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## Reuters Features

# Call Centers Fuel Social Change in Traditional India

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Wed Jun 9, 8:26 AM ET

By Maria Abraham

BOMBAY, India (Reuters) - Cranky U.S. talk-show hosts, John Kerry ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) and powerful British union leaders have all had their say. Now it's the turn of a Catholic priest in India's money capital, Bombay.



[Reuters Photo](#)

Outsourcing has a new critic.

From a church pulpit in a middle-class suburb one sultry Sunday morning, Father K.T. Emmanuel spelled out the biggest danger facing the city's young men and women: call centers.

In the congregation were scores of 20-somethings who spend their nights fielding calls from the customers of U.S. multinational giants such as General Electric and Time Warner.

"The lure of money is making youngsters drop out of college to take up call-center jobs," Emmanuel said in his sermon.

"They blow money on the latest cars and cell phones, while their middle-class parents struggle to save money," he added, as several parents nodded vigorously in agreement.

At a Bombay call center at about 1 a.m., 21-year-old Reema darts out of work during a break to share a smoke with her male colleagues, looking forward to a late night out at a disco -- all shocking behavior for some conservative Indians.

"My family life, social life, health ... Everything is screwed up because I work nights," she said. "But the money is so good that I'm willing to compromise."

These Indian "customer relations executives" (CREs) are part of an outsourcing industry expected to employ more than one million people and account for \$25 billion in exports by 2008.

They may well force a tradition-bound country to rethink its age-old social

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mores.

"In this age of globalization, where young women step out of homes to work at night, the attitude of Indian society will have to change," said sociologist Myrtle Barse. "Otherwise, it will lead to plenty of conflict between the generations."

The change has already fueled a conflict half-way across the globe. After a U.S. political backlash, it has become a prominent issue in the presidential campaign. In Britain, bank and telecoms unions have led fierce protests against jobs going to India.

But four-fifths of the world's 500 largest companies already outsource some work to India. With so many English speakers and 1.5 million university graduates each year, it makes sense for Western companies seeking new ways to cut costs.

#### WANT TO BREAK FREE

Graduates entering the industry earn between 8,000 and 10,000 rupees (\$175 to \$220) a month, only a tenth of their U.S. counterparts, but a decent sum in a country where the average annual income is about \$500.

So each night, while the rest of India is fast asleep, thousands of young men and women wearing headsets talk to customers around the world in call centers in New Delhi, Bangalore and Pune. Most are hip dressers and drink in pubs until dawn after their shifts.

"Youngsters in call centers have big spending power and this gives them the sort of independence young people in India usually do not have," said psychiatrist Anjali Chhabria.

Reuben Fernandes, 20, earns 13,000 rupees a month, and says he will settle for nothing but the best. His shopping list includes the latest mobile telephone, a car and the best liquor.

"And now, I want to live on my own," he said firmly.

This is rebellious talk in India, where the family is considered the bedrock of society and young people are often expected to live with their parents until they get married.

"Indian parents tend to be doting and demanding," said 23-year-old Lakshmi, who works in a call center in the country's technology hub, Bangalore. "Parents threaten to commit suicide or jump off buildings, but in the end they come around."

Call-center bosses insist their offices are hardly hotbeds of revolution. "Software and back-office centers have brought in a world-class approach to work in India," said Raju Bhatnagar, chief operating officer of ICICI OneSource, part of financial services giant ICICI Group.

#### DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION

But for students barely out of their teens, the money is great, so many wonder why they should "waste time" getting a university degree.

"No other job in India offers this kind of money to graduates and undergraduates fresh out of college," said Harmeet Singh, a 23-year-old car-owner whose father has never owned a vehicle.

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Middle-class Indians have traditionally scrimped and saved for decades to send their children to the best universities, but 19-year-old Karen Fernandes managed to convince her parents it was a good idea to drop out of university after a year.

"She (Karen) is earning a good amount and taking care of all her expenses, so I won't insist on her going back to college," said Wanda Fernandes, her mother.

Father Emmanuel, in the suburban church, takes a longer-term view, however.

"A good college education is vital in the long run for career growth," he told his congregation.

"What if the call center bubble bursts one day?"

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