INTRODUCTION AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

The birth of the modern age is marked by the onset of industrialization. Industrialization has metamorphosed man’s life style almost all over the world. In the pre-industrialization era, man lived in a predominantly agricultural civilization, and followed the cycles of nature. But the industrial revolution ushered in a life style where man organized his activities and consequently his society in accordance with the artificial rhythms imposed on him by the industries that he followed.

These changes have indeed brought about great economic prosperity and that has naturally helped man to improve the quality of his life in certain ways. For instance, man’s life span has improved greatly, and living has been made safer with the great improvements in science and technology and medicine. Man has conquered space geographically and far above the earth, in the skies. The conquest of space has brought about the conquest of time also.

But man has been paying a heavy price for such conquests, too. If his life span has increased, the inherent risks in this new life style have polluted that span of life. Man has lost his relaxed pace of life and his calm internal and external atmosphere. If the killer diseases of the past have lost of much of their sting, the new killer diseases have taken their place, and are more difficult to control, let alone eradicating them. Man’s industrial life is spreading fast all over the globe, and the mixed blessings of
industrialization are now affecting all the people of the earth. Developing and undeveloped countries are striving, and vying with one another, to become industrialized. So the problems to which industrialization has given birth are now universal problems.

The developments in science and technology in the very recent past have been explosive and far reaching. The pace of all organized activities has increased incredibly in the past two or three decades with increased and increasing mechanization, not just in the advanced world but all over the world. The coming of the computer, for example, has ushered in unforeseen powers of expanding human control over information: its gathering, storing, retrieval and application, and also its communication. Inventions like cell phone have revolutionized life in families, life in the business field, and life in all society. These developments have enabled us to bridge the rural-urban gap, and also enhance the accessibility of even remote corners of the world, bringing even people in remote corners of the world closer to the more advanced modes of life in the progressive world. A student of commerce has to take account of all this in order to grasp the changes that are fast taking over the modern world and handle them profitably and sustainably.

One of the important results of these modern developments is the bursting of the traditional national boundaries in matters of economics and trade and industry. These developments are sponsored and strengthened by modern science and technology which have become inseparable now. Industrialization in its wake brought about immense changes in world economy and world politics, and spawned imperialism and colonization and capitalism. The western world derived the greatest share of these benefits, and it
took the rest of the world nearly two centuries to catch up with these advanced western countries. This has meant extensive westernization of the non-western world.

Industrialization was instrumental in bringing in fundamental social changes, and some of these changes were hastened and aggravated by the two world wars and the smaller wars that punctuated the twentieth century and continue to dog the new century. When the majority of the male work force that powered the traditional agricultural and industrial operations of the world was diverted to continued warfare, their place in these fields had to be taken over by women. It was during the war that women entered the world of regular and organized employment outside the family. This was a momentous development, releasing them from the age-old confinement to the four walls of the house, enlarging their vision of the world through education and formal training, and brought them a measure of economic independence and at least a limited amount of individuality and even autonomy. Modern education became accessible to them. It was realized that women could competently take up other jobs hitherto been male reserves. During the war women were involved even in intricately technical jobs like the fabrication of bomber planes-it is said that the planes that bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki finally ending the Second World War were fabricated by women. These developments brought them a good deal of empowerment. The other side of these developments is of course that it brought them into equal partnership with man in the disadvantages of the modernized industrial way of life. Thus now both men and women are equal inheritors of the boons and banes of industrialization and modernization.
While these changes are western in their origin, they have become universal now to a great extent. Even traditional societies like the Indian have responded positively to these changes. Of course, such changes, when they are very fundamental, do not take place very completely; traditions and changes coexist somewhat uncomfortably. Growing westernization and urbanization and industrial conglomeration have led to many changes in the traditional society. Old taboos and restrictions are giving way to new ways and departures from tradition. Even strong age-old structures like caste and religion are losing their primacy and becoming subordinate to new sentiments and new norms and compulsions.

The industrial sector in India is developing very fast in our contemporary world. The trend of public sector undertakings dominate the industrial landscape has changed, and is giving way to a large scale mixed economy in which private capital and corporate undertakings are becoming progressively predominant. One of the stimulating elements in this development is the opening up of Indian economy to outside influences like foreign capital, foreign industrial and trade practices, etc. The official policy has now veered to liberalization and globalization, and though there are virulent critics of the processes in India, they are potent influences which nobody can miss noticing. The contribution that the industrial sector is making to India’s foreign exchange and other vital needs is enormous.

