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## **COLONIALITY OF POWER IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT TEAMS: PERSPECTIVE FROM INDIAN AND BRAZILIAN TECH WORKERS**

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### **Introduction**

The global digitalization process sweeping the world in the last few decades is often approached through the prism of some disruptive or innovative tech products, the big tech companies that “built” them or the relentless public efforts to regulate them. Still, the practical picture actually looks much more mundane: taking the form of products as seemingly as simple as an e-commerce banner, a check-in app or a simple sale receipt, developed in global teams bringing together developers, designers, researchers, quality analysts and product or project managers often based in the Majority World – in major tech subcontracting or outsourcing hubs such as India or Brazil – and working directly for clients or subsidiaries based in Europe or the US.

The driving force behind both the development and maintenance of the thriving ecosystem of applications, platforms, and websites sustaining modern digital life is thus to be found in the profound international division of labour of the global software services industry, marked by the longstanding colonial dimension of the modern capitalist world-system (Grosfoguel, 2002).

### **Global research with Indian and Brazilian tech workers**

Drawing from an ongoing global research project focusing on the trajectories and worldviews of tech workers originating from Brazil and India, with substantial experience in such global development teams, this paper aims at understanding how their work experiences and technology they build are shaped by the global coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) and the overall political economy of the tech industry.

Based on extensive ethnographic interviews with these workers and long-term immersions in these two tech giants of the Global South, the research thus uncovers their perspectives on the inner workings of the global tech industry. Through these dialogues with the workers, it is indeed the whole dynamics of the companies they are

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working for, the challenges of consultancy work for clients based in the Minority World and the very social, cultural and political implications of this global organization of labour that became visible.

Taking into account this general context of international division of labour then allows to highlight the complex network of their working relationships and experiences, at the intersection of three major dimensions: as *workers* (in a capitalist wage labour relation of exploitation with a private company, itself working for another company) and *consultants* (in a commercial relationship of commodification where the workers themselves – their working hours, knowledge and skills – became the product to be sold to a client company) from *the Majority World* (in a colonial dimension of domination with managers and clients based in the Minority World).

### **Guiding questions and main findings**

These entanglements, typical of subcontracting consultancy contexts, thus raise numerous questions regarding both the coloniality of production of knowledge and the control these workers have on the product of their own labour. What kinds of pressure are these offshore tech workers feeling or receiving to adapt to social realities and norms very far apart from their own social context but still deemed “self-evident” by clients or onshore managers? What space do they have, if any, to share doubts, to question or even to engage in conversations regarding the social impact and actual use case of the tech products they build? And how does the highly mediated relationship with real users – along with the definition of the overall project objectives – passing through the entire structure and hierarchies of the contracting client companies end up shaping, and limiting, their agency and creativity as technologists?

Engaging in a dialogue with colleagues having previously worked on such global teams, this paper echoed some of the findings of these previous research: such as Seán Ó Riain’s (2010) ethnography of the Irish branch of a US software company – highlighting the ever presence of the market and missing customer perspective in software development – Carol Upadhyia’s (2009) studies on the outsourced Indian tech industry – uncovering the panoptical control and structure of power governing work in software outsourcing companies – or Bhumika Chauhan’s (2025) comparative research in onshore and offshore development teams in India and the US – revealing the uneven deskilling process at play between teams based in the Global North and their counterparts in the Global South.

Still, this paper also emphasizes how the coloniality of power embedded in these global software development teams ultimately ends up having major implications on the ways in which subjectivities are shaped on the remote tech shop floor. By imposing Global Business English as *de facto* workplace lingua franca in either non-English speaking (Brazil) or highly multilingual (India) societies, this coloniality of language (Veronelli, 2015) indeed defines both the prospects in terms of diversity and inclusion – following class, race or caste and how they mediate the very possibility of joining, surviving or thriving in the industry – and the power hierarchies at stake when facing European or North American clients very often with very few or no multi-linguistic experience or

knowledge of the social and cultural backgrounds of the Majority World's team members – failing to acknowledge or even take into account the significant efforts required to express the full range of their knowledge and skills in a foreign language and cultural context, and putting them instead at greater risk of discriminatory hiring practices and more vulnerable to poor performance reviews or even lay-offs.

## Conclusion

Adopting both a workers' point of view and a Majority World perspective thus contributes to revealing dynamics and processes that are simply made non-visible from a Minority World standpoint – highlighting how a subaltern positionality combined with a decolonial lens can actually provide invaluable insights if one simply wants to start understanding the very conditions in which contemporaneous technology development is taking place.

Highlighting the limitations in terms of ownership and control that the vast majority of tech workers behind the global digitalization process actually have on their product of their own labour – referring to the classic definition of alienation in Marx (2007) and subsequent contributions on the tech industry (Mukherjee, 2008; Healy, 2020) – this paper thus aims at questioning the spectre of agency and room for manoeuvre that tech workers could enjoy, if any, to steer their creative practices into a more critical direction. In so doing, it also sheds light on the very constraints imposed by the capitalist mode of production on the kinds of technologies (and digitalization) that may come to light through the complex articulation of the combined labour of thousands of technologists – questioning which conception of value actually drives technology development in a world where the interests of the ever-present client (i.e. private companies instead of end users) are still framed in terms of exchange value rather than actual use value.

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