

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 208 pp. \$US 21.95 paper (978-0-8047-6914-3), \$US 60.00 hardcover (978-0-8047-6913-6)

It will be difficult for anyone who has not recently conducted research in India to appreciate the massive social changes which the outsourcing revolution has brought to that society. Reena Patel's excellent ethnography, *Working the Night Shift* does, however, succeed in conveying to readers a sense of what is involved when new customer service industries originating in the West explode on the local scene. Although there is a developing literature on call centre outsourcing to offshore destinations such as India, to date this research has mainly been conducted from a sociology of work perspective. Patel approaches the subject matter from a different angle, by examining the impact that such employment is having upon not only the working lives, but also the extra-work experiences of the women who staff the industry. In other words, the book provides a much needed gender dimension to research on global call centres.

Patel's study is oriented by both feminist theory and literature on gender and the body. She did 10 months of field work in Mumbai, Bangalore, and Ahmedabad, conducting 72 interviews mainly with female customer service agents (CSRs) working in call centres, as well as interviewing family members of workers, call centre managers and consultants, and even film makers who have produced documentaries on the industry. The author also convened four focus groups and conducted field observations and interviews at two call centre sites. From these various sources, Patel weaves a rich narrative of how employment in the call centre industry is affecting the lives of middle class women in contemporary India. She examines the demographic profile of the industry, challenges to traditional patriarchal control and its emergence in new forms, empowerment and exploitation, and the mobility and morality narratives that accompany working in this sector.

Patel begins by examining the ways in which the spatial and temporal mobility of women (when and where women can go) have historically been constricted in India. Barriers to mobility have included the custom of arranged marriages, the early age of marriage and childbirth, legal prohibitions on women working at night, and norms which sanction liv-

ing in extended family households. Enter the call centre industry, which in order to service European and American markets requires female labour during the evening hours, directly challenging traditional systems of patriarchal control. Other “anomalies” include comparatively high wages, more akin to skilled professional salaries than to the remuneration levels associated with clerical work. What in the North American context is defined as low paid gendered work, in India has become a middle class occupation in which men outnumber women.

Working the Night Shift successfully captures the contradictions and nuances of the Indian call centre industry. Comparatively high salaries have provided options to young middle class women, including establishing independent households and home ownership, starting up businesses, and undertaking international travel. In numerous cases, income earned through call centre employment has kept extended families out of dire poverty, especially when workers’ fathers have died prematurely. At the same time though, the subjects of Patel’s work are acutely aware of the huge salary differentials between themselves and workers doing identical work in the US. Moreover, to make the industry socially acceptable new controls have been instituted. These include company supplied transportation between home and work, which can extend the length of the working day by several hours as workers wait for home-bound transportation. There are also informal controls, such as malicious neighbourhood gossip about women working at night, and the generally pejorative reputation of the call centre industry. Interestingly, the mobile phone is also now commonly used to keep track of women who work the night shift and ownership of cell phones is defined as a necessity for workers in the industry. In short, call centre employment is both enabling and constraining for the women who participate in it. The book captures these dimensions with considerable insight.

The concluding chapter of the book also contains some wonderful personal reflections on being an ethnographer in an alien setting. One quibble with the book is that the author does not fully reflect on the meaning of her findings for existing theories. The now substantial literature on call centres goes unacknowledged, and Patel misses an opportunity to intervene in current debates. Similarly, the significance of her work for the study of gender and the globalization of work is not developed, while references to the significance of the gendered body as a theoretical construct for analyzing the global call centre industry do not extend beyond poorly developed and rather unhelpful metaphors. These points are, however, minor, and should not deter readers from taking up a fine monograph.

Bob Russell teaches in the Department of Employment Relations and Human Resources in the Griffith Business School. He received his PhD from the State University of New York at Binghamton, before going on to become a professor in the Sociology Department at the University of Saskatchewan. Bob is the author of books on industrial relations in Canada, and work transformation in the mining industry. More recent research on customer service and informational work has appeared in *Smiling Down the Line: Info-Service Work in the Global Economy* (University of Toronto Press, 2009) and *The Next Available Operator: Managing Human Resources in Indian Business Process Outsourcing Industry* (Sage, co-edited with Mohan Thite). In partnership with Queensland Health, he is currently conducting research on tele-health and the transition to digital work environments.

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