

Youth As Call Centre Agents: A Sociological Description

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Abstract

As vans with tinted windows creep at night into middle-class, urban neighbourhoods in India, spirited away young men and women to work until dawn at multinational call centres. Following the dot-com boom in India in the nineties the phenomenal success of BPOs, particularly call centres, continues in 2023, offering high-school and college English-speaking graduates quick employment with comparatively high wages. Through empirical research, this article addresses the transformation of Indian urban labour into a global proletariat. The paper explores the socio-economic background of call centre employees working in Gurgaon. It makes a sociological analysis to ascertain the social, economic, and family background of call centre employees and their level of education—impact on health. Based on a structured interview schedule, the study selected 300 employees working at six call centres as the primary data.

Keywords: call centre, employees, urban

Introduction

Numerous job openings have been made possible by the growth of India's telecoms sector. An example is the proliferation of "call centres," which act as a company's front line of customer service. The annual growth rate of call centres and the number of persons employed there is estimated to be between 15 and 20 per cent. Because of the strategic importance of call centres in the age of e-commerce, this trend will continue to expand. A call centre is the hub for all customer service activities, including online chats, email correspondence, and phone conversations. Call centres in India have flourished since the 1990s, when American firms began outsourcing software development projects to Indian service providers and when multinationals began putting up offshore software development facilities in India (McMillin 2006). Indian firms have pioneered a new type of corporate structure, the Business Process Organization, by expanding on their success in the medical transcription industry (BPO). As a result of the growth of the business process outsourcing (BPO) sector, India now has a different reputation in the eyes of the world. It has also popularized stereotypes of the Indian 'techie' and the Indian call centre agent as low-cost (but 'high-quality') technical workers who pose a major threat to IT jobs in the United States and Europe in the current decade. Furthermore, IT (Information Technology) has become seen as a blueprint for India's future economic growth and development by many political and commercial leaders based on liberalization and globalization policies.

Such new enterprises are seen as a positive contributor to employment and income in developing nations. India has emerged as a leading destination for call centres because of its convenient location in terms of time zones for serving customers in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific. Because of the low wages paid for services, call centres in India are quite economical. Time's convenience may have led to employment, but it's also the root of many of the issues faced by those who hold such positions. The study conducts an empirical analysis of call centre employees' experiences. The liberalized call centre industry places specific demands on its workforce, regardless of skill level: the ability to endure long hours of monotonous work, respond quickly to orders, and undergo certain transformations to adapt to the workplace environment, which could include a change in accent, diction, sleep cycle, and workplace identity. Certain pertinent questions arise as the relatively young (18-45-year-old) urban and semi-urban call centre proletariat pours its education, skills, time, and energy into the service of a remote bourgeoisie for comparatively lucrative local pay but globally substandard working conditions: What factors motivate graduates to work in call centres? What is the employees' socio-economic and demographic situation?

