

IT jobs trickling down to rural India

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A call centre company called Rural Shores is trying to bring the two Indias a little closer together

WITH FANS whirring lazily overhead, several lines of young men and women peer at flickering computer screens as the sound of hundreds of fingers tapping on keyboards fills the room. At first glance, the scene could be that of any office in the high-tech hubs that have mushroomed in many of India's cities over the past decade, helping propel an economic growth rate of almost 9 per cent this year.

But this is Bagepalli, a sleepy town of some 20,000 people deep in rural Karnataka. In the dusty market, barefoot traders sell their produce to locals who depend mostly on farming and labouring to make a living. Some two hours' drive – and a world – away is the bustling city of Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley and home to IT giants Infosys and Wipro. When a company named Rural Shores began data processing operations here in Bagepalli two years ago, it was an attempt to bridge those two worlds and bring urban and rural India just that bit closer.

“We asked ourselves: instead of bringing the people to the jobs, why don't we just bring the jobs to the people?” says Rural Shores chief executive Murali Vullaganti.

Only a small fraction of India's 1.2 billion people work in the country's predominantly urban-based IT and services sector. Given that 70 per cent of Indians live in villages and small towns like Bagepalli, the question of how to bring the boom beyond the cities is crucial to India's future prospects.

“Unless economic development happens at the rural level, the growth that India is experiencing today is not going to be sustainable in the long-term,” says Vullaganti.

Since the Bagepalli centre opened in 2008, Rural Shores has moved into several other Indian states. It plans to establish 500 centres across India by 2017. Each will employ 150 to 200 people.

The company's literature boasts of its aim to “assimilate rural India into the knowledge economy”. Most of those who work at the low-slung Rural Shores building near an ashram on the outskirts of Bagepalli are the first in their families to experience anything beyond agricultural work, let alone of-fice life. The majority have completed secondary school, and some have begun to study for degrees by correspondence course. “When they started here, around 90 per cent, while they knew what computers were, had never seen one before,” says Ganesha Subramanian, a manager from Bangalore. “But they are fast learners, and we have learned much from them too.”

Surrounded by walls hung with posters carrying slogans emphasising success and customer service, the employees, mostly in their 20s, handle data entry work for Indian and multinational companies, including insurance and logistics firms. They also answer customer queries through e-mails.

To get to the Rural Shores centre, M Venkatesh (24) travels more than 40km from his village every day on his scooter. “There are no other opportunities for young people in this area,” he says. “I have learned to type and my English has improved through talking to managers. Having a guaranteed monthly pay cheque means a lot.”