

THE LURE OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

EDUCATION  
SPECIAL

TECH ON THE HINTERLAND CAMPUS

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# Forbes INDIA

## MASTERS OF EDTECH

WHY SEQUOIA CAPITAL  
BET BIG ON EDUCATION  
TECHNOLOGY, WITH OVER  
A DOZEN INVESTMENTS,  
INCLUDING IN INDUSTRY  
GIANTS BYJU'S AND  
UNACADEMY

*Sequoia's  
MANAGING DIRECTORS  
GV RAVISHANKAR (left)  
and RAJAN ANANDAN*



**PLUS**

IS A  
DUOPOLY  
EMERGING  
IN EDTECH?

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Digital Edition

# Catchers In The Rye

If you go strictly by what 'edtech' expands into, you'd realise that education technology goes back to the 40s, when computers entered school and college campuses to prepare youth for the world we live in. *THE Journal*, launched in 1972 and perhaps the first magazine to cover education technology, captured the journey of pre-internet edtech back in the late 90s.

It may have well begun with the MARK 1 in 1944 at Harvard. As *THE Journal* notes: "Early use of computers in education was primarily found in mathematics, science and engineering as a mathematical problem-solving tool..." Then in the early 60s, professors at Stanford established an R&D programme on computer-assisted instruction in math and reading, allowing students to correct their responses through rapid feedback. And, soon enough, powerful computers and high-bandwidth networks were helping take the knowledge and information to the world.

Today, edtech has evolved to include modern technological implementations, from massive open online courses and in-classroom tablets to interactive projection screens and whiteboards. And, in a pandemic-stricken world, as learning from home became the norm, broadband, laptops and smartphones became the gateway to education—at least for those who can access and afford them.

Edtech doubtless has been one sunrise on the wider bright horizon of pandemic-induced digital transformation. Entrepreneurs go where the opportunity is, and funders where the entrepreneurs are. But edtech is a bit different from, say, food delivery or ride sharing or leasing living spaces: It can't be just about the marriage of technology and content. Which is why the origins of edtech can be traced back to institutions like Harvard and Stanford.

*Forbes India's* special package this fortnight is on education—online and offline, school and home, urban

and rural, real and fake (go to page 61 to find out more about the last distinction). Our cover story is on a venture capital firm that entered the sector early, perhaps before it was a gleam in most Veecee's eyes. Sequoia's first edtech funding round took place almost 15 years ago, but it wasn't until a decade later that it could claim to have got the education bit between its teeth. And that's because, as Sequoia India's Managing Director GV Ravishankar tells Rajiv Singh, who has penned the cover story, most entrepreneurs in the first wave may have had the tech education but little background in educating.

Sequoia stayed the course, and it's a different story today, as it sits pretty on over a dozen investments in edtech, including the two 800-pound gorillas, Byju's and Unacademy, and a handful in Southeast Asia. Don't miss 'Meet the Headmasters' on page 18.

Another big edtech story is on the rise and rise of Byju's and Unacademy, both of which are widening the gap from the rest of the pack with dollops of funding and a never-ending string of acquisitions. Are we looking at the emergence of a duopoly in edtech? Naini Thaker and Naandika Tripathi, who take stock of the action, have an answer: There will be consolidation, but that won't stop new players from entering the lucrative fray. For more, go to 'The Big Small Question' on page 28.

What good are entrepreneurial ambitions and the billions of dollars fanning them if the bulk of India's students cannot benefit from them? When over 10 lakh government schools were forced to go online last March, millions were left out of the learning process, as they lacked access to digital devices. Divya Shekhar captures this grim reality, and what a handful of non-profits—along with a few edtech majors—are doing at the grassroots to bridge this widening gap. 'Beating Bharat's Edtech Blues' on page 38 is a must-read. On any device.

4



**Brian Carvalho**  
Editor, *Forbes India*

[brian.carvalho@nw18.com](mailto:brian.carvalho@nw18.com)

Best,

## STORIES TO LOOK OUT FOR



▲ (From left) GV Ravishankar, MD, Sequoia India, says the VC firm wants to back daring founders who build enduring companies; Byju Raveendran, founder of Byju's, believes that healthy competition drives innovation



# A JOURNEY FROM A BACKLOG RIDDEN BACKBENCHER TO THE INDIA'S 25 MOST INFLUENTIAL STARTUP CEO'S LIST

The word hack is the most dreaded thing today. You never want to be on the receiving end of it. My whole world revolves around it. I typically keep on researching on how cyber attacks are done and how to defend it. These days almost everyday I encounter these situations, but It was not the case when I started taking interest in ethical hacking back in 2004.

I was a computer science engineering student. But after this engineering was my tool to get to the bottom of this. I was so curious that I just wanted the answers and guess what that didn't stop till today. It opened Pandora's box for me. I kept unravelling the deep secrets of how things were in the computer world. I was learning what was definitely not in my engineering books. I think this phase of learning everything from the scratch gave me a competitive edge in my profession and business. I am not trained by the finest of the universities but I have learnt from the necessities and curiosities. I have learnt from life.

Once I started understanding the cyber security there was no looking back. I was discovering the most incredible information every minute. This is how scientists learning the great universe must feel like. There is no end, its just amusement and lot of fun. You are in the awe of this world. I could spend days and months on computers without ever feeling fatigued and I continue to do so. In Army they teach you attack and defence. In cyber security you have to learn attacks if you want to defend your systems from being hacked. There is always a war and you have to think from attacker's point of view. I come from humble background. My family is extremely God fearing and honest. My family cherishes it's ethics and values. It was extremely important to me to be able to sleep peacefully in the night doing what I do. I chose ethical hacking not only to build a business but to create a huge workforce for India who would defend our system in future. I myself have trained close to 60,000 students in cyber security, many of them are entrepreneurs today. To spread the awareness I curated a World Records event where we recorded the longest and largest cyber security marathon with 9870 participants breaking Microsoft's record of 5432. I am also the author of 13 cyber security courses online on different platforms. I am extremely proud of the efforts I have put in for creating cyber security awareness in the world.

My work is extremely challenging, almost everyday everything you know is proved obsolete, but I enjoy this the most as it keeps me on the edge to keep on learning in order to stay ahead in the game. I am not just a technical guy for whom it is just piece of



**Vinod Senthil T, Founder & CTO, InfySEC**

“Today I offer services for companies ranging from FORTUNE 500 to startups in order to build more secure digital environment. I have been spokesperson for cyber security for India at the international level for more than a decade now, speaking at ASSOCHAM and many such platforms.

code, I feel for the poor grandma who lost her fortune as a victim of a simple call made for her password. The ransomware attacks crushes all those people who has worked day and night to achieve what they loose in a day, and I urge everyone “Let's make the cyber world a secure place to live in”. There is too much at stake here. I have used media to create public awareness for Credit card cloning, Wi-Fi war Driving, RFID hacks, website database hacks and countless more. Without these efforts we have just created million doors without any locks.