This development is greatly facilitated by the spread of higher education in India after independence especially. Even in the British days, education of the western type had made great strides. The vast, teeming population of India is one of the enabling and
enriching factors in this regard. So today India has the world’s largest college-educated population, well exposed to science and technology. Historical circumstances have also contributed to the great number of people who could handle the English language. So, apart from India’s growing capacity to export industrial products, it has a large pool of academic and technical expertise, an expanding pool of qualified human resource which could also be imported. The numbers of Indian experts in key industries in the developed world indicate the great strides India has made internationally. This had given rise to the outcry against brain drain in India because the Government of India has, after independence, subsidized higher education to a large extent. Primary education and education up to the higher secondary level is also easily accessible to all Indian children of both sexes. Even remote villages could now boast of schools, and state governments and the central government are trying their very best to modernize the education given these millions in terms of academic content and infrastructure so that they are exposed as much as possible to practical training.

This means that this traditionally patriarchal culture is fast moving into a culture that offers woman a better deal. But such changes cannot become complete overnight. So there is the uncertainty and fluidity in modern Indian society which characterizes all social change of a fundamental nature. India’s contemporary society is slowly getting attuned to the modern ways of life, without completely abandoning tradition. This involves indeed a lot of confusion and conflict for all concerned. Any study of the contemporary society from the commercial angle has to take account of these historical and social circumstances of the country and of the world. In modern studies the
convergence of specializations like Economics, Sociology, and Psychology has to be grasped well for a thorough understanding.

Till recent times, trade and industry were marked by national interests, and even when the trade and industry of a country overflowed its political territories they maintained their national identity. For instance, industrialization in England led to the British markets overflowing the national limits and eventually to the establishment of an empire over which the sun never set. Such developments led to fierce political and commercial tensions in the modern world, and they had far reaching global consequences because eventually they led to the industrialization and westernization of the rest of the world, especially the non-western world. But in the contemporary world, this national identity is giving way to the trend of globalization. To improve their viability and maximize their profits, trade and industry now resort to innovative practices like finding trained personnel for their specialized jobs in other countries where expertise and infrastructure are available at a cheaper price. Sometimes, big corporate entities do not hesitate to open production centres in places where trained personnel and markets coexist. This practice is now fast spreading so much so that some of the societies and governments of advanced countries are getting worried about their innovations and are trying to reverse the trend. One of these innovations is the technique of outsourcing important functions of organizations. The objection to the practice is that it lessens the employment opportunities of the natives of the concerned countries as they are snatched away by foreigners who are equally qualified [or even better qualified] who are willing to
work for less pay in their own environment, saving the cost of repatriating these professional experts and providing them with the necessary infrastructure, and higher salaries. In a way, it is an ironic shift from the cry in the developing countries against brain drain—thousands of experts educated at public expense in the liberalized educational market of the country were being absorbed by developed foreign countries which could afford to pay them better. Now they can be retained in their own countries, paid very good salaries helping the companies to do well, but ultimately resulting in the capital drain of the advanced countries.

Since educational opportunities in India are accessible to both genders, India has quite a large supply of women workforce. The government does not discriminate between men and women in the matter of recruitment for jobs. Depending upon the practical considerations of the private employers, there might be varying amounts of discrimination in the private sector. But by and large it could be said that there is not much of evidence of discrimination against women employees in India. This means that women are reasonably well represented in the fields of employment. Again, in matters like pay, promotion and other factors relating to career, the government does not enforce any discrimination.

However, women have their special problems as workers outside home. They have to contend with sexual discrimination from traditional people and unprincipled male counterparts in the workplace and elsewhere. The law recognizes the special conditions of women that justify the allowance of special privileges for women-like maternity leave etc. They are also given some special privileges in matters like transfer, shift duty
allotment, etc. Yet it cannot be denied that women workers in India face special problems peculiar to their gender. Domestic, family life is still very much based on gender role conventions. So women have very often to contend with domestic responsibilities connected with home making even when they are employed outside the family.

Conditions of work in modern establishments have certain special features. Even from the early days of industrialization when division of labour and specialization came into vogue, certain of these problems were identified. For instance, division of labour makes for boredom and a sense of stagnation in the workers. The busy schedule of an industry requires unremitting attention to the work—which may happen to be tediously repetitive—which aggravates the boredom. A sense of wholeness, the element of enjoyment that comes out of self-expression and enjoyment of the work is lost because division of labour limits a worker to a limited set of jobs. This deprives the worker of his/her sense of achievement and a sense of belonging.

