

New Indian Stories @ the Digital Frontline: Women, Work, America, and Sex

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Abstract

“New Indian Stories @ the Digital Frontline: Women, Work, America, and Sex” examines aspects of India’s experience with the digital age. While it is a commonplace to speak of a digital revolution, its specifics are rarely well delineated. Focusing on individual experiences and on the narrative portrayal of those experiences is one path to understanding the larger impact of the digital revolution. This paper begins by looking at interactions in the 1990s in Chennai (then Madras) at the beginning of Indian immigration to Silicon Valley. This first narrative should be considered as field notes from a working environment. This paper then examines the writings of Chetan Bhagat, and how his novels and the subsequent films they inspired have illuminated the new dynamics of the workplace in the digital age. Another novel, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Miss New India*, is discussed in this context. Finally, recent journalistic representations of the effect of the digital age on lived lives, particularly women’s lives, are explored. News stories of sexual violence, rape, and dangers to women workers are examined. Within these intertwined narratives from anecdotes, novels, films and news stories, two themes stand out. One theme is the increased, and deepening intimate cultural connection between India and the United States. The second theme is the sexual danger, both perceived and real, that the new Indian workplace presents to working women.

Key Words: Internet, Chetan Bhagat, digital revolution, India, call center, working women, rape

Introduction

While it is a commonplace to speak of a digital revolution in Asia, the specifics of such a revolution are not well delineated. Are we speaking of the spread of the internet or the spread of cell phones? Computer literacy or e-commerce? This paper examines aspects of India’s experience with the digital age by looking at new narratives from India. While thousands of pages have been written about the arrival of the digital age in India, this paper tries to see the picture more clearly by examining stories being told about this new universe. Focusing on individual experiences and on the portrayal of those experiences is one path to understanding any larger impact of the digital revolution. Examining three linked narratives about the digital revolution in India, and identifying similar themes in the narratives, can help us grasp some of the changes it has wrought.

The related narratives discussed in this paper form an arc from the 1990s to the present. They range from personal experience and anecdote to novels and films and then to newspaper stories. While one can approach these stories in light of theories of India’s economic reforms, the rise of the “middle class,” (a problematic category in any discussion of India because of the difficulty of defining “middle class”) or the emergence of consumer India, it was helpful at the outset just to read the stories without any particular agenda. Then, after

an initial reading, I looked for common themes in these unmediated stories of call centers, the new Indian workplace, and young Indian workers. This search brought to light repeating themes that bear examination and that suggest a larger public engagement with these themes.

The first story related here is an extended anecdote about the early call centers in Chennai (then Madras) that serviced the United States and the initial wave of young Indian men and women leaving for Silicon Valley in the 1990s. The intention of this first-person section is to provide what one can regard as field notes. This is the raw data of experience. The second narrative in the paper focuses on novels and films about call centers and young workers in the digital environment. Chetan Bhagat's runaway and unprecedented success as a novelist over the last decade as he documents, in English, the new Indian digital workplace is indicative of how powerful these stories are, and how eager his readership is to hear about themselves. The section also looks at another novel, *Miss New India*, in this context.

Finally, recent journalistic representations of the effect of the digital age on lived lives, particularly women's lives, are explored. News stories of sexual violence, rape, and dangers to women workers are examined. What links these three different narratives—personal anecdotes, novels and films, and then news stories—are the changed perceptions of the “foreign” and the continued theme of sexual violence.

The changed relationship to the “foreign” and the theme of intimacy with Americans looms large. It encompasses biz speak, the American consumer, and the desirability of marrying someone who works for Google. Increased, and deepening, cultural connections and—in the case of the Indian worker—profound frustrations with the United States stem from this shared digital universe. The second theme that emerges from these new stories is that of sexual danger and violence, and especially rape, and women workers. The Indian workplace itself has changed, of course, from the workplace of forty years ago. There was no outsourcing forty years ago—no call centers. With the economic liberalization of the early 1990s, business in India changed its character. For working women—young women, women out at night—the threat of rape loomed as old protections and behaviors have evaporated.

This paper argues that these particular stories about India's experience with the changed nature of the workplace and with call-center workers are important in understanding the political and social consequences of work in the digital universe. At the very least, it is in these stories that the workers themselves, and the society at large, see themselves.

Other Writings on Digital India

As mentioned earlier, much has been written on India's growth, economy, and use of new technologies. The subject is so vast that it welcomes any number of approaches, from purely academic assessments to more popularized accounts of change. No one author or approach can capture it all. Nonetheless, other writings often allude to the two themes that have emerged in the narratives under discussion here—of a new familiarity with the foreign and of sexual danger—though these issues may not be the focus of the analyses.

Authors usually concentrate on one or two issues, while acknowledging that other authors may have other focuses. For example, in *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (2006), Leela Fernandes notes that

On the one hand, existing analyses have either focused on estimating the size of the middle class or have pointed to the growth of such intermediate classes as a potential base of support for liberalization. On the other hand, culturally oriented research has tended to analyze the middle class through the lens of consumption, an approach that has rested on an underlying conception of the middle class as a consumerist class.¹

In her work, Fernandes attempts to address these lacunae. She looks at the political processes that occur in the intersections between the middle class, consumption, and liberalization. In her analysis, the issue of rape of working women arises in the context of the right-wing political party Shiv Sena's attempt to restrict the hours of waitresses and bar workers in Mumbai. Fernandes sees the conservative right-wing movement as raising rape as a red-herring issue in order to enforce conservative social norms (i.e., limit activity in bars). But she also notes the problems for young women working in Mumbai of where to live—if they live on their own, and not in a hostel, they are harassed by men. In her case studies, Fernandes captures the voices of some of these women, as they try to find physical space to accommodate themselves in order to safely go out to work. So, in effect, her work does touch on the issue of women workers, their claim for space, and threats against them.²

Other authors, writing as actors from inside the economic boom, have other emphases. For example, the issues that engage Nandan Nilekani, a founder of Infosys, are his company's growth and the remarkable changes that occurred after the economic reforms in India in the early 1990s. In *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation* (2008), Nilekani writes about the old license raj, when business was controlled by government offices that issued licenses for any activity. He also discusses, with an insider's knowledge, why the Internet so benefited from liberalization and why liberalization sped the export of Indian computer expertise.