Today I offer services for companies ranging from FORTUNE 500 to startups in order to build more secure digital environment. I have been spokesperson for cyber security for India at the international level for more than a decade now, speaking at ASSOCHAM and many such platforms. I am also the first Indian to become a brand ambassador for cyber security in US. I will continue to defend our dignity and our lives in this digital world, it really is a binary outcome of either 0 or 1.

Website: <https://vinoxsenthil.com/> or <https://www.infysec.com/>

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CHAITANYA DINESH SURPUR

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Why Sequoia Capital bet big on edtech, with over a dozen investments, including in industry giants Byju's and Unacademy





The RG Halli government school in Bengaluru procured devices during the pandemic to help students continue their education



Angad Kikla (left) and Naisheel Verdhhan, co-founders of CityMall, are building a network of micro-entrepreneurs

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Amrutha Joshi Amdekar wanted to customise her son Agastya's education as per his needs so she went in for homeschooling



During his playing years, tennis legend Andre Agassi set up a foundation to help children from underserved communities

**REGULARS • 10/LEADERBOARD • 96/THOUGHTS**

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414, Senapati Bapat Marg, Lower Parel, Mumbai

400013, Maharashtra.

Tel: +91-22-66667777, Fax: +91-22-24910804.

National Capital Region - Network18 Media &

Investments Limited, Tower A and B, Express

Trade Tower, Plot No 15-16, Sector 16A,

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Editor: Brian Carvalho

**TO OUR READERS**

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**Nandaram Srinivas Goud, Chairman & MD,**  
Orient Spectra Consulting Pvt Ltd

**H**aving opened the doors 16 years back, Orient Spectra Consulting Pvt Ltd, the brainchild of Mr Nandaram Srinivas Goud has earned reputation of being one of the most competent organizations with the mission to transform lives through education.

The manager, business head and educational counselors for respective countries are the backbones of the organization. They have vast professional experience in the field of counseling and advising students about the various study options available abroad, keeping in mind each and every student's profile and requirements; as every student is unique in their own way. The people in their team are empathetic towards the students' needs, and they have the ability and the will to fulfil commitments made to the students.

#### MAN OF VISION

Mr Nandaram Srinivas Goud who is the Chairman, Managing Director of Orient Spectra Consulting Pvt Ltd is well qualified having a rich experience in the field of Overseas Education. He started this company with the aim to provide genuine, transparent information for abroad education aspirants, to reach their career goals and giving the best possible alternative solutions of higher studies in abroad. He believes in quality advice and professional service. He has organized various seminars on career guidance and is well versed in providing effective guidance to the student communities for studies overseas.

#### BIGGEST CHALLENGES

Managing people or rather assembling the team at Orient Spectra Consulting Pvt Ltd was one of the challenges Srinivas faced. There were also issues like raising capital, getting investors and dealing with competition to name a few.



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It is important to have patience and never give up mindset. They were many difficult situations but he always fights back until he achieves. They do not believe in micromanagement as each and every employee knows their responsibilities and delivers their duties on time.

"I feel I had built my team where I had mentored more and realized them to see my vision as their vision and aligned them as a single team. Firstly, we used to believe in quantity rather than quality but later realized quality fetches more results than quantity. We believe in a healthy relationship with the students. Students word of mouth has given us more results apart from other marketing and promotional activities" added Mr. Srinivas.

#### SUCCESS FACTORS AND NETWORKING

One biggest factor which helped Mr. Srinivas in his success is to fail but fail differently and keep moving forward. Their thinking strategy has always proven successful for them, they are always ready with strategy B to face the changing market dynamics. He also likes to spend time with his family especially his mom and he is greatly spiritual. On the professional front, he networks with different social organizations like BNI, JCI etc. He also reads and watches articles about the current market trends to analyze and plan accordingly.

#### LEADERSHIP QUALITIES IN THE ORGANISATION

"Work always in a positive frame of mind and align each employee goal as my personal goal. I always believe in our company's vision - a purpose of helping students achieve their dreams beyond the boundaries. I would want to coach more and provide the right opportunities for my team to grow and boost their confidence. I also take decisions on promotions, advertising and marketing activities so that we would always be in reach of our clients" further added Srinivas.

Every alternate day they host a brainstorming session with 2 different teams regarding a particular issue or scenario, where the employee is encouraged to express their views and plans to find a solution for that scenario. They do role-play activities wherein, employees change their roles and discuss the problems and come to a conclusion so that issues can be resolved and implemented in future. They also impart training programs on emerging technologies/topics for their staff and students.

#### BEST ADVICE FOR READERS

They should have a passion, purpose which can ultimately fetch them profit. Always be abreast with the current trends in the markets, maintain networking and healthy relation with students. Education is an investment and lifelong learning, as the saying goes "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance".

**Mind It**

More people are turning to mental health apps to battle anxiety and stress **P/12**

**Bosses @ 60+**

Hospitality veterans launch a startup after being laid off during the pandemic **P/13**

**Makeover In The Madness**

Personal care brands see wind in their sales even as companies bolster online strategy **P/14**

**MARKETS**

## How Long Will The IPO Fever Continue?

Initial public offerings are the latest stock market darlings. But their dream run could be on its last legs



ADEEL HALIM / BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES



**WHEN A COMPANY RAISES**

money through an initial public offering (IPO) it's usually for the long term. Few investors, however, hold the stock for more than a day. Their aim: Make the most of listing-day gains and move on to the next opportunity.

Aiding them is an IPO market that is seeing levels of enthusiasm (read

oversubscription) not seen since the pre-Lehman days. Popular issues get bids worth several hundred times of the shares on offer. And the first day usually sees hectic buying and selling.

Brokers *Forbes India* spoke to pointed to a market where there is still easy money to be made, IPO financing easily available to high net-worth individuals (HNIs) and

low returns in other asset classes, most notably real estate, as factors driving this boom. "Things seem good for now but sentiment can easily change once a couple of big name issues do badly," said one broker. He pointed to the fact that the Nazara Technologies listing is being watched as a barometer of market sentiment.

