

Women, Identity and India's Call Centre Industry

J.K. Tina Basi



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This is a modern book for modern times. Basi defies conventional wisdom – that call centre employment is either India's post colonial revenge or globalisation's way of destroying national identity – and in true feminist tradition, privileges the experiences of the women themselves. She explores the lives, experiences and aspirations of young women working in call centres in New Dehli outsourced from the UK and examines the ways in which they negotiate patriarchal expectations of management family and culture, actively constructing new identities which work for them in the new India. This is a compelling account of fast changing industry which Basi captures with sophisticated theoretical analysis as well as a woman's eye and understanding.

Ruth Pearson, Director, Centre for Development Studies,
University of Leeds

Tina Basi makes an invaluable contribution to discussions on globalization and postcolonial subjectivity through a captivating study of women call centre workers in India referencing their lives inside and outside the workplace. The focus on identity and agency ensures the emergent picture is one of complexity and contradiction, exploitation and empowerment, challenging singular depictions of docility prevalent in the literature to date.

Diane Perrons, Gender Institute, London School of Economics

Women, Identity and India's Call Centre Industry

This book examines the concept of globalized identities and the way in which agency is exercised over identity construction by women working in India's transnational call centre industry.

Drawing on qualitative empirical data and extensive original fieldwork, the book provides a nuanced analysis of the experiences of Indian women call centre workers and the role of women's participation in the global labour market. The author uses social, cultural and historical factors to create a framework for examining the processes of identity construction. Within this framework, the book explores the impact of the call centre labour process on the social landscape of urban centres in India and the way in which this has impacted upon transformations and shifts in society in relation to gendered, sexual and generational relationships. Highlighting the significance of identity in a globalised world, the author argues that identity acts as one of the most powerful constructs in transforming global 'scapes' and flows of culture and economics.

This book will be of interest to academics working on South Asia, gender and labour studies and issues of globalization, identity and social change.

J.K. Tina Basi holds a PhD in Gender Studies and Sociology from the University of Leeds. Previously a freelance ethnographic researcher with Intel's Digital Health Group in Ireland, she has also established a consultancy, Mehfil Enterprise, conducting corporate ethnography in media and technology related industries. She is currently working on a new ethnographic research project about spirituality.

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1 Women, Identity and India's Call Centre Industry
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**Dedicated to the memory of Barbara Powell,
for calling to the rebel within and daring me to try.**

Acknowledgements

This book has been a real labour of love. Beginning with academic research that saw me transition from Regina to Leeds to Delhi to London, it's been quite a journey. Along the way I shed a lot of skins and experienced the reality of being a cosmopolitan citizen wearing labels and badges in multiple, and sometimes simultaneous, contexts. There were many people who helped along the way and I offer my thanks.

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My life in India was enriched by three very important people: Charu Nagrath and Rishi Levi revealed to me an India I never knew to exist – I have never been the same since; and Randeep Chandyoke, thank you for EVERYTHING – I really owe you – I wouldn't have survived in the depths of Pahar Ganj if you hadn't found me. Pratibha Sawhney and her family provided a warm and safe home on Hanuman Road, in Connaught Place, as well as offering up countless opportunities to discuss and experience life in Delhi, especially Banita and Harpreet, who were both working in call centres at the time. Kapil Sharma was an amazing gateway to the call centres and his help in negotiating that entry as well as the introduction to late night socializing was crucial in gathering the research for this book.

I am eternally grateful to my parents, Balbir and Tarsem Basi, who didn't always understand 'the dreamer's desires' but supported me nevertheless. They were at the starting line and pulled the trigger by telling me, 'This is not how we Indians do things.' My mother has continued to show me how to put feminist theory into practice in all that she does and my father has unwittingly taught me even more. My wildly disparate and global support network stretches across Canada, England, India, Japan and Australia and includes: my family, Harvinder and Kavinder Basi, Gordon Sanghera, Elizabeth Shand, Isabella Sanghera and Sandish Benning; and my friends, Tony Elliott, Dev Kashyap, Garrett Schmidt, Jaime and Nik Reban-Jones, Dave McGrane, Lara Bonokoski, Tara Smith, Lucas Stepp, Michelle Mikkelsen, Amy Hodge, Shanthini Cowley-Sathiakumar, Brad Thatcher, Ant Walker, Ben Pheloung and Simon Wilson.