But perhaps more interestingly in the context of this article, Nilekani writes about the place of Englishness and "foreign-ness" in today's India. He notes the importance of English in a global market is unquestioned and that

English had rapidly become the language of creative discourse—and while Indian writers who were writing in English have remarked that they often face hecklers at their readings who demand to know why they do not write in their mother tongues, such criticism has become marginal in recent years.³

In fact, to take Nilekani's observations a step further, we can reflect that Chetan Bhagat, who writes novels about this new India of computers and call centers, and the lives of techies, is the biggest-selling author in English that India has ever produced—and he is almost unknown outside of India. The global did indeed become local, as much of Nilekani's writings reflect. And with new understanding of the foreign, "foreign-ness" was no longer taboo as Nilekani notes: "... the children of post-reform [the economic reforms of the early 1990s] India have no time to listen to tales about conspiracies of the "foreign hand";

they are too busy tapping into the vast opportunities that are emerging for them.”⁴

It is this new familiarity with the foreign, and with America, that is a theme that emerges in the narratives that are the subject of this study. English and foreign-ness are part of an economic construct and a necessity for economic well-being, and now they are part of a larger Indian story that is popularly accessible.

Of course, this essay can note only a tiny fraction of the authors who have dealt with the myriad subjects related to the digital economy in India. Even so, Xiang Biao’s *Global “Body Shopping”: An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry* (2007), is one work that is useful to look at because of its resonances with the subject of the first story examined here. Xiang analyzes the raw experiences of Australian temporary work visa holders and H-1B workers in the United States. His work documents, with case studies and statistical underpinnings, the relationship between work, visas, dowries, and the lure of young men with jobs in Australia or the United States. Xiang was drawn to his research material because he met many of these workers when he was doing doctoral research on Indian immigration in Sydney, and he realized that the salient story was not immigration per se, or what he saw as the jargon-heavy “diasporic space”; rather, the story was how people were being “body shopped,” or recruited for IT temporary jobs.

The narrative inside this situation—of dreams, workers, exploitation, and institutions—is potent material, as it was when I first encountered it in the 1990s in Chennai. It is this narrative that Hari Kunzru uses in his English language novel about body shopping, *Transmission* (2004). It is also the narrative of increasing intimacy and familiarity with the “foreign,” one of the themes examined in this essay.

As Amartya Sen sees it, “the growth story” of India (those are his quotation marks) often has not acknowledged how limited the societal reach of that growth has been.⁵ I argue that the two themes explored in this essay have infused the Indian imagination. Familiarity and intimacy with foreigners, as they utilize Indian workers, and the night workplace, with its dangers to young women, are now part of the narrative. This is a form of societal reach of economic growth—if not an improvement in living standard, it is a long reach into the new stories people know and tell.

Wet Cement and Indian Doctors: A Story from the Field

We can regard the following section and its continuation later as extended field notes from my own experience, which explains the voice of this narrative. There is no intentional mediation—literary, historical, anthropological—in its telling. Readers are asked to regard it as raw data.

In 1995, almost twenty years ago, two American businessmen contacted me at the U.S. Consulate in Madras. They had started a little company in that southern Indian city and they wanted to show me their operation. “It’s a new kind of business,” one of them told me on the phone. “You should come and see it.” I was doing business outreach for the Consulate, so I made an appointment to drop by.

John and Dave greeted me at the door. They had just flown in from Thailand, where they lived, to look over their on-going operation. Middle-aged, relaxed, tie-less, they were typical of the kind of expatriate businessman you could meet in Bangkok any day. But I had never seen men like that here in Madras.

John escorted me around the building. It was a brand-new three-storey structure that smelled of wet cement and fresh plaster. "Wet Paint" signs were hung on the walls. It had just opened, but John and Dave had been running the business for almost two years in another location. Their profits had built the new place. About twenty women sat at individual tables, with headphones on their ears. They were typing at computer keyboards. Large black screens glowed in front of them.

"They're all doctors," said John. "They are transcribing as surgeons do surgery in State College, Pennsylvania."

In real time, as the surgeon in the U.S. dictated what he was doing, the Indian doctor in front of me was typing rapidly.

"Here, look. The phone number is the same as an area code in Pennsylvania."

Later, John said, "We only hire women. They are loyal. These ladies are all married, or if they aren't, they get married right after they get the job. Why, they take time off to have a baby, and they come right back." With a bit of awe in his voice, he added, "Do you know, we have never had anyone quit in two years?"

Unstated was the precariousness of the Indian workplace for women. It was one of the reasons the Consulate was such a good place for working women. They wouldn't be sexually harassed. They would be paid what they were told they would be paid. Why, a little van even went round to pick up the "ladies."

I could see that John and Dave were running an operation like that—they needed the workers and they wanted to retain them. Who you knew would not get you this kind of job. The workers had to be good, maybe better than good. Why would a hospital tolerate any mistakes or problems? And think of how much money the hospital was saving. So John and Dave didn't want any problems.

"We need to send one of our managers to Pennsylvania so he can see the layout," Dave told me, back in their office. He guided me to a chair, and warned me not to lean back. The paint on the walls was not dry. "That's why I wanted you to see this—it is hard to explain."