Data from Refinitiv shows that

64 issues received bids worth \$5.8 billion (₹42,340 crore) in 2020 and 2021. In comparison, 2017 saw 180 issues receive bids worth \$10.7 billion (₹78,110 crore). Those numbers were skewed upwards on account of the DMart IPO in March 2017.

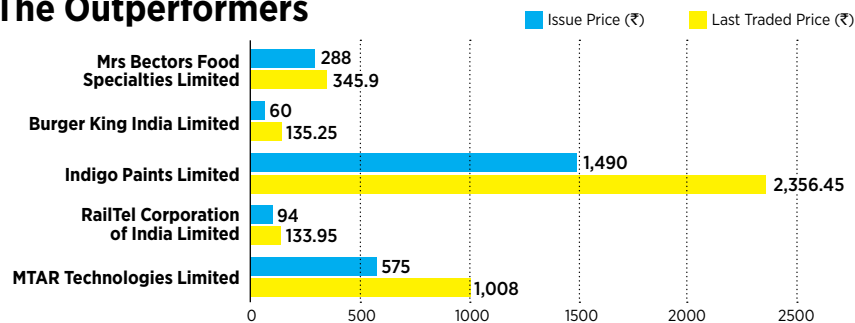
To understand the bullishness in the IPO market it's best to take a look at how leveraged bids work. Brokerages often have large funds that may not be deployed in any given day, week or month. Parking it in a liquid fund would get them 7 to 9 percent. In comes an investor who has a relationship with the broker and wants to block ₹100 crore for bidding in an IPO.

The broker agrees to block the money for 10 days at a rate of, say, 15 percent. The investor then bids for shares many times the number he hopes to receive. The higher the bid, the higher the chance of getting an allotment. On his part he needs to put money for the shares being bid. That is one reason why bids often come in the last few closing hours of an IPO as that reduces the time the funds are blocked for. Bajaj Finance, JM Financial, ShareKhan and Edelweiss have large IPO financing books. They declined to comment for this article.

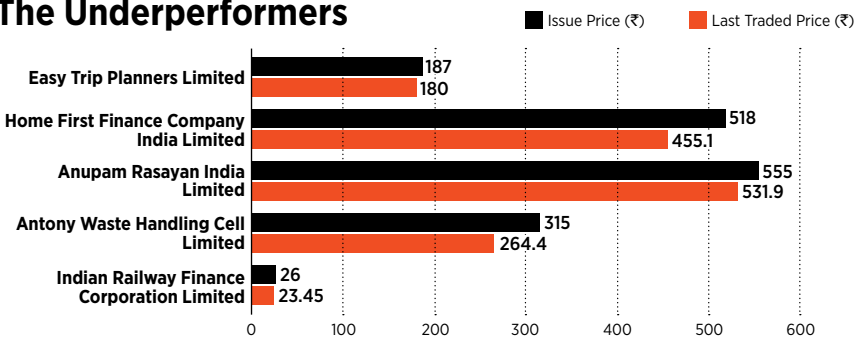
Once the allotments are out, HNI investors typically receive no more than 1 to 2 percent of the shares they'd bid for. So a ₹100 crore bid would work out to an allotment of ₹1-2 crore. Money borrowed at 15 percent would attract an interest of 0.4 percent for those 10 days or a payout of ₹40 lakh for the ₹100 crore borrowed. This is why allotment numbers and listing day gains are eagerly watched. An allotment of 1 percent would mean no gains for the first 40 percent pop. A 2 percent allotment would need only a 20 percent pop for gains to be made. On the other hand, a 100 percent pop can easily allow an HNI to make 18 percent annualised gains in a 10-day span.

**"SENTIMENT CAN EASILY CHANGE ONCE A FEW BIG NAME ISSUES DO BADLY."**

## The Outperformers



## The Underperformers



\*IPOs in the last six months; \*\* Last traded price on March 24

As the market rallied in 2020, a host of companies rushed to tap into what was clearly buoyant investor sentiment. Some like Indigo Paints, which listed in February, had strong, rapidly growing businesses but were priced high. Others like EaseMyTrip, which listed in March, had weak business models. Both issues were oversubscribed 113 and 153 times respectively. Clearly, as time had worn on investors had become more bullish.

“A common problem with most IPOs is they are priced very aggressively. Most got listed at a premium and post-Budget sentiment has been very good. As a result, they left nothing on the table for investors,” says Sunil Damania, chief investment officer at Marketsmojo.com. “In a bad market they would have struggled to get even one-time subscription.”

It is post listing that the market's price discovery mechanism kicks in.

Indigo Paints closed its first trading at ₹3,118, up 109 percent from its IPO offer price. It has since fallen to ₹2,301. EaseMyTrip is down 4 percent below its IPO offer price at ₹180.

As the financial year drew to a close, brokers, investment bankers and companies will be keeping a close eye on sentiment. It could take one large failed listing to tilt sentiment and send them back to the valuation drawing board.

“While we are nowhere close to the Reliance Power stage, investors should be careful about which IPO they bid for especially if it is on borrowed money,” said the broker quoted earlier.

On March 26, Kalyan Jewellers made a weak debut, trading 11 percent below its IPO offer price. Barbeque Nation received bids worth 5.98 times the shares on offer on March 26. Nazara Technologies closed the last week of March up 60 percent from its IPO offer price, while Suryoday Small Finance Bank ended the week marginally below its offer price.

• SAMAR SRIVASTAVA



SHUTTERSTOCK

# LeaderBoard

## COVID-19: ONE YEAR AFTER

# Mind It

With anxiety and stress on the rise during the pandemic, people are turning to mental health apps to get expert advice



### THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS

not only taken a physical toll but has had an adverse impact on people's mental health as well. As a result, there has been a surge in the number of apps that support mental well-being.

One of them is YourDost, a subscription-based app launched in 2014. In the past year, it has been fielding questions related to anxiety, anger, frustration, and loneliness. These, says founder Richa Singh, result in a deterioration of the quality of sleep, and a sharp rise in emotional outbursts. "We saw a 120 percent rise in the number of sessions taken on the platform by working professionals, just as the lockdowns started," she adds.

YourDost has more than 900 experts, offering assistance round-the-clock; it also on-boarded more than 100 corporates in the past year.

Other apps such as Mindhouse, Evergreen Club, and ThinkRight.me are also seeing more people looking for help. Launched in April 2020, Mindhouse has one goal: To make meditation and yoga-based mental wellness solutions more accessible and affordable, says Pooja Khanna, its co-founder. With more than two lakh downloads since its launch, the app was recently introduced in the United Arab Emirates. "We've seen a tremendous uptake of our live interactive classes, and users say our content has helped reduce their stress and anxiety levels, ensure better sleep, and improve productivity while working from home," adds Khanna.