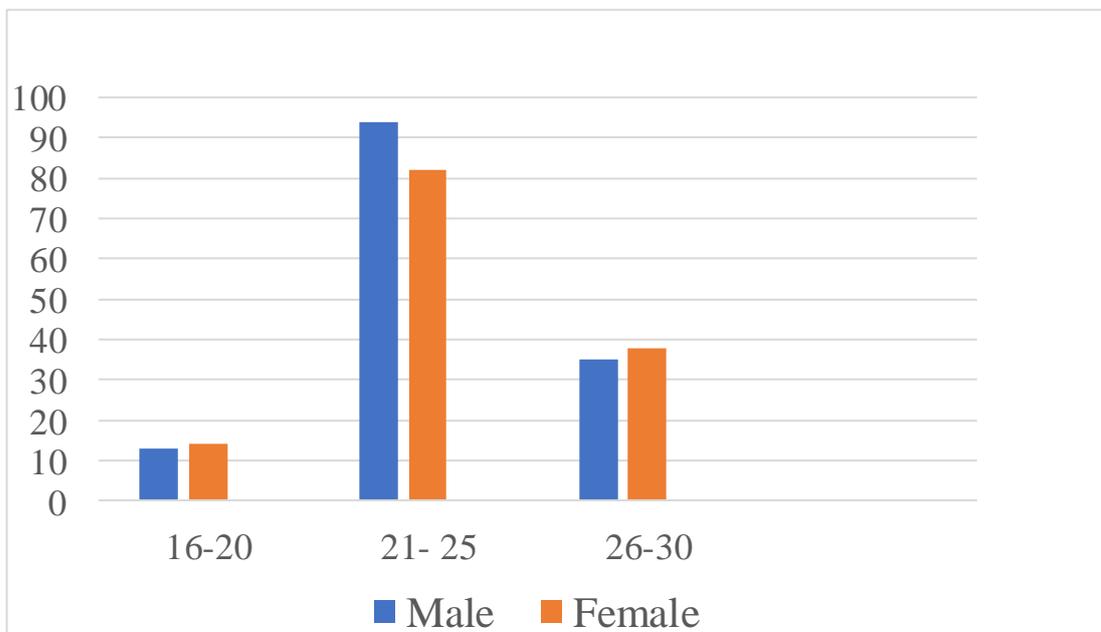
Methodology

To answer these questions, participant observation was conducted in six call centres, and interviews were conducted with 300 employees from six call centres in India. The quota sampling method was followed in the direct face-to-face interview. As the employees worked during the night shifts, the survey was done after 5 p.m. The survey combined quantitative and qualitative methods. The data was collected through a structured interview schedule. Informal interviews were also conducted to collect qualitative data.

Age- Sex Composition

The age group of the employees is an important characteristic of an industry. Age is a useful criterion in determining whether a company or firm employs older or younger workers. All of the interviewees who worked in call centres were under the age of 30. 9.0% of the people were under the age of 20.

The mean age of the employees was found to be 25 years. The data also indicates that only 7 per cent of the employees were in the age group of 30- 40 years and around 1 per cent were aged between 41-45 years.

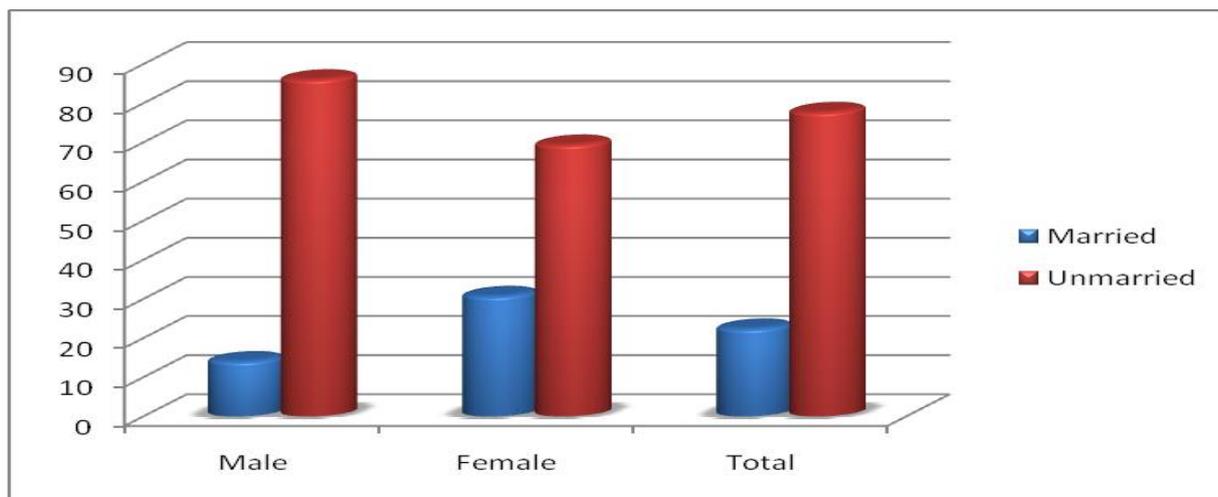


The data in the above table reveal that the call centre industry is an organization of young people. About 92 per cent of the workforce in Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES)-BPO companies was found to be below the age of 30 years, consisting mostly of college graduates looking for high-growth opportunities, high salaries and a great work environment (Jha 2005). Thus, one finds that the call centre sector consists of young undergraduates who are flexible in working during the night shifts, which is probably unmanageable and challenging for middle-aged or older people.

When call centres came to India the industry set a strong norm of hiring only those employees with a minimum graduation degree. With the global economic recession and rising attrition call centres were also hiring undergraduates. Higher employee turnover or attrition rates in the call centre industry have forced management to hire young students aged 16-17 years for call centre jobs.

Marital Status

Approximately 83% of the call centre employees were single, indicating that the call centre sector mostly employs young unmarried individuals. As they start earning at a young age, they do not prefer to get married at an early age. The youngsters in this new IT generation had become highly conscious and were aware of their ambitions and earnings. They also did not want to be governed by the conventional norms of our society in getting married according to the wishes of their parents and family.

