Workers' knowledge in the 'knowledge society':

voices from the South

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on first-hand interviews with call centre workers in Mumbai, participant observation and a variety of secondary sources, including email forum contributions by call centre workers, this paper takes a critical look at the concept of the 'knowledge economy' from the perspective of those who work in it. In particular, it questions the extent to which 'knowledge workers' have access to the knowledge that underlies the work that they do and points to the ways in which this knowledge is eroded as value chains are extended. It also looks at these workers' stakes in their skills and work, and concludes by pointing to a series of contradictions that are raised for Indian society by the rapid development of the knowledge economy there.

Introduction

Issues raised by the current phase of the economy and the relationships that have emerged out of it span a very wide canvas. They are varied in themselves and are more so when one looks at the context of local labour markets in post-colonial developing economies and their place in the global economy. Here I will focus on only three aspects of concern: the content of skills, work and the stakes employees have in these. I will not discuss important issues like working conditions of the workers in the knowledge sector or the profile of the employees. There has been some research on these aspects and there are crucial aspects that need to be further discussed. However, for reasons of space and clarity, I will confine myself to just these three areas of concern. What is presented here is not the result of a definitive scientific study. Rather, it is in the nature of an exploratory investigation, drawing on 26 interviews with call centre workers, participant observation and other material in order to sketch out an agenda for more focused work in the future.

Content of Knowledge in the knowledge economy

The current dominant phase of the economy has been characterised as knowledge-based. In fact society in its current phase has been called a 'knowledge based society' or 'knowledge society'. The knowledge elements in work today cannot, however, be taken for granted; they need to be carefully mapped.

Formal knowledge has always been polarised and has been the monopoly of dominant sections of society for centuries. This monopoly is also based on a denial of the status of the knowledge that people, especially women, carry forward through generations. Women in the health sector, for instance, were forcibly expelled from their knowledge-based activity. In India, the caste system punished lower castes if they tried to acquire formal knowledge. Whether it was the white male in the North or the Brahmin male in the context of India who held privileged possession of this knowledge, large sections of the rest of the population, the majority in most societies, have been deprived of access to certain types of knowledge.

With increasing democratisation of society and struggles of large sections of people against this monopoly, access to knowledge has become less restricted. It is nevertheless necessary to attempt a critique of the knowledge base in the current context of work restructuring, especially in the light of elaborate chains of sub-contracting and outsourcing arrangements. Large sections of knowledge workers are completely deprived of and alienated from the 'knowledge' they work with. It is therefore important to critique the content of the 'knowledge' in the 'knowledge economy'.

The knowledge economy encompasses very different levels of knowledge. At one end of the spectrum is work that involves creative work as well as extremely high levels of skill in research and development, software and other technological fields. However, this type of work is relatively small in scale compared with the proliferation of the Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) sector, especially call centre work. According to the National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) Strategic Review, 2005, the BPO industry in India is worth \$5.8 billion, up from \$1 billion in 2000-01 (NASSCOM Strategic Review, 2005). Total employment in this sector has passed 3,50,000 people and is still increasing. Genpact alone employs 14,000 people in the BPO industry in India and a further 5,000 in Hungary, Mexico, China, Romania and the USA combined (Singh, 2005).

When I carried out in-depth interviews with call centre workers in Mumbai (twenty women and six men) it emerged that this lack of 'knowledge' was an important element in several different respects.

As S, a young 29 year old woman puts it:

'I could have made a great deal of money in sales. I was making a lot of money. I can sell very well, you see. Of course there is also a lot of pressure. That too was alright. But once I was talking to a client and convincing her about a telecom product. She was quite convinced. Then she asked me: "See, I am a very poor woman. Are you sure there are no hidden costs? I will not be able to afford those". I asked my supervisor. He said: "How do we know if there are any hidden costs or not? We are not informed. We cannot take such responsibilities. But why are you bothered? Just tell her something". I realised I could not do that. I could not continue to tell people about things I had no knowledge about.'

P, a 22 year old call centre agent explained her work in these words:

'There are people calling up and asking about some equipment they have bought that has stopped working. We look up manuals and tell me what to do. We have to sound confident and knowledgeable. That is important. The actual

knowledge is not. After I have instructed people several dozen times, I am not sure I will be able to repair the refrigerator that has suddenly stopped working or start a computer whose mouse refuses to respond.'

Workers' lack of understanding of the underlying logic of the processes they are obliged to carry out becomes much more acute as value chains lengthen.

