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TODAY

SIMPLY BANGALORE

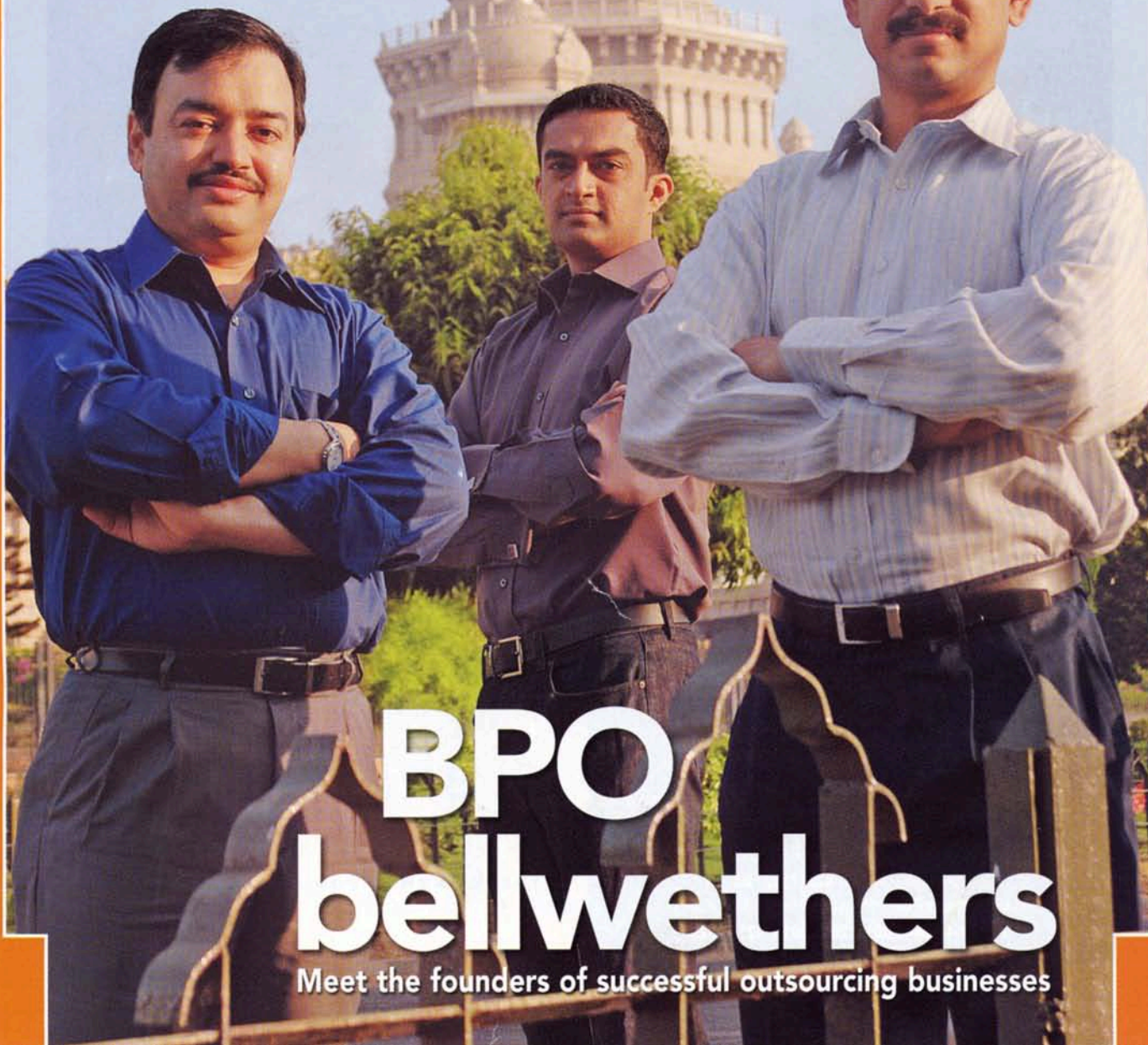
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Breakfasts

(From left) iSeva's Tewari,
Nirvana's Kondur and
24x7's Nagarajan



BPO bellwethers

Meet the founders of successful outsourcing businesses



BPO

BELLWETHERS

as pioneers of the business and knowledge outsourcing industry, they are the cogs that keep the sector going and growing

When most of the city switches off the lights and tucks itself into bed, nearly 1.2 lakh people in Bangalore position themselves before their computers ready for another night at work. Slogging away in brightly-lit offices that could just as well be located in California or Texas, these BPO (business process outsourcing) and KPO (knowledge process outsourcing) agents service clients thousands of miles away. Behind this flurry of activity and Bangalore's unchallenged position as the chosen destination for global outsourcing is a bunch of extremely farsighted entrepreneurs. They help contribute about 25 per cent of India's software exports of nearly \$30 billion (as per NASSCOM 2006 figures).

