

Discourses of Globality in *Bangalore Calling*: An Analysis of Select Short Stories

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Abstract

The paper attempts to examine the various manifestations of globality in select short stories of Brinda Narayan's anthology *Bangalore Calling* and seeks to assess its impact upon the represented local urban fabric. The work showcases a phenomenon peculiar to a 1990s Bangalore, which transformed almost overnight into a global IT hub, earning the city one of its contemporary and most tenacious monikers as the Silicon Valley of India. The IT sector boom and the concomitant business process outsourcing that developed alongside of it in the city translated to the loss of white-collar employment in First World countries, a phenomenon referred to as being "Bangalored". The call centre became a microcosmic representation of the production of globality within the larger urban fabric. The overlay of the discourses of globality upon local urban life meant that individual experiences would often be shaped by the homogenising influences characteristic of such 'worlding'. In Narayan's work, the call centre emerges as a site of intense contestations between nuanced local cultures (represented by its employees) and its discourses of globality, marked by the specificities of consumerist culture, Americanised English usage, altered temporalities and spatialities and Westernised socio-cultural values. The paper attempts to examine how globality produced by the call centre impacts upon individual experience in select short stories in Narayan's fiction.

Keywords: Discourses of globality, worlding, call centre culture, urban development

Over the course of fifteen interlinked short stories revolving around the eponymous call centre Callus, Brinda Narayan evokes the world of the call centre in Bengaluru as it has manifested itself in the local urban fabric of the city. Now known by the moniker of Silicon Valley of India, the IT/ITES/BT global hub of Bangalore (now Bengaluru) has wrought permanent changes in the lifestyles, cultures and world-views of its actors in many ways, some of which are showcased and illustrated in these stories. The call centre in Bengaluru has been the vortex of the business process outsourcing that marked the city's urban transformations from the 1980s onwards, becoming a prominent motif of the rapid image-change of Bengaluru from a sleepy Pensioners' Paradise to a glitzy global IT hub in the early 2000s. In her essay "Brand Bangalore: Emblem of Globalizing India", A.R. Vasavi examines the diverse factors which led to the city's new global visibility; she also quotes a 2006 Wikipedia definition of the term "Bangalored", which refers to a phenomenon peculiar to the rise of the call centre culture in the city. The definition is as follows:

"Bangalored: verb; losing one's information technology job to someone in Bangalore. Bangalored is a neologism and used as a verb. Bangalored is used to indicate a layoff, often systemic, and usually due to corporate outsourcing of the business function to 'lower wage economies. The word is derived from Bangalore, India, which houses many outsourcing centers for Western economies" 264).

The once-salubrious weather, the presence of highly-skilled trained youth (often home grown and locally situated), the relatively low wages for BPO services (as opposed to those in Western economies) and the city's own particular characteristics "of emitting its own specificity to herald its rise as a city representing the new global India, and of lending itself to the designs and orientations of global capitalism" (Vasavi, 264) made Bengaluru a particular locus of global dynamics, manifested in its mushrooming call centres.

The first story, titled "Over Curry Dinner", documents the efforts of Yvette Periera, a call centre trainer at Callus, to hone the English language skills of the fresh recruits allotted to her, in terms of their pronunciation, locution, diction and usage. All of these have to be in accordance with the needs of the American clientele of Callus, and therefore involves the complete rooting-out of native language cadences, which is referred to in call centre culture as mother tongue interference. Herself a local Anglo-Indian, Yvette's efforts at training are ultimately infused with her anxieties and doubts about cultural identity; she realises that the accent modulations, linguistic switches, cultural briefs and condensed histories that she deals out as a trainer are not just about readying skilled call centre personnel, but about an aggressive erasure and anathematisation of local Indian cultures as she found them, and replacing them incontestably with an all-American makeover, complete with name changes like "Ashok-to-Ashley, Seema-to-Samantha, Jaswant-to-Joshua" (Narayan 4).