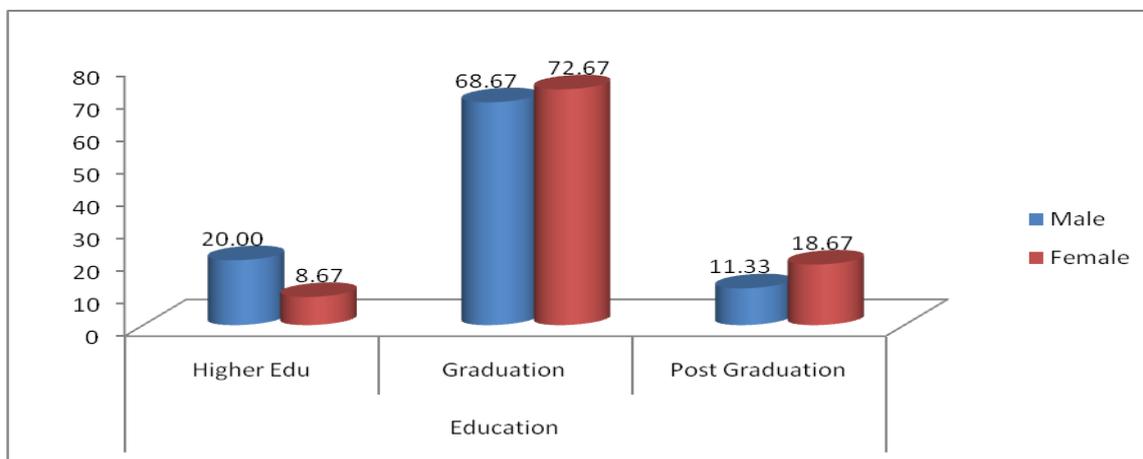


Marital Status of Employees

Approximately 83% of the call centre employees were unmarried, indicating that the call centre sector mostly employs a youthful workforce of individuals who are not married. As they start earning at a young age, they do not prefer to get married at an early age. The youngsters in this new IT generation had become highly conscious and were aware of their ambitions and earnings. They also did not want to be governed by the conventional norms of our society in getting married according to the wishes of their parents and family.

Educational Attainment

Education is an important socio-economic determinant of an occupation. A person’s higher educational qualification or degree enhances prospects for getting a high-salaried job. The survey reveals that 14.33 per cent of employees had passed their higher secondary (12th). It also came to the fore that these 14.33 per cent of higher secondary passed employees were also pursuing their graduation through different modes (correspondence, private or regular).



Educational Qualification of Employees

Graduation is the primary degree required to work as a call centre employee or customer care executive. 70.66 per cent of employees working in the call centre industry of Gurgaon were graduates. This was followed by a lower percentage of 15 per cent of the employees who had a higher degree in the form of post-graduation. Approximately 14.3 per cent of the employees had completed their higher secondary school and were now pursuing their undergraduate degree, either through distance education or attending a normal institution.

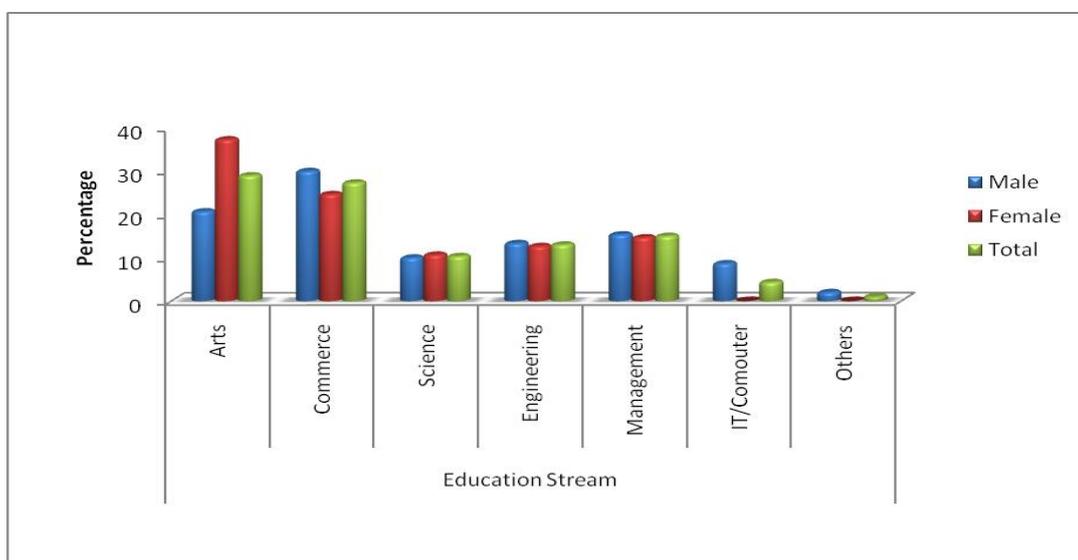
Therefore, a lower percentage of the employees having post-graduation degrees indicates the reluctance of the students to work or seek a career in the call centre industry, owing to their higher education. The number of females with post-graduate degrees exceeded that of males.

