JANE *in the* CALL CENTER:

(In)securities from and Adaptations to Neoliberalization

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ABSTRACT: *In this paper, I study a call center in Mumbai to explore how cities transform and adapt to neoliberal policies. Due to growing global demand, as well as a variety of additional favorable factors, call centers have proliferated in cities throughout India, though particularly in Mumbai and New Delhi. The gendered impact of this proliferation is observable through movement and adaptation in urban space. I focus on Mumbai in order to examine how these social effects appeared alongside the emergence of its first call center.*

The research methodology for this study consisted of interviews, on-site observations, and informal conversations in and around the call center in Mumbai. I look at spaces where female call center workers work, rest, and visit for leisure or consumption, in order to shed light on their perception of the call center and its immediacies. The paper demonstrates how space can initiate displacement, how hierarchies in societal structures are reformulated and stabilized despite claims of liberation from tradition, and how attempts at adaptation through compliance, negotiation, and resistance occur in space.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, globalization has dominated the discourse on the relationship between culture, people, and knowledge. With the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s, the nation shifted to an increasingly free-market economy, bringing about significant changes in Mumbai, the commercial center of the country. Global entities encouraging production and consumption emerged alongside local economies that struggled to adapt to increasing competition. As with numerous other cities around the world, Mumbai was rapidly transforming from a regional center for administration, small-scale manufacturing, and commerce to a strategic global center and a hub for the flow of activity, economy, and people. At the same time, the state was

strategically flexing its policies to make the local environment conducive to the flow of capital. Illustrative of this move is the cre-

ation of spaces in India designated as Special Economic Zones, which are advertised by the state as "hassle-free environments" promising various types of incentives for foreign investments. (Hegde 2011, 181)

As multinational companies began to occupy new buildings, the state amended national policies to allow women to work at night, overriding former state policies forbidding it. This was mainly to accommodate call centers, which can only operate at night in India in order to serve customers in time zones in the United States and Australia. Furthermore, India is an ideal location for call centers, as a significant portion of the population speaks English, has technical know-how, and is willing to work for low wages. Call centers serve a variety of multinational companies, including "British Airways, TechneCall, Dell Computers, Citibank, GE, HSBC, CapGemini, SwissAir, America On-Line, and American Express" (Hegde 2011, 107). The location is

FIGURE 1. *Area around call center, Malad, Mumbai. Source: Kunal B., 2009.*

also geographically convenient, well situated between the Americas and Australia to serve clients in Australia, Great Britain, and the United States (though most call centers serve customers in the United States). All these factors combined led to the proliferation of call centers in various cities in the early 2000s, particularly Mumbai and New Delhi.

The Indian youth—who supposedly were looking West to break free from the shackles of age-old conventions they perceived as restricting—popularized working in call centers through their notion of liberation from tradition (Hegde 2011). Advertising for call centers was based on the idea that Business Process Outsourcings (BPOs) would bring Indian youth closer to imagined forms of Western thinking. In this sense, "Western thinking" is closely linked to processes of modernization, ranging from the consumption of junk food and alcohol, and altered notions of family to the extensive use of glass in office buildings in order to construct a Western aesthetic (Mishra 2008). As a result, working in a call center has often been compared to living on an American college campus. Given that the starting salary is significantly higher than

FIGURE 2. *Image of the call center from the adjoining street. Author, 2012.*

other jobs requiring similar qualifications, there are financial motivations as well.

Through an analysis of Ashim Ahluwalia's 2005 documentary film titled John and Jane, as well as my own conversations with people in the area around the call center, I have positioned the workers into three loose categories. The first are young students, who are tempted to quit college in order to pursue a job that can give them immediate monetary benefits, despite the limited upward mobility in these jobs. The second are those who are the primary breadwinners for their family. This job is central to the income of the family, and they earn far more from this job than they would have in another job with their same qualifications. The third consists of individuals, usually women, who do not require work to meet financial ends, but aspire to an image of modernity through their job.

METHODS *and* FRAMEWORK

I conducted a study in and around Mindspace, the complex of buildings where the first call center in the city of Mumbai is located. The fieldwork for this project was conducted mainly during the months of May and June in 2012. I had great difficulty in gaining access to the call center, so the bulk of the data comes from conversations with employees while they moved in and out of the call center. I also had extensive conversations with entrepreneurs who had set up mobile food stalls on the edge of the call center. They were available and willing to talk to me while I waited for people to move in and out of the call center. Through observations at the edge of the call center, my research indicates that this space is an important boundary of transformation where one can understand the social changes and adaptations that have occurred due to the emergence of the call center.