One example of this can be found in the banking industry where, in India, several types of jobs have been outsourced. In one case, the State Bank of India gave a large data-entry company a contract to carry out the work of listing the people who had had their Tax Deducted at Source (TDS) due to term deposits with the bank, and preparing their statements. The bank's idea was to downsize its own workforce and give the work out, further reducing the number of direct employees and its own responsibility. A large sub-contract company did the work. When the documents came back to the State Bank of India, the enormous piles of papers had no logic. They were neither arranged according to the names of the clients nor according to the numbers of the accounts. They had been fed randomly into the computer. The bank staff and the clients had to spend hours going through every piece of paper, sifting through reams of evidence and still could not find their own TDS certificates, because the subcontracted company had not been able to complete the job. One manager told me, *'Since this TDS and other processes and jobs have been subcontracted out there is not a day that we have worked for less than 12 hours and all of it without overtime payment' (personal interview, 2006¹).*

Class and caste division of jobs

There are obviously more creative and challenging jobs in the knowledge economy too. However, they are not the norm and again they are the prerogative of a small section of upper class, upper caste men and a few women, even more upper class and upper caste. Even at the lower end of the hierarchy within the knowledge sector, in call centre jobs for example, it is women and men from the relatively better off sections who are able to take advantage of the new employment opportunities. In a study of 100 call centre women employees in Gurgaon near Delhi, 65% of the women employees came from a 'service background' and 30% came from business families. Forty-seven per cent were from the income group Rs. 20,000 – 50,000 whilst 17% of the women were from families whose income was more than Rs. 1,00,000 per month (Singh and Pandey, 2005).

There is now an increasing gap between people from urban and from rural areas in India in terms of access to knowledge work. This gap seems to be larger where women are concerned. While men from rural areas, though only more recently, have begun to have some access to, for example, software training and employment, women in the hinterlands are even in the 21st century deprived of this.

According to several studies, women even in this type of work 'occupy mid-level positions and men tend to move into higher positions' (Singh and Pandey, 2005). Female executives have reported that 'being a female is their major career obstacle' (Singh and Pandey, 2005).

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Personal Interview with Mr. Dhoke, manager, State Bank of India, Borivali Branch, Mumbai, 15th July 2006

According to the National Index on Communication Skills (NI-CS), only 10% of applicants are fit for BPO jobs. The study shows that 'Tier II cities are below average in terms of grammar as compared to Tier I cities and the national average. They also fare poorly on accent neutrality.' (Raghavendra and Seshagiri, 2006)

From this picture it emerges that, while there are few but increasing numbers of men who are from the more historically deprived castes and geographic areas, most women in the knowledge sector are from upper castes and from urban areas. Women from more historically deprived castes and geographic areas, that is the vast majority of women, still do not feature anywhere in the knowledge sector.

One of the critical factors limiting access to these jobs is language and communication skills, of a type only likely to be found in households and areas with relatively privileged backgrounds.

'The selection process for (call centre employees at the recruitment stage) typically includes phone and email screening, behavioural interviews, testing for keyboarding and written communication skills, evaluation of sales and customer service aptitude and screening of references.' (McMillin, 2006)

According to H, a call centre employee, who is aspiring to a promotion to a team leader position fairly soon,

'The main qualification required in jobs like the call centre ones is an ability to be comfortable with the English language in terms of conversational and pronunciation skills.'

In a country like India, with a legacy of colonialism and at another level, a particular historical response to this colonialism, the labour market for knowledge-based work is even further restricted to a certain section, gender, caste and class of people. Only a miniscule proportion of people have the background and resources to be able to gain these skills. So a very small proportion of people can access these jobs. Because fewer people are available for these jobs the 'attrition rate' of call centre employees is high. Thus there is a great deal of job-hopping in the industry.

Several studies have pointed out that very often people coming in to call centre work are not thinking of this as a long-term career but only as a stop-gap arrangement. Whatever their original intentions, however, their plan to get out of the sector generally appears to fail, and they ultimately merely end up going to another call centre. The ability to hop from centre to centre also means that there are very few strong incentives for employees to bring about changes in the terms and conditions of work at the centre where they are currently based. This situation is not inevitable. It does not have to be like that because the bargaining power that a sellers' market bestows on employees could be used in other ways too.

That does not seem to be happening just yet at least, as the experience of the Young Professionals Collective (YPC) in Bombay demonstrates. The YPC had a membership of 50 young professionals working in call centres by the beginning of the year 2006. Over the next few months however, most of the members left their call centre jobs and are now working elsewhere – in banks for example; some have gone back to college for further education (interview with an activist in YPC, 2006).