The mechanization that accompanies industrialization imposes a merciless loyalty to time schedules. The machine’s pace has to be maintained by its tender, whatever the cost. The rate at which machines contribute to production demands constant attention to the provision of raw material and unwavering attention to their pace of work. The big investment that machinery requires makes it imperative that the investor arranges for the continuous and competent exploitation of the machinery. And machinery has to be maintained and updated, and such updating has become more of a necessity in today’s
fast changing world. Industrial organizations therefore resort to the continuous employment of labour to keep their machines going as a part of the effort to maximize production and profit. Thus the shift system comes into vogue. And in industries which depend on outsourcing in far-away locations, the host countries have to expose their workforce to night shifts to suit the time zone compulsions. For instance, the worker in the information hub in India has to keep awake in the night to be in uninterrupted contact with his counterparts in the other hemisphere. Round-the-clock norms force the employment of several shifts of workers in such industries. While these are very profitable measures industrially, in human terms they overflow with physical and mental health hazards for the personnel, causing individual, familial, social and ultimately industrial life.

Today, even desk work in the office is getting automated very fast. So the difference between desk work and industrial employment is gradually decreasing. All employment today demands rigorous time management. The possibilities that science and technologies have brought into existence have boosted consumer expectations and demands incredibly. The expansion in service provision has further enlarged and intensified ruthless competition. So workforce in any organization is subjected today to relentless unforgiving schedules. Mechanization and automation help man by relieving him from drudgery, but they also demand very close attention to technicalities of performance. The demands made on human attention and creativity and capacity for prolonged periods of close attention to the job are prodigious. Commensurate with all these, of course, the compensation that the workers get for their contribution also has
been on the rise all over the world. In fields like information technology the rise in the emoluments has been phenomenal in recent times, but in almost all fields the improvement has been considerable. This is all the more remarkable if we keep in mind the fact that today the compensation that the worker gets from his work is not merely the salary and material benefits; labour law today obliges employers to attend to the entire life style of the workers under them. Every attempt is made by the governments to reduce economic inequalities and imbalances, and inequalities in opportunities. Liberal thinking tries even to attend to the needs of former workers who have retired from active service due to age, health reasons or other circumstances.

Work under such demanding conditions naturally expects the workers putting all their mental and physical resources at the disposal of the organization that hires them. The pressure that this exerts upon one’s resources is great. This gives rise to strain and stress, and when this condition goes beyond creative and constructive limit and persists for any length of time the workers begin to contract physical and mental disturbances. Individuals and institutions alike have to cope with this.

Thus when we discuss the conditions of the women employees in any segment of the working class these realities have to be taken very seriously into consideration. A remunerative undertaking that inevitably exposes the incumbents to physical and mental sickness defeats its very purpose in human terms, however crucial the undertaking to the commercial life of the country. The present study proposes to deal with the conditions of women employees in the Outsourcing Centres run by the Call Centres in four centres prominent cities of the state of Tamil Nadu in India.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The establishment of call centres as conduits of outsourcing of big foreign establishments is of recent origin in our country and it is to be borne in mind that at the moment India has the greatest world presence in the field and has the potential to preserve the position though there is heavy competition in the field for such predominance.

A call centre or call center is a centralized office used for the purpose of recording and transmitting a large volume of requests by telephone. A call centre is operated by a company to administer incoming product support or information inquiries from consumers. Outgoing calls for telemarketing, clientele, product services, and debt collection are also made. In addition to a call centre, collective handling of letters, faxes, live chat, and e-mails at one location is known as a contact centre.

A call centre is often operated through an extensive open workspace for call centre agents, with work stations that include a computer for each agent, a telephone set/headset connected to a telecom switch, and one or more supervisor stations. It can be independently operated or networked with additional centres, often linked to a corporate computer network, including mainframes, microcomputers and LANs. Increasingly, the voice and data pathways into the centre are linked through a set of new technologies called computer telephony integration (CTI).

Most major businesses use call centres to interact with their customers. Examples include utility companies, mail order catalogue retailers, and customer support for computer hardware and software. Some businesses even service internal function
through call centres. Examples of this include help desks, retail financial support, and sales support.

A contact centre, also known as customer interaction center, is a central point of any organization from which all customer contacts are managed. Through contact centers, valuable information about company are routed to appropriate people, contacts to be tracked and data to be gathered. It is generally a part of company’s customer relationship management (CRM). Today, customers contact companies by calling, emailing, chatting online, visiting websites, faxing, and even instant messaging.