FIGURE 3. *Auto rikshaws outside the call center; vendors outside the call center (left to right). Author, 2012.*

In these conversations with vendors and employees of the call center I found assumptions and choices influenced by gender, ethnicity, and class. I began to consider the idea of a gendered perception of space, presented in feminist theory through the concept of intersectional identity (Crenshaw 2003), where various facets of one's identity can provide insight into structural causes of choices and opinions. This feminist analysis goes beyond the provision of gender inclusivity to bring out struggles of power and the dismantling of binaries through intersectional identities, while also demonstrating my positionality as the researcher.

Time is also an important aspect of the call center, which is based on a program that functions at Eastern Standard Time instead of Indian Standard Time. This creates alternative landscapes of the night and ideas of safety, as well as understandings of the space around the call center during the day. Networks of adaptation are formed through the occurrence of a small number of associated entrepreneurs, allowing one to examine the unanticipated edge conditions that occur between the call center and the surrounding spaces of the city.

EMULATION *and* ADAPTATION

"How much English do you speak? Learn English fast! Call today!"

The above quote comes from a flyer I saw frequently while traveling on the Western railway in Mumbai throughout the 2000s. These flyers provide information about the type of English language training available: British, American, or Australian (though, as mentioned, the majority of training focuses on American English. It is important to note that companies seek those who can already read English (as these notices were mostly in English). Therefore, the training is meant for those hoping to work in a call centers where, by honing their language skills so they speak without the vernacular accent, they can answer customer service calls from countries other than their own using prepared scripts.

The emulation of a foreign accent creates a tension between newly acquired values and existing ways of self-recognition. A duality in routine, consisting of a split between the physical spaces one inhabits and the virtual geography where one interacts, affects one's thought processes as well, leading to a uniquely temporal identity crisis. This is evident in Shome's (2006) paper, "Thinking Through the Diaspora: Call Centers, India, and a New Politics of Hybridity." In speaking about a call center employee, Shome writes:

He kept finding fault with everything we did and then fumed, "that's so typical of you Indians," stated his family members. Arnold/Anand defended himself in the interview stating: "How can I switch identities? I am Arnold for eight hours and then Anand for the rest. I've learned to speak like a foreigner now and I'm beginning to feel like one too. What's wrong with that?" (115)

As this example demonstrates, a physical and psychic denaturalization of the self takes place through the change in name, the adoption of an American accent, and the nature of the work itself. Unlike identity crises that emerge out of migration, there are not the benefits of exposure to another culture, aside from television shows and training sessions, which are geared to project a desirable construct of the West, worthy of emulation.

The interaction with people in different geographies also has a cultural impact, as employees are exposed to another society through their telephone conversations and training: "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" (Ramesh 2004, 494). Embedded in this training is the intent to integrate con-

sumerism into the psychological make-up of the call center employee. For example, by instructing call center employees with the cultural concept of "the mall," these trainings elaborate the needs of a consumer, constructed through a superficial exposure (Krishnamurthy 2004).

The construction of offices in Mumbai has occurred alongside the development of new housing. New apartment buildings are often hastily built, and builders make promises far beyond what they are able to provide. While they assume the occupants come from a homogenous group, these spaces are used in multiple ways by a diverse range

FIGURE 4. *Apartment building near the call center. Author, 2012.*

of users. Some apartments house families, while some are converted into offices; others are occupied by paying guests, while many employees of call centers often live together in a single apartment.

In apartment buildings around the call center, a two-bedroom apartment may become a home for six to eight people, most of whom are employed at the call center and are of the same gender. In some cases, partitions have been added to ensure privacy for occupants. Sometimes the living room becomes an additional bedroom, so that each room in the house (apart from the kitchen) is a private space for different individuals. There are apartments in which the kitchen is not used, and residents only order their meals from either inexpensive restaurants or women who run small businesses where they deliver home-cooked food. A few of my interviewees said that they shared a bed with an occupant who worked at a differ-

ent time of the day. In this case, the shared sleeping routine continues on weekends as well.

