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Rural BPO cradles young dreams

Innovative project to take IT jobs to villages

G. R. N Somashekar



A new dawn: B. Kiran Kumar along with other employees at Sai Seva BPO in Puttaparthi on Thursday. -

Features

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Recently in Puttaparthi B. Kiran Kumar, 20, begins his day at his father's hair-dressing saloon in Puttaparthi. Similarly, Mr G. Hari Babu from the nearby hamlet Veeranjenyapalli turns milk-vendor in the mornings.

Both these young men, however, nurse bigger ambitions and, in pursuit of their dreams, work for Sai Seva Business Solutions, a rural business process outsourcing (BPO) unit in Puttaparthi.

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The Hari Babus and Kiran Kumars of rural India are the new faces of the Indian BPO sector.

"Sai Seva has given me a new life," says Mr Kumar, barely two months into his BPO job. "It has not only enhanced my self-confidence, but also given me an opportunity to study further." Mr Kumar, who earlier couldn't continue beyond 12th Std, has now enrolled for Bachelors of Computer Applications at the Tamil Nadu Open University.

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A year into the job, Mr Babu, who earns Rs 3,500 per month, trains newcomers at Sai Seva while pursuing his MCA at the Indira Gandhi National Open University.

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Sai Seva (Serve and Inspire Simple Employment for Village Advancement) BPO was started by the management students of Sri Sathya Sai University in May 2006. "Our idea is to help educated rural youth upgrade the quality of their lives without destructing the cultural fabric. We aim to hold back the youth from migrating to cities by providing employment here in villages," said Mr Prashanth R., director of Sai Seva.

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Sai Seva recently got a major boost when HDFC Bank decided to

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outsource part of its work on data capture and profiling of new account details. This means that if you happen to open a new account with HDFC Bank, chances are that your profile and personal details will be indexed at Sai Seva BPO in Puttaparthi.

HDFC Bank's head of operations, Mr A. Rajan said his bank would initially outsource about 30,000 applications to Sai Seva and might later scale up to 3 lakh. Currently, the bank's data capturing and indexing of customer details is done in-house by some 1,000 employees spread across Mumbai and Chennai.

HDFC, which incurs a data profiling cost of Rs 8-11 per application, does not see any cost advantage to begin with as the gains are offset by increased connectivity costs. "As we scale up outsourcing we may see some cost advantage," Mr Rajan added.

Sai Seva's director, Mr Sai Narain C.D.K. said the rural BPO offered clients a cost advantage of around 40-60 per cent as compared to larger cities. Sai Seva has no night shifts and has not faced attrition so far.

"The cash component of the salaries paid is pegged at a moderate level while ensuring all other benefits such as PF, ESI among others. The idea is to make them more responsible," he added.

The BPO employs about 50 people living within a radius of 10-15 km from Puttaparthi and counts the Hyderabad-based rural finance firm BASIX, Royal Sundaram and the US-based mortgage firm Reasource among its other clients.

"About 80 per cent of our employees are graduates and the remaining have passed 12th Std. The concept has taken off so well that we have some 250 resumes waiting to be scanned," said Ms R. Sujatha, director, Sai Seva.

The BPO provides free computer training for potential employees and sponsors some for higher education.

Stating that the workforce was clear about its expectations, Ms Sujatha said, "We have got assurances from the employees that they'll go back and work for parents back home."

"There has been tremendous interest in the concept from elsewhere and we are exploring options to open more centres."

Mr Prashanth and Ms Sujatha run their own BPO firm, Trayee, back home in Chennai, while Mr Sai Narain is head of consumer banking at Standard Chartered in Bangalore and Mr Prasad Ayyagari, another director at Sai Seva, is with an IT firm in the US.

The Sai Seva directors do not take any payment from the venture and all profits are ploughed back for developmental activities.

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