

India wiring out: ethnographic reflections from two transnational call centres in India

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This article examines the increasing presence of North American call centres in Bangalore and Delhi and analyses the ways in which these products of transnationalism have impacted notions of Indian national identity. The analysis is based on primary fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2006, and reflections on Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat*, one of the earliest pieces of literature that discussed the call centre phenomenon. The argument presented suggests that the popular notion that India has become an equal global power because of the outsourcing business is flawed; instead, it points out that evident within many pro-globalisation claims is the reproduction of a first/third world hierarchy that works to further oppress the third world worker. I focus on accent training sessions and information gathered from first-hand interviews and observations to suggest that the call centre business has emerged as a convenient way for North American companies to create Indians as subordinate workers, who are expected to exchange physical mobility for the comparatively high economic benefits that the business promises.

Introduction: a flat world?

In 2005, Thomas Friedman's bestseller *The World is Flat* speculated upon the rapidly shrinking and flattening globe and proved to be a sky-rocketing success. The author, who clearly demonstrated a penchant for things 'Indian' in the text, viewed his journey to a call centre in the high-tech city of Bangalore as emblematic of a major shift in global economic processes. According to Friedman, India—once the 'land of jewels' but now hindered by symptoms of third-worldness—was experiencing a kind of renaissance, which was bringing the nation onto 'the same level playing field' as other global giants. The way in which global economic processes have been entirely transformed is expressed by Friedman in the language of geography: the world has essentially been 'flattened'.

Friedman's fluid writing and persuasive voice is integral to the establishment of this book as a contemporary, quintessentially modern piece of writing about India for newly-attuned North American readers. Thus, Friedman takes his readers on a journey to India to illustrate his point about an increasingly homogenised world. In showcasing a globalising India that is on par with 'the rest' (i.e. the west), Friedman ignores the fact that India is a predominantly rural, agrarian-based nation. Instead, he takes us to Bangalore, the locus of India's recent economic growth, largely fuelled by its information technology sector. Friedman arrives at the exact geographical coordinates of what he considers to be a model of globalisation: a transnational call centre. Making our way into this space, we become audience to Friedman's vivid descriptions of what call centres

look like from the inside. His descriptions are complete with details about the centre's use of first-class technology, unprecedented wireless paraphernalia, and phenomenal resources. Most notable of all these resources are middle-class Indians who work as call centre agents and speak fluent North American-inflected English. Imagining himself as a Columbus re-incarnate, Friedman was clearly fascinated enough by his discovery to write a book that apotheosises globalisation. Using India's outsourcing boom as cornerstone evidence, he claimed that if even India has made it to this place of success, the world's nations must all finally be on the same platform.

Friedman's conclusion is ironic, for in using the call centre model to prove that 'the world is flat', he espouses a highly selective and naïve perspective on globalisation, one that is itself a victim of the so-called first world/third world hierarchy at work in his theory. His book, complete with Orientalist observations and tinged by White guilt, is nonetheless a celebrated success in the United States.

Two call centres in Bangalore and New Delhi

Driven partly by curiosity and partly by suspicion, I decided to study the hotly-debated subject of Indian call centres for my honours thesis in cultural anthropology during my senior year of undergraduate study at Bard College, New York. Having myself been surprised by the ability of Indian customer service representatives to both pronounce my Indian name correctly and conceal their own identities seamlessly at the same time, I wondered about the ways in which Indian workers working for transnational companies negotiated this process.

In the summer of 2006, I set out to do a brief period of fieldwork in Bangalore and New Delhi, in two well-known call centres that serve as the back offices for multiple North American mobile phone, insurance, and credit card businesses. Each of the centres where I conducted research was located in the city outskirts; the expensive glass and steel facades made them anomalies in otherwise rural settings. While I was fortunate to have access to these centres through family acquaintances who were involved in the management of the businesses, my work was expected to adhere to standard security regulations. These buildings all have extremely high levels of security, barring any 'non-affiliates' from entering the buildings. While I obtained permission to enter freely, I was strictly prevented from carrying any form of recording device (including camera phones) into the facilities. This firm regulation is implemented by the North American companies to prevent the recording of credit card, social security, or any other data that might significantly affect the call centre business. This stipulation, though strictly enforced, was fortunately not a hindrance to my method of research, which was based on informal interviews and participant observation.