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Abbreviations

ACD	automated call distribution system
ATL	assistant team leader
AVP	assistant vice-president
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BPO	business process outsourcing
BTM	bhenji turned mod(ern)
CIO	Computer Information Office
CRM	customer relations management
CTI	computer telephony integration
CWDS	Centre for Women and Development Studies
DOT	Department of Telecommunications
FDI	foreign direct investment
GOI	Government of India
HR	human resource(s)
ICT	information communications technology
IDS	Incomes Data Services
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IT	information technology – the merging of computer technology with communications technology
ITES	information technology enabled services
ITES–BPO	information technology enabled services – business process outsourcing
IVR	interactive voice response
MBA	Master's in Business Administration
MNC	multinational corporations
NASSCOM	National Association of Software and Services Companies
NCR	National Capital Region
NGO	non-governmental organization
NRI	non-resident Indian
NTP	New Telecom Policy
PG	paying guest

PIO	person of Indian origin
TL	team leader
TNC	transnational corporation
VOIP	voice over internet protocol
VP	vice-president

Prologue

Well, I just wanted to know everything about British culture. Here I've learned how to groom myself, how to talk to people, a lot of things. Here you are talking with Britishers, not Indians, and they don't show their emotions very easily. Britishers, man, they like speaking with Indian people – it really touches your heart. It makes you think, I'll do anything for you.

A year back, my boyfriend was asking me, 'Why do you need to work in a call centre? Why can't you do normal job 10–16?' That's why he didn't marry me. We met at a Christmas party. We started as friends and then we got serious. And he wanted to ask me ... well, he had some questions about my lifestyle, the way I carry myself, my working timings, everything. For that reason he got married to somebody else. He tells his wife that he met me through a call centre and that I live here and live alone, without any family and he needs to take care of me. Normally, we have our off days and holidays together and we go out – and he has conveyed some other message to his wife.

I used to party a lot, when I was very new in this place. I love boozing, smoking, and parties; clubs and discs. Akhil used to take me because he didn't like me hanging around with other guys. He would call and say, 'Where are you?' and I'd say, 'I am with my friend, we are going to Delhi Devils,' and he would be, like, 'Who are you with? Let me know the names, blah blah blah,' and got too possessive. I quit all of that mostly because of him, he doesn't like me hanging around with these people. He is not a party animal like me.

In call centres, we do feel that we are just out from college. Nobody is so much aware of what background you are from or what age I am. So you feel that you are a fresher, a graduate. You are working so you'll be in a funky mood, a party animal, very outgoing and very fast. No men from my office would like to marry a person from a call centre. Guys only care if the girls are out stationed or live with their parents. When they find out that a girl is out stationed – they have a ball of a time. They can come, they can stay over. Come to her place and booze.

Before you leave your parent's house, you have to have some support and if you cannot convince them, forget it. I can't go back home to my parents now. Back home, they're not into the same things as I am, they're not interested in marketing or communications, they do door-to-door sales. I don't even visit. All my relatives are suspicious of what I do. I haven't actually told them that in fact I work in a call centre.

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>Prologue</i>	xv
1 Introduction: 'a myriad of well-wishing "little sisters"'	1
2 Globalizing India: the rise of the call centre and BPO industries	28
3 Pinking and rethinking professional identities: the construction of women's work identities	56
4 BTMs in BPOs: using sartorial strategies to establish patterns of identification and recognition	94
5 Techs and the city: challenging patriarchal norms through spatial practice	132
6 Conclusion: agency and identity	159
<i>Epilogue</i>	165
<i>Glossary</i>	167
<i>Notes</i>	168
<i>Bibliography</i>	182
<i>Index</i>	203

Figures

1.1	Cover of <i>India Today</i> , 18 November 2002	10
1.2	Two women making calls	12
2.1	Two women on their coffee break in the call centre	53
2.2	Call centre floor	54
4.1	Multiplex and shopping centre in Gurgaon	95
5.1	Shantytown behind call centre in Gurgaon	139
5.2	Cover of <i>India Today</i> , 13 June 2005	153
5.3	Zaika, a dhaba in Gurgaon	156

1 Introduction

'A myriad of well-wishing "little sisters"'