It was the first time I had ever seen an office like this. In fact, I had never heard of this happening in Madras. I knew that the Philippines had businesses where court cases were transcribed onto a disk and then sent round to subscribing offices—I had worked in an office like that. But this was new. This was real time, not just a better way to keep legal files.

As John and Dave explained the activity—accent training, working round the clock, more hospitals in America to sign contracts with them for transcription, I could feel the ground shifting. And even then, the accent training was only so the women could understand the American doctors. The idea of being trained to sound like Americans, as Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center* would record, was still far in the future.

They were paying the women about \$50 a month. I was stunned. There won't be a transcription job left in America—my aunt had been a legal transcriptionist. There goes Aunt Janie, I thought. As I left, I maneuvered around workers spreading cement for a larger driveway. Again, the smell of cement and paint hung in the air.

Later I told people, particularly when I was back in the U.S., about this strange building in Madras that now existed, virtually, right in Pennsylvania. How could there be a transcribing job left? Those lady doctors were working for peanuts. And that seemed to be just the beginning.

The Missing Necklace and the Battered Women: Field Notes, Continued

John and Dave's manager showed up to apply for a visa so he could go look at the hospital in Pennsylvania. In fact, the number of young Indian men began to increase daily at the visa window at the Consulate. The visa category they were applying under, H-1B, meant they were going as temporary workers, usually for information technology companies. They were educated at Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and other prestigious places. They were engineers and computer scientists. Some had studied in the U.S. but the majority had not. For the most part, they were coming straight out of Indian engineering schools. In five years, between 1994 and 1999, worldwide the number of these work visas tripled, from around forty thousand to more than a hundred thousand.⁶ India was the main supplier of these temporary technical workers, and Madras was the place they were issued.

These men—always called “boys” in India—were just the marriage age in India. Normally an Indian boy, well-educated with a good job, was desirable marriage material. If a couple got married and he had a green card, or legal permanent residence status, it would take years to file a petition and get a new bride to the United States. In the past, a distant chance at U.S. residence had been enough to enhance desirability.

But the H-1B category was different. This kind of visa had a spouse category: H-4. And H-1Bs were virtually always issued—denying them because the consular officer believed the applicant intended to move to the U.S. was illegal. If the company filing for the young man (and of all the thousands we issued, only a handful were to women) had done its work, the boy was in. And the spouse was approved if she was his legitimate spouse. As word spread in Southern India, in Bangalore and Madras, more and more young men appeared with new brides. The wife's visa was given immediately. Hennaed hands, sparkling jewelry, red saris, last week's wedding invitation in hand; hundreds of young women appeared at the visa window. There was no wait to leave for the United States, the economic solution and dream destination for educated Indians.

But it seemed too good to be true. The parents of the girls had bargained a lot—a big dowry for a boy who was working in America. There would be instant residence in the U.S. Of the thousands of young brides I saw over two years, maybe two or three had married in a “love match,” which merely meant that the two people had chosen to marry each other on their own. All other marriages had been arranged. For immediate residence in the U.S. the girl's parents had

provided the dowries, the girl, and the gifts to the groom's family. The girls were very pretty and, mostly, very educated. Was a boy in the U.S. and an immediate move to America too good to be true?

So the families hedged. What if she didn't get the visa? It all seemed too easy. If her parents had spent the tens of thousands of dollars thinking they would get a girl settled in America, and then for some reason she did not get the visa, they would have spent all the money for nothing. We noticed the girls gradually appeared for the interview—which was really just a token conversation, because if the boy's H-1B was fine, and they were married, then the H-4 was virtually automatic—looking decidedly unmarried.

The girls had begun to apply for the spouse visa without wearing the *mangala sutra*. This is the traditional heavy gold necklace that Indian brides, particularly in the South, always wear. If there was no *mangala sutra*, there had been no rites. No rites, no sacred fire, no seven steps, no pandit (priest) in attendance. If these things had not occurred, the girl was not married with the proper Hindu religious ceremony. And the girl in front of us was not in red, and her hands had no henna. So, in effect, the girls were not married. The parents had registered the marriage as a civil marriage and were waiting for the visa before going through with the real wedding.

We cabled back to the Department of State, which punted the question to South Asia specialists at the Library of Congress. The researchers agreed—without rites, no Hindu girl was married, unless she had declared she was not a Hindu. If her parents and her society did not think she was married until she had performed certain rites, then she was not married.

So we told them no, they had to really get married. But this brought back an old worry. What if the visa was refused? The parents worried they might have paid the dowries and gotten their daughters married for naught. Word now got around that a civil marriage, without religious rites, did not satisfy the requirement of being married. The girl must be truly, ritually, married. Even the U.S. Consulate had said so.

The feeling that things were too good to be true persisted. We began to get applications from fathers who were going to visit their newly married daughters to see "how things were going." A picture began to emerge. The boys had strangers arriving to live with them. Neither had lived outside of India until that first trip to some suburb in the United States. He was gone all day at work. No one knew anything about sex—the traditional, Victorian-like middle- and upper-middle-class Indian attitudes had seen to that.⁷ What was the girl going to do? It was the first time any of them had been away from their families.

Tales were filtering back to Madras, tales of domestic violence and spousal abuse. Then, organizations in the U.S. began to contact us with flyers and through congressional representatives. We knew there was an increase in wife-battering because Apna Ghar (Our House) had started up in Chicago. This was a shelter focused on South Asian women. As its literature noted, "because of cultural differences in language, dress, food, religion, family structures and values, Asian-American women were reluctant to seek help from existing shelters and social service organizations."⁸ Throughout the nineties, more centers were started: in Boston, in North Carolina, in Oregon, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The rush to the United States using the new visa category had had unintended consequences.

