Call Centre Calling

Technology, Network and Location

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

A call centre is a central place where customer and other telephone calls are handled by an organisation, usually with some amount of computer automation. Typically, a call center has the ability to handle a considerable volume of calls at the same time, to screen calls and forward them to someone qualified to handle them, and to log calls. Call centres are used by mail-order catalogue organisations, telemarketing companies, computer product help desks, and any large organisation that uses the telephone to sell or service products and services.

searchCRM.com Definitions – Call Centre
http://searchcrm.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid11_gci211736,00.html

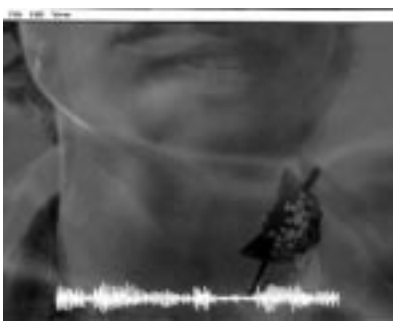
< *Call Centre Work: The Positives and Negatives >* *[2002-09-30 02:03:56]*
On the other side, is it really thrilling job?... What about the long work hours? Are you not tired of speaking for others in 'customised and programmed language'? Are you living most of your time as another person? Do you like to be monitored throughout your work and get fired for a minor mistake?

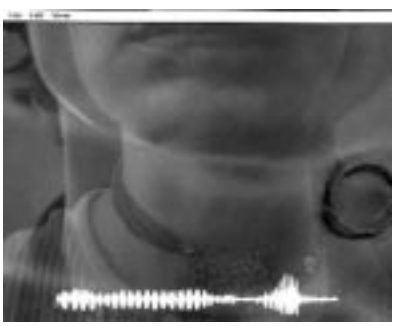
From a posting on a bulletin board
http://www.callcentersindia.com/showall.php?value1=40

...It's 6.30 pm as Ritu Sharma gets ready to leave her modest apartment at Paschim Vihar, West Delhi, in her smart casuals for another evening out. No, she's not going out partying with friends. A car will soon ferry her, along with other colleagues to her new place of work, GE Capital's sprawling communications complex in Gurgaon. The moment she enters the complex, she will turn, quite literally, into another person. Ritu will become Ruth, a customer-relations executive with an American accent. As the sun rises over the Atlantic coast of the United States of America and sets on North Delhi, Ritu, now Ruth, will start calling customers across the US, moving slowly towards the west coast, following up on credit card bills, mortgages, dues and doing the occasional tele-marketing.

"You wake up as Ritu, but answer to the name Ruth"
30 March 2001, *Economic Times*, New Delhi

The emergence of the global call centre industry, of which the city of Delhi is an important node, demands a new and incisive look at the intersection of networks, technology and culture. It signals a new kind of work, and a new kind of worker, whose invisibility (in the network) is mirrored by a rhetorical excess of 'national wealth generation', 'new global work culture' and 'cheap labour' that, in the end, renders the conditions that produce this work and the experience of the worker, equally invisible.





I. The Historical Location: The Making of a Productive Larynx

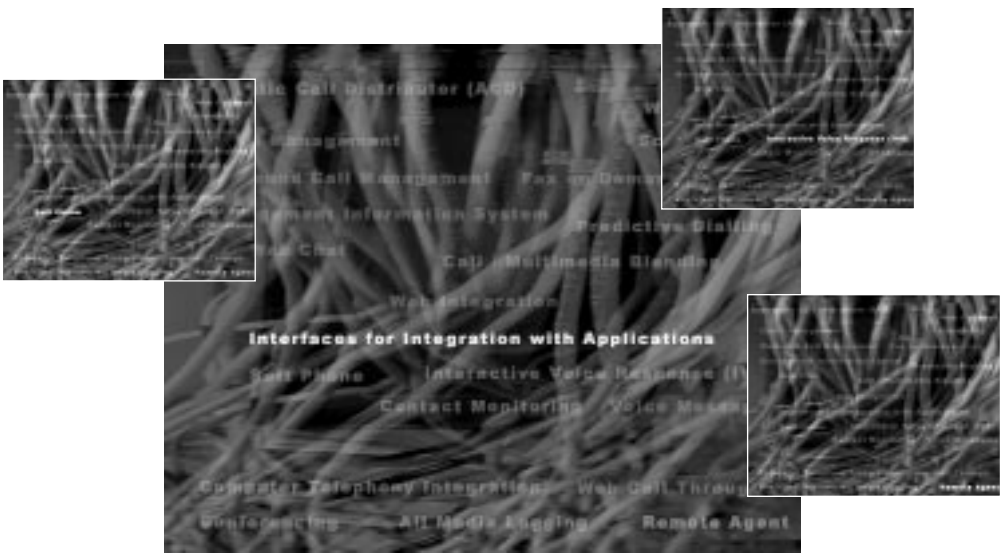
> *India has the second-largest English speaking population in the world.*
> *English is the principal language for the business transactions in India.*
> *India has the second largest and the fastest growing pool of technical manpower.*
> *High availability of Computer literate, English speaking and educated customer care professionals.*
> *India has the lowest manpower cost. Manpower cost is approximately one-tenth of what it is overseas. The annual cost per agent in USA is approximately $40,000 while in India it is around $5000.*

The India Advantage
http://www.delhicall.com/why-india.html

The new economy in our part of the world is cantilevered on a fortuitous accident of geography and culture, and a long history of reading and writing in the English language.