Malls, theaters, and restaurants have emerged in this area, for both the entertainment of the people who live or work here as well as to attract crowds from different parts of the city. Malls, the first of which was constructed in 1999 in Mumbai, introduced the idea of recreation in enclosed spaces of consumption. The architecture of these spaces follows a similar language in its making. Conversations with store managers in malls revealed that, unlike other malls in the city, these are open for longer hours in order to accommodate call center workers, an important consumer demographic. This is especially true for the food court within the mall, which receives a large crowd from the call center. However, the food in the mall, typically much more expensive than street food, is an occasional
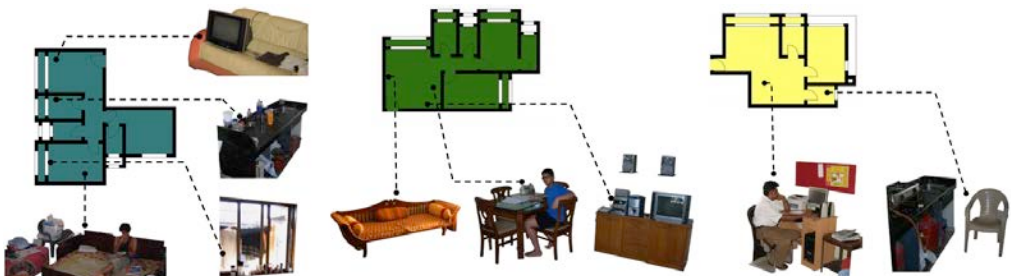

FIGURE 5. *From left to right) Configurations within apartments within the same apartment block: rented by call center employees, conventional household, and transformation into office. Micha Baumgartner, Lukas Nacht, Kunal Bhatia, Aparna Parikh, 2009.*

treat for a call center employee, not every-day fare.

GENDERED WORK?

The media has portrayed the entry of call centers as a catalyst for a transformation in identity: "A popular thread of reportage claims that call-center jobs have liberated Indian youth and turned them into avid consumers, thereby providing a necessary nudge to the traditionalism of Indian society, especially with regard to women" (Hegde 2011, p. 178). In expressing it as such, the media has both reflected and reinforced the impression that the youth in India, particularly women, were gaining freedom from their employment at call centers. Unlike call centers in other locations, those in India have nearly an equal number of male and female employees, and these businesses like to promote an image of gender equality. However, while men usually rise to higher positions within the call centers, women do not (Mukherjee 2004). This is due to the fact that, as women, they are expected to start a family at a certain age, and thus they do not work sufficient hours for a promotion. There is even an expectation that a "decent" married woman would not work at a call center. Nevertheless, this is not always the case, for example when the woman is the primary breadwinner in the family.

The landlords of apartment buildings around the call center that I interviewed often considered call center employees to be unfavorable tenants, mainly due to their odd work hours. This was especially true for women. While there is an aura of independence around the image of the modern woman who works at a call center, single women who work at night find it particularly hard to find an apartment because of a stigma directed towards women who work at night. This echoes the analysis of Melissa Wright, who argues that there are spatial paradoxes inherent in attempts to open up avenues for women's political agency. For the women she studied in Northern Mexico those who protested against femicide were "dismiss[ed] and devalue[d] for 'prostituting' themselves by venturing beyond the domestic sphere, that traditional domain of female purity and obligation" (Wright 2005, p. 279). Such discourse is absent amongst women in India, however, because of the existing binary between the decency of the call center worker and the more questionable prostitute who works at night (Hegde 2011). In an attempt to dismantle these binaries, feminist scholars have argued that a discourse of moralities around women's occupation and attire helps stabilize the patriarchy in society (Sanders, O'Neill, and Pitcher 2009).

SECURITY *and the* ALTERED NIGHT

The social life of call center employees is severely inhibited due to the highly demanding work schedule and long hours. Employees are not given Indian national holidays and festivals off because the call center's work schedule is designed to be in sync with the country of its customers, who likely do not share the same holidays. K, a 36-year-old call center employee addresses this in her interview:

"Not too many people end up coming because everyone know that my timings are very odd. So I'm generally sleeping during that day. If at all anybody wants to come, I prefer if they come when I have a holiday or an off. But it's really hard. My friends are accommodating and all, but it's difficult."

