

**The BPO Story (Season 1)**

The morning Akash Mahajan left for America, his younger brother Prithvi stood outside the airport, waving to his brother till he could no longer spot him in the sea of international travellers heading to their destinations.

The year is 1984.

The brothers had made a pact—Akash would chase opportunity abroad while Prithvi would keep their ageing parents comfortable and the family hardware business afloat.

They were two sides of the same coin: Akash the dreamer, and Prithvi the dutiful son.

Akash and Prithvi grew up in a rented one-bedroom flat in West Delhi. They grew up watching and learning from their father's stern pragmatism and their mother's quiet creativity. Their father, Surendra Mahajan, who ran a small hardware store, had clawed his way up from poverty and demanded academic excellence and practical pursuits. In the rare moments where he expressed any kind of love, it was through high expectations from his sons rather than words of affection.

Their mother, Kiran Mahajan, who taught art part-time at a neighbourhood primary school, earned little for her efforts but treasured the connection to creativity she had nearly abandoned after marriage. The meagre salary she brought home was her way of contributing to the family's finances. But the real value was in how those few hours in the classroom kept her spirit alive. At home, she found small ways to nurture the imagination in her sons—bedtime stories whispered after their father fell asleep, secret trips to art exhibitions on Saturday afternoons, bright fabric scraps smuggled home for crafts projects.

Though it was their father who was a strong character, it was their mother who had a lasting impact on the two brothers. They watched their mother keep her dream of being an artist alive even if life had other plans for her. She found happiness by making the best of what she had but she never completely let go of her dream. This taught them that dreams are important and you have to fight to stay connected to your dreams.

The brothers were poles apart. The younger brother, Prithvi, absorbed their father's lessons readily, finding comfort in structure and validation in achievement. He excelled in mathematics and science, dutifully joining cricket clubs and debate teams that might bolster future university applications. Akash, however, was their mother's son through and through. He would lose himself for hours sketching in hidden notebooks, collecting stray objects from the street to create elaborate imaginary worlds, and staring out windows during study time, his mind wandering to places far beyond their cramped flat.

When their father's disappointment manifested in quiet sighs or sharp reprimands, it was Prithvi who would cover for his brother, completing Akash's homework after bedtime or creating practical justifications for Akash's artistic diversions.

Ironically, it was Akash who secured the coveted position in Silicon Valley. Luck favours those who are in the right place at the right time. And that is what happened to Akash. It was because of Prithvi's technical brilliance that everyone had expected him to be the one to land a plush job in a big company. But when opportunity knocked on Akash's door, Prithvi stepped back graciously, immediately understanding that Akash's growth would be his growth too. After all, the hardware store could not be abandoned.

Even after completing his BA, Akash could not get a job that suited him. His BA degree was anyway a compromise his parents had reluctantly accepted after his mediocre engineering entrance exam scores.

Bored with life and everything it had to offer, Akash hears about a science competition that is being run by an American university. He picks up the flyer for Prithvi but Prithvi couldn't find the time away from his studies to focus on an extracurricular competition.

Intrigued by the opportunity, Akash's creative mind gets churning. Akash creates an innovative layout for a user manual that simplifies complex computer operations for the average person. Years of sitting next to Prithvi working on his computer science degree gave Akash an insight into how inaccessible computer science was. He would hear Prithvi talk about how computers are the future for everyone. But Akash was sceptical. If computers can only be used by someone with a technical degree, how can they become the future for all?

With this thought in mind, he designed a creative user manual with illustrations and text that was simple and easy to use. His clean illustrations and intuitive instructional flow caught the attention of an American computer manufacturer's representative visiting India on a market expansion trip. The American representative – an American Indian who takes great pride in taking Indians to America to live the American dream - recognises that while engineers focused on technical specifications, Akash's approach to making technology accessible to non-technical users could have a great impact on a growing market need as personal computers began entering homes and small businesses across America.