To help people track their sleep



IMAGE COURTESY: PETIT BAMBOU

cycle and gauge their risk of getting sleep apnoea is a free app called myNight by ResMed, launched in 2020. "The idea was to encourage people to practise a healthy sleep lifestyle and educate them about the repercussions of sleep disorders," says Carlos Montiel, vice president, Latin America and South Asia, ResMed. Sleep apnoea is a disorder in which the throat muscles relax to the point of collapse, and restrict airflow.

Petit BamBou, a mindfulness and meditation app available in six languages and with over seven million users globally, entered India last August. "We saw a sharp increase in the number of new users globally—from 5,000 a day to 15,000 a day—during March-April 2020," says Benjamin Blasco, co-founder, Petit BamBou; in India, the app saw a surge in users last August and September, and has two lakh users.

To cater to one of the most vulnerable segments of the population, senior citizens, RPG Group's Seniority, an online shopping portal, launched an app called Evergreen Club this January. "We wanted to address the issue of loneliness and social isolation among senior citizens, which got accentuated due to the pandemic. They have had to compromise on their daily routines, leading to poor mental and physical

health," says Tapan Mishra, founder, Seniority.

Continuing to experience high traffic during the lockdown was another app, ThinkRight.me, which has been around since 2018. It saw maximum traffic between last April and June, a 50 percent rise in daily active user count, and a significant increase in subscriptions.

These apps help remove barriers to treatment, says Dr Roma Kumar, chief psychologist at online counselling platform Emotionally.in. "Mental health apps have the potential to reach people who would otherwise not receive help. They are lighter on the wallet, available for all smartphone users, and ensure greater privacy," she adds.

The pandemic has presented an opportunity for people to talk about mental health. Nelson Moses, founder of Suicide Prevention India Foundation, says, "This might be a good time for the government to seriously implement the Mental Health Care Act 2017. It is time to mainstream the mental health conversation, so that there's awareness, increase in help-seeking and shedding of stigma."

• ANUBHUTI MATTA



To read the full article, visit [www.forbesindia.com](http://www.forbesindia.com)

**6.5%**

India's unemployment rate in January, a drop from 9.1 percent in December, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy



SHUTTERSTOCK

# LeaderBoard

**COVID-19: ONE YEAR AFTER**

## Bosses @ 60+

A group of veteran hospitality professionals, laid off due to the pandemic, set up a bootstrapped housekeeping startup to begin again

**LIKE MOST PEOPLE, GARIMA**

Nagpal, 64, thought the lockdown would last a few weeks. “Last year, March 15 was our last working day... we were asked to work from home thereafter. We were happy to get two to three weeks of working from home. Little did we know that it was going to extend for such a long time,” says Nagpal, who was heading the quality department at Oyo Hotels.

The hospitality industry was one of the hardest-hit by the pandemic—there were layoffs, salary cuts and many restaurants shut down. “From April, my salary stopped coming. And from August onwards, I was not involved in any work. I was laid off. It came as a shock,” says Nagpal, who had worked with Oyo for about three years and has over 40 years of experience in the hospitality industry.

Instead of wallowing in self-pity, Nagpal decided to use her expertise and experience. There were others

she knew in the industry who were either nearing retirement age or had been laid off. After giving it some thought, Nagpal and four peers—Meenakshi Agarwal, Madhu Dubey, Swarnalata Mankikar and Suchitra Naidu, all in their 60s—started SOHO, a syndicate of housekeepers.

The Covid-19 crisis brought with it job cuts, but also presented an opportunity for people to turn entrepreneurs. “This platform is set up for people who have either been asked to retire, are retiring or have been laid off. There is no new opportunity for people who were laid off because the market is tight,” says Agarwal, who has over 20 years of experience in the tourism and hospitality industry.

SOHO was born in September 2020, after long and frequent virtual meetings. “The virus in a way has brought home something that we had been saying for a long time, that hygiene and good housekeeping

practices are non-negotiable in a hotel or hospital space. It’s something customers have started being aware of,” says Nagpal.

The SOHO team has 13 experienced housekeepers across India. The company provides five services—pre-opening support of any new property, which includes preparing manuals, policies and procedures, corporate housekeeping consultancy and training, professional review of housekeeping operations, and quality checks and audits. “We officially started functioning in January 2021, but started getting projects even before that. All of us utilised our strong network... word of mouth was so strong that we started receiving many queries,” says Agarwal.

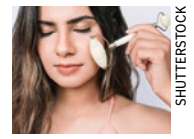
SOHO, a bootstrapped company, has completed one project of auditing and creating standard operating procedure for a chain of 60 restaurants in India while four others are in the pipeline. “A year ago, I never thought I’d be doing what I’m doing today. SOHO is a product of our creativity. It’s a beautiful turn in life. In our previous jobs we had to keep running around... now we have the time to pause and think. There is room for newer ideas,” says Naidu, 62, who is based in Hyderabad and is a pre-opening expert with more than 30 years of experience. She was working with The Park prior to being associated with SOHO.

They took it as a challenge and dispelled all doubts they had about entering a new territory with entrepreneurship. Nagpal believes more people should take advantage of their knowledge, experience and expertise as that gives them an edge at a later stage in life. “We want to inspire women of all ages to take the leap. We’re so proud to have kept going,” she says.

• NAANDIKA TRIPATHI



To read the full article, visit [www.forbesindia.com](http://www.forbesindia.com)



SHUTTERSTOCK

**COVID-19: ONE YEAR AFTER**

## Makeover Amid The Madness

Personal care brands see wind in their sales during the pandemic even as companies bolster online strategy



Shantanu Deshpande, founder, Bombay Shaving Company, says the brand is 3.5x bigger than pre-Covid times