Because call centers operate to suit daytime hours in North America, the nightscape of this neighborhood has undergone a radical shift. Movie times are adjusted to fit em-

FIGURE 6. *Time usage of space, where light indicates areas active at different times in the same geography. Micha Baumgartner, Lukas Nacht, Kunal Bhatia, Aparna Parikh, 2009.*

ployee schedules, street vendors come in at specific times depending on when call center employees arrive or leave, breakfast places provide dinner meals for call center workers, and networks of taxi cabs proliferate, especially for those who do not have a pick-up or drop-off service from the their companies.

Cab drivers hired by call center companies may provide door-to-door service, or drop off employees at the railway station, where they can take a train to where they live. The cab drivers are usually immigrants belonging to a lower class, and are perceived somewhat suspiciously. There is a perceived element of danger associated with a lower-class migrant, who is assumed to be a perpetrator of crime. In an incidence of homicide in Bangalore, where a cab driver raped and killed a female employee, the media immediately questioned the promiscuity of the woman in question, and criticized the behavior of lower-class male migrants in general (Hegde 2011). The assumption is that lower-class migrants are more likely to commit crime because they know no better. However, despite these dominant discourses, there are often positive relations between call center employees and the cab drivers, regardless of their different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Cab drivers often become confidantes of call center employees, and privy to interpersonal relations between employees. During an interview, a cab driver told me that he would never allow his daughter to come to the city, as he was afraid she would be tempted to work in a call center. He believed that it was not the type of job a decent young girl should want. It would lead her to become a "night girl" (likely referring to a prostitute), and he feared that she might begin to desire products that contained traces of Western influences.

FUTURE *of* CALL CENTERS

In Indian call centers there is the impression that one's job is "here today, gone tomorrow," which contributes to job anxiety and competition, while also affecting the mental health of the worker (Hegde 2011). The ease of mobility, commonly associated with globalization, while true in the way capital flows from one place to another is not necessarily an option for those who work in globalized industries, who may lose their jobs if the industry relocates to a part of the world where the work can be done cheaper. This impression is slowly becoming a reality. According to a 2011 New York Times article, the Philippines has begun to replace India as the dominant player in the call center industry. People from the Philippines "learn American English in the first grade, eat hamburgers, follow the NBA and watch the TV show 'Friends' long before they enter a call center" (Bajaj 2011); such aspects of American culture help them better empathize with their customers, and leave a lesser number dissatisfied.

CONCLUSION

This paper has observed how neoliberalization affects the trajectories and spatial interactions of female call center workers in the city of Mumbai. The conflict between tradition and modernization is embodied in the establishment of call centers and their subsequent social impacts. The positive effects of modernization are marketed to potential employees of call centers: by watching American TV shows, adopting American accents and having conversations with people in the United States, one can become "Westernized." Nevertheless, I believe that the rapid influx of Western influence has led to a revalorization of tradition. In other words, tradition transforms itself, or gets reinforced to help cope with insecurities emerging from neoliberalization.

As has been discussed, older traditions remain exemplified by the inability of women to rise to higher positions in the call centers, oftentimes because they are expected to marry at a "suitable" age. In addition, the stigma against women who work at night causes difficulties in finding a place to live. In this paper, I have attempted to problematize the rhetoric that women who work at night are seen as prostitutes.

The break from tradition can be seen in the built form of the call center, which, despite its mundane appearance, epitomizes globalization in that it isolates itself from lo-cal conditions in order to respond to global needs. This is executed through its architecture, its function, and the way it projects itself. Isolation is also present in the job of the call center worker, who is barely able to communicate with others while on the job. These modes of isolation valorize privatization and consumerism, two important tenets of neoliberalism. For example, the range of products available in malls introduces a new kind of consumerism that shapes the aspirations and desires of the users of that space.

The adaptations to space, as well as the deviation from expected behavior around space, is brought out through conversations with female call center employees who migrate to the city. They make adjustments within singularly imagined apartment blocks in order to lay claim to space. Vendors who situate themselves at the edges around call centers and malls exemplify the unanticipated formation of informal economies. A sense of informality can also be observed in the interactions with cab drivers, who are unexpected sources of information. The informal knowledge they distribute outside official circuits has been a key methodological tool for this paper, in highlighting the nuanced interactions between everyday life and globalization.

The anxieties that arise due to this work are palpable, actualized through the loss of jobs occurring as the industry shifts to the Philippines. This shift poses the question

of whether the Indian workers' emulation of Western culture was insufficient for the industry to survive in their country. If not, this decline can only be explained by shifts in the global economy, which are beyond the control of call center employees.

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