Over a period of three months, I observed the individual call centre spaces with a plethora of questions in mind. As an Indian student in the United States, I was initially interested in the relationship between Indian national identity and transnational call centres. As I began my fieldwork, I became increasingly interested in how employees negotiated the call centre space as a place physically inside but temporally outside of India. For instance, I was immediately struck by how the clock was faithfully turned to US Eastern or Pacific time, how Kajol was Karen and Rahul was Ray, and how conversations around

me switched between colloquial Hindi (amongst each other) and North American English (while on the phone, with the managers or with me). The employees with whom I spent my nights were recent college graduates, well-educated and ambitious. Our common age group, languages, and interests in world issues and entertainment blurred the relationship between researcher and informant.

When I spoke to my informants about overall satisfaction with their careers, I found that it varied greatly, and many employees could articulately express the clear pros and cons of their work. Amongst these responses, a noteworthy plus that was often cited was the ability for young women to travel safely to and from work, thanks to the chauffeured car-pool services provided by the call centres. However, the counter was that many women felt the brunt of social stigma as ‘night workers’. Some said that this stigma had forced them to conceal their careers while looking for marriage partners, or alternatively, had limited their choice of partner to men in the same business.

Overall, the pro-con balance that most call centre agents described to me was that while outsourcing jobs meant a huge augmentation in income, they came at the cost of a complete ‘life adjustment’. For most employees, working in ‘American time’ forced them to sacrifice time spent with their families, to miss important religious festivities, and to skimp on household chores that they would usually participate in. Radha, a first-year employee and new mother suggested to me that not being able to spend Diwali with her family this year had caused ‘tension at home’. I asked her if she had the option of taking a holiday on Diwali; she shook her head to say that ‘the deal was too good’ to give up. Anyway, she said, the makeshift festivities sponsored by the call centre kept everyone from feeling totally isolated.

The inherent contradictions of the call centre

These pro-con discussions gradually drew my attention to a somewhat surprising paradox. I realized that while the ‘booming’ call centre or outsourcing business in India had fuelled the talk of India as ‘the next superpower’, the call centre business is, in fact, anathema to exemplifying globalisation. I would argue that the debate about whether call centres are ‘good for us’ or ‘bad for us’, pro-globalisation or anti-globalisation, are at this point irrelevant. Instead, what needs to be emphasised is the fact that India’s inclusion on the ‘global stage’ is predicated on the (re)construction of its borders, in a way that is convenient to the North American companies. Outsourcing works only when Indians are paid as Indians (that is, in rupees), but do not identify themselves as such when they engage in ‘globalisation’, that is, when they are on the telephone as transnational workers. The deconstruction or manipulation of physical borders, on which outsourcing rests, brings increased financial wealth in exchange for a different kind of oppression for a specific kind of worker: the white-collared, de-territorialised, third world employee. Friedman’s thesis, along with the liberal, English-language national media in India, exemplifies this simultaneous oppression. As advocates of globalisation, they travel to a once-backward India to identify progress, yet the call centres—the so-called paragons of cultural integration and economic equality—are the ground on which global hierarchies are realized.

During my fieldwork, I experienced the effect of this contradiction in its everyday forms. Once, on a normal work day, my informants and I were chatting over lunch; as usual, there was a steady rotation of people in and out of the cafeteria since the flow of ‘caller traffic’ had to remain smooth. It was a Tuesday afternoon in New York, and the employees at this call centre in Delhi were exhausted from the busy 4th of July weekend that had just passed. Just as US citizens were easing back into the workweek, my informants too were happy to return to a somewhat more normal work load. As we sat around a table, engaged in a discussion about a series of new Hinglish films (Hindi-English movies), Simran, a manager, rushed to the cafeteria and told us that a team of North American supervisors had come to ‘inspect the floor’.