Prithvi had watched with a mixture of pride and bewilderment as his dreamer brother packed his bags for America. Akash was first hired as a technical documentation specialist but was quickly promoted to the product design team.

Akash is too far away to witness the changes but Prithvi sees how things are home are changing over the years. The family dynamics shift dramatically: their father, initially disappointed by Akash's rejection of engineering, now boasted to relatives about his son working for an American computer company. When their mother is sad about Akash being so far away, Prithvi explains to her that Akash carried with him both the artistic sensibility his mother had nurtured and the pragmatic work ethic his father had demanded.

In America, Akash's early years pass in a blur of fourteen-hour workdays at a mid-level telecommunications company in New Jersey. His technical knowledge and willingness to work harder than anyone else catches the attention of his superiors.

However, his brown skin and thick Indian accent is the butt of many jokes and snide remarks. Over time, he learns to ignore all that. He realises that if he wants his American Dream to come true then he would have to turn a blind eye to racism which was a usual part of his day-to-day life.

Akash has a deep understanding of managing people and telling them what they want to hear so they would be motivated to do what he wants them to do. His years of gruelling effort had taught him that in the tech industry, he had to play the men before they got a chance to play him.

Meanwhile, Prithvi reads Akash's letters aloud to their parents in their modest living room. With the money that Akash is sending home, they have moved to a better apartment. While they marvel at Akash's descriptions of a digitally transforming America—computers appearing on every desk, businesses storing customer information in massive databases—Prithvi's days remain filled with inventory sheets and haggling with suppliers. But at night, he pores over technology magazines, trying to glimpse his brother's world.

With a lot of struggle, Prithvi is able to get a telephone installed in their house. The first call that comes to them is from Akash. The family is overwhelmed at that moment as they feel close and connected to their son who lives so far away.

Prithvi's marriage is arranged to Sarita, a bank employee. Their parents want Akash to get married, too but he is not interested in slowing his life down for his family. When Akash attends Prithvi's wedding, the family first see the changes in their elder son. He is changing, becoming more westernised. He is unable to relate to some of the things in India.

By 1988, Akash has moved up. During a project installing transoceanic phone lines, he makes his first business trip back to India. Over dinner in their new apartment, Akash speaks with a new American directness: "India is going to change, Prithvi. I've met executives from American Express who are looking at moving back-office operations to Asia. You should be preparing for this."

Prithvi smiles politely but later confides to Sarita: "Akash has been gone too long. He doesn't understand that here, change moves at the pace of government approvals, not American ambition."

But things are moving like a whirlwind in New Jersey. The tech landscape is changing, markets are expanding, and everywhere, people who show the courage to have a fresh idea enjoy the fruits of their creativity and hard work. Akash learns to make his voice heard in a room full of white people. He attends international conferences and absorbs how the world is changing before his eyes.

Akash gets a job at a tech giant. Akash is now working in GenTech's international division.

1991 brings economic liberalization to India. Those living in India start feeling the changes of what this means. Markets start having new products, TV shows and movies are changing, as are people's aspirations and ways of living.

Prithvi sees the world changing around him and sometimes feels the pinch of being stuck at the hardware store. He knows he is capable of so much more. But he sees his father's love for the hardware store that always supported the family, he doesn't have the heart to let go of it.

Akash calls Prithvi at midnight, ignoring the time difference: "This is it! This is the moment India will transform."

Akash has befriended a visionary Indian businessman named Praveen Bansal, who is exploring GenTech first operations in India. Praveen Bansal was different from anyone else Akash had ever met. While everyone else had written India off, Praveen was confident that India would be the next big destination for call centres. Akash is inspired by Praveen's ideas and realises this is exactly the path he wants to take up.

Akash understands that the first thing to do is to convince Prithvi to go on this crazy adventure with him.

Over weekly calls, Akash pressures Prithvi: "You need to get in early. I can help secure a contract for call centre operations. Use the hardware store's savings."

Prithvi is swayed by Akash's ambition but is also scared. He has a family to take care of and couldn't put their savings at risk.