14

**DURING THE PEAK OF THE** lockdown, Shantanu Deshpande, founder, Bombay Shaving Company, realised the growing demand for women's shaving products. "My wife Sakshi told me, 'It's ridiculous that you run a shaving company, and there is nothing for me'. That's when it struck me that there was a potential gap in this market," he says. Six months ago, the company launched a line for women's hair removal products; today, it enjoys a 7 percent market share. The pandemic has been a blessing in disguise for self and personal care brands. And players with an online focus found it easier to bounce back. Bombay Shaving Co is currently 3.5x bigger than what it was pre-Covid and at an annual recurring revenue (ARR) of ₹100 crore. Vegan skin care company Plum, too, has grown 2.5x post Covid, with an ARR increase from ₹70 crore to ₹200 crore ARR in a month or two. "For close to two months [after the lockdown], we

had zero revenues, and fixed costs to pay," says Shankar Prasad, the founder. It was only after August that the company saw growth. "Since then, we have been expanding our product portfolio, from 70 stock keeping units (SKUs) pre-Covid to 100-plus now," he adds. Rohit Chawla, co-founder of Bare Anatomy, believes direct-to-customer brands in the personal care sector were more agile to bounce back, unlike larger companies that were more retail-oriented. "While we have grown by 4x in terms of revenue compared to pre-Covid figures, the online space is too crowded, which has put pressure on sales," he says. Even before the pandemic, Delhi-based Arata had made a strategic decision to remain internet-first. "That saved us from a whole lot of pain when the pandemic hit. We have gone deeper into adding new online channels and digging deeper into channels we were selling through," says Dhruv Bhasin, co-founder. Arata's sales have increased by 4x

compared to what they were selling in February 2020. The pandemic has also led to the growth of make-up brands. In August 2020, beauty brand MyGlamm announced the acquisition of women-centric digital platform POPxo. MyGlamm, which recently raised ₹175 crore, is seeing close to 250,000 transactions every month. Director Darpan Sanghvi says, "Our acquisition of POPxo helped us grow our digital reach and understand consumers better." Currently, the company clocks ₹210 crore in ARR—almost double its pre-pandemic figure of ₹130 crore. Vivek Sahni, CEO, Kama Ayurveda, says, "Sixty percent of our total business continued to remain online." The company's online presence has grown by 140 percent. Like Kama Ayurveda, France-based luxury personal care brand L'Occitane has been focusing on building its online presence through platforms like Nykaa. Says Simi Dewan, country head (DGM) of L'Occitane India, "There is also a focus towards making more sustainable choices when consumers buy any product."

Manish Taneja, co-founder, Purplle.com, says, "Despite a Covid year, we have delivered over 90 percent GMV CAGR for the last 3 years and over 70 percent of our sales contribution is from non-metro regions." Purplle.com recently closed a \$45 million funding deal. Looking at the growing demand for personal care brands, in May 2020, four graduates—Navya Nanda, Ahilya Mehta, Mallika Sahney and Pragya Saboo—launched Aara Health, an end-to-end products & services platform for women's health and wellness. "Our products are centred around preventative and proactive health care," says Mehta.

Chawla of Bare Anatomy says it has never been easier to launch a brand, "but it has never been more difficult to scale it either".

• NAINI THAKER

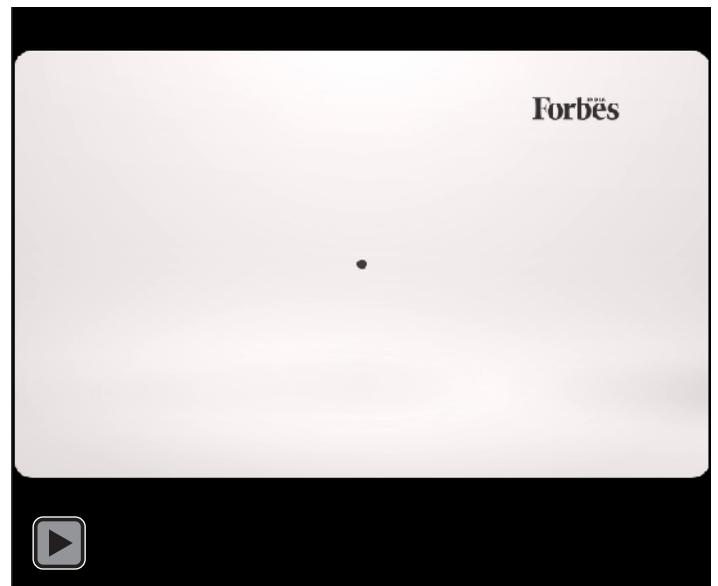


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**Forbes** INDIA

# AMBITIOUS PLANS AND AFFIRMATIVE LEADERSHIP

**Usharani Manne, Founder-Director, Polmon Group**, has perfected the art of making her company an indispensable part of the Life Sciences industry by creating bespoke products, and takes pride in being part of the ecosystem that provided essential services during the Pandemic

A year ago, Usha found herself in the seat of Chairperson of the Hyderabad Chapter of FICCI Ladies Organization - a pan-India body of women entrepreneurs, corporate leaders, and professionals - with 17 Chapters across India. It would have been a moment of unbridled jubilation for this IWEC Award, Govt. of Telangana's Woman Achiever Award and FAPCCI's Best Woman Entrepreneur Award winner, if not for one small hitch - Covid-19. Here's an excerpt of our conversation with her on what kept her going through the uncertainties of the year...

Our unique ability to 'listen to the customer' has helped us stand the test of time and deliver quality, time-bound solutions consistently.

**As an integral part of the Indian Life sciences industry, you must be working with some leading names. Can you give us a bird's eye view of your clientele?**

True. Hyderabad being the Pharmaceutical hub of India, we have had the opportunity of working closely and enduringly for all

**Polmon could not take a single day off - not even during the early days of the lockdown. But as I said, it is in Polmon's DNA to expect and prepare.**

”

**Tell us about Polmon Group. What would you count as the Company's significant achievements in the last 25 years?**

From 10 in 1995 to over 350 employees today, the Polmon family has grown by leaps and bounds. Our products and services - more than 1500 in number - support the unique needs of over 1300+ clients across India. Starting with our first ISO certification in 2005 and through regular recertifications in 2008, 2011, 2014 & 2018, we have stayed focused on quality assurance and process improvement.

Our deep domain understanding of the Pharmaceutical industry and its regulatory challenges has enabled us to develop process expertise that spans the whole lifecycle of a project from concept to commissioning.

the leading players in several domains including pharmaceuticals, paper, food, delivering solutions in the areas of instrumentation, automation, medical devices, single fluid heat transfer systems and consultancy services. To name a few, Dr. Reddy's, Biocon, Aurobindo Pharma, Mylan, Sanofi, Divi's, Laurus, Zydus Cadila, Sun Pharma, Jubilant Life Sciences, Biological E, Cipla, Novartis, Pfizer, Schneider Electric, Piramal Healthcare, Glenmark etc. Our products have touched the shores of Bangladesh, African countries, Sri Lanka, UAE and we are working on our plans to explore the Europe and USA markets.