The data in the table indicates that a significant proportion of call centre personnel have a university degree. Employees who were regular college students preferred working night shifts at the call centres. During interviews with these employees, it was highlighted that the call centre authorities were accommodating, particularly regarding giving them leave during their graduation or post-graduation examinations.

It was also found that call centre companies had ties with good management institutions in the country and helped their employees by sponsoring their higher education, especially for Management courses. This shows that call centres have not only provided easy employment and good salaries to their employees but at the same time have become a source of sponsorship for their higher education. In other words, it has become a source of income or pocket money for youngsters earning a decent salary while pursuing their college degree. The concept of earning and learning which was alien to Indian culture about decades ago has come to our society also. Call centre companies to maintain their goodwill amongst the young employees provide higher education facilities for their employees. It eliminates the most common perception that call centre work stops one's educational growth.

From the above Table, a comparison can be made between the educational background of male and female employees. One can infer that firstly, there were a lesser number of females who had joined call centres with their higher secondary degrees in comparison to their male counterparts. Secondly, the number of female employees who passed their graduation and post-graduation exams was higher than that of male employees. This indicates the female staff employed in all of these call centres had higher qualifications.

Educational Stream



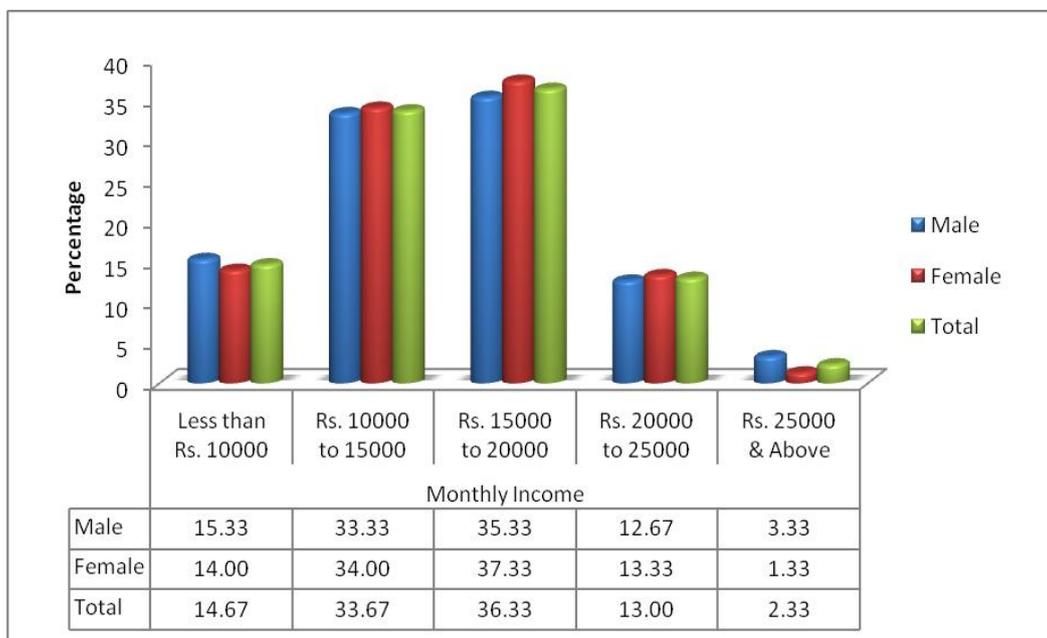
The table reveals that the call centre industry is primarily comprised of graduates. The industry has a minimal representation of postgraduates. A high percentage of the employees i.e. 29 per cent were from the arts background followed by commerce i.e. 27.3 per cent. 15 per cent of the employees had their management degrees viz., B.B.A (Bachelor of Business Administration) or Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.). In comparison to the other educational streams, the percentage of Engineering graduates was just 13 per cent. The percentage went down to 10.33% for personnel from the science stream.

The number of IT computer graduates had the lowest say in the call centre industry. Thus, on the whole, it can be interpreted that a large number of employees i.e. 56 per cent belonged to the Arts and Commerce stream. This was followed by 28 per cent of employees from Science, Engineering and Computer backgrounds. Only 1% of the remaining 15% had degrees in hotel management, tourism, or fashion design, while the majority were from the management course.