Labour market, skills and stakes

Workers' and employees' attitude to work has a great deal to do with the labour market, the security they feel within it and the alternatives within their sight. The picture in India, as elsewhere, is contradictory.

As U, a bright young commerce graduate put it,

'I completed my graduation and was doing Chartered Accountancy. But I left that when the possibility of working in a call centre came my way. The main reason was the money. Earlier, when I worked as an accountant, I barely earned Rs. 5,000/-. In a call centre, you start off with Rs. 10,000/-. Now I have been working for 15 months and get Rs. 16,000/- in hand. The entire package, with bonus and Provident Fund comes to over Rs. 18,000/-.'

According to R, another 27 year old science graduate,

'It is not just the money you earn in a call centre. It also has implications at home. I come from a conservative family background. Many of us do. But even then my say in family matters has increased. I make much more money than most people in the family. Most of my friends have experienced the same thing. There is an increase in your status in the family, in the extended family as well. The pressure to conform and to get married is much less. Now, even if I go home late, nobody asks questions. Earlier it was very different.'

R's friend, C, the same age of 27 says,

'I used to do a lot of housework when I worked as a laboratory assistant earning Rs. 4,000/- in a private clinic. But now I almost never do the housework. I do not have the time. I do not have the energy. So in a way it is bad - that I do not have the strength to do anything apart from my call centre job. But anyway I do not like domestic work much. So it is good that I do not have to do it. Of course, it is not that my brothers or father does it. My mother and sisters-in-law have to take my burden as well.'

Another source of information about the views of call centre workers is internet discussion forums. In 2005, a study by the VV Giri National Labour Institute on Business Process Outsourcing (BPOs) in India and a novel on call centre work by a young author called Chetan Bhagat (Bhagat, 2005) generated heated debates among employees working in call centres and BPOs in different parts of India and elsewhere in the media as well as on the Internet. The debate encompassed a very wide spectrum of issues ranging from working conditions, skill acquisition or the lack of it, to the future of the young generation of Indians.

Most of the people involved in these debates were BPO or call centre employees themselves. Some of them had been working in this sector for a few months, while others had been in the sector for much longer, even a decade. Some of these debates were carried out personally through interviews and group discussions, while others have been posted on the Internet. I acted as a participant observer in several of these group discussions as well as carrying out an analysis of internet postings.

While there are obvious and serious limitations regarding Internet debates, in terms of the identities of the people posting their comments, the content of most of these postings seem to be genuine and based on their own experiences.

Most of the Internet postings seemed to be from men, whereas a majority of the respondents in my personal interviews as well as most of those who took part in the group discussions were women. Whilst their comments may not be representative of all call centre and BPO workers in India, they certainly convey the flavour of the debates.

The VV Giri National Labour Institute is an autonomous society under the Ministry of Labour and Employment in India that was mandated to carry out a study on call centres in Noida, north India. Drawing on an analysis of interviews with 277 customer care agents from six call centres, the study compares the Business Process Outsourcing to ancient Roman ships that once employed prison labour.

An article summarising the report was posted on the Business Desk of the Rediff.Com website in October, 2005² and provoked a lively discussion on the site's message board from. Here are some of the postings from BPO and call centre employees³:

'Subject: Indians are BPO slaves

Hi, I am working in the same industry for the past two years, in which past one and half year experience comes from an international American call centre in Gurgaon (Convergys). Well I believed the same mentioned in the above article but no one actually believed it. Finally I quit the job but could not find any other alternative as I had already wasted a major time of my career growing in this industry. As mentioned in the article they exactly need slaves who could be tied for 8-9 hours a day and speak non-stop. No one even cares if the person is hungry as he/she is working at odd hours. All they care is about customers. They want customers to be happy so their product grows and sells well. They don't care about employees. Every policy, rule is meant for the customer. They want us to realise that customers are god and treat them alike. However they don't realise that ever the employee is a person.' Posted by AG on 27-OCT-05

'Subject: Salary is Pathetic

Man, I think salary sucks, you can only live a mediocre life. Rest of the life you will be paying the money, who says they pay generously???? Working in nights, you don't have any social life whatsoever. A person works for 9 1/2 hours at least, then 4 hours in the cabs. It is around 14 hours for the company then how can you expect a person to sleep at 12 in the afternoon. One day everybody will ruin his health except for the managers who work in the day for 8 hours and leave on their own cars on office petrol'. Posted by Addy on 27-OCT-05

'Subject: Hail Giri's Institute of Management!