From IIT to Call-Center Nights: A Guy Gets the Zeitgeist

The world of Madras in the nineties—of Indian women doctors and phone rooms, of boys studying computers at universities that were impossible to get into, of Indian techs going to the U.S. and Indian girls marrying the techs, and the girls in the States with no family support—was all around us. Bangalore, the center of the Indian IT industry, was booming. But so far little was being written about this world, about the new young people, about the women working in phone rooms, about the back and forth to America. The rush to marry these H-1B grooms was certainly having some unexpected consequences, and yet the fundamental changes stemming from the digital revolution seemed to be taking place almost without record.

Signs of change were everywhere. The names of computer companies—Oracle, Wipro, Infosys—were on everyone’s lips. Economic liberalization had started in 1991 and then taken off, and that was why these Indian companies were growing.⁹ The talk was of computers, and IT, and the fight to get into the technical institutes with the big American job-payoff. But this was talk. Who was going to tell this tale in writing? Would it all just evaporate?

In Hong Kong, working for Goldman Sachs, was a man named Chetan Bhagat. Like the thousands who had appeared at the visa window in Madras, he had studied at the best places, married, and gone off to make his fortune. But he was different from the others—he had plans to tell the story, and was writing it all down. Bhagat’s novels and their film adaptations have stunned the Indian publishing world and become blockbuster hits. In 2004, the Indian publisher Rupa released his *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT*, a novel based on his experiences as a student at the IIT, Delhi. The story is set in the nineties, and Bhagat captures the momentum and pressure of doing well at IIT, and the lure of the United States. The novel is funny and, as the *New York Times* noted, deliberately sentimental like a Bollywood movie.¹⁰

The next year, 2005, he published *One Night @ the Call Center*. The book sold out 50,000 copies in a week—an unheard of figure for an Indian novel in English.¹¹ As of this writing, it has still not dropped off the best-seller list in India. By 2010 Bhagat was named one of the hundred people who most affect the world by *Time* magazine, with A. R. Rahman (the Oscar-winning composer for *Slum Dog Millionaire*) writing: “I’ve seen the effect Chetan has on his readers. He often writes about following your dreams and not bowing to others’ expectations. That isn’t easy in India, where family opinion matters and some professions are regarded as more serious than others.”¹²

Digital India had found someone to tell its story, at least in part. Bhagat’s two early novels, with this focus on the digital universe, have unusual narrative hooks, a very interesting voice—the voice is young, middle-class, a speaker of both Hindi and English—and frank presentation of sexual relationships, with emphasis on women’s responsibility for their own sexuality.

The narrative hook, in which the author is driven to tell the story, hearkens back to the very newness of the material in 1990s Madras. It was difficult to talk

about many aspects of the digital universe, because it had no antecedents. The universe was truly unheralded. How to describe a call center in the middle of the Madras night, staffed with women doctors, taking dictation from surgeons in Pennsylvania? Bhagat has created a new language that reflects the newness of the situation. He has to write in this new idiom to be genuine.

In comparison, Bharati Mukherjee's much later (2011) *Miss New India* (to be discussed below) is told in the third person, with no colloquialisms, no Hindi-English or Hinglish, and no real neologisms. The language's distance from the immediacy of Bangalore as it is experienced hurts her story. Bhagat has accustomed his readers to a free-wheeling, ungrammatical, mash-up that describes the digital world, a language that was ubiquitous in the India of the nineties. Fernandes discusses the mixing of Hindi and English in her study of the new middle-class, and indeed this linguistic intimacy with English has been a hallmark of the boom feel of the times.

"Meri skin bahut oily hai" ran the TV ad—"My skin is very oily." This is Bhagat-style language. In India, there has long been speech in two languages, with Hindi and English used in the same sentences. It is typically both chatty and to the point. Salman Rushdie has used it from *Midnight's Children* (1980) onwards, and a century earlier the dictionary Hobson-Jobson cataloged the words that sat on this permeable border: memsahib, moghul, bungalow. In the late 1990s, this language was everywhere—Hinglish for the masses—and by 1999 everyone was singing this English line from the Hindi movie *Haseena Maan Jaegi* (The Beauty Will Accept Your Proposal/Agrees): "What is mobile number?"

The world of cosmetics, fashion, perfume, travel, cars, and all the other ephemera of a rising consumer class was being discussed in this language. "Yehi hai right choice, Baby," went the Pepsi slogan: "This is just the right choice, Baby." Even the title words of Bhagat's first novel, "five point someone," are a kind of college slang for students who, like the three main characters in the book, are stuck in the fiftieth percentile.

Besides Bhagat's style of narration (he is always compelled to tell the tale; it comes down to his bearing witness) and his fresh language, Bhagat's books include female characters who personify the romantic and sexual dilemmas that confront Indian women. His women are the call-center workers, the mistreated wives, and the victims of the temptation to marry for money. His women capture on paper the unwritten experience of Madras in the nineties.

Although his writing was increasingly dismissed as "not literary," in fact his first effort went through fifteen drafts. In many discussions and interviews, Bhagat simply (and I think, disingenuously) agrees that he is not literary, and closes off the topic.¹³

As a first person narrator in both his novels, he is at once the writer (Chetan) and not the writer. He—the real Chetan—is an IIT guy, a business guy. Why must he write and what is it he is writing? This is how he explains his engagement with the story of *Five Point Someone*:

Before I really begin this book, let me first tell you what this book is not. It is not a guide on how to live through college. On the contrary, it is probably an example of how screwed up your college years can get if you don't think straight. But then this is my take on it. You're free to agree or disagree. I expect Ryan and Alok, psychos both of them, will probably kill me

after this but I don't really care. I mean, if they wanted their version out there, they could have written one themselves. But Alok cannot write for nuts, and Ryan, even though he could really do whatever he wants, is too lazy to put his bum to the chair and type. So stuff it boys—it is my story, I am the one writing it and I get to tell it the way I want it.¹⁴

In *One Night @ the Call Center*, he explains how he is coerced into telling the story by an emissary from God. On a train, he sees a beautiful girl. She tells him the beginning of a story. "One night God has called into a call center." Chetan is also told that in order to hear the full story of that night, he must promise to write it down. The emissary insists it must be told in a book if Chetan wants to hear it now—and Chetan decides to use the character Shyam of the call center to tell the story.