Compared to the Arts stream, the ratio of females to males was almost equal in other streams like Commerce, Management, Science and Engineering. According to the data, graduates with degrees in Arts and Commerce were employed in call centres than those with degrees in Engineering, Science, or Management. Workers with advanced degrees in science, computer science, or management would rather not work for a call centre because of the low pay and lack of advancement opportunities. It was due to the global recession in the IT industry, absence of college campus placements, improper skill and knowledge of their field and non-recognition of their Engineering and Management degrees by the hiring companies, the employees from educational backgrounds in sciences, computers and management were preferred to join a call centre. Out of the remaining 15%, just 1% have degrees in hotel management, tourism, or fashion design, but the bulk had backgrounds in management courses.

Salary

A significant indicator of an employee's level of skill, knowledge, and job experience is the salary they receive from their organization. An attractive compensation contract is a metric that indicates one's economic status, leading to job satisfaction. Employee’s salary is an important variable for determining their socio-economic status.



Employees monthly salary

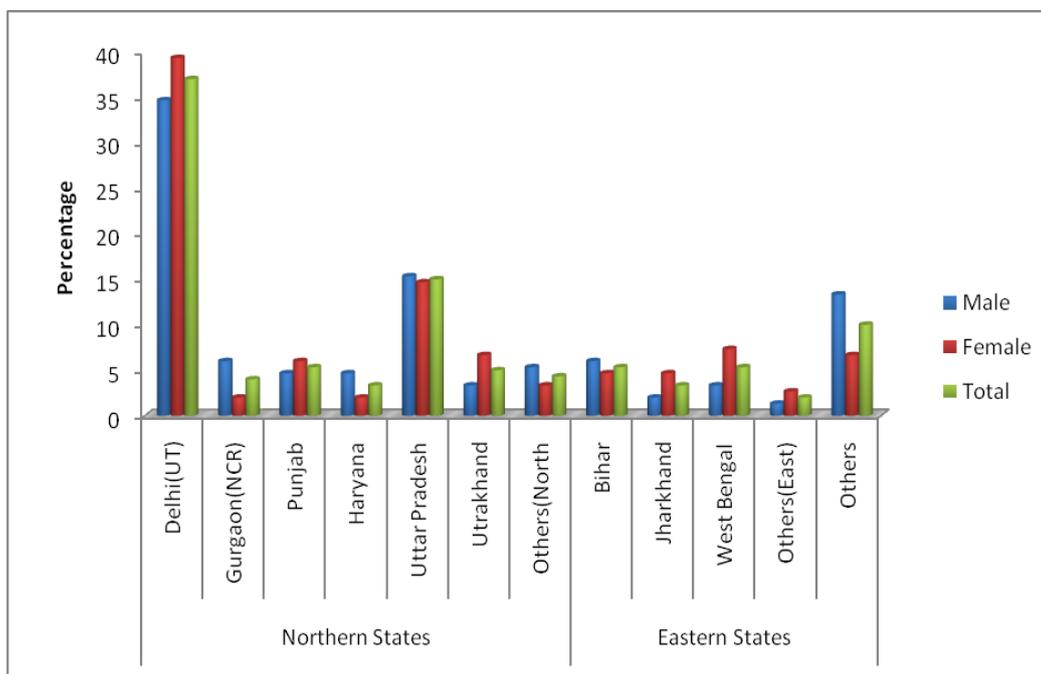
The data in the Table shows that 36.33 per cent of the employees received a salary between Rs. 15,000 to 20,000 rupees. This was followed by 33.66 per cent of the employees who received pay between Rs 10,000 to 15,000. The employees who received a salary of less than 10,000 were just 14.66 per cent. Only 13 per cent of the employees received higher pay between rupees 20,000 to 25,000. Only a small percentage of the employees 3.33 per cent drew a salary between twenty-five thousand and above. The average salary of the employees was between Rs 15,000 to 20,000. From the above table, it can be inferred that call centres pay a decent wage to their employees.