It is important to remember that India contains the second largest pool of proficient English speakers in the world. The intensity of the education system is able to produce millions of English speaking young people from lower middle-class and middle-class backgrounds from the metropolitan cities and small towns of India. This is the legacy of a troubled and violent, complex and contradictory history of the last 300 years in South Asia, which has to do with the histories of colonialism, and the nation-building project. These are histories of the movement of ideas, technologies, goods and people, enforced and voluntary.

From within this history has emerged a body, more specifically a larynx that is gifted at learning – very quickly – diverse accents, styles and manners of speech in the English language. This historically constructed larynx is today a precious lode of raw material ripe for mining in the global economy.



II. The Networked Location: The Anxiety of Location

...once, while working I got someone on the line who got really difficult to deal with. I was calling him to follow up on his credit card payment record. This guy knew that I was calling from a call centre, somewhere in India. So he said to me, "Do you even know how to spell CREDIT? I mean, C-R-E-D-I-T! Put me through to your supervisor, or some real American person..."

Anchal/ Anna, in conversation with Monica Narula

Indian companies can provide call centre services to clients based in the US or the UK at one-sixth to one-fourth of what it costs in the US, UK or Australia.
Time Zone: A virtual 12-hour time zone difference with the USA and other markets for Call Centre services is in India's favour.

The India Advantage
http://www.delhicall.com/why-india.html

Paradoxically, the more 'world class' and globally produced the products are, the greater is the level of anxiety about their place of origin. The realities of contemporary trans-national capitalism require a global workplace, but the 'else-where-ness' of this workplace is always a problem. The fantasy that capitalism wants each of us to buy into is that of an endless circulation of materials and products across space, coupled with an unwillingness to accept anything but an adhesion or stickiness of people within space – something that functions as the sheet anchor of an increasingly unstable world.

If you are a person who has defaulted on their credit card payments somewhere in the United States, it is unlikely that you will take seriously a voice that originates far away, especially in India, when that voice threatens you to send the credit sharks after you if you don't pay. This claim to authority that call centre workers frequently have to deploy loses all credibility if it is seen as being made from a remote location. The same goes for an aggressive sales pitch. Proximity is the key to the blandishments as well as the rewards of capitalism. As a client I must get a sense that the offer, or the threat, is 'at my threshold' for it to have an acceptable reality quotient. The virtual masquerade that underpins the work of the remote agent is based on a sense of what is viably 'real' in today's world.

III. The Economics of Location: Not just 'Cheap Labour'

> *The work force is highly reliable and can deliver world-class quality and ensure rapid delivery of service. Indian companies are also increasingly adapting to international quality and security standards.*
> *India is outfitted with well-connected telecommunication systems on a world-class scale· High availability of infrastructure resources.*
> *India's satellite-based telecommunication network enables almost instantaneous high-speed transfer of voice and data across the globe.*
> *Maintains High cost-competitiveness in service sectors*
> *Proactive Govt – 10-year tax holiday. Duty-free import of capital machinery and software.*

The India Advantage
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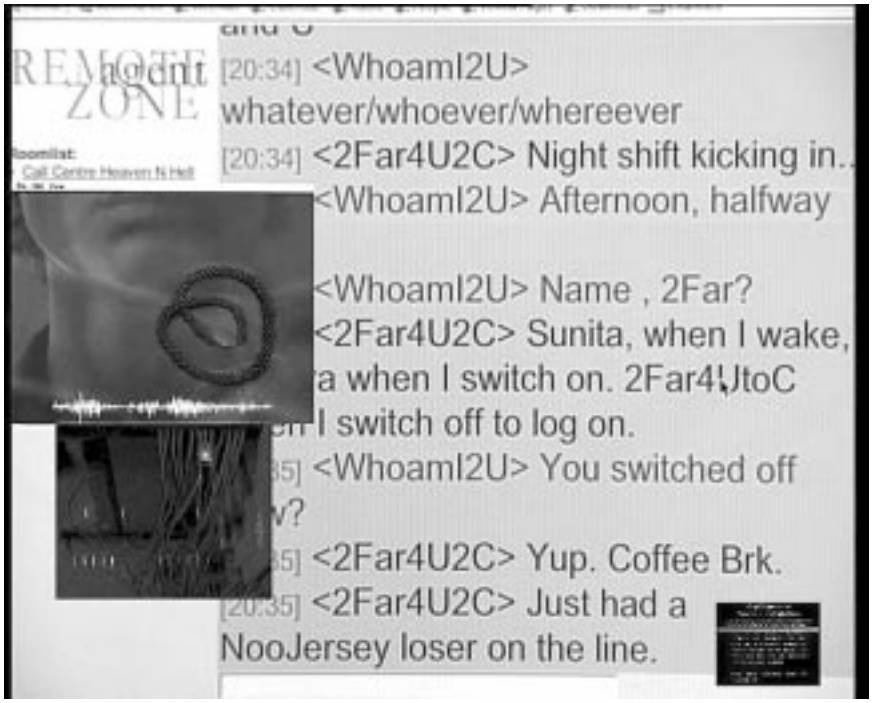
India, with its intrinsic strengths is being touted as "Outsourcing Destination of Choice" for call centres and global players are fast calling up Indian shores for outsourcing their requirements. With NASSCOM having projected a US$142.0 billion industry by 2008, there is a gold rush happening today.