This is the voice of Shyam in *One Night @ the Call Center* as he explains who he is and his job:

By the way, hi. I am Shyam Mehra, or Sam Marcy as they call me at my workplace, the Connexions call center in Gurgaon (American tongues have trouble saying my real name and prefer Sam. If you want, you can give me another name too. I really don't care).

Anyway, I am a call center agent. There are hundreds of thousands, probably millions of agents like me. But this total pain-in-the-neck author chose me, of all the agents in the country. He met me and told me to help him with his second book. In fact, he near as well wanted me to write the book for him. I declined, saying I can't even write my resume or even other simple things in life, there is no way I can write a whole damn book. I explained to him how my promotion to the position of team leader had been put off for one year because my manager Bakshi had told me I don't have the "required skillset" yet. In my review, Bakshi wrote that I was "not a go-getter." (I don't even know what "go-getter" means, so I guess I'm not one for sure.)¹⁵

He goes on to describe the demand made upon him to write:

But this author said he didn't care—he had promised someone he'd do this story so I'd better cooperate, otherwise he would keep pestering me. I tried my best to wriggle out of it, but he wouldn't let go of me. I finally relented and that's why I'm stuck with this assignment, while you are stuck with me.

I also want to give you one more warning. My English is not that great—actually, nothing about me is great. So, if you are looking for something posh and highbrow, then I'd suggest you read another book which has some big many-syllable words. I know only one big, many-syllable word, and I hate that word—"management." But we'll get to that later. I told the author about my limited English. However, the pain-in-the-neck author said big emotions do not come from big words. So, I had no choice but to do the job. I hate authors. For now, let us go back to the story.¹⁶

In Bhagat's female characters we find the outlines of the young women who populate the digital and urban workplaces of India today. Neha, the professor's daughter in *Five Point Someone*, has a long affair with the protagonist, Hari, and eventually they part, but keep in touch. Hari goes to Bombay to work, and the book ends with Neha trying to get a job in Bombay as well. There is sex before marriage, love, autonomous decisions, and the demands of earning a living for both characters.

Neha's independence and sexuality is a foretaste of Priyanka's behavior in the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship with Shyam in *One Night @ the Call Center*. But the dilemmas of the three female characters of *One Night* are also each an

aspect of the problems of autonomy, money / security, and sexuality. None of these characters escape exploitation or commodification.

Priyanka, Shyam's girlfriend (their story told in an extended series of complicated flashbacks), finally agrees to an arranged marriage with an Indian who lives in Seattle and works for Microsoft. Only a Google search, quite late into the plot, exposes him as a fraud. Radhika, who is married, is tortured by her mother-in-law and takes tranquilizers to calm down, but is desperately in love with her husband. He is exposed as unfaithful to her through a prank phone call.

Esha, the girl who has left her family and village to become a model in Delhi and can barely hold body and soul together working all night at the call center, finally sleeps with a modeling agent. She thinks it is a path to a job, but he abandons her. These women, one agreeing to an arranged marriage, another suffering mistreatment in a marriage, and a third agreeing to sex to further a career, inhabit the novel with a kind of gripping reality. We all know them. We met their older sisters in the nineties. And, in fact, the characters were little altered when *One Night @ the Call Center* was made into the Bollywood Hindi movie *Hello* in 2008. They rang very true, and their problems were the young audience's problems.

Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*, made into the Hindi film *Three Idiots* (2009), struck a similar chord of reality and did even better at the box office. Its focus is more on the absurdities of the training for the digital universe, but America and the problems of love loom large. Again, attention is on success and finding happiness on one's own terms. Parents, and the pressure to "succeed," are compelling the characters to lead unhappy lives. As the character Farhan says about one of his friends: "Today my respect for that idiot shot up. Most of us went to college just for a degree. No degree meant no plum job, no pretty wife, no credit card, no social status. But none of this mattered to him, he was in college for the joy of learning, he never cared if he was first or last."¹⁷

Significantly, in the digital terrain that transcends boundaries, this movie's message of excessive pressure to attain a university degree at the expense of both thinking and finding love was understood in China. Overworked students flocked to see *San ge shagua* (literally "Three Idiots"). It was one of the special "New Year" releases, and one of the few Hindi films to be released in theatres in China since the 1970s. *The Hindu* reported that it was prescribed in some courses in Chinese universities to promote "stress relief." One Chinese blogger, named Neiyi Guojiang, wrote last year in praise of the film: "Rote learning made me rigid, stupid and I ended up like a machine. I felt like a real idiot compared to the three in this wonderful movie."¹⁸ The slangy, hip tagline of the movie, the English phrase "all izz well," used when all was *not* well, became the catch phrase of the moment.