Trend of Immigration

Socio-demographic characteristics of call centre employees in the form of age, education and marital status, have revealed that the call centre industry comprises a young workforce with an average age of 25 years. The employees were primarily graduates and were unmarried. Since Gurgaon is one of the major call centre destinations of India, it becomes important to know about the migration patterns of these employees As migration is driven by economic development, it is economic development in urban areas which generates demand for labour resulting in a large number of people moving to cities and working in burgeoning manufacturing sectors (Liang: 2006)

The substantial expansion of call centres has greatly contributed to the economic prosperity of Gurgaon. Therefore, the migration patterns of the employees present a clear picture of the trends of interstate migration in India concerning Gurgaon, a prime destination for major call centres and multinational companies 74 per cent of employees were from the northern states, working at various call centres in Gurgaon. Out of 74 per cent of the workforce, 37.33 per cent of employees were from Delhi and 4.66 per cent from Gurgaon. The remaining 32 per cent of the employees had migrated from states like Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Uttar Pradesh and Utrakhand. 16.33 per cent of employees were from eastern states like Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya. Thus, on the one hand where about 80.33 per cent of the employees migrated from the various parts of North and Eastern India for call centre jobs in Gurgaon, only 5 per cent of the call centre workforce came from western parts of India such as that of Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Central India primarily comprising its largest state of Madhya Pradesh had a lower percentage of 1.3 per cent of employee migration compared to the rest of the other Indian states. Data further revealed that only 3.6 per cent of the employees migrated from Southern parts of India like Karnataka and Kerala.

Trends of Immigration (from different states to Gurgaon)



Source: Primary data

From the above Table it can be inferred that the highest migrations of employees were from the northern area comprising Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Utrakhand. This inference supports the Census of India Survey 2011, which states that much of the migration is concentrated around the demographically dominant states of northern India. This is because cities like Delhi, Gurgaon, and Noida have become major hubs of investment, economic activity, wealth and jobs. Delhi has the highest rural-to-urban migration (from Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar and Haryana) followed by Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh. While comparing total urban to urban migration, Delhi again leads other states as a destination followed closely by Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Karnataka. Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. It also shows a significant migration into urban areas.

Thus, Delhi and the nearby NCR region of Gurgaon, which have multiple call centres, have become a significant factor in the movement of young people from rural areas to urban areas and from one city to another in search of jobs. The proportion of migration from eastern India was relatively modest compared to the northern states. One possible explanation for the low migration from the eastern states of India might be the presence of Kolkata, a prominent metropolitan city that serves as a popular call centre hub, meeting the call centre needs of eastern India.

Leaving the city of Kolkata, It seems that many of the North Eastern states of India like Jharkhand, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Tripura are not that educationally competent and skilled and even aware of the existence and employment opportunities offered by IT and BPO industry. The percentage of employees migrating from other states of the country was also significantly lower, at only 9.9%, identical to that of the eastern states. These 9.9 per cent of the employees mainly came from Western and Southern India. The young graduates from the South are reluctant to migrate towards Gurgaon from their region to seek jobs in the IT and ITES industry as call centres. This may be due to the feeling of belonging to the most literate state as in the case of Kerala with a 100 per cent literacy rate, the highest in the country (Census, 2011).

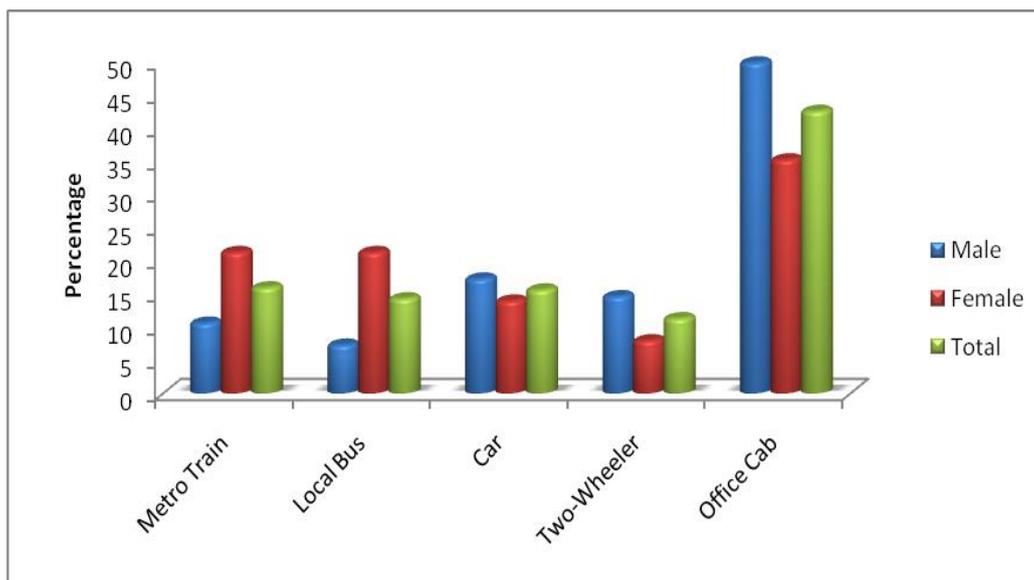
Like Kerala, many other states of the South like Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka also have a vast pool of its population with better educational backgrounds and IT literacy. E.g. Bangalore is often called the Silicon Valley or IT hub of India. The availability of large technical manpower of youth in these areas whose preference is more towards having a career in the software industry than a BPO or call centre primarily states the reason for not migrating to other parts of the Indian subcontinent other than their region for seeking employment. Most of the employees working in the call centre industry of Gurgaon in our study belonged to Delhi and Gurgaon. A significant number of individuals from Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand relocated to Gurgaon to secure jobs in contact centres.