Within minutes, half-eaten samosas and barely-sipped Iced Teas were in the trashcan, the talk of movies was long forgotten, and the agents were back in their seats, in their ‘professional’ mode: headphones on, badges with American names pinned, and ‘global’ accents back. I watched Rahul, Kiran, Meena and others sit rather stoically in their chairs while the North American team made their round rather comfortably, stopping to chat to the Indian workers, and even pausing to compliment them on their colourful Indian clothes. Responding with trained North American speak, most of the employees scored perfect marks. The criteria laid out for evaluation were accent, intonation, comfort, and work ethic, yet what gained them an ‘A grade’ was not how well they spoke English, but rather how well they could collectively ‘perform’ American-ness and disguise Indian-ness—at least aurally. It was essential that Meena, Rahul and Kiran presented themselves as Indian workers, albeit Indian workers who work as if they are North Americans. The foreign team reported that the agents had managed to pick up the accent well, and were impressed by their general knowledge of the United States. The underlying idea of this impression hinged on the Indian ability to perform a transnational role, knowing that this global performance was inherently something out of character.

The ability to switch ‘roles’, as my informants told me, is directly dependent on ‘having a broad imagination’—the single most important skill that they as call centre workers possess. In thinking about their self-claimed characteristic, I would speculate that a broad imagination is indeed integral to their role, but that the imaginative expansion that employees strive for corresponds directly to a physical limitation that they are confined to. In the call centre setting, employees are constantly asked to imagine the world outside India from the time that they are inducted. A two-week cultural training session that takes place alongside accent training, before the employees are deemed full-time workers, focuses on ‘cleansing’ the language, memory and thought processes of the employees. Through ventriloquist Indian trainers who have mostly been educated in the United States or are considered perfect speakers of English (read: North American English), prospective Indian employees are rigorously trained to imagine North American culture, and simultaneously to ‘forget’ Indian culture. In typical lessons, they are bombarded with glitzy images of North American diners, malls and subways, and are invited to participate in a process of collective dreaming. However, much unlike the actual process of dreaming, in which one is free to let one’s mind travel, Indian workers are asked to dream while specifically being told what they should dream of: trainers stand in front of the classroom playing out various North American roles and suggest to students what would be examples of ‘imaginative’, correct conversations.

Following these kinds of interactions, which include direct conversations, watching short clips on western news channels and learning about Thanksgiving turkey, the participant who is best able to imagine life in the United States as it has been demonstrated by the trainer—right from mastering and differentiating regional twangs to being able to recall important historical dates—is considered the best worker. However, the same best worker who is awarded this title bears an invisible cross that automatically barricades his or her imagination, in the name of ‘freeing it’. In order to illustrate this idea, I would like to share what I gathered from Sunil, an informant whom I interacted regularly with at the call centre and managed to develop an amicable friendship with.

Sunil’s imagination

Sunil is a 22-year old, west Delhi resident, who lives with his family and two sisters in a small, ‘quite crowded apartment’. After graduating from Delhi University over a year ago, he attempted to pursue a career in computer engineering, his original passion and field of study. Faced with job application rejections, and having to turn down poorly compensated opportunities, Sunil turned to the outsourcing industry, expecting that his English skills would secure him a job. He gives the credit for his linguistic fluency to prime time television. Sunil quickly secured a comfortable position in the centre and progressed to earn several prestigious employee awards. Now he is often commended for his perfect accent, which can shift from Texan to Californian on command, and his ability to converse ‘freely’ with North American customers who know him as ‘Sam’. Intrigued by his multifarious vernacular abilities, I asked Sunil how he managed to identify with his customers despite never having travelled out of India. Sunil responded that he was simply able to imagine his callers’ daily lives. He said that he could picture ‘the stresses of American culture, the girls on the beaches, and the malls that stay open all the time’.

This ability to imagine his customers’ lives is essentially what Sunil is honoured for, and this is the skill that is commensurate to his growing compensation. However, while chatting with him about his accelerating savings, expenditures, and desires, I asked Sunil what he planned to do with his earnings. Sunil suggested that his greatest dream was to actually be able to visit the Californian beaches and the New York avenues that he navigated perfectly in his mental map. However, his well-detailed itinerary—going to Los Angeles first and then catching the ‘red-eye’ to the east coast—was coated in flippancy: although going to the United States and even staying there might be financially possible in time, doing this would mean losing his stable job in India and his ability to one day make it to a high position in the call centre. He echoed many of my other informants as he expressed that his desires to travel were clear, but clearly not possible. He spelled out this calculation to me somewhat jokingly, simply indicating that India is for the body, and America is for the dreams.