**Obviously, the life sciences and allied industries could not take a break during the lockdown. What immediate actions**



**did you take when the Pandemic struck, and how ready was Polmon to adopt and adapt?**

Yes, Polmon could not take a single day off - not even during the early days of the lockdown. But as I said, it is in Polmon's DNA to expect and prepare. So, just as the news started to trickle in, we reorganized our work schedules to a 24x7 mode in order to maintain social distancing. We applied for, and acquired, special permission from the Government for staff and vehicular movement within the City and Interstate too. We ensured sterilized workstations and buses, compulsory use of masks and sanitizers, temperature check twice a day, staggered attendance and working hours. Many of our employees left for their hometowns. Our IT team quickly developed systems that allowed them to work from home and review practices were redesigned to monitor and control operations remotely.

Today we are working at full capacity, but for good measure, we are continuing to maintain the same amount of caution and discipline. I am happy to report that thus far we had just one case, and no casualty to Covid-19.

**What significant difference did it make to your role as a leader, given the need to recast the operational style?**

You would agree that the world had hit the panic button. In India especially, there was a mass exodus of the section of the workforce that was working away from their

hometowns. The need to stay with parents and family was felt overwhelmingly. At Polmon too, almost overnight, less than half of our staff reported to work.

With Hyderabad being the hub for drug R&D and production, continuity in manufacturing was imperative and Polmon had to respond to the need without slack. While we restructured our working style, we also did not hesitate to incur huge, unexpected expenditure on account of interstate permissions, setting up of more robust IT systems and most importantly, physically picking up materials to avoid supply bottlenecks.

When imports became an impossibility, our R&D team came up with design changes to accommodate alternatives developed by local vendors. Site visits were reduced to the bare minimum and clients were educated online about essential trouble-shooting techniques. 3D virtual content was developed for our Sales team to aid business development efforts.

Being responsible for Finance, HR and Operations - all three areas that came under tremendous pressure - I had to up my game in communication and compassion, flexibility and agility, leveraging technology to manage not only deliverables but also hybrid teams i.e. those working onsite and from home. Risk assessment came into sharp focus as did conscious decision-making, especially as our financial stability was undergoing an acid test.

At the end of the day, I am happy the way we coped and continued to deliver our best as always, without missing a beat.

**Through the lockdown, you donned another role - that of Chairperson, FICCI FLO Hyderabad Chapter. In a year that was so different, how did you go about fulfilling your vision and responsibilities?**

Of course, the euphoria of taking over was dampened by the dark clouds of Covid-19. But FICCI FLO is an organization of women entrepreneurs and professionals with diverse skill sets. Once the decision to move on was made, there was no looking back. We just scientifically knitted our individual capabilities together and the result was a cohesive talent pool whose collective strength could move the proverbial mountain.

Technology came to the rescue like never before. We redesigned our motivational and learning sessions to make them compatible with online platforms. Social media helped us spread the word to a larger audience. Many illustrious personalities who would otherwise be too busy to visit Hyderabad were more amenable to an online session. As opposed to about 100 members within the City who could access any give program, we were able to attract a global audience.



**FLO Hyderabad collaborated with organizations such as IIT-H, IIMR, CIE@IIT-H, WE Hub, and organized boot camps, workshops, micro-accelerator programs, investor pitching sessions to get our members business-ready.**



One of our biggest successes was the retention of old members and addition of new ones. In terms of which, I am glad to share, Hyderabad ranked top amongst all 17 chapters pan-India. The think tank at FLO Hyderabad made sure that every program catered to a felt need. We also worked extensively, and smartly, on Incubation and Mentorship for our members. We tied up with organizations such as WE Hub, IIT Hyderabad, CIE@IIT-H, IIMR and organized boot camps, workshops, micro-accelerator programs, investor pitching sessions to get them business-ready.

Social Outreach is another agenda that ranked on top for us. At the grassroots level, we trained close to 120 women farmers in vermicompost and organic pesticide manufacturing with the help of Khadi Gramodyog Maha Vidyalaya. For the urban workforce, we tied-up with McLean Skill Academy, the licensed facilitator for Deendayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushal Yojana, and were able to train and place over 25 girls in corporates such as Cyient, Jio and others. Training for

another 50 girls is underway. In response to the travails of Covid-19, we tied-up with Roshni NGO and launched a mental health awareness campaign under which we hosted several experts. We brought the 16 last practitioners of Telangana's indigenous art form, Cheriya, under one brand - Tirumani - and developed marketing collateral, backward and forward linkages and a smarter product line for them. I am happy to say, they are now catering to a pan-India marketplace that we created for them.

**Which was your most ambitious project during the year?**

Undoubtedly, FIWA - FICCI FLO Influential Women awards 2021, where we honoured 14 distinguished women on the eve of International Women's Day. It was a magnum opus event against the backdrop of Hyderabad's historic, UNESCO Heritage site of Chowmahalla Palace and was attended by the City's elite from Government, business, professional and social communities. It was a dream project that was actualized by the diligent and smart work of our members.

