intranet network. All these prevent the agents from any collective efforts.

The attraction of higher salary/perks in BPOs also gets murky, when it is juxtaposed with the education and opportunity costs of the employees. As majority of them are educated in expensive institutions, the average cost of their education far exceeds that of an ordinary Indian graduate. Thus, these agents represent a group of expensively educated cheap labour. The long-term opportunity costs of BPO work could be still higher. Most of these youngsters are in fact burning out their formative years as 'cyber coolies', the toll of which is very high. Entering into a well-paid employment soon after the completion of graduation act as a deterrent to continue studies. Further to this, BPO work does not provide any scope for skill upgradation. Most workers in the sector are doing low-end work, which were handled by erstwhile computer operators and receptionists. Rather than picking up accents and certain communication skills, the skill upgradation is minimal. Gaining specific accents would sometime adversely affect the job prospect of the employee also.³³

Yet another issue is related to the gender aspects of the work. IT enabled service sector and call centres are perceived to have much potential to offer employment avenues for women unlike the traditional manufacturing sectors [Mitter 2000]. However, the findings of the survey testify against the hypothesis of stress-free, women-friendly nature of work, with the proportion of women workers below 40 per cent.³⁴ Women's scope in the job is extremely constrained due the atypical timings of the work make it impossible for women to continue in the job, clubbing their domestic commitments. The inherent social frame of patriarchy also adds constraints that make it unviable for the women to continue in the work for long, with odd working hours. The stress and strain at work lead to situations where the female workers cannot carry on, especially during pregnancy. In the firms studied, the attrition of women workers is found coinciding with their engagement, marriage or during pregnancy. The profile of the existing female workforce of these firms is that of predominantly unmarried women, without much familial commitments. Those women workers, who are above 30 years of old and married are found with special circumstances (such as widows/divorcees, mothers with grown up children, married to call centre executive/similar professional and so on). All these suggest that BPO work is also equally or more women-unfriendly as compared to traditional manufacturing sector jobs.

VI Conclusion

There is a growing paradox in the work organisation in the call centres. Despite the fact that work in BPOs are characterised with much innovations, flexibilities and freedoms, at the core, it denotes a relatively inflexible form of work organisation. This inconsistency *inter alia* has resulted in the creation of a new class of workers, with distinct features and differently conceived identity eroding even the basic rights at work. The challenge of the researchers, here is to delineate and explore the insecurities and vulnerabilities, which are so veiled in the organisational logic of the firm. It is equally important to explore possible corrective measures or adjustment mechanisms that help in tapping the employment potential of the sector, with minimum adverse impacts in the labour markets and overall economy of developing countries, which are emerging as the electronic housekeepers of the west.

Address for correspondence:
neetbabu@rediffmail.com

Notes

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- 1 The spectacular growth of BPO in India owes primarily to the favourable stock of English educated youth with relatively low wage rates along with a drastic drop in both in international private lease line rates and improvement in bandwidth availability.
- 2 During 1998-2002, 336 call centres have sprung up across the country.
- 3 For a detailed account on non-standard work refer Mangan (2000)
- 4 NOIDA, a satellite town of Delhi, situated in Uttar Pradesh, is an upcoming hub of electronic back-office work in National capital region.
- 5 <http://www.nasscom.org>
- 6 It is widely perceived that for industrious and committed workers there are chances to enhance the salaries and upgrade designations, within the firm during a short span. Also, it is believed that gaining some experience in BPO sector provides chances to migrate to better firms, both within and outside the country.
- 7 An examination of the advertisements of the BPOs reveals that more than a score of designations are used to denote almost same type of work.
- 8 Further to this, in one of the firms, the agents are given a VCD player, if they do five successful referrals.
- 9 A detailed account of attrition is provided in a subsequent session.
- 10 All these breaks are tracked continuously vide computers. This enables the team leader or manager to generate statements of time utilisation of the employees, at any point of time.
- 11 Number of casual leaves varied from 7-12 in a year. The other leaves include medical leave, privilege leave, optional leave, study leave and maternity leave.
- 12 During the survey period itself, we have come across about half a dozen cases of termination due to unauthorised absence.
- 13 Any dispute regarding attendance could be crosschecked with the data sheets corresponding to the electronic identity cards of the agents, which are also used for punching their attendance.
- 14 Although structured around the telephone, the one thing never heard at a call centre is the sound of a phone ringing. The agents are even fined if their mobiles ring in the work bay.
- 15 The work in the call centres are made possible through by automated call distribution facilities, a technology that automatically feeds incoming telephone calls to the available agents.
- 16 This refers to the use of software to dial outbound calls automatically, transferring calls when they are answered to available members of staff.
- 17 Recently, some of these firms are reported to be using certain softwares for analysing the performance of employees and generating grade sheets.
- 18 The team leaders/managers undertake regular 'target meetings' and one-to-one meetings where the agents are repeatedly reminded of keeping the targets met.
- 19 In quality check, attention is given to the manner in which the calls/emails are attended – accent, alertness, attitude and aptness of the response (for voice processor) and grammar, punctuation, right information (for e-mail process).
- 20 If the employee fails to report for work due to 'transport defect' of the firm, it would be treated as a paid holiday. Even here, the employee's monthly rating would fall, due to these non-working days.
- 21 The firms prepare the daily performance record of each process, which are informed to the clients on a routine basis.
- 22 Incentives in kind include awards in the form of gift coupons, sponsored dinners and picnics and expensive gifts.
- 23 Defining and enforcing the roles for separate categories of the workforce and defining dos and don'ts are central in the planning of employment relations.
- 24 This include planning the interior of work-areas, allocating space between various divisions, positioning and presentation of cafeteria and recreation centres and so on.
- 25 Organisation of several group works/competitions such as floral arrangements and hanging of colourful balloons are also undertaken by HR divisions.
- 26 Several perks/facilities offered to the employees such as conveyance arrangements, providing in-house facilities such as credit card collection boxes and ATMs and so on, are also aimed at enhancing the intensity of work, by freeing the agents from the day-to-day worries.
- 27 Instances of massive attrition soon after the announcement of promotion results are widely reported by the agents.
- 28 In some cases, agents have to assume another names too, to suit the requirements of the customers.
- 29 As human alertness is controlled by the biological clock, which is designed to have sleep at nights and alertness during the day, the workers could not naturally function at peak alertness and performance during odd hours.
- 30 To quote an employee: "We are not getting a holiday on Independence Day, but there would be a holiday on George Washington's Birthday!"
- 31 All these preliminary findings point towards the desirability of undertaking a detailed epidemiological study on these atypical occupations.
- 32 In some of the firms, the arrangements are made in such a way that the vehicle would pick up the agents from their homes and drop directly inside the firms' premises. As the refreshment and recreation faculties are provided inside, the workers need not find any reason to get out of the firm.
- 33 Further, analyses of the job advertisements of the BPOs reveal that more than a years' experience is often considered as disqualification, as the firms are keen in getting 'raw workforce', who could be groomed to meet their requirement easily.
- 34 This is considerably lower vis-à-vis an earlier estimate provided by Vijaybaskar et al (2001).

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Hitkari House, 284 Shahid Bhagatsingh Road, Mumbai 400 001

Phones: 2269 6072, 2269 6073 Fax: 2269 6072

E-mail: epw@vsnl.com epw.mumbai@gmail.com

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