One day, Prithvi is walking back to his house. He takes a quick look around his neighbourhood, seeing the first satellite dishes appearing on rooftops and watching roadside telephone booths multiply. At home, Sarita tells him about the TV dish that their neighbours have put up. He sees the desire in Sarita's eyes and is moved by the want to do something more special for his family.

Perhaps Akash is right. When Prithvi finally agrees, it's as much from fraternal loyalty as conviction.

The next few months are spent with Akash and Prithvi planning out how they will begin a call centre in India. Akash sends Prithvi a ticket to America and they spend 2 months together understanding the landscape and what all needs to be done. They meet investors and potential partners and start dreaming about BPO they will set up together.

Once back in India, Prithvi approaches Sarita's father to help him find a location from where they can start the call centre. Everyone thinks the brothers have gone crazy. Their parents who once were so proud of Akash and now worried that both the brothers are no longer making sense. But Prithvi seems to now be obsessed with the same dream. Sarita sees this and convinces her father to help Prithvi find a place for the call centre.

Sarita's father shows him an old abandoned building in Gurgaon. It looks nothing like a call centre should. The office is small and cramped. This time Prithvi makes the bold move of dipping into his savings to repurpose the warehouse into a call centre.

Prithvi stands amid empty desks, envisioning Akash's American dream, when the power cuts for the third time that day. The backup generator wheezes to life, then dies. A small pool of rainwater expands under the door.

Prithvi realises that his struggles have just started. Dipping into his savings even more, he decides to hire a manager – Milind - to help him with the day-to-day work.

"Sir, the Department of Telecommunications requires seventeen different approvals for international lines," explains Milind to Prithvi after another long day of getting approvals.

Milind is a sharp, fast-talking man in his early 30s. It has only been 2 weeks since he joined this job. With a history of not being able to stick to an office job, Milind shares the same entrepreneurial spirit that the brothers had.

It does not take long for Prithvi to understand that they have hit another roadblock in approvals. They cannot move forward till they pay a bribe to all the officials.

When Prithvi relays this to Akash during their weekly call, his brother's voice crackles with frustration across the undersea cables: "Don't pay bribes! That's the old India talking. In the new India, everything will be professional, by the book."

"Easy to say from New Jersey," Prithvi shouts at Akash. He feels Akash has totally lost touch with how things happen in India. He is angry and tired of being put in this situation where Akash does not understand ground realities.

Akash and Prithvi have their first major fight. They don't talk for a few days. But both feel the pinch of this conflict.

One day Akash calls Prithvi up and says that he has a plan. He tells Prithvi they will have to try the creative route. Milind is put on the job to find out more about the junior officials at the ministries. As he waits all day to get a meeting with government officials, Milind befriends Soham. Soham is a lowly peon but well connected to all the decision-makers. Milind quickly finds out that Soham needs help to get his son into a prestigious college. Prithvi pulls all the strings he can manage and gets this done.

Grateful for Prithvi's help with his son's college admission, Soham smartly guides their paperwork through the labyrinth while all the time giving important updates and inside information to Soham.

The monsoon of 1993 tests them severely. Floodwaters destroy equipment worth lakhs of rupees. Diesel for generators is rationed. The local telephone exchange fails during a critical call with prospective American clients. After each setback, Prithvi sits alone in the darkened office, wondering if he should return to the simple certainty of the hardware business. But each time, something stops him—the excitement in Akash's voice every time they talk.

But Prithvi knows that there are many more loops they need to jump through. Without Akash's knowledge, he starts paying bribes to get this moving when things get desperate.

By early 1994, their situation has become desperate. Initial investors withdraw. Indian banks laugh at their business plan. "Call centres in India? Who will trust Indians to handle American customer service?" a bank manager asks dismissively.

Akash finds out about the bribe that Prithvi has been secretly paying and is furious. They get into another fight, both of them unable to understand each other's points.

