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The Impacts of New Normal's driven strategies in the Post Covid-19 economy: A Case Study of Call Centres in India

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Abstract

Indeed, covid-19 has produced changes which have never been seen before in the capitalist-driven economy. Some of the changes were considered quite positive. For instance, technology has introduced avenues through which people were able to do their job from their homes, meet people, and conducts meetings through applications on their phones and computers. In other words, the pandemic has allowed reevaluating our approach towards work, workers, and workplaces. The steps which were taken during the pandemic by governments and corporate organisations have become the new normal. The new normal has widely discussed the nature of work and workplaces. But, workers' conditionality could not get adequate space in mainstream media and academia. However, some researchers have talked about workers' mental issues and the people who have lost their jobs during covid. The holistic approach was lacking for analysis of worker issues during and after the pandemic. Recent researchers have claimed that the new normal has not just changed the working patterns but simultaneously provided alternatives to traditional works and workplaces. However, this paper finds that the saga of the new normal did not work out in some jobs. For instance, business process outsourcing (BPO) workers did not notice revolutionary changes in their work patterns rather than slightly feeling more controlled and vulnerable. In the BPO industry, the new normal has just invented some new forms of exploitation and tried to normalize them probably in future also. Broadly, this paper is trying to understand the futuristic impact of strategies and mechanisms of the new normal of Covid-19 in the BPO industry. This study has used an ethnographic model for conducting this research. The interviews have been conducted from January 2021 to August 2022 in the national capital region of Delhi.

Keywords: Workers, New Normal, Identity, Workplaces, Covid-19, Technology

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Introduction

Covid-19 has brought changes which probably will be a part of our daily lives. Some of the precautionary measures were taken due to demands of 'exceptional' conditions across the world. And that is how the world came to know about the new normal. One can ask what was exactly new in this 'new normal'. According to Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz 'the new normal': work-from-home setting, parents home-schooling their children in a new blended learning setting, lockdown and quarantine, and the mandatory wearing face mask and the face shield in the public" (Corpuz 2021: 344e). Somewhere or the other, these measures were adopted because of an 'extraordinary' situation and that was a medical emergency. Interestingly, the extraordinary or exceptional situation has permitted nations and the corporate world to take decisions on an immediate basis with the hope of concrete results. And, certainly, countries did so. However, countries have achieved whatever they aspired for. For instance, control of virus spread, providing vaccines to the larger sections of society, monitoring of people through applications and state apparatus and so on. Along with these changes, capitalism and the market also went through some drastic and appalling changes across the globe. Some of those changes were positive and some of them futuristically seemed negative from the perspective of downtrodden sections of different societies across the world. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/02/18/experts-say-the-new-normal-in-2025-will-be-far-more-tech-driven-presenting-more-big-challenges/>).

From the labour point of view, the pandemic has impacted their life, their perspective towards work, workplace and future. Similarly, the management approach towards labour has also been changed (Lyon, 2022). Broadly, this paper will ponder upon the narrative of respondents, members of management, and the literature responses on covid-19 and initiatives which has been taken in the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the BPO industry at large has suffered as other sectors. But later on, the industry started to work from home and performed smoothly. However, the challenge was for both workers and the management to continue the job. As Corpuz pointed out, the new normal is still in

continuation and trying to come out from the critical situation. In Corpuz's words "we need to improvise, adapt and overcome. Further, he argues we need to follow 3R (resilience, recovery and restructuring) rules which can help us to overcome the pandemic. Inevitably, technology became an important means which has simplified and help out corporate to organize work and workers through the process of surveillance.

If we talk about surveillance alone then we find that different ways of monitoring workers took place in innovative ways. For instance, Monu, twenty-three years old, was working for a cement firm called PK Cement as a customer care executive (CCE). He says "my manager or higher authority from the first party (Pk Cement) used to make the random call and ask about product information and whether I am answering correctly according to the queries. And sometimes my team leader used to make video calls to see my workspace settings". Similarly, Himanshu, in his twenties, working for a firm called Killaris, a BPO company in Delhi. He says he used to get random calls from his senior management, team leader (TL), the client (first party representative), quality analyst to crosscheck his work ethics and product knowledge. Further, he says whenever the internet would stop working then you used to get log out from the system and he has to make a call to his higher management members to log in again. In that scenario, higher management (TL, QA,) would make a call to IT management then those people would provide another login id. Problems like this became an everyday issue during work-from-home days. He took a long pause and said "please don't recall those days". But, it was good working from home, mother giving you food and tea on your one call, working the entire day in informal clothes, and most importantly saving so much time travelling. Even Monu mentioned very strongly that "at least, I was away from the direct gaze of control from our seniors and team leader. Targets were there though.

More or less sense of control was modified in terms of making random audio and video calls to workers by higher authority, and certain types of applications have been asked to download into their (workers) computers for data security. David Lyon (2022) has



found out that during pandemic surveillance-based applications and types of equipment have been used by companies at a large scale like never before in history. Lyon argues "the demand for employee monitoring tools rose by 108 per cent by April 2020". Some of the popular products like time doctor, desk time, and kickidler have been in high demand during Covid-19 according to Lyon. Therefore, he predicts that working from home is becoming an emerging industry now. Consequently, the care job will continue as it was functioning earlier. In such a scenario, women's jobs will further increase at home. In other words, Lyon predicts women workforce will have lesser opportunities for economic and social growth in society.

Recent held Covid-19 driven research about people and society is not so positive, especially for working sections of society (Lyon, 2022; Ball 2021). The field study of this paper finds that certain aspects related to IT and IT-enabled service sectors going to be affected. Those aspects are the existing socio-democratic space among the workers, the possibilities of resistance by the IT sector employees and the weakening position of the worker's identity. These aspects will be elaborated in detail in coming sections.

