

Security of women employees in BPO and call centers

SP Kandalgaonkar 13 May 2008

Background

On 4th November 07, twenty two year old Jyotikumari Ramnand Chaudhari, a BPO employee at a Wipro call center was raped and later killed by a cab driver and his associate. The driver was supposed to pick up a male employee but instead of picking up a male employee first, the driver, Purusottam Borate (26) and his friend Pradeep Kokade (20) picked up the victim. According to police, “it was preplanned.”

The news item threw shock waves in the concerned citizens of Pune and IT/ BPO managers. It is worthwhile to examine the responses of officials of industry, police and society at large to the tragic death of Jyotikumari and learn from the incident and do something so that such things do not happen in future.

This note is written to review the process of how our social, legal and economic institutions responded to the event. I shall also try to show the limitations of the so-called managerial approach to the security problem and propose an alternative approach to this vital and human issue of security of women employees.

Basic facts

First, let us see the factual scenario of the transportation facility in BPO industry of Pune. There are about 5,500 cabs engaged in local transportation on about 35,000 BPO employees daily in the city. High profile companies like Wipro, WNS, Converges, EDS, Infosys, EXL Axa use these cabs which are not owned by them They are outsourced. Background check and references are the weakest link in the otherwise efficient BPO operations.

Officials of **Nasscom**, **CII** and HR executives and senior managers defended themselves by pointing out the measures they have taken to tighten the security and made further suggestions to improve the system for transportation and security. Some of the solutions/ options are

- 1) *Post a security guard in cabs of female employees.*
- 2) *Hire mini buses so that more employees would travel and reduce the chances of crime*
- 3) *Use centralized technology to monitor the speed and movement of cab drivers*
- 4) *Improve security and social awareness of employees through training and counseling.*

Now, let us examine the limitations of these solutions with a view to move towards the larger picture of the issue. **The first option** is of additional security in cabs. The preliminary findings of the Security Sensitization Committee formed recently by the Center for Police Research, Pune, reveal that most companies in IT/BPO industry employ security personnel directly through labour contractors. Also, above 40 % of the class IV

employees in cafeterias, conferences rooms, housekeeping and security are employed on contract basis. The data shows that security personnel supplied by these contractors are mainly drawn from northern and eastern states (Patna and Moradabad). Police certify these employees on the basis of reference given by contract labour agencies. As there are no local references, these certificates are mere paper documents. Police do not get accurate information of these personnel. Unfortunately, even companies do not question or demand accurate information since they are not legally responsible for these personnel due to contract labour law. These employees are not educated and not aware about the legalities of employment contract. The contractors who take away 50% of their monthly income exploit them. They work at two places to survive. They are exhausted and demotivated. If security of female employees is given to such guards whose knowledge of local roads is minimal, what would be the quality of security is a big question mark.

The *second option* of mini buses is a sensible one but has been opposed by the employees and their parents as well. Interestingly, the reason for this opposition is that cab offers the perceived status that it comes to their house doors. This is how social status gets preference over security.

The *third option* of using US based technology with software that monitors the movements of cars with the help of a remote control is actively considered by some companies. But it is questionable whether the software would plug all holes in the security system. As one manager remarked: “We can monitor the cars but how can we stop the drivers from committing the crime? By the time we manage to track the errant driver, it might be too late. This software can be useful in post mortem but cannot prevent the crime.

Some companies have assigned car marshals who keep tabs on the movements of the cars. Inconsistent drivers are reported to the agency and are replaced by the agency.

Best HR practices *Option four*

HR managers of some companies have implemented the option of improving awareness of BPO employees with zeal. The common practice is to introduce a **Code of Conduct** and **Dress Code** for employees. The norms of acceptable behavior are written and circulated to the employees. Training and counseling programmes on themes like Family as social institution, Indian culture, relationship at work place, social responsibility are conducted with the help of experts in the field. Personal and group pressure is used in case of deviant behavior. BPO and call centers have a tradition of provocative clothing; hence companies have made dress code with dos and don'ts mandatory for men and women. Cab drivers are asked to undergo breath tests before and after duty hours to check alcohol consumption.

Interestingly the solution to the problem of security faced by BPO employees is dependent on the quality HR function in the company and the quality of the personnel supplied by the contractors. Crimes and other problems in BPO industry have provoked the international trade unions to take note of the situation. They have focused on Indian BPOs, call centers and private security agencies and have found that these organizations

are deficient in work place democracy, as employees are not allowed of form unions. It is pointed out that only democratic processes can uncover the problems of crimes and violence.

The Broader Picture

The Problem of security in call centers is not a micro or HR issue. It is very much connected with the socioeconomic and political issues as well.

Let us consider the macro level economic and political issues that have a bearing on the problem of security. It is a fact that BPOs, call centers and private contractual security service providers are off shoots of the globalized and capitalist economy. Corporate management that takes security as HR issues is also very much concerned about the business issues in competitive markets. The typical logic used by corporate managers in a globalized economy is to outsource all routine and less value added (transactional) activities and retain the core, value added (transformational) activity. Hence HR functions of payroll administration, recruitment at lower and middle levels, performance appraisal follow-ups, security, and transportation are outsourced. The repetitive part of this function is automated with the help of IT and people intensive part is given to suppliers and labor contractors. In Pune, all major manufacturing and service companies depend on labor contractors for transportation and security. It has multiple benefits (and losses also). It is cost effective, with no legal obligations and above all it weakens the positions of organized unions. But in management parlor it is justified in terms of improving competitive advantage, survival in markets and so on. It is interesting to note that with all the debate and discussion in the press after the tragic death of Jyotikumari, no corporate manager has mentioned the root cause of low security in the so called idealized new economy that treats people's issues in terms of monetary benefits. Hence the drivers of BPO cabs will be hired form the agencies that provide contract labour. Nobody can challenge this fact of the new economy.

Social Divide

Also there is a sociological dimension to the specific issue of cab divers in Pune. Interestingly the Center for PoliceResearch, Pune has done a study on the issue. It is found that BPO employees are mostly teenagers and come from English medium schools. They have psychological immaturity, and are unaware of cultural and social responsibility. They have easy/ pocket money since they come from middle class, economically sound families. In contrast, the cabdriver though of same age group, comes from an economically depressed class, is less educated, earns very low income even after hard work every day and is a contract worker, exploited by the agency and the company. The two classes of Indian society in the city travel together every day in closed and comfortable cabs. When BPO teenager returns home, he is dreaming and planning his weekend entertainment. The cab driver spends his time with other youngsters from the same social class. Many a time, the young boys and girls in the cabs misbehave, use obscene language, gossip long hours on cell phones. Their behavior towards the driver is snobbish and arrogant. Naturally, a sense of hatred and jealously is generated in young

cab drivers. They tend to become mechanical and insensitive. They find it difficult to focus when BPO teenagers misbehave in rear seats. When the cab is late, their wages are deducted and sometimes asked to sit at home as a penalty. When cab drivers stay together, as in case of contract labour, they plan the criminal acts of thefts, damage to property and assault on women. These are the findings of the Security Sensitization Committee formed under the auspices of Center for police research Pune.

Conclusion

The security of women employees in BPO deserves serious attention from industry, police and other institutions of the society. So far, the attempts made HR managers and police are laudable but the definition and the solution to the problem needs participation of all players in the field. The issue needs to be dealt at an institutional level rather than at corporate and administrative levels.

(This note is based on information collected from esakal and TNN. Analysis and conclusions are mine)