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Imperial Neutrality: Clashes of the Future in India's Call Centers

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A. Aneesh

In the winter of 2005, while investigating India's call centers, my research assistant, a sharp and unreserved Indian graduate student, in New Delhi made a suggestion: "Why don't you try to get a job at a call center. You still don't look your age, and you speak with a slight American accent. Any company would give you the job." While

not a particularly pleasing comment, I did end up following the suggestion. I had conducted quite a few interviews with workers and executives by this time, and thought I had fair knowledge of this nocturnal world, but I had no *feel* for the floor, the immediate experience of connecting live with customers across the globe.

I started by applying for the position of Voice and Accent Trainer at a major call center in Gurgaon, a city bursting at the seams with economic exuberance. While my credentials - having lived in the United States for over a decade - were impressive, I was not offered the position after three interviews. A snippet from the third interview may explain why:

"Could you stop using that American accent?" my interviewer, Payal, a senior trainer in her 30s, asked me.
"What do you mean?" I said.
"I mean, can you stop rolling your R's as Americans do, and start using a neutral accent, instead," she said brusquely.
"But there is no such thing as a neutral accent," I failed to control my intellectual righteousness, even though this was not the occasion for academic debate.
"Well, there is. Do you hear how I'm speaking? Plain and neutral English," she said.
"You mean plain, Indian English," I said.
"Yes, Indian English is global English. It is neither American nor British," she proudly claimed.

The interview continued to deteriorate for an hour without any of us giving up our respective stand. I tried to convince her that all speech was accented, and the native speakers of American English would clearly detect an accent in her English, but she continued to claim that she spoke "global English," which was based on the neutralization of regional accents. She was obviously not a linguist and it was easy to fault her stance. But she did bring to light an important aspect of call centers: the creation of a neutralized space for communication across cultures. Neutrality, I would soon discover, was the crux of understanding not only call centers but also key transformations of the global age.

During my training and work as an agent I discovered that neutrality was not just about accent; it was also about the general transformation of life in a form that could fit emerging global systems, a discovery that revealed life as a means to systemic ends.

Soon I focused on obtaining, not the trainer's job, but that of an ordinary agent. Within a month I found myself working for GoCom, a middle-of-the-road company in size and revenue, a reseller of mortgages and mobile phone connections, employing about one thousand agents targeting American and British consumers. During my training and work as an agent I discovered that neutrality was not just about accent; it was also about the general transformation of life in a form that could fit emerging global systems, a discovery that revealed life as a means to systemic ends. This reversal of the means-end relationship between life and techno-economic systems forms the basis of the epithet *Imperial Neutrality*. While allegories of "the tail wagging the dog" or life plugged into the machine have become common, it is time to wring fiction and cynicism out of the discussion to reveal profound social consequences.

During training I was part of a group of 8 men and 5 women, all young, spirited, and fresh out of college. The training period was both cheerful and agonizing. This was the time when the group developed solidarity against their common opponent, the trainer, and took longer than permitted breaks between sessions. These breaks included tea, coffee, smoking, and even singing. This was a highly social and lively group, quite typical of India's college students. Yet, the painful part was the training session itself when one could notice the trainees' anguish of trying to suppress their previous accent and speech learnt through primary socialization. Attempts at stifling the effects of their first language on English were at once comical and sad. Still sadder was the attempt at changing their style of speech, which was heavily influenced by their first language. The transition from their First Life to Second Life, to borrow the language of the virtual world, was not easy. English is not just another language on the continent, every Indian would testify: It is a measure of success, status and class, and thus remains very much an imperial language. If I try to correct someone's Hindi, my effort may be rewarded with respect. To correct their English would most likely cause them humiliation. Despite the trainer's warning, the trainees kept using "sir" in every sentence to address the mock customer. The use of "sir" in India has connotations of hierarchy that appear off-key in the American frame of ideological equality. A few trainees lacked fluency in English, which made the task even harder. You could argue that this identity shift must occur in every new job situation where one tries to master new organizational languages, new rules and regulations, and new work processes. Yet, it was different in the case of my co-workers at GoCom, and indeed, every call center in India. Their identity shift required them to rub out marks of primary socialization, knowledge of their culture,

and styles of speech. Contortions of identity shift were instructive. Their intimacy with the immediate social and geographical world became irrelevant in the new work situation; infantilized and embarrassed, they learned the ways of their new world. The break from their immediate horizon was alarming, something I attempt to explain in terms of a split between social and system identity.

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While working in the call center, it soon became clear that the shift from a social to system identity did not affect only Indian calling agents who needed to change accents, acquire pseudonyms, work hard to know a place they would never visit, learn work skills not portable to any other industry, and work at night when the city outside their building was asleep. Their American customers were also turned into their system profiles. Indeed, a call center agent was not the one who dialed the number. It was a software program called the "Dialer," which targeted specific American profiles, according to credit history, age, gender, region, education, and buying patterns. This global conversation was not between persons but profiles; it was not a social conversation but postsocial communication.

Just as eating emerges as a program under nutritionism, which neutralizes and subordinates our relationship with food to the higher authority of scientific knowledge; identities and places, too, have begun their journey to higher grounds. It is interesting to see this change in the lives of call center agents working in Gurgaon, and illuminate the still hazy interstices from which the present age is gradually emerging. It is a story of cultural encounter, a study at the point of contact where cultures are forced to make sense of each other. Gurgaon, "a fashionable address of the new India," to borrow a phrase from the New York Times, bears the marks of the global age in all its complexity. Operating in American, British, or Australian time zones, Gurgaon's call centers are unique, previously unavailable, sites of examining global transformations.

The names of individuals and corporations have been changed to protect identity.

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A. Aneesh is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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