The Position of Socio-democratic Space in the BPO industry

BPO/call centres do have certain undefined 'socio-democratic spaces', Chai ki tapri (Tea Stalls) and some local eateries places within and outside of the working premise. Within the working premises, people do help each other if someone has any issue regarding customer's queries; workers share their concerns, food, and sometimes pass out their anger and frustration by putting call on mute. One of the respondents Raman, an employee of the company called Killaris said: "It is like a government job. You get a variety of food on your table. Everyone brings something interesting to eat on daily basis. Apart from certain hectic days, most days we spent like fun days". However, some of the respondents have said call centres do not work like this. Since this process (insurance company) has just started. Therefore, calls are not lent in high numbers. Mohit, who has got four years of experience in this industry, says "in call centres people often do not get

time even for lunch. Whenever the call flow gets increased team leader won't allow you to take short bio-breaks. That much hectic this work is. However, people become habitual to these routines and behaviour over the years.

This industry does not allow any scope where any worker can unite people against management. In general, mostly young workers, those in their twenties join this industry for the sake of developing their communication skills. Due to the utmost level of surveillance within the industry (Ball, 2011), all worker's activities remain in control and monitored through applications and electronic devices. Covid-19 has further provided the opportunity to practice the best form of surveillance within mostly IT sectors (Lyon, 2022).

Labour unions are already struggling to get their space within the BPO industry due to their unconventional working and timing patterns (Sandhu 2006 and Remesh 2004). Covid-19 has made the path even more difficult. Since 'work-from-home' or working from remote areas does not allow workers to interact with each other. And, corporate has and will take advantage of it in future (Lyon, 2022) as well. Even on normal working days management tries all possible ways where they can control workers. For instance, two friends' colleagues will not be allowed to take breaks at the same time. The management psychology-driven team leader (TL) thinks that they will exceed the break timing which will increase call flow and increase the pressure on the workers on the working floor. TL makes sure that worker availability for taking calls from customers. In technical terms, it is called ready to available (RTA) time. For maintaining RTA team leader instructs workers to take breaks according to RTA and frequency of calls. And whenever, RTA is low and call frequency is high worker concerns priorities get minimum support from the management.

Ambiguous Question of Resistance

Institutions, like labour unions, have got tiny space in the industry. But labour union condition gets even more difficult when workers do not recognize themselves as a worker rather than 'professionals'. The irony has been noted that whatever the immediate senior would say they follow without asking any questions. And following orders and pursuing



organisational goals like their own goals. The workers give the liberty to the management to use them recklessly. This obedient nature of workers has been called 'professionalism'. Critical and surveillance theorists call such kinds of workers a 'docile body' (Lyon, Ball and Haggerty 2012; Wajcman and Dodd 2017).

The orders of management get accepted because workers think that management control and their feedback improves their skills and develops their personality. Workers think that it is a 'caring surveillance' (Swell and Barker 2006). However, management just finds out the mistakes of the workers whether they are giving the right information about the product and following protocols. In other words, they are improving their knowledge about the product only and doing the same job every day. One of the respondents, Tisha, an employee of Killaris says "when you do the same job every day then inevitably you improve your skills". Another respondent, Saroja, a colleague of Tisha said: "I used to be shy, but now I can talk to anyone. I am quite bold now. In the name of developing my skills I also developed a habit of abusing people says Sarooja with a huge laugh". Some of the respondents have said they have not developed any skills rather they have found out that it's a place for liars. For instance, Nootan says "a call centre is a place where you will be asked to perform a task for some company whereas on the working floor you might be working for some other company". She has been hired as a representative of a bank employee and she is supposed to make calls to the loan defaulters to pay back the loan amount to the bank. However, at the call centre, she was selling tour packages on the pretext of providing loans to needy people. In her terms "call centre is the place for liars".

Debilitating Position of BPO Worker's Identity

Weak position of labour unions and the development of surveillance technology will affect the IT and IT-enabled worker's identity finds the paper. Humans receive their sense of belongingness when they can communicate and access the social space with their full potential (Turkle 2015; Sen 2000). Amartya Sen (2000) says the accessibility of any space without any hurdle is 'conducive for development. Unfortunately,

the way technology is progressing we are about to lose such socio-democratic spaces in different industries. Losing such spaces inevitably means cutting down the space of dialogue between workers. That's how the sense of identity emerges through the process of conversation. Sherry Turkley (2015) argues that the process of dialogue does not just make people more productive but it also develops a sense of community between them. Therefore, turkle strongly advocates the process of dialogue, especially in digital working spaces. One may probably ask the question of why we need a sense of belonging in the working spaces. From the identity formation point of view, the workplace is not only a place for earning rather also a place for the realization of one's selfhood. Of course, the higher authority thinks that controlling spaces and behavior of the workers will increase the productivity and focus of the workers. Inevitably, this benefits the organization in terms of profit and customer satisfaction. However, most respondents think that when they spent quality time together then they also perform better because it makes their mood pleasant. The more you control the more resistance you would get in return says Preetal.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has not just impacted human lives but also provided the opportunity to seek alternative approaches towards workers, work, and workplaces. A phenomenon like the new normal is an initiative which has been taken in exceptional conditions. In other words, 'exceptional' is becoming 'normal' now in the BPO industry. The exceptional condition's driven initiatives are about to become a rule of the daily life of BPO workers. Such initiatives can be dangerous in future in terms of social security, sustainability of the job, and the formation of identity-making.

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