Transport

Public transportation, featuring local buses and metro trains, is the preferred mode of transportation in major metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. It is frequently taken by individuals to commute to their jobs or workplaces. Therefore, knowing the means of communication used by the employees to commute to their respective

places of work will tell us about the type of public transportation system of that particular area. It would also highlight the convenience level and problems faced by employees while using such transport mechanisms. In the present study, the study of various means of transportation used by the call centre employees is important taking into account the late-night working shifts of the employees and issues of security involved with the female employees. According to our study, the employees commuting to their respective call centre destinations in Gurgaon were scattered in various parts of the big cities of Delhi, Gurgaon and Noida.

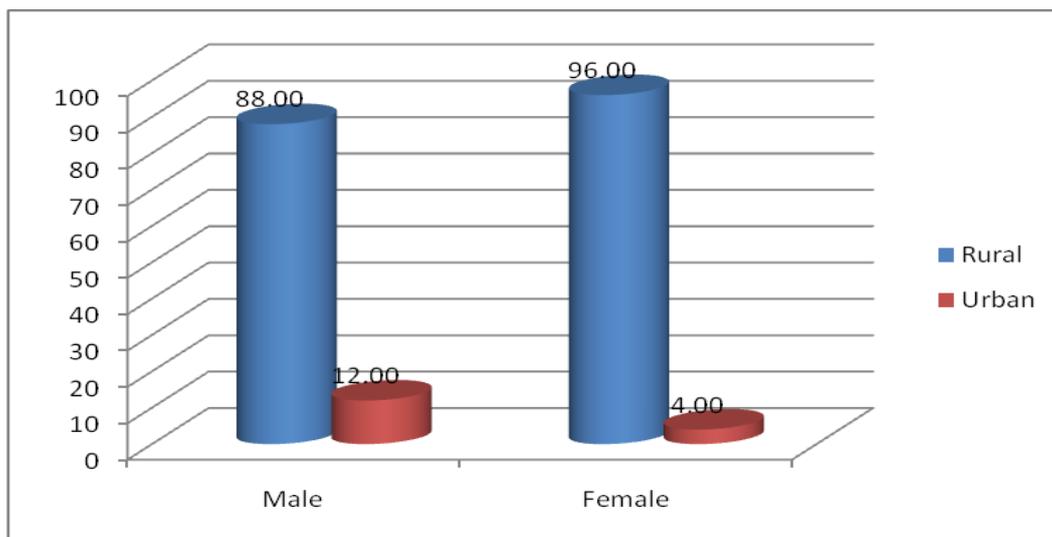
Employees, Means of Transportation used for Commuting to their Call Centres.



The above Table presents the various modes of transportation being used by the employees for commuting to their respective call centres in Gurgaon. After analyzing the responses from employees it was revealed that most call centre organizations provided transportation to their employees free of charge. 42 per cent of the employees, therefore, made full use of this free transportation facility provided to them by their call centres. The company cab providing pick and drop facility to their employees was a commonly prevalent benefit of the BPO industry, which could be attributed to the nature of work and timings. Another factor that contributed to the usage of this free transportation service was the time logging practice. Due to frequent traffic jams and highly congested traffic in Delhi employees preferred to use the company cab-provided facility to avoid any ramifications of late arrivals. To other employees commuting by Metro train was regarded as one of the most convenient and fast modes of transportation. Several employees 16 per cent preferred travelling by Metro train from Delhi to Gurgaon as it provided a fast and comfortable means of commuting to their offices in comparison to office cabs. On the one hand, where office cabs and metro rail served as the chief means of transport for commuting, there were around 14 per cent of the employees found a local bus to be one of the easiest means of transportation. It is also inferred from the data that 11 per cent of the employees’ used two-wheelers in the form of bikes and scooters to reach their offices. Around 15 per cent of the employees with a good financial background used their cars for going to their work. Commuting from home to the workplace is often a struggle, especially in big cities like Delhi and Gurgaon. From the study, it was inferred that the average time a respondent travelled was approximately 60 minutes. Not much difference was found between the male and female employees regarding the choice of transportation to commute to their workplaces.