Akash spends more time with Praveen Bansal who advises him that things will not happen fast. The trick is to strike when the iron is still hot.

Some time goes by and Akash can feel Prithvi's energy dipping. In a desperate attempt, Akash arranges a make-or-break demonstration for American investors without consulting Prithvi about their readiness.

Prithvi pulls together everything he can in a short span of time. He hires people, trains them and entices them with quick money they can earn if they join this project. He asks everyone to get dupattas and saris from their homes to create partitions in the makeshift call centre.

The night before the demonstration, Prithvi paces the facility where borrowed equipment has been temporarily installed. Akash arrives from America with the potential investors in the middle of all this.

The trained employees are ready but lacklustre. Some calls drop as soon as they come in. When a call does connect, employees are unable to understand the thick American accent on the other end. A couple of employees give up after a couple of call and leave the call centre. Some of the cubicles are empty. Nothing works as it should.

The demonstration fails spectacularly. International lines drop. Power fluctuations cause equipment to malfunction. The potential investors leave shaking their heads.

That night, again, the brothers have an argument bigger than any they had had before.

Prithvi finally erupts: "You sit in America making promises I have to fulfil! You don't understand what we face here—the bureaucracy, the infrastructure, the costs of your imported equipment with 100% duties!"

For the first time, Akash has no immediate answer.

This crisis becomes the turning point. Akash realises that he would have to stay in India for some time to support Prithvi through these struggles.

Where Akash saw only obstacles, Prithvi began to see opportunities for innovation. He partners with a local engineering college to modify available technology. He identifies an area in Gurgaon with better infrastructure and convinces other businesses to share power backup systems. He builds relationships with telephone exchange technicians who teach him how to strengthen connections. He cracks a deal with cab company owners and caters to begin services to the call centre.

For imported equipment facing prohibitive duties, Akash finds returning NRIs willing to bring components as "personal electronics."

By mid-1995, Akash has assembled a small team of engineers who believe in the vision. Akash is surprised when Prithvi begins asserting his own ideas during their calls: "We're not just implementing your American model anymore. We're creating something new that works in Indian conditions."

The recruiting challenge proves as difficult as the technical ones. The educated young graduates with good English skills viewed "answering phones" as beneath them.

This time it is Prithvi who has a new idea. Having a good understanding of what Delhi society values, Prithvi transforms this perception by creating a "finishing school" approach, positioning the work as "international business communication." They partner with an English-language institute for specialised training. Akash gets a hold of actual customer interactions from the US and uses it training materials. And they introduce performance-based incentives, a novel idea at that time, giving all employees the motivation to earn better if they do better.

Just as their operation finally seems viable, the government telecom monopoly VSNL raises international bandwidth rates by 200%, threatening to make their business model collapse. Their approved lines face mysterious "technical delays."

Through persistent networking, Prithvi connects with a forward-thinking telecom secretary - Gopalakrishna Subbaiah - who recognises the industry's potential and helps establish a special regulatory category for their operations. Prithvi is able to explain to Subbaiah the benefits to the country if call centres open up in India. For the first time, Subbaiah sees that it is not about doing the bidding of the white man but providing job opportunities to Indians.

With Subbaiah on their side, things start moving smoother. It seems they are almost at their goal.

In the weeks leading up to their launch, Prithvi barely sleeps. Their small office begins to take shape. Rows of cubicles are assembled. Computers are installed. The telecom equipment arrives and is mounted on the roof. Engineers test and retest the lines. The custom software is loaded and crashes repeatedly until bugs are fixed. At the same time, Prithvi, with the help of Milind, have picked out twenty-five young people with polished English who undergo intensive training on American culture, customer service protocols, and the specific insurance products they will support.

But another hitch arises. The American investors have suddenly lost confidence in the arrangement. Akash and Prithvi can see their entire dream come crashing down and, along with that, all their life savings. The brothers are at the call centre, drinking and nervously imagining what their life will look like if this deal does come through. Suddenly an idea strikes Akash.