In "A Knock on the Door", Natalie Foster, the white American manager of the Springfield company Beam America, a client of Callus, pays a review visit to the call centre in Bengaluru. Even as she is suffused with welcome gestures at Callus, to whom she represents "America the Beautiful, a Super Power and World Leader" (Narayan 61), she realises that American jobs are being outsourced to call centres like Callus, the latter typically resonating with the discourses of American corporate culture: "'Strategic Outsourcing', 'Business Transformation Outsourcing', 'High-Performance Sourcing Models', 'Climbing the Value Chain'" (Narayan 61). This story in particular illustrates the ways in which the world of the call centre mimics the discourses of global corporate culture and represents in microcosm its profit and market driven world-view which overlays the lived experiences of its local home grown actors.

Vasavi's observations about Bengaluru's urban transformations can arguably be situated within the world of a call centre like Callus: being subject to international scrutiny, the city (through its call centres) "has generated new idioms and images that highlight its identity within the context of flexible capitalism, new technical workers, and the spread of elitist global lifestyles" (264). Further, Vasavi notes:

Integrated into the circuit of global capitalism, the city and its landscape, identity, orientation, and its key actors have been appropriated and altered to suit the needs and regime of the new flexible capitalism. Not only are the spectral buildings of IT companies the sites of new production; they are also closely matched with the attendant new sites of consumption — gated residential communities, malls that house global brands of consumer goods, international food chains, and upmarket branded cars that ride the roads (265).

In "Platinum", a local Shivajinagar-residing Callus employee named Bitty Menon (otherwise known as Betty in Callus) confronts the conflicts and tensions between her Malayali modest middle-class upbringing and her tumultuous introduction to the discourses

of conspicuous consumption upheld and celebrated by Callus. Her home life is infused with the waste-not want-not common sense policy of a typical middle class family of modest means, together with the Ayurvedic concepts of wholeness, inner balance and wellbeing sustained by her *vaidyan* father, whose clinic is part of their house. Her night-into-day call centre working hours, her uneasy relationship with her credit card purchases, her induction into the brand culture intrinsic to Western consumerist behavioural patterns, all inevitably clash with her home values. As Bitty-Betty spirals downward into a vicious vortex of unaccustomed consumption and expenditure, it is her parents who bail her out of a credit card debt with their careful savings. One of the ironies of Bitty's transformation into Betty is that her efforts to give her parents a taste of her new world (expensive flowers, a shopping trip with her father to an ersatz shopping outlet pretentiously called Le Ayurved) all fail, because they do not recognise the immense pressures their daughter faces daily in terms of identity crisis, cultural erasure and the forced facade imposed by Callus's discourses of the American corporate world on its local employees. Ultimately, the help and support she receives from her parents in a crisis (created by the pressures of conformity within the call centre world) further alienates her from them. This story highlights Bitty-Betty's violent personal transformations as well as her non-negotiable terms of induction into the pressures of the corporate scenario represented by Callus; this process defamiliarises her known world and makes her an uneasy stranger within it, together with her mediocre performance at corporate conformity, rendering her unable to fit in either. The generation gap between herself and her parents is further exacerbated by the clash of values brought about by the transformative and invasive superimposition of the call centre world over local realities.

This point has been further illustrated in Sahana Udupa's study of call centres in Bengaluru ("Call Centres Call On"); the example is that of Nithin, a failed civil engineer-turned-call centre employee now completely integrated into his global work culture, and his retired government-servant father who is uneasy with its erosive effects on what he understands as "Indian" culture. With these reference points, it is clear that the overlays of global dynamics on local urban structures as manifested through the call centre motif are not merely in terms of physically, geographically altered spatialities and temporalities. They also point to the emergence of the city (of which Bengaluru is a prime example) as a locus of other kinds of dynamics related to the global information economy.