Dear Mr. Karnik & Nasscom, I have been working for over 1 1/2 years in a call center. Let me let you know why Giri's call call-centers a prison camp. 1. We work 12 hrs a day most of the times. 2. We take 120 calls a day, we have been asked to take 75 calls a day by hook or by crook. 3. We get the most pathetic food in

² <http://www.rediff.com/money/2005/oct/26bpo.htm>

³ Spellings and grammar have not been corrected in order to avoid distorting the voices of the original contributors.

our cafeteria. You eat it & u let us know. 4. How would like to have a half an hr break and run a block to the next building after coming 4 floors down and then going 3 floors up to have dinner. All in half an hour. Where reaching the cafeteria takes 10 mins & then waiting for food in the line takes another 10 mins and then eat it in 5 mins and run. 5. How would you like to work under tremendous pressure all the time. You are recruited as customer service & then asked to do sales all the time. 6. What happens when you take up the issues with the topmost of topmost management people and all you get is promises. 7. How about having a break everyday after 4-5 hrs sometimes even 6 hours? 8. You get paid peanuts to work that you do and the profits that you earn for the company runs in crores.' Posted by BPO Hater on 31-OCT-05'

'Subject: Are Indian BPOs slave ships

Can't comment on the slave ship aspect of the job, since I myself have never experienced it. But one thing is for sure. These centres are definitely killing the creativity and intellectual instinct of our youth. One of my cousins hasn't even finished high school and has been offered a job in one of these call centres. Now if you start giving decent salaries to kids, who would want to study? They of course don't realise that completing their education is far more important than earning a ridiculously fat pocket money. What if suddenly the BPO industry goes bust, as it happened with software for a while? What will these kids, without even a high school degree, do with "expertise in making phone calls"?' Posted by Varun on 03-NOV-05

Whilst it is clear that many call centre workers are critical of their working conditions, they also seem to be aware that the available alternatives may well be worse.

'Really surprised to read that such a respectable body has opined / compared an entire industry to Roman slave ships..... I have been working in call centres / BPO for almost 9 years now. I come from the hospitality industry and I can compare BPOs to the hospitality industry. Hotels – A minimum of 12-14 hour shifts. Break shifts are quite common. I would be lucky if I got 4 offs in a month and be able to spend time with my family on festivals. Hotels are not desk jobs. You have to be physically fit to stand for 8 hours a day Guests to a hotel, hardly respect you as an individual. Bosses have the same philosophy, deliver or move out (Unions are for non management staff). For women employees, sexual harassment are a common occurrence (by bosses and guests). Girls work in night shifts in hotels too. Every movement is monitored, through access cards and CCTVs in non-guest areas. BPOs - Most firms work on a 5 day week schedule (40-45 hours /week). More time for myself and family. By turn, most employees are able to spend festivals with their family. Sexual harassment / escapades happen in call centre, but is it only in call centres or it happens in every industry.' Posted by Rajiv on 26-OCT-05

This more positive view of BPO work is echoed in other, equally vociferous postings.

'Subject: About BPO's

I too work in a BPO in Bangalore, and have been working for a little over a year. The comparison of BPOs to slave ships is all rubbish and a farce. In my tenure as an employee in a BPO, I never felt that way as I felt that my work was

respected and moreover I was also respected as an individual. But why are people cribbing? [gripping?] I will tell you why... one to hide his inefficiency blames the other ... if people are so fed up working in a BPO, they are always welcome to quit and go for a sloppy job with a pay equivalent to that of a beggar. Times are hard sometimes in a BPO industry but then if an employee can prove his worthiness he can survive it in splendour. Why do people overlook the fact that these BPO's are giving our youth the much needed employment? One thing that people have to understand is that not everyone can become a CEO, it requires a lot of hard work and not lots of cribbing. People expect promotion overnight which speaks in their contempt for the industry. Just a piece of advice, for people who badmouth the industry, CAN YOU GIVE US AN ALTERNATIVE? Well I cannot speak for all the players in the industry. There may be a few black sheep in the crowd but not all.'
 Posted by Kirant Rai on 26-OCT-05.

Issues for further investigation

It is unsurprising that workers express a range of different views in a sector that is changing very quickly. However several contradictory issues resurface repeatedly in the context of their discussions about the knowledge sector in India and seem deserving of further investigation in the future.

The first of these is the lack of alternatives in the economy. The relatively higher wages and better facilities in the international offshore sector makes this lack even more acute, since it is impossible for call centre workers, for instance, to find alternative jobs with similar emoluments and facilities.