Success, Love, and Danger Rewritten for the Miss New Indias

It is not surprising with social and economic change building in India during the nineties, with increased immigration to the United States for those with technical expertise, with burgeoning call centers and outsourcing, and with Bhagat's novels stacked in bookstores all over India, now selling in the tens of thousands, that other authors, outside India, tried a hand at capturing the zeitgeist. In 2006,

Canadian film-makers produced a documentary, *Bombay Calling*, about young Indian call-center workers.¹⁹ A television show about outsourcing and a call center called *Outsourced* (2010–11) was made in the United States. It lasted only one season, but attracted critical attention.²⁰

At around the same time, another novelist attempted to tell the digital story. Bharati Mukherjee, an established Indian-American writer, then in her seventies, published *Miss New India* in 2011. Like its counterparts written in India, Mukherjee's novel is centered on the themes of a young person's search for personal autonomy and love. More importantly, this tale never loses sight of the danger young Indian women confront when they transgress boundaries. The sense of this danger has recently reached a crescendo in the Indian press and been picked up by the international media, with stories of call-center workers being raped. Before turning to the journalistic stories and the narrative that they use, it is useful to look at one fictional character, Anjali, whose story is reflected in the many current news stories of call-center workers.

In the case of Mukherjee's *Miss New India*, the main character is not the IIT guy, or the cell phone / tech-savvy character of Shyam, but a young, naïve girl who moves to Bangalore from her provincial town in Bihar to work in a call center. Using Anjali Bose as her third-person protagonist, Mukherjee tries to communicate this social upheaval, and indeed, tries to enter the same world that Chetan Bhagat recreates. Her version, as noted earlier, lacks the slangy authenticity of Bhagat's. Mukherjee simply does not talk the talk. At the same time, her focus on Anjali Bose, and Anjali's sexual experiences, presages India's own most recent journalistic narratives of young women, call centers and rape.

America—always there, as the destination of success in Madras in the nineties, as the place where the good teacher studied at IIT in *Five Point Someone*, and as the stupid customer on the end of the line in *One Night*, is also present in *Miss New India*. In Mukherjee's telling, America is present as the helper in Anjali's move to Bangalore. Her teacher, Peter Champion (!), is an American who has lived in her provincial home town of Gauripur for decades. Thus, in the beginning of the novel, America is not the distant goal or the distasteful customer, but the kind teacher. At the same time, complicating the sexual landscape of the portrayal, Peter is gay. This also solves a dilemma for the author, for Anjali's relationship with him can be complex, but since it is not romantic, she can leave town.

Anjali, Peter's brightest student, is pressured by her middle-class parents to agree to meet potential husbands. She refuses each one. Finally, she allows herself to meet one of the boys, Subodh: "And she felt comfortable, secure, in Subodh's company. This is how she had imagined it, driving through the countryside in a red car with a handsome, confident husband. It could work. She felt certain that her mother and sister had never known such a moment."²¹

The suitor takes her away to a field near her house, and rapes her in his car. He says, during the assault, "Don't be stupid. I'm going to marry you.... Your father almost begged me to."²²

That night, Anjali flees to her teacher Peter's house and leaves the next day for Bangalore. In that fast-growing city, with the help of Peter's money and advice, she will find a place to live, and train to work in a call center.

Anjali's plight, and her solution to her situation is an echo of Bhagat's Esha of the call center, who has abandoned her family and birthplace. These are women on their own. In the *New York Times* review of *Miss New India*, Akash Kapur reminds us, accurately but perhaps with not too much originality: "Nations are narratives. Every country is shaped by its particular set of ideas and myths. Inevitably these are simplifications, often clichés, but they hold a country together, imposing a certain coherence on diverse populations. The narrative of modern India has changed over the last few decades."²³

Kapur is correct, of course. The young brides lining up for H-4 visas in Madras all those years ago and the young women working in the call centers are part of the new narrative of India. Were the women going to the United States who barely knew their husbands going to be alright? Were the women working at night safe?

More recently, another narrative has gained ground, one that had been building but that exploded in December 2012 with the rape of a young woman in Delhi, who was going home one night with her software-engineer boyfriend after watching *The Life of Pi*. The stories making up this narrative were news stories, and they owed nothing in the style of their telling (on the surface) to the novels and movies of call centers and/or to the changes in the workplace. They were simply stories of assaults on women. From the very beginning of the technical revolution, there have been stories of the dangers to women. People knew that the women doctors working at transcription centers needed to have transport at night. The growth of women's shelters in the United States that focused on South Asian women pointed to another danger. But the huge numbers of call centers, young working women, and even cell phones (used to contact gang members and rapists and track potential victims) now became part of the narrative.

On December 29, 2012, the Delhi rape ended in the death of the young victim, in Singapore, where she had been medically evacuated for expert treatment. By the following September the rapists had been convicted. During that time, follow-up international news stories gave the world a picture of the victim, and India underwent, by all accounts, an almost frenzy of rape awareness, and for politicians an acute demonstration of the power of an incensed citizenry.

Many stories were written to explain the circumstances of this particular rape—by now generally referred to as "the Delhi rape." The following report, in England's *Daily Mirror*, focuses on the victim's ordinary life and economic situation. Headlined "35 Pence an Hour: Delhi Rape Victim Jyoti Singh Worked Nights at IBM Call Centre," the story supplied these details:

Delhi rape victim Jyoti Singh worked night shifts in an international call centre for just 35p an hour, the *Sunday People* can reveal. The Indian medical student, 23, worked from 7 pm to 3 am for IBM to pay her way through college. Despite her fluent English she earned as little as £60 a month, her family say. Dad Badri, 53, also worked double shifts as an airport worker. Jyoti's brother Gaurav, 20, said: "She worked very hard. She slept only two hours and we had to wake her up so she could get up early in the morning." IBM refused to confirm Jyoti worked for the firm saying it was "safeguarding the victim's identity," though the family has allowed her to be named.²⁴

When the assailants were convicted, international news outlets again used the story to reiterate that the rape had become a symbol of the dangers to and mistreatment of Indian women. Reporting for the Associated Press on Yahoo, the story was told in this way: “An Indian court Friday sentenced to death four men for the gang rape and murder of a young New Delhi woman, ordering them to the gallows for a brutal attack that riveted India, where it became a symbol of the widespread mistreatment of women and the government’s inability to deal with crime.”²⁵

But even while that case was wending its way through the courts—fast-tracked because of the political fallout—a photojournalist was raped in Mumbai on August 26, 2013. The *New York Times* picked up the story from Mumbai only in October, after the verdicts in the Delhi case. Reporting on this Mumbai story in the U.S. press was spurred by widespread discussion of “the Delhi rape.” The *Times* noted:

At 5:30 p.m. on that Thursday, four young men were playing cards, as usual, when Mohammed Kasim Sheikh’s cellphone rang and he announced that it was time to go hunting. Prey had been spotted, he told a friend. When the host asked what they were going to hunt, he said, “A beautiful deer.” As two men rushed out, the host smirked, figuring they did not like losing at cards.