**What is your Business Plan for Polmon over the next 3-5 years?**

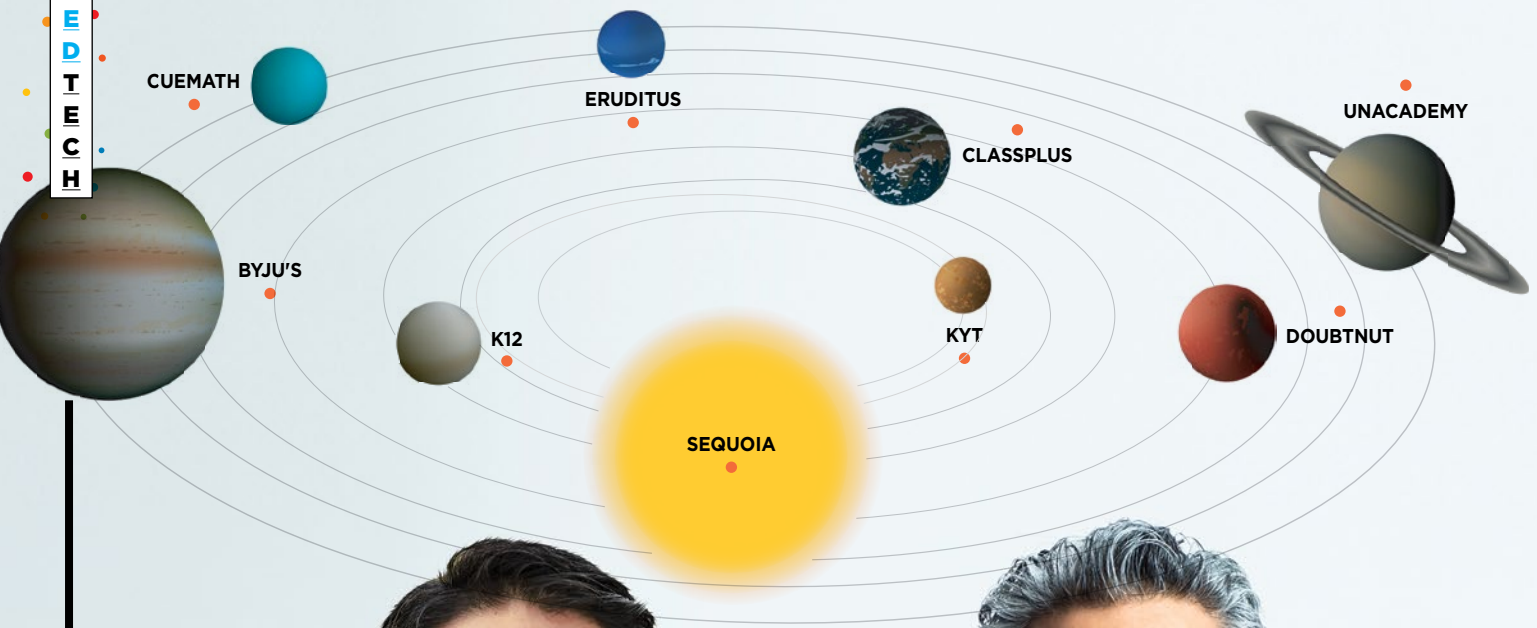
As the Life Sciences industry looks towards increased efficiencies, improved throughput times, and reduced costs, instrumentation suppliers are in turn looking at IoT, Big Data, AI and Collaborative Robotics to help them stay relevant. At Polmon, we are already prepared to ride this next wave.

Multiproduct manufacturing is another trend that is catching on. And so is the case with wireless technologies. As also, the FDA-mandated MES & EBPR norms. Polmon, anticipating these upheavals, is already geared to deliver customized solutions that take into account all these varied needs of the future. Through continuous R&D and on-the-job training, we ensure our employees stay relevant at all times.





EDTECH



GV Ravishankar (left) and Rajan Anandan, Sequoia India's managing directors. The firm has been among the early VC companies to make the most of the edtech boom



# Meet The Headmasters

Sequoia Capital has bet big on edtech, with over a dozen investments, including in industry giants Byju's and Unacademy

By RAJIV SINGH



Bengaluru, 2014



section of Christ College wore a festive look over the weekend. It was the last Sunday of July.

July 27—GV Ravishankar still has the date saved on his Google calendar. How can the managing director of Sequoia India forget the day? The mood inside the college auditorium was electric. Restive schoolchildren—from classes 5 to 12—and their twitchy parents were jostling for every inch of space; everybody was glued to the big white screen on the empty stage. The class was about to start. The spectators were waiting patiently to see the teacher.

Ravishankar, sitting in one of the last rows, was also eager to hear the pitch. He looked edgy though. Two visuals were playing on his mind. The first was the giant Byju's hoarding which he unfailingly noticed hanging on a building next to the flyover every time he travelled from the Bengaluru airport towards the city.

The second thought that bugged the seasoned venture capitalist (VC) was the joke doing the rounds at the office of India's biggest VC firm. "There was a reputation at Sequoia—that we meet and pass every opportunity in education," he says. The jibe had roots in the fact that the marquee VC fund

had managed to invest in just two education-focussed startups since 2006. Reason: The fund didn't find anything super exciting. "We were in no hurry to pull the trigger," recounts Ravishankar. This time, though, he was hoping to change the script.

Back in the auditorium, the noise levels suddenly dropped. You could have heard a pin drop as Byju Raveendran took the stage to address the gathering. As the charismatic teacher solved student queries, the parents and their wards were hooked; and the backbencher was onto something. By December 2015, Sequoia had pumped \$26 million into Byju's for a 22 percent stake, which went over 25 percent by early 2016.

Fast forward to four years later in the same city. At a late-night dinner towards the fag end of 2018, Gaurav Munjal, co-founder and chief executive officer of Sequoia-backed Unacademy, was thinking of his next big move. The person giving

**"Many things at times are all supremely planned, but sometimes it's serendipity. It's also about having a prepared mind."**

**GV RAVISHANKAR,**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
SEQUOIA INDIA



him company was Shailendra Singh, managing director at Sequoia India. Munjal's special bonding with Singh started way back in 2017 when he used to chat on Twitter. "When I first met him, I wanted to partner with him," recalls Munjal. The reason was simple. All the investors to whom the entrepreneur had pitched urged him to think small. Singh, though, was cut from a different cloth. "In the first meeting, Shailendra asked us to go global and think big," he says.

Back at the dinner table, Singh offered some food for thought. "Why don't you bundle everything and give access to quality teachers and live classes under one package?" he asked. Munjal was dismissive. "I didn't understand it. I thought it won't work," he recalls. After two weeks, though, Munjal got convinced. "That idea didn't leave me. It stuck with me," he says, adding that the 'Unacademy Plus Subscription' plan was rolled out in January 2019. Within two months, the edtech startup managed to get a staggering 15,000 paid subscribers. "It became one of the fastest products to strike a \$100 million annual revenue run rate," claims Munjal (see interview).

Cut to January 2020. Sequoia India made a killing by partly exiting Byju's. In FY19, the VC firm reportedly made 21x of its ₹78.8 crore investment by pocketing a whopping ₹1,665.33 crore from a partial exit. Though Ravishankar declined to comment on the financials of the deal,



Sequoia reportedly is still the second biggest investor in Byju's with an 8 to 9 percent stake, after Naspers.

That's enough to make Sequoia India the largest edtech investor in the country over the last decade. Along the two big boys of edtech, the portfolio also boasts a diverse and promising mix of startups catering to students in India, Southeast Asia and beyond.

Ravishankar makes a modest assessment of the strategy of the VC firm. "At times, many things are all supremely planned," he says. "But sometimes it's serendipity," he smiles. "It's all about having a prepared mind until you find the right opportunity."