Under today’s circumstances many big establishments resort to the practice of outsourcing, and their call centres tend to be staffed by both men and women. The companies might be producers of high end consumer goods or services and they may be very complex in their organization. But their relations with their customers are managed by men and women who are at best semi-skilled workers who have no direct knowledge of the products or their producers whom they handle/represent. Their job is mechanical but often this mechanical response is directly connected with real customers. As representatives of market-driven producers, they have to ensure that they are courteous and helpful all through, however rude or bad the customers’ behaviour. Being at a job like this for hours on end every day is something that could test the mental, intellectual and physical stamina of any individual. And when such a job does not actually bring the two parties to a communication process face to face, but only ear-to-ear as it were, it is all the more hard upon the employee.
In India, job stress can affect women workers especially. Though women find far easier access to education of all types to day than in the past and relative freedom from gender bias in the matter of recruitment and emoluments, they live under social conditions where traditional role expectations in family and society have not much changed. Though women in many families may be the breadwinners and actual providers, they are expected to be more responsible for the maintenance part of the domestic organization. Biologically, at a certain period of her life, women is more or less committed to child-bearing and child-rearing, and she has other biological conditions which make it difficult for her to support such familial and professional demands adequately. Thus, inherently women are heir to special problems as workers in any type of organization or profession. The peculiar job conditions of call centres expose their woman workers to many special problems. If the health of these individuals and concomitantly the health of the organizations for which they work are to be maintained at the optimum level, these problems have to be fully probed and analysed and understood. Hence, this study on the women operators employed by the Call Centres in four centres in the State of Tamil Nadu in India.

Fatigue is a common result of any employment. Job Stress is a phenomenon that goes far beyond this. Job stress is a chronic disease caused by conditions in the workplace that negatively affect an individual’s performance and/or overall well-being of her body and mind. One or more of a host of physical and mental illnesses manifests job stress. In some cases, job stress can be disabling. In chronic cases, a psychiatric consultation is usually required to validate the reason and degree of work related stress.
This phenomenon threatens the well being of an emerging industry that promises much for the business earning for the country from foreign sources, and promises a lot of employment opportunities with relatively high emoluments. The glamorous aspects of the prospects naturally allure many young people, and many of them may walk into the trap innocently. A study like the present one may help the workers and their employers to tide over the crisis-breeding situation in the industry.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The present study is confined to the prevalence of stress among the women employees in Business Process Outsourcing Call Centres in Tamil Nadu only, even though this Industry is spread all over India. Further the study is mainly undertaken from the viewpoint of the women employees. Even both for men and women working in BPO Call Centres. However, data pertaining to the level of stress were collected from the Women employees of Business Process Outsourcers Call Centres concerned.

1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To review the nature and prevalence of stress among the women employees of BPO Call Centres in the present scenario

2. To study the origin and growth of BPO Call Centres

3. To analyse the demographic and job characteristics of the sample respondents
4. To measure the level of stress among the women employees in BPO Call Centers

5. To ascertain the factors influencing the level of stress among the women employees in BPO Call Centers and

6. To offer suitable suggestions for reducing the stress among the women employees.

METHODOLOGY

This study is based upon both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected with the help of a questionnaire. The secondary data were collected from the books, journal, magazines, reports and records, articles and web sites.

With a view to analysing the level of stress among the women employees in BPO Call Centres 350 women employees were selected as sample respondents.

FRAME WORK OF ANALYSIS

The data have been analysed by using various statistical tools like Percentage Analysis, Standard Deviation, Likert’s Scaling Technique, Chi-square test, Factor Analysis, ANOVA, ’F’ test and Garret’s Ranking Technique.

The collected data were analyzed with the help of percentage analysis, to find the growth of certain variables. The co-efficient of variations was applied to get the extent of variations during the study period. To measure the level of stress and the opinions of the sample respondents the Likert Five Point Scale was applied. Chi-square test was applied to find the relationship between demographic factors and the level of stress. Garret’s
Ranking Technique was used to rank the problems faced by the sample respondents. Factor analysis was used to find the most influential among the other factors. The relationship between the demographic factors and the opinions about the BPO Call Centres was measured with the help of ANOVA.

CHAPTER SCHEME

The report has been organized and presented in six chapters.

The first chapter deals with the introduction and design of the study, statement of the problem, review of previous studies, scope of the study, objectives of the study, methodology, hypotheses, sampling of the study, tools of analysis, frame work of analysis, and chapter scheme.

The second chapter focuses on stress. It provides a conceptual frame work, and definition of the term stress, its meaning, origin and development, and different categories of stress like organizational stress, evolution of the concept, the sources of stress, the consequences of stress, the moderation of stress, and coping with the stress.

The third chapter elaborately deals with the PBO Call Centres, evolution, services, Challenges and the like.

The fourth chapter analyses the demographic and job characteristics of the sample respondents and offers a measurement of the level of stress of the sample respondents.

The fifth chapter deals with the factors influencing the level of stress.

The last chapter is the summary of findings and it offers suggestions for reducing the level of stress and conclusion.