Rural and Urban Background

The table presents the distribution of the employees according to their area of living in terms of rural or urban. It states that 92 per cent of the employees working at call centres came from urban areas or cities whereas only 8 per cent of the employees had a rural background. Call centres primarily find their destinations in urban areas. Therefore, they are more accessible and act as favourable means of employment to urban youth. The urban youth residing in metros as Delhi and Gurgaon due to their good educational background and good English-speaking skills have a big edge over those hailing from rural and remote areas



Employees rural-urban background

The above data reveals the fact that it is the problem of the ‘digital divide’ which alienates the rural masses from IT-related jobs as that of call centres. The ruralites due to their non-accessibility to computer education or literacy and fluent English-speaking skills do not find space in the call centre market. Some efforts are being made by call centre entrepreneurs to bring call centres to rural areas and provide computer literacy and good communication skills in local schools and colleges, especially in the states of Andhra Pradesh & Bihar (Verma: 2005).

Conclusion

Call centre primarily is the industry of youngsters. Youngsters especially undergraduates and graduates are attracted to this industry due to the nature of its job. *“There were mainly two types of employees who joined the BPO or Call Centres. The first ones were the fresh college pass-outs and the others who were serious about having a career in the BPO industry and looking for professional growth”*. Eighty per cent of the employees who joined call centres either during their college or after passing were primarily non-serious about the call centre jobs. For them call centre was a nice place for partying, meeting friends and earning pocket money. Whereas only a few were serious about having a long-term career in the call centre industry were quiet. Further, the employees who joined the call centre with a high post-graduation degree found it frustrating to work under team leaders or managers who were less qualified. They often felt embarrassed while reporting to them.

Call centres as found in our study primarily comprised of young force of male and female employees aged less than 25 years. In the early 2000s, the call centre industry had a very high percentage of female employees around 70 to 75per per cent constituted of females, but during data collection on average, the industries had almost equal percentages of male and female employees. In some call centre companies, the percentage of male employees was higher than of 60per per cent in comparison to the female employees which was found to be as low as that of 40per per cent *“It is good that the percentage of females has come down – otherwise it looked as if one has come to a large beauty parlour,”* said one of the male employees. Besides this sometimes it became difficult to handle the youngsters during work. As the employees are young and smart the attraction to the opposite sex at this age is very normal. A call centre company took strict measures to check any such office romances inside the call centre building. A senior Human Resource (HR) manager said that recently a couple was terminated from their job when they were spotted in an objectionable position near a corridor during their lunch break.

For youngsters, getting a job at a call centre was easier in comparison to the other jobs in private and government sectors requiring higher knowledge, experience and skill. Moreover, the job at the call centre was also full of fun and enjoyment. The story was however different for married employees. Due to the nature of call centre work, the hectic night schedule working hours posed a major problem in managing their family life who in many cases withdrew from call centres after their marriage. During the interview, many of them stated that they were now looking for a better alternative to call centre jobs. Some of them had expressed their keen desire to go for teaching as the most suitable job which can be managed well with their family life. In the case of married male employees, it was stated that one could only survive as long as both partners were working. Therefore, for some married employees, the monthly call centre salary was not sufficient for a married person to bear the expensive living costs in the cities of Delhi and Gurgaon with their spouse and children. In an interesting case, an employee whose wife was living with her in-laws in Jaipur did not express any feelings of sadness or separation on account of being detached from their

partner. Rather he was quite happy to live like a free bird with his friend in a rented accommodation in Gurgaon. It was a revival of his bachelorhood again!

Looking at migration trends people from North Eastern states found Gurgaon and Delhi as the most preferred destinations for availing job opportunities in the IT sector, especially the call centres. What is the scope of getting a job for an arts graduate? said Saurabh who works at one of the call centres in Gurgaon at Udyog Vihar. Thanks to the call centre who gave me a job with an initial salary of Rs. 12,000 which I could not have considered earning at my native place in Jharkhand. Thus, there are many cases like that of Saurabh who hails from very backward states of the North East. The lifestyle, youth culture, openness, and tremendous job opportunities in Gurgaon and Delhi gave them a feeling of being in a foreign land they had never dreamt of living in their native place.

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