Two hours later, a 22-year-old photojournalist limped out of a ruined building. She had been raped repeatedly by five men, asked by one to re-enact pornographic acts displayed on a cell phone. After she left, the men dispersed to their wives or mothers, if they had them; it was dinnertime. None of their previous victims had gone to the police. Why should this one?²⁶

And, of course, like Anjali Bose in Mukherjee’s novel, there is an endless supply of young women in India. Just days after the Delhi rapists were sentenced to death, the *Times of India* reported yet another story. Again, call centers, cell phones, and ultimately, information about the rapes on-line are the motifs. “Call centre employee gang-raped in Gurgaon,” reads the *Times*. Gurgaon is the place where Chetan Bhagat’s fictional call center is located. This all-too-real story continues:

A 19-year-old call centre employee was raped by three men here early on Wednesday, police said.

The young girl was returning from her friend’s birthday party in sector 46 of Gurgaon post-midnight on Wednesday, police said.²⁷

The rape stories do not end, and their connection to the digital world of work, women, and call centers that connect with customers globally will not end. There will be studies, investigations, and more coverage in the international press. In 2013, Harvard announced a study of the rape crisis in India, focusing on the legal system in India’s persistence in not criminalizing marital rape. In late 2013, the *Wall Street Journal* devoted an entire inside page to the suicide of a young Indian policewoman who had been bullied by her new spouse. This story would have had no particular journalistic significance in America, if the United States and India were not united by the digital universe—the technical labor of Indians in the U.S. and the outsourcing of jobs to India, those many jobs performed at night, when America is awake.²⁸

Now that the conversation about India's digital environment has moved into mainstream American media, the subject of Indian women and call centers is being discussed there, even as the call centers receive calls from their customers in America. Writing in *The Nation*, Lakshmi Chaudhry thoughtfully points out some issues with this New India:

The young girl who paid an astronomically steep price for an evening out at the movies proved that the so-called "new India" exists in a bubble built on the delusion of safety. A bubble that can be breached at will by the other India that we try so hard to insulate ourselves from. All you need to do is jump on the wrong bus.²⁹

Afterword

Obviously, when something is completely new, we cannot know what is important about it, what will grow, and what is not relevant. We cannot know how the new thing will change us. When computers became small enough for home use, and digital communication replaced analog dial-up, could we have predicted massive shifts in the economy and social experience of India's middle class? Maybe. But the nature of what those changes may have been, or how they might affect society, was a mystery. We can look back over the past twenty years and see the glimmerings of what the Indian digital workplace would bring.

Early on, even the raw data from the U.S. Consulate in Madras revealed certain emerging themes. Women's experiences, in particular, seemed to be on a new and unfamiliar path. But who could have known that years later, the issue of the public safety for young women would be paramount in the minds of many in India, and that the public-safety issue was linked to cell phones and workspaces? Twenty years ago, American companies were already clearly engaged in a new economic relationship with India. But who could have predicated the subsequent easy familiarity, or even mild amusement, with things American in India? Or vice-versa? Could anyone have foreseen that in 2013 huge posters of Amitabh Bachchan, the great Indian film star, would hang over arriving passengers at the Caltrans commuter station in San Francisco, counseling wise investments? Nowadays, hundreds of South Asian techies rush under those posters on their way to jobs in downtown San Francisco. The digital economy was the catalyst for it all.

In the second edition of *On the Internet* (2009), Hubert L. Dreyfus, a professor of philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, and a frequent commentator on technology and the issues arising from new technologies, makes an observation that seems to speak to some of the problems in thinking about the ways the digital age has affected India. Dreyfus says, here speaking of the Internet, that it is not just a new technological innovation, but a new type of technological innovation; one that brings out the very essence of technology.

He notes that inventions have created unexpected side effects: that Henry Ford thought of the automobile as giving people cheap, reliable, individual transportation, but he did not imagine it would destroy the inner cities and liberate adolescent sex. Dreyfus thinks the Internet (and I am adding, by inference, the digital universe) is different. "It is too gigantic and protean for us to think of it as a device to satisfy any specific need and each new use is a surprise."³⁰

Each new effect that the digital world now has in India—on India’s social structure, on women, on work, and on India’s connection with the rest of the world, especially with the United States—seems as utterly unpredictable as the effect of the invention of the mass-produced car on the inner cities. We are only beginning to understand even the simplest effects of India’s digital age. Chetan Bhagat’s novels, films about call centers, and stories in the press about women workers all catalog and describe these effects. The curious connection between different phenomena, from H-4 brides to India’s best-selling author to call centers, is just our initial glimpse of these unexpected consequences and unanticipated events. The connections, and the writing about them, in whatever form— anecdotes, novels, jokes, films, news stories, are just the beginning of the new narrative.

Notes

- ¹ Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xvii.
- ² *Ibid.*, 161–64.
- ³ Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India: The Idea of a Renewed Nation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 92.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁵ Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4–8.
- ⁶ “New/Initial H-1B Visas Issued Worldwide by State Department through Consular Offices over Two Decades,” U.S. Department of State, accessed November 11, 2013, http://travel.state.gov/visa/statistics/nivstats/nivstats_4582.html.