SIMPLY BANGALORE meets four founders of companies that symbolise the success of the sector in the Karnataka capital. Pure-bred BPO veteran Shanmugham Nagarajan founded 24x7 Customer (with California-based partner P.V. Kannan) while Vaibhav Tewari set up early bird iSeva, now merged with e4e. ChrysCap venture firm founder and Harvard grad Raj Kondur launched Nirvana, and Wharton-trained finance whiz Vivek Kulkarni quit 22 years of IAS service to establish Brickwork India. Here's their story.

shanmugham nagarajan

The 7,000-strong 24x7 Customer BPO co-founded by Shanmugham Nagarajan and P.V. Kannan is the only player in this league to have set up its own outsourcing centres outside India. It is now present in the Philippines, Guatemala and, most recently, Ireland. "We are an Indian BPO going global," says Nagarajan, sitting in his cabin at the Michael Foley-designed office in the Embassy

Golf Links software park. Not bad for a company that started out six years ago with just 20 people. So how did the story start? Well, Nagarajan and Kannan, who operates out of California, had been friends for decades, having worked together at Tata Consultancy Services where Nagarajan led the development of various versions of the popular financial accounting software EX. An MCA from Coimbatore's PSG College of Technology with a degree in statistics from Loyola College, Chennai, Nagarajan says the idea of setting up a BPO was born while the two were having coffee at a Starbucks in New Jersey.

"We travelled on work around the world and sensed a big opportunity in India," he says. Their New Jersey company was acquired by Nasdaq-listed Kana Communications in 1999 for \$150 million, and a year later, the two boarded a plane to Bangalore to set up 24x7 Customer. They picked verticals such as banking and financial services, insurance, technology and telecommunications. The average volume of transactions at the 24x7 Customer centres in Bangalore now exceeds five million a month. Nagarajan has just started 24x7 Ascend, a programme to catch young talent from 400 colleges, and train them to join the industry. The company also plans to have centres in at least 10 strategic locations around the world. They are on expansion mode within India too, and Hyderabad is already on their drawing board. This is India calling of a different kind.

vivek kulkarni

The BPO/KPO sector "is not just about answering calls anymore," says Vivek Kulkarni of the 1,500-member-strong Brickwork India. A Wharton-trained IAS officer, Kulkarni quit his job as IT

secretary in the Karnataka government to launch this KPO. "Our boys and girls are engaged in highly intellectual knowledge-oriented sectors. They do equity analysis for US mutual funds, advise mega foreign banks on the Indian credit card sector and even prepare mortgage industry market reports for a Fortune 500 company." Why not? Kulkarni's Bannerghata Road office employs PhDs, chartered accountants and graduates from the IITs and the IIMs with specialisation in nutrition, healthcare, and oil and gas; qualifications which more than equip them to understand the intricacies of finance in the globalised economy. "India's image in the outsourcing world has taken a turn for the better," says Kulkarni, whose Kellogg Business School-trained wife Sangeetha helps him as a director of the company.

Some of the studies done by Kulkarni's outfit have found their way onto the pages of top notch American business reports and mainline magazines. The company is now looking at the long-term effects of the baby boomers in the US who will have the potential to invest \$40 trillion (Rs 200 million crore) in the next 10 years. Last year, Kulkarni personally trained officers of the \$50-billion National Bank of Kuwait in the Persian Gulf on risk management. "Conducting such exercises is an honour for India," says the founder.

Brickwork focuses a lot on the health sector: one of the works in progress, for instance, is for a Japanese client building a nomogram, a device that helps detect the severity of prostate cancer. "India is poised for big growth and we are here to stay," says Kulkarni, who travels to the US every quarter to meet clients.

While in the government he had to consult superiors and ministers to make decisions, "but now I make my own decisions and take risks". This, says Kulkarni, has paid him rich dividends.

raj kondur

At 35, Raj Kondur still looks like a grad just out of B-school. The truth is, he's accomplished much in his short span as entrepreneur. He co-founded venture fund ChrysCapital (with Ashish Dhawan) and launched Nirvana Business Solutions in 2002. "Early in life, you learn to raise capital, define your strategy and establish business and management systems," says Kondur over a strong cappuccino at a bookstore cafe where he hangs out occasionally.

He was just 28 when he co-founded ChrysCapital, which today manages \$1 billion across four funds and aspires to build the leading investment firm focused on India. The venture's first fund was the largest in the market at that time, and among the top 10 per cent of all funds worldwide of a similar tenure. It assisted in the building of Spectramind, India's largest third-party BPO player with over 16,000 people at a time when there was no third-party BPO provider in India. (Spectramind later merged with Wipro.)

A tennis player, Kondur completed a five-year curriculum at Georgia State University in three years becoming the first student in the university's history to win the highest academic, leadership and service awards, and has an MBA degree from Harvard. "You have to be always thinking ahead in