He goes to a computer, puts on the headset and dials Matthew Dane, the client who is about to change his mind.

“Hello. This is Matthew”. His voice is clear on the line.

“Hey. This is Akash. I just got in this morning.” Akash says as he glances nervously at Prithvi.

“I had no idea you were back to the States.” Mattew says.

“I wanted to see if you wanted to meet up for a beer this evening and discuss things again. I think I would be able to change your mind.”

Matthew is not impressed. “Look, Akash, I appreciate your concern. But India is not going to work for us. It’s too big a risk for us. Our customers will expect consistency and quality, not crackles and call drops. Americans are used to clear phone lines. Like you and I are speaking on right now.”

“Like you are I are speaking on right now?” Akash asks. A smile is beginning to form on his face.

“Yes. Lines need to be as clear as they are in the US. Only then will it work.”

“Then I have good news for you and bad news for you, Matthew”. Akash is now not able to contain his excitement.

Matthew is silent, unsure about where the conversation is going.

“The bad news is that I can’t meet you for beer this evening. But you see that is also the good news. The good news is that I am making this call from India. And the line is exactly as clear as any American would want it to be..

Matthew is flabbergasted.

“Well, I have good news and bad news for you too, Akash”, says Matthew.

Akash is holding his breath.

“The bad news is that I have already cancelled my ticket to Delhi.”

Akash closes his eyes in defeat.

“But the good news is,” Matthew added, “I think I want to get another ticket to come over to Delhi.”

Akash can’t believe what he’s hearing. He is in tears. He thanks Matthew and hangs up. The two brothers hug and cry in each other’s arms. In the distance, we see the the sun rise as dawn breaks in Gurgaon.

Two days before the scheduled launch. For Akash, watching his brother transform from the dutiful son who ran a hardware store to the co-architect of this pioneering venture has changed something in him. His bosses always told him that he didn't have the thick skin it takes to be a decision-maker in this cutthroat industry. But Prithvi had shown him a different kind of leadership.

The night before the launch, the brothers sit in the empty call centre. The air conditioning hums. The computers glow with screen savers in the darkness.

"What if it doesn't work?" Prithvi asks, his voice small in the quiet room. "What if after all this, we fail?"

Akash places a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Then we'll have been the first to try."

Launch day arrives. As night falls in Gurgaon and the already empty streets become more deserted, the call centre is buzzing with energy. Prithvi has arranged garlands and a small ribbon-cutting ceremony. Their elderly parents are there, confused but proud. A few local reporters hover near the entrance. The team of twenty-five newly minted call centre agents sit nervously at their stations, headsets ready, scripts positioned, computer systems humming.

"When does Akash sir start the ceremony?" asks Anjali, the receptionist. She is an enthusiastic girl in her early 20s. It has only been 2 weeks since she joined this job. She has a few years of work experience, but this is her first stint at a call centre. It was not easy to convince her parents to let her take up this job and she is determined to impress. She is intimidated by Prithvi and is quick to respond when he glances at his watch.

"Any time now."

At exactly 9:00 PM India time, 11:30 AM Eastern Standard Time, the ribbon is cut. Their parents break a coconut for good luck. Prithvi and Akash take their positions at a special monitoring station where they can oversee the call flow.

The room falls silent. Twenty-five agents sit with their headsets on, fingers poised over keyboards, eyes fixed on screens displaying the American insurance company's customer service portal. The monitors show zero calls in the queue.

One minute passes. Then another.

A small beep breaks the silence. On station 14, a light flickers. A young man named Vijay, placed at that station because he scored highest in the training tests, takes a deep breath and presses the answer button.

"Good morning, Sunlife Insurance customer service. This is Victor. How may I assist you today?" he says, his accent carefully neutral, using the American name they had agreed upon.

Prithvi and Akash hold their breath. The call connects. The line is clear. The woman on the other end of the line, calling from Seattle, begins describing an issue with her

policy. Vijay navigates his screen confidently, asking appropriate questions, and inputting the information. His voice is steady. The training is working.