In an analysis of how urban dynamics are changed in the global economy, Saskia Sassen asserts that centrality is one of the constitutive properties of cities: a property that has largely been embedded historically in the central city (6). This centrality, whether understood in terms of geographical, physical or abstract space, has been reconstituted as well as reconfigured in the recent past of megacities in developing economies due to their alliance with the forces of global economy. The discourses of IT/ITES/BT (Information technology, Information technology enabled services, Biotechnology) industry in the Bengaluru represented in Narayan's anthology clearly demonstrate the ways in which the historical centrality of the city has been reorganised to privilege its current image as a global hub. In fact, the centrality of Bengaluru has changed both within and without, as the narratives of "Deodorized", "Very Very Varghese", "FIRE 'n' ICE" and "Cultural Labour" reflect.

In the first two stories mentioned previously, i.e. "Deodorized" and "Very Very Varghese", the inescapable contrasts between the glitzy architectural splendour of Callus and the unmitigated squalor of the slum immediately next to it, and the deeply gendered violent class injustices of so-called urban development are showcased. Here, the displacement and

reconfiguration of urban centrality is to be seen manifest in the emphasis given to urban infrastructural facilities required by Callus to maintain its hyperreal world and not to the glaring absence of basic amenities like clean drinking water, sanitation and housing to its less skilled, less privileged and therefore invisible, nonetheless human, support staff. Real-life characters like Rani, a janitor in “Deodorized”, are invisibilised within the new centrality created by the call centre world, simply because they are cheap unskilled and easily replaced local labour on the margins of the service economy that Callus represents. The violent eviction and slum clearance resorted to by Callus in a bid to ‘harmonise’ its surrounding areas with its *vaastu*-altered internal building aesthetics (the latter itself being a sign of how native traditional epistemologies are aggressively packaged, commoditised and consumed in global corporate culture) is documented in “Very Very Varghese”. These dimensions of an altered centrality linked to global dynamics are characteristic of the urban development (as well as redevelopment) of present-day Bengaluru, in which urban governance by civic authorities, infrastructural improvements and indeed the very conception of urban space are all hijacked to feed into the discourses of global economies, rather than address local realities. In Sahana Udupa’s words, “Bangalore, as the greatest beneficiary of the IT revolution, could be regarded as the cradle of India’s tryst with global capitalism” (281).

The story “FIRE’n’ICE” reflects the efforts of Callus to monitor the performance of its local employees through a system of panoptical control and to arrest attrition, one of the most typical problems that beset the call centre world. Human personalities are assessed, graded and reduced to the performative indices and parameters dictated by the 24/7/365 on-call service industry. Udupa observes that call centres “sometimes try to arrest attrition by creating a bubbly, hyperactive social atmosphere within the office or doling out freebies at regular intervals” (283). In illustration of this discourse peculiar to call centre work culture, some of the other stories in Narayan’s anthology detail a very consciously performed celebration of Valentine’s Day and a much-hyped incentive to Callus employees of a reward trip to Florida, within the hyperreal environs of the call centre itself.

In “Cultural Labour”, the Callus trainer Yvette Periera quits her job to undertake a sociological study of cultural changes in Indian call centres, only to come up against the extremely porous boundaries and categories that make up the altered centrality of Callus. Many of the employees she interviews for data collection profess a complete identification with the goals, ideals and discourses of Callus, while also characterising these as the only way forward to a better life. The brain drain syndrome and the exporting of skilled minds to bolster an always-already wealthy and developed West privileged by colonial history, trouble Yvette but not the actor-employees caught up in it.

Sahana Udupa draws attention to how call centres have altered gear shifts in the lifestyles of its employees and actors (284-5), creating a simulacrum in which local employees of the service economy-driven developing world are made to feel, however fleetingly, a part of the privileged hyperreal global space. The ripple effects of Bengaluru’s integration “into the circuit of global capitalism” have meant that “the city and its landscape, identity, orientation, and its key actors have been appropriated and altered to suit the needs and regime of the new flexible capitalism” (Vasavi 265). These discourses, in Vasavi’s analysis, have led to the creation of “Brand Bangalore” as a global IT hub that has re-centred itself to cater to the demands of the service-oriented economy: an image amply illustrated in Narayan’s anthology through the motif of the call centre Callus. Thus it could be argued that

Brand Bangalore and the call centre world are mutually sustaining constructs in the 'worlding' process, through the larger global discourses they are embedded in.

References

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