We are rich because the Indians are poor. Now the jobs we stole 200 years ago are returning to India. Last week the *Guardian* revealed that the National Rail Enquiries service is likely to move to Bangalore, in south-west India. Two days later, the HSBC bank announced that it was cutting 4,000 customer service jobs in Britain and shifting them to Asia. BT, British Airways, Lloyds TSB, Prudential, Standard Chartered, Norwich Union, Bupa, Reuters, Abbey National and Powergen have already begun to move their call centres to India. The British workers at the end of the line are approaching the end of the line. (Monbiot 2003)

George Monbiot stated this week that 'the most marketable skill in India today is the ability to abandon your identity and slip into someone else's'. As a job specification the abandonment of identity seems a rather high price. Indeed, the most accomplished become, like those Thomas Macaulay envisaged in his famous Minute on Education of 1835, 'a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' ... The call centres create new forms of social division, separating these reconstructed young adults from the rest of society. It reinforces social gulfs, alienating people from their traditions, without offering them any place in the values they have to simulate in order to ease the lives of distant consumers they will never meet. (Seabrook 2003)

India's call centre industry: the sunshine sector, hotbed of sexual liberalism, bound by professional agreements, ripe for discussions of postcolonial subjectivity, evoking the guilt of Empire. This book is a discussion of how agency is experienced by women working in Delhi's transnational call centre industry, seeking out truncated spaces from within which identity is articulated.

Over the last decade we have witnessed a steady rise in the outsourcing of call centre and data entry work from the UK to India, a trend that has proved irresistible to popular commentators.¹ In pairing these two quotations together one can appreciate the contradictory impression left upon *Guardian* readers and the British liberal Left concerning the relocation of call centre work. With one side arguing that call centre relocation is retribution for colonial exploitation (Monbiot 2003), the other retaliates by claiming that commodification

2 Introduction

of self-identity is too costly to naively identify as reprisal (Seabrook 2003), demonstrating a tension that reflects the contradictions in the agency/structure dynamic engulfing discussions of globalization, labour and identity.

This analysis of Indian call centre workers is itself located within a wider context. The popular perceptions of colonial exploitation (Caulkin 2002; Denny 2003a), retribution (Denny 2003b; Flanagan 2003; Monbiot 2003) and the compulsory commodification of identity (Seabrook 2003) have dominated British media discussions of India's transnational call centre industry. These reports demonstrate an oversimplification of the discussion and the quotations from Monbiot and Seabrook that opened this chapter indicate a sense of guilt emerging from the liberal Left – what Said (1993: 22–24) has referred to as the 'contemporary residue of imperialism'.

Indo-UK bilateral relations evolving out of the context of British colonial rule have created an unmistakable discursive wrinkle within which this discussion takes place: the postcolonial condition.² It is difficult, if not impossible, to isolate contemporary social, economic and cultural relations from colonial relations; the postcolonial condition produces subtle hostilities, or subtle forms of racism. This is not to suggest that any reference to socio-historic contexts is to be read as an act of imperialism. Rather, it is important to understand, first, the contemporary discourse surrounding the outsourcing of service work to India and, second, that the very nature of call centre work demands that Indian employees have voice-to-voice interaction with UK customers. This may be up to 300 exchanges per agent per day, and many include references by UK customers to these former colonial contexts. Proclamations regarding the exploitation and the commodification of self-identity are not only presumptuous and without strong evidence, they negate the experiences of Indian call centre workers.

The empirical research for this book is in part concerned with globalization: the globalization of production, particularly in the service sector, and the globalization of cultural identities. It goes some way towards deconstructing the notion that call centre work outsourced to India is simply 'electronic sweatshop' work (Kjellerup 1999; Holman and Fernie 2000) and looks at the way in which such employment has also empowered and given greater agency to those who work in it, both socially and economically. In presenting an ethnographic case study of women working in some of the transnational call centres of Delhi, this book explores how identity is produced through global and national discourses and examines the way in which agency functions in the construction of these identities. Second, it looks at the challenges and opportunities for women brought about by the relocation of call centre work, arguing for a closer examination of social, cultural and historical contexts in researching the globalization of service work. In doing so, it contributes to 'transnational feminist research' by critically examining women's experiences in transnational Indian call centres, linking it analytically to different places, thereby enhancing women's common struggles (Moghadam 2000; Nagar 2002, 2003).