The brothers exchange a glance as the first call continues smoothly. Then another light flickers on station 8. Then station 22. Within five minutes, ten agents are engaged in live calls with American customers who have no idea they're speaking to someone on the other side of the world.

Akash places a hand on Prithvi's shoulder. "We did it."

The call center that began as a dream, a conflict between brothers, has become reality. On the walls, a banner reads "Global Connect – Bridging Distances." Below it, in smaller letters, their company motto: "From India to the World."

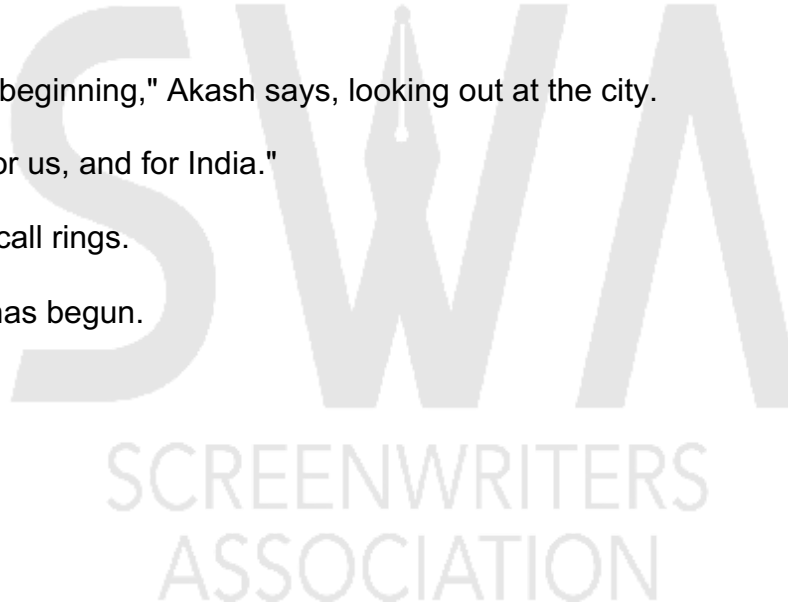
As the calls continue to flow in, the brothers step out onto the balcony overlooking the empty streets of Gurgaon. Lights of some other buildings twinkle in the distance. Somewhere out there, other entrepreneurs are watching, waiting to see if their effort would succeed.

"This is just the beginning," Akash says, looking out at the city.

Prithvi nods. "For us, and for India."

Inside, another call rings.

The revolution has begun.



**The BPO Story (Season 2)**

As season 1 ends with the dawn of the BPO industry in India, season 2 shows audiences the economic impact that the industry brings with it. And the domino effect this change in the economy has on the social fabric and norms. It is the early 2000s, and BPOs are booming across India. Another new call centre, NeoServe, has just been set up by Akash and Prithvi, who are now veterans in this space. NeoServe is a microcosm of the social changes in India, where tradition and modernity are clashing like never before. We meet the young, vibrant employees at NeoServe, each with their unique personality and social dilemma as they manoeuvre their dreams, aspirations, values, and culture in a rapidly modernising environment where the only option is to change, if you don't want to sink. Prithvi and Akash are not untouched by this change. The fierce competition pushes them to reanalyse the employee-friendly principles they started with. Would their clashing personalities be an opportunity for their business development, or turn into a barrier as they come head-to-head at every turn?



**The BPO Story (Season 3)**

The world has changed. People have changed. AI is now the catch phrase and a key decision maker in everyone's life. The BPO industry has transformed dramatically. As AI threatens to take jobs with the promise of enhanced productivity, Prithvi and Akash need to tackle a force that is much bigger than them – one that is a boon and a curse at the same time. Some decisions that were taken in order to grow the business had already created friction between the two brothers, but AI poses an even bigger threat. With AI powering the industry, do the two brothers still need each other anymore to succeed?



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