A second factor is the cynical, but possibly realistic, judgment that things are no better elsewhere and are not likely to be. This is especially true in discussions regarding increased stress levels. In most types of jobs, including in the public sector (like the State Bank of India employees discussed earlier), the stress levels have increased phenomenally. This also applies to the health aspects of the work that call centre employees experience, including the gruelling night shifts that increase health problems and leave little space for social life for large numbers of employees.

A third phenomenon is the emergence of some sections of the population, for example some women, who are benefiting from the power they get by earning large amounts and which they will find it difficult to acquire by other means given the labour market situation in the current context. There is a growing realisation among these women of their own autonomy and the means by which they can assert it, possibly for the first time.

A fourth contradictory development in the knowledge sector is that many of the young people it employs are in fact turning away from knowledge in order to pursue short-term gains that may not remain for long. A study of 100 call centre employees indicated that 22% of employees were only educated up to school level (Singh and Pandey, 2005). Although most of these were earning relatively high salaries, they would not be able to develop any other skills if they were to continue working in this sector for long.

Fifth, it could be said that an army of unskilled, non-knowledgeable, ignorant but spoilt youngsters is being created that is unsustainable even in the medium run. As has been discussed by several reports,

'The lack of a clear career path is seen by parents and youngsters as one of the biggest reasons for their reluctance in applying for BPO jobs. Then there is the issue of life after a BPO. "I don't want my child to realise after five years that his only qualification is answering a phone call", says one parent. Kiran Karnik, president, NASSCOM admits that there aren't too many related options available' (Sharma, 2005).

Sixth, it is clear that employees in the sector are facing severe health problems. Apart from issues like night work and long hours, an important issue that has been pointed out is the stress factor. The fact that employees have to work at a frenzied pace, often without breaks, for many hours to keep up with the pressure of calls, together with the surveillance of the team leader and often of the head office as well, has been pointed out as an important reason for burn-outs. S, working in a call centre of the Citibank has a different take on this. She cites her friends who work in large banks, including nationalised ones.

'You can try and search for a job that is not stressful. You will not find it. Or very rarely...Gone are the days when you could have a job and feel relaxed about it. That is the reality...I agree we need to do something about it all. This is a race to the bottom. This sector is no exception.'

A seventh issue raised in the public discussions about the knowledge sector in India questions whether the scarce resources of developing countries are being squandered on short-term gains through a particular emphasis on development and infrastructure that will only benefit some sections of society, and is likely to be extremely short-term and possibly a mirage. According to Sam Pitroda, Chairman of the Indian Government's National Knowledge Commission,

'Internet will not create jobs in the country. The real future of jobs lies in development – water, sanitation, environment, housing and agriculture. I agree, IT will create 400,000 jobs. But we need 10 million jobs per year. IT has given the confidence. IT has given us balance of payments. IT has given \$110 billion as foreign exchange reserves. The key now is how we use this \$110 billion to create more jobs in India. We are creating more software parks than jobs. We are solving problems of the West. So far, we are using Indian talent to solve the problems of the West. It is not even western poor, but western rich' (Vidyasagar, N, 2004).

The Indian government incentives for the BPO sector have taken the form of tax breaks and reduction of tariffs by the central government and infrastructure support and other incentive packages by state governments. In addition to expedited customs clearance, the customs duty on project imports with investment of at least Rs. 50 million in plants and machinery has been reduced from 25% to 10%, and customs duty on computers and peripherals has been reduced to 10%. Central government has also promised a tax holiday for the sector up to 2010, and is actively engaged in lowering international communication costs to benefit the BPOs. This despite the fact that the entire IT sector

employed only about 1 million employees in 1999-2002, representing a fraction of a percentage of the entire workforce of India. This was at a time when the total number of unemployed persons touched 27 million (Young Professionals Collective and Focus on the Global South, India, 2005).

Finally, it should be noted that the collective bargaining milieu of the formal sector, at least, is being completely eroded and being replaced by individual contracts and competition within the workforce. This is reflected in the fact that most attempts at some sort of collective of call centre workers have not been successful. One of the most recent such attempt was the formation of Young Professionals Collective (YPC) in the city of Mumbai. The YPC conducts welfare activities and plans 'to build a movement to involve call centre employees in social issues and to work with the government, professional bodies and international agencies to develop guidelines for the working conditions of call centre employees' (Young Professionals Collective and Focus on the Global South, India, 2005). However, as discussed earlier, these early attempts have had serious teething troubles.

These and other related issues need to be addressed especially in the context of post-colonial developing countries. This is because the balance of skill and knowledge-based jobs vis-à-vis those without these skills and knowledge within the so-called knowledge sector has implications that are quite different from those in the Western world.

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