Sunil’s example illustrates the contradiction of globalisation, a point missed by Friedman. While it is certainly true that Sunil’s mastery of a foreign language, increase in salary and knowledge of North American cities is evidence of a globalising world, one must highlight that his imagined world outside India depends on the fact that workers like him must remain territorially grounded within the nation, and firmly constrained within its borders. Sunil’s job as an honourable worker depends on his ability to master certain

skills as an Indian and the guaranteed fact that he will return to his Indian home at the end of the shift, his pocket full with rupees, not dollars: the essential brainwave of the outsourcing phenomenon. Globalisation then for Sunil depends on the fact that he must be able to be Sam for a while, but know, at the back of his mind, that he is Sunil.

Role flipping

What is particularly interesting about this role switching is not just the ability to camouflage nationality upon need, but also the simultaneous construction of an Indian national identity that takes place within this 'flipping'. When Indian employees are not engaged in phone calls, when they are calling each other by their real names and talking about everyday affairs, they perceive themselves as being 'real' and consequently 'fully Indian'. Speaking in a Hinglish dialect that they are comfortable with, and talking about their daily concerns, which include family, food, entertainment and politics, they suggest that these aspects are what it means to be Indian. When back at work (recall the scene of the North American 'inspection') as 'globalised' workers, what they give up, and are asked to give up, is not only described as not-global, but is rather blatantly recognized as Indian. Therefore, when the North American company demands that the Indian names, accents, voices, religions, castes, and backgrounds should be concealed in the global tele-marketplace ('for the sake of coherency and customer efficiency'), they are also suggesting, and the workers are simultaneously recognizing, that particular accents, names, voices, castes, religions, and so on, are characteristically Indian, and therefore, not characteristically global/ised. For the North American companies, even the idea that their employees' 'natural conversations' may reflect a high degree of true global awareness (instead of mere regurgitations of North American phonetics) is not even worthy of thought.

This global power hierarchy that shapes the transnational workings of the call centre is also evident within the professional structure of the Indian setting itself. The call centre agent, who engages directly and primarily verbally in the global marketplace, exemplifies the heights of imagination at the lowest compensation. In the Indian call centre hierarchy, agents who do the actual talking and the highest level of engaging with North Americans occupy one of the lower professional rungs. The contradiction of globalisation and the imprisonment of imagination correspond directly with organised seniority within the call centre space: the higher up you go in the Indian business, the less tax upon your imagination, and the greater potential for physical mobility. The big bosses of outsourcing are very unlike Sunil: they speak comfortably with an Indian accent, proudly retain their Indian names, travel to the United States for business, and make enough money to fund their Boston-going college kids. They are fully immersed in the global marketplace, but on a level far different from the tele-marketing agent; while Sunil and his same-level colleagues free their minds and restrict their bodies, the bosses sitting up-top enjoy the often glorified version of globalisation that allows them real tickets to transcend borders and enjoy flexible citizenship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not easy to make sense of the transnational outsourcing business when one bears witness both to what it has done to the Indian idea of nationality, and what this identity has done for the business. It is difficult to blame Thomas Friedman for his fascination with a supposedly flattening world as he eavesdropped on conversations and sat comfortably awe-struck by the high-tech workspace. In fact, many Indians have even credited Friedman and others for writing positively about India, and often echo his views, claiming that the outsourcing business has done wonders for the economy. Surely it cannot be denied that the big bosses of the call centre business benefit from the same forces that simultaneously oppress those that are directly and verbally engaged in the marketplace. However, before we fall for a reduced, overly positive theory, we need to ask the essential question: What is at stake in talking of call centres as evidence of a globalised world? Globalisation, most commonly understood as the breaking down of borders and the unification of nations, is only half of the call centre story. The other half (and the tastier half for the North American companies) is the breaking down of borders through technology, alongside the necessary re-affirmation of borders through conveniently divided economies and psychologies.

References

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About the author

Meher Varma recently finished her undergraduate degree in Cultural Anthropology from Bard College, New York. Her thesis, entitled “India Wiring Out: The relationship between transnational call centers and the Indian nation-state”, examined the ways in which the call centre business has impacted notions of Indian national identity. Her work is based on primary fieldwork that she conducted in Bangalore and New Delhi and analysis of popular literature that has dealt with the subject of outsourcing in India. She is currently living in Washington, DC, and preparing for further graduate study. She can be contacted at meherv@gmail.com