Social Enterpreneurship - Rural Shores

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Contribute

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05/10/2012

(This article is sponsored by Kanan Sachdeva)

R. Sujatha is a founder and the CEO of Sai Seva Business Solutions, a pioneer in rural BPOs in India. Rural Shores, a large scale nation-wide initiative, whose mission is to create 500rural BPOs spanning all of India, and that will employ 100,000 rural youth, was inspired by Sujatha's pioneering work. Rural Shores won the Edison Awards for innovation and social impact. Sujatha describes the concept of rural BPO and talks about the two organizations Sai Seva and Rural Shores.

What is the main challenge Rural Shores and Sai Seva is trying to address?

India lives in its villages. Today, even as the Indian economy is booming and lifestyles changing for the better at a rapid pace, the economic and social divide between Urban India and Rural India continues to grow. Of late, we have seen mass migration of the rural youth to the cities as they do not have employment opportunities closer to home. They get lost in the cities - and the villages are deprived of their youth. Cities get crowded.

On the other hand - the outsourcing revolution that took India to be the most preferred destination because of its quality of educated people at attractively low costs is losing its position to countries like Phillipines because of the rise in operating costs in the cities and the very high rates of employee attrition. If India has to retain its position as the preferred outsourcing destination, we have to find alternatives to offering high quality-low cost options to the clients.

What motivated you to look at this problem?

I was inspired by the words of Bhagwan Sri Sathya Sai Baba who exhorts in his discourses that " Grama Seva is Rama Seva - Manava Seva is Madhava Seva".

I have been in the BPO space for over 20 years running two enterprises in Chennai specializing in Banking operations. In the last several years, it has been a disturbing trend to see many employees join us from rural areas - far away from home and struggling to get adjusted in the cities.

Looking at the processes, I felt that many processes are simple and can be down-streamed, if the employees are trained appropriately.

This set me thinking - if global companies can outsource to countries like India - why not take the simpler jobs to villages? This would address all the problems mentioned above.

Could you describe your approach/solution?

In May 2006, with 3 other friends, I co-founded SAI SEVA Business Solutions Pvt Ltd (SAI SEVA is an acronym for Serve and Inspire Sustained Employment for Village Advancement) to test this concept. Basix & HDFC Bank supported this initiative and we started their data processing activity from our Center at Puttaparthi, a small village in Anatapur District of Andhra Pradesh. Very soon, we scaled up to 75 employees (from 4) - coming from over 16 villages around Puttaparthi. On date we have 140 rural youth working at Sai Seva.
Sai Seva is also ISO 9001:2008 certified for its quality standards in processes, and it adheres to all Information and physical security standards of our clients.

One of the challenges that we faced while setting up the center was the lack of "employability" skills like communication and computer skills in the rural youth. To address this, we started a training center called " Prerana" which trains them with the skills that are fundamental to getting a BPO job. On successful completion of the course, depending on available vacancies, they are given employment in our center.

Inspired by the success of Sai Seva, we decided to take this concept to a larger arena and six of us (Murali Vullaganti, C N Ram, V V Ranganathan, Sudhakar Ram, G Srinivasan & myself) founded RuralShores with strategic investments from HDFC Ltd and Lok Capital with a vision to set up several rural centers across India. Our first Center was set up in Bagepalli, Karnataka in 2008.

How do you measure impact? What is your current impact? What is your long term goal for impact?

As on date, Sai Seva employs 140 youth and RuralShores over a thousand across its 11 centers. This number may be small - but the larger impact is in showcasing the success of this concept. RuralShores has been recognised by Nasscom and several accredited forums and the 2012 Edison Award is yet another recognition for the innovation and the resultant social impact.

Back home, many large corporates have come to believe in this concept and are willing to consider rural outsourcing - a Corporate Social Responsibility program that pays them back rather than being just a charitable act. Many entrepreneurs have started setting up small rural processing centers across the country.
Our vision is to establish one Center in each of the 500 rural districts of India providing employment to over 100000 youth in situ in their villages by 2020.

What has been the greatest reward in this process?

Transforming relatively raw rural youth into workers who can handle business processes for multinational companies and banks with the quality and accuracy that typically one associates with urban graduates, is a soul-satisfying experience. I can see a sense of gratitude in the eyes of many employees and their families for providing the opportunity to work in a modern corporate setting without being separate from their families. I have also had the satisfaction of triggering reverse migration, where some youth who had earlier left for the cities returned to join us in their native village. Some of our employees who joined us after high school, since they couldn't afford a college education, have completed their college degree through correspondence, while working for us and also aspire to do their post-graduation.

What opportunities do you see in this space?

The Rural BPO concept is proving to be successful in India. There is ample scope for expansion of the concept within India. I certainly believe that this can be taken to other countries (like Africa) which have a similar need to provide sustained employment opportunities to their rural youth. This is one way to bridge the rural-urban divide.

What challenges do you perceive moving forward? Are there any killer issues that you are seeking solutions for?

Equipping the rural youth with requisite communication and computer skills is itself a significant challenge which we have addressed with a good degree of success in Sai Seva. However there are larger challenges such as technology infrastructure, connectivity, uninterrupted power, and transportation from remote villages into the center. One of my employees at Sai Seva who lives in a village across the Chitravathi river had to swim across the river when it was in full spate. This of course is not an every day occurrence, but serves to illustrate the kinds of infrastructural gaps that one may encounter in a rural environment. Telecom infrastructure has improved considerably and made inroads into rural areas, but we have to manage the electric power constraints using diesel-powered generators. However, these are noisy and contribute to environmental pollution and not the ideal solution.

How long has your organization been in existence?

Sai Seva was set up in 2006 and RuralShores in 2008. We were one of the first to set up and scale up in this space.

What kind of support/collaboration will help move your cause forward?

The trust and support of corporate entities will greatly help in moving this forward. In fact, corporations get the benefit of a very committed and grateful work force at a lower cost without any compromise on the quality of services provided. Subsidies and other other forms of assistance from the Government for training will go a long way in scaling up quickly. Solar power is an environmentally friendly way of ensuring uninterrupted power supply in rural areas - support and subsidies to install solar photo-voltaic systems in BPO

centers will be very helpful.

Any special message for our readers?

Based on my experience setting up and running rural BPO centers, I
am convinced that rural youth have immense potential and are no
way inferior to their urban counterparts once they are properly
trained. I pray that this tiny spark should fire the inspiration of many
to initiate the rural BPO revolution in India.

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