Year	H-1B
1990	794
1991	51,882
1992	44,290
1993	35,818
1994	42,843
1995	51,832
1996	58,327
1997	80,547
1998	91,360
1999	116,513
2000	133,290
2001	161,643
2002	118,352
2003	107,196
2004	138,965
2005	124,099
2006	135,421
2007	154,053
2008	129,464
2009	110,367
2010	117,409
2011	129,134
2012	135,530

“Indian H-1B and H-4: In the three years that correspond to the stories about the H-4 brides, these are the numbers: In 1995, 22,309 Indians were issued H-1B visas. That year, 9,213 spouses and children were issued H-4 visas. In 1996, the figures were 29,239 H-1B issuances for Indians, with 12,292 H-4 visas. By 1997, the numbers exploded: Indian H-1B issuances were 66,829 and H-4 issuances were 27,588,” in “Yearbook 1995–1997,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, accessed November 11, 2013, <http://dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/1997>.

- ⁷ This is a frequent observation about India—that its sexual mores are Victorian. Most recently, the *Harvard Gazette* carried an interview with Jaqueline Bhabha, director of research for the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health. This discussion covers many cultural points, including India’s legal persistence in not criminalizing marital rape. See Christina Pazzanese, “Understanding India’s Rape Crisis: Q and A with Jaqueline Bhabha,” *Harvard Gazette*, September 20, 2013, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2013/09/understanding-indias-rape-crisis/>.

- ⁸ More information about Apna Ghar can be found on its website <http://www.apnagar.org/> (accessed, retrieved December 02, 2013). There had been a slow buildup of focus on violence against South Asian women in the United States with the creation, and then the spread of information, about these centers. There were some early news stories as well, describing centers as “little hubs of hope scattered throughout the USA, especially in cities that have a sizable Indian population,” in “Kiran: Ray of Hope for Abused Women in US,” *Times of India*, September 16, 2002, accessed November 12, 2013, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2002-09-16/mumbai/27291344_1_indian-women-south-asian-women-domestic-violence.
- ⁹ All of the works I discussed in the first few pages of this essay deal with the effects of the economic reforms in India of the early 1990s. There is an excellent brief article “India’s Economic Reforms: Can India Work?” in *The Economist*, June 10, 2004.
- ¹⁰ Donald Greenless, “An Investment Banker Finds Fame off the Books,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2008.
- ¹¹ For a discussion of the astonishing sales figures and the clever marketing of the book at under Rs. 100, see “Priceless @ 95,” *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, India, May 11, 2008, accessed November 22, 2013, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1080511/jsp/7days/story_9254827.jsp.
- ¹² A. R. Rehman, “Chetan Bhagat: The 2010 Time 100,” *Time*, April 29, 2010, accessed November 10, 2013, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1984685_1984940_1985518,00.html.
- ¹³ Greenless, “An Investment Banker Finds Fame.”
- ¹⁴ Chetan Bhagat, *Five Point Someone* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2004), 1.
- ¹⁵ Bhagat, *One Night @ the Call Center* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2005). This section of the novel is reprinted in “The Rediff Special: Chetan Bhagat,” *Rediff India Abroad*, February 28, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ *Three Idiots*. Movie. Produced by Vinod Chopra (India, 2009).
- ¹⁸ “Success of 3 Idiots Breaks China’s Bollywood Great Wall,” *The Hindu*, January 02, 2012, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/cinema/success-of-3-idiots-breaks-chinas-bollywood-great-wall/article2766764.ece>.
- ¹⁹ *Bombay Calling*. Documentary Film. Directed by Ben Addelman and Samir Mallal. Produced by the National Film Board of Canada, 2006.
- ²⁰ *Outsourced*. Television Series. Based on the John Jeffcoat film of the same name and adapted by Robert Borden of George Lopez (In Cahoots Productions) and Universal Media Studios for NBC. September 23, 2010–May 12, 2011, and “Outsourced (TV Series 2010–),” accessed December 12, 2013, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1593756/>.
- ²¹ Bharati Mukherjee, *Miss New India* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 58.
- ²² Ibid., 62.
- ²³ Akash Kapur, “A Parable of the New India,” review of *Miss New India*, by Bharati Mukherjee, *New York Times*, July 01, 2011. Kapur’s own work, *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India* (2012), tackles the change in India with a journalist’s eyes.
- ²⁴ “Delhi Rape Victim,” *Daily Mirror*, U.K., February 24, 2013, accessed December 05, 2013, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/delhi-rape-victim-jyoti-singh-1728827>.
- ²⁵ “4 Men Given Death Sentences,” *Yahoo News*, September 13, 2013, accessed December 03, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/4-men-given-death-sentences-india-gang-Rape-090906857.html>.
- ²⁶ Ellen Barry and Mansi Choksi, “Gang Rape in India, Routine and Invisible: In Mumbai Case, a Group of Assault Suspects Had Little Fear of the Law,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2013, accessed December 02, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/world/asia/gang-rape-in-india-routine-and-invisible.html>.

- ²⁷ "Call Centre Employee Gang-Raped," *Times of India*, October 30, 2013, accessed December 05, 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/gurgaon/Call-centre-employee-gang-raped-in-Gurgaon/articleshow/24932295.cms>.
- ²⁸ "Delhi Policewoman Finds Tradition Mightier than the Badge: Enforcing Women's Rights at Work, Cop Faces Age-Old Home Battlefield," *Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 2013. This paper has not used material from Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), but I wish to mention this work as another example of the discussion about Indian women workers taking place in the United States.
- ²⁹ Lakshmi Chaudhry, "Rape in the New India," *The Nation*, February 04, 2013.
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