India Calling – A Report on the Call Centre Industry
http://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/2387/



Generally, when call centres are referred to, they are bracketed within the rhetoric of 'cheapness of labour'. A critique based on this view expresses a 'moral turn' built into the larger rhetoric of 'the exploitation of poor countries by rich countries'. These theorisations are over simplifications. They are signs of a deep inability to think about the political economy of the trans-national present.

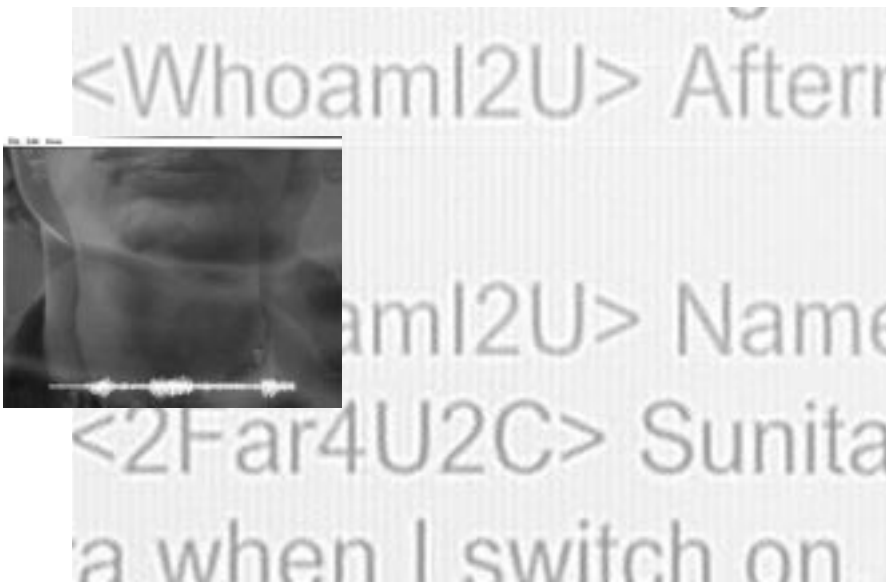
It needs to be understood that the benefits of the masquerade are not translatable simply in terms of the much touted possibility of employing 'cheap labour' in a third world location. Every investment decision rests on a careful calculation of 'the cost per unit' within a framework of legitimate industrial activity and the larger political-economic stability of the 'space of production'. Infrastructural capacity, the cost per unit of energy, taxation policies, interest rates, and the relative flexibility of labour laws are all elements in such a calculation.

Further, when talking of labour, particularly in a global context, we often tend to forget that labour capacity is always calculated within pre-defined parameters of cognitive and operational skills. Hence, productivity, efficiency, bargaining norms and the normative concerns that mark the workplace (what management can do, enforce, get away with or even what it cannot do) are all crucial to the cost/benefit calculation.

It is critical to understand that socially necessary labour time is required to reproduce any specific kind of labour. This implies a level of material, educational and cultural attainments that a given society can make available to its workforce and the drive towards labouring that it induces by offering a series of quantifiable wages or value-laden rewards.

At present many spaces within the territory of the Indian state seem to be favourable to the corporations who are constantly in search of spaces of production with the lowest overall cost per unit. It would not be unrealistic to visualise a future in which Call Centre Industry corporations based in India invest in creating remote agents in Bangladesh, Myanmar or Cambodia.

To assume otherwise is to misread the faceless and placeless global nature of networked (C)apital.



The images accompanying this text are taken from *A/S/L*, a video+text+sound installation by Raqs Media Collective (presented at the "Geography and the Politics of Mobility" exhibition curated by Ursula Biemann for the Generali Foundation, 16 January – 27 April 2003, Vienna).

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DEVICES

CYBERMOHALLA DIARIES