

A Moral Measure of Globalization: Reflections on UK and Indian Experiences of Sourcing Financial Services Offshore

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With some years of experience in researching aspects of contact centre activities and outsourced software design in and to the UK (Knights and McCabe, 2003; Aleroff and Knights, 2003; Jones, Baldridge and Worrall, 2003; 2004; Jones, forthcoming) the research discussed in this paper reflects the authors' various and ongoing longitudinal studies into new ways of organizing and uses of technology as they informs social theory. The visits to India (Bangalore) were the authors' first to a major offshore location and a follow up to a colleague's exploratory interviews conducted a year earlierⁱ. Of considerable interest was that in less than five years, outsourcing is not simply about overseas suppliers but has gained the status of an established industry. Known in India broadly as the BPO (Business Process Outsourcing, which now includes variants such as KPO (Knowledge Process Outsourcing)), the main aim of this pilot study was to meet and work with academic colleagues in the field and to interview a range of stakeholders (executives, managers, employees, entrepreneurs, trades unionists, journalists) in establishments (company-owned, independent, and start-ups) involved in its development. The interviews were conducted, quite literally to exchange views and gauge what respondents locally found to be significant. One of our themes was to gain a broad understanding of the moral dimensions of sourcing UK financial services in India, in particular insofar as we could detect moves towards global values. To a lesser extent we were also interested in the morality or otherwise of direct work-related experiences: what the literature tends to summate as "bad" or "best" practices. Following classical Geertzian approaches, our contribution has been to briefly summarize the discussions with what can probably be encapsulated as a socio-political economy mindset and a broad, westernised outlook on this global turn of events. By inviting respondents to speak for themselves, we hoped, probably in some small way, to lessen the extent to which the research represented our account of the interviewees' stories "as vehicles of meaning" (Miller, 1982: 20). It is only in the rhetoric of their understanding that we felt we were likely to glimpse any relationship between their personal experiences and wider societal impacts especially those with international scope. Without wishing to become too involved with debates on methods - the trap of never-ending theorizing about 'theoreticals' - there are nevertheless issues associated with researching "the other" and their places, spaces and local culture that require some elaboration if our study is to be read with a level of confidence and as an appropriate contribution to social research. By their "nature", "international" activities invite nationalistic and ethnocentric viewpoints. If we paraphrase Saïd (2005:74), it may be all too easy to understand the Indian experience by going around the world to find our own ideas already there and then to present this to a western academic audience primed for such consumption. That said, the "Bangalore phenomenon" has been well researched, the

evidence of which is interesting. For example, many respondents, primed by experiences of other western researchers, were keen to tell us (or anxious to avoid telling us) what they thought we wanted to hear- ironically about the “bad practices” in the workplace. This study therefore examines moral aspects of the “offshore sourcing phenomenon” given the comparative, interrelated UK and Indian contexts where prevailing (and historic, post-colonial) circumstances, cultural anxieties and political positionings have come together in efforts to achieve economic sustainability.

Notes:¹ We thank Emma Surman for the preliminary work conducted and the consolidation of contacts that we had made prior to the initial visit.