Right from the first investment in TutorVista in 2006—it was actually made by WestBridge Capital, which got merged with Sequoia India in June 2006—to the funding of school management firm K12 Techno Services in 2010, the VC firm kept at it. Ravishankar and his team met hundreds of companies across all segments: Pre-school, school, test prep, high education, training post higher education. Nothing triggered the 'aha' moment. The reasons were many. Most of the first wave of companies was far from education firms. None of the entrepreneurs had any education background, the business model was to give technology and content, and then charge a leasing fee over a period of time. "We were not convinced that these were the models of the future," explains Ravishankar.

Another impediment in finding the right kind of edtech company was the absence of a conducive environment. "Remember 2006 was a time when 256 kbps was called broadband," laughs Ravishankar. This is not the kind of infrastructure, he lets on, which would support high quality video and other things. "Clearly, the market was not ready for such offerings."

K Ganesh, founder of TutorVista, chips in. "In 2006, there were no

## 'Healthy Competition Drives Innovation'

NISHANT RATNAKAR

**B**yju Raveendran, founder of Byju's, the second-most valued startup in India after Paytm, insists that it is not fighting with others in the edtech segment. "In sectors like ours, most of the time, competition is with the system," he says. "And this system is the mindset." Byju's, he underlines, has been able to create a small but fast growing segment of students who learn on their own. "This form of learning is not what most of the kids are used to. So that's the real competition," he tells *Forbes India*. Edited excerpts from an interview:



17-year-olds. And the test prep space is for two- or three-year-olds. If you look at the big tech companies in the US, they all collaborate, they all compete in certain areas. Healthy competition is always good because that's what drives innovation.

### ON BUYING AAKASH AND RE-ENTERING OFFLINE

From a segment perspective, we are refocusing and making a re-entry into test prep with a new blended model. It's not going back. We will bring the best of both online and offline. Once everything reopens for after-school tutoring, mainly for test prep, there are things which can be done much better online and things which can only be done offline. And that model is what will scale. Today the willingness to accept online learning as a more mainstream format is greater.

### ON POWER OF ONLINE INTERACTION

Some people say in an online interaction you can't feel the passion, but I don't agree because we have done a lot more in the last 10 months by doing things online. We've done more acquisitions than before.

### ON COMPETITION

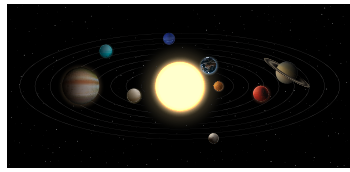
We have products for four- to

### ON SMALL TOWNS AND ASPIRATIONS

Students coming from small towns are hungry to learn. I come from a small village and went to a government school which was not English medium. The aspiration and the hunger to learn are high among students who come from such backgrounds. In smaller towns, we are giving students an opportunity, which they didn't have. Today, Aakash has 200-plus locations. By taking it to 400 to 500 towns, we are making sure that students have access, and not just convenience.

### ON MONETISATION

We monetise a certain top percentage of students, those who go to an English-medium school and private schools. That's our main audience for monetising. Over the last 12 months, we have accelerated and launched our products in almost all the regional languages. We are not monetising that segment.



## Solar System, & Milky Way

Sequoia's edtech investment journey over the last decade

**TutorVista (WestBridge)**  
2006/*Series A* (exited in 2010)

**K12 Techno Services**  
2010/*Series A*

**Byju's**  
2015/*Series B*

**Cuemath**  
2016/*Series A*

**Unacademy**  
2017/*Series B*

**Eruditus**  
2018/*Series C*

**Doubtnut**  
2019/*Pre-Series A*

**Scaler Academy**  
2019/*Seed*

**Classplus**  
2019/*Series A*

**CoLearn\***  
2019/*Seed/Pre-Series A*  
Based out of Indonesia

**Tigerhall\***  
2019/*Series A*  
Based out of Singapore

**KYT**  
2020/*Seed*  
Based out of India and Singapore

**Pentester Academy\***  
2020/*Seed*  
Based out of Singapore

**Studyroom**  
2020/*Seed*

**LingoAce\***  
2020/*Series A*

(All investments made by Sequoia Capital India; \*Investments in Southeast Asia edtech startups)

unicorns.” There was a major question mark on whether Indian startups could raise hundreds of millions of dollars, deploy them in India, create value, and provide billion dollar exits to investors. “This was unproven and had never happened,” says the serial entrepreneur and promoter at BigBasket, Portea Medical and HomeLane.

Ravishankar, though, didn't give up. “We knew somebody would come up with a model that we would be interested in.” Then came Byju's in 2015, Cuemath the next year, and Unacademy in 2017. Since then there has been no looking back. “We feel fortunate to be in such a place. I'm a big believer in serendipity,” he says.

Though luck or ‘being the right one at the right time’ might have had a role in Sequoia's success, credit must also be given in large part to the ‘design’ of the VC firm in carving out the edtech empire, reckon industry experts. “Investing is about being able to think ahead and imagine the future,” says Radha Kizhanattam, partner at Unitus Ventures. “It [Sequoia] has carefully chosen bets across the edtech spectrum: K12, test prep, employment and continuous learning,” she points out. It has partnered with some of the best entrepreneurs, learnt and morphed their thesis constantly and built conviction to support companies with capital across stages. “All this has put it in a unique position,” she adds. Whether in education or investment market, success and returns take time. One needs to have loads of patience, risk-taking appetite and stay curious, she adds.

Back in 2014, Ravishankar exuded all the above traits. He was patient. He didn't jump the gun and invest in Byju's after his Christ College tryst. The first meeting happened when Tejeshwi Sharma, who was then an analyst and now a principal with Sequoia India, decide to cold call the company. “Then it was more a CAT (common admission test)-focused



**“While aspiration to do better and talent are universally distributed, access to learning opportunities are extremely scarce in smaller towns and villages.”**

**VAIBHAV AGRAWAL**  
PARTNER, LIGHTSPEED  
VENTURE PARTNERS

company,” recalls Ravishankar. Raveendran, the star teacher, was all over the place. “He was taking flights over weekends, and had people from Infosys, Wipro and all coming for CAT preparation,” he says. Flying from one city to another made it clear to Raveendran that he couldn't scale the model. “When we met them we thought that the bigger market was K12,” he says. Back then, the market for CAT was small, with roughly half a million people preparing for the exam as against an estimated close to a million now.

The first meeting set the ball rolling. Ravishankar stayed in touch, and met again after a few months, in August, in Mumbai. By then, Raveendran had made a big change in his business, and had launched digital content in recorded form for K12.

Raveendran, his head of sales and the CFO were there for the meeting. The team explained how teaching using VSAT (very small aperture terminal) technology was not different from teaching in a classroom; how recorded digital content was effective even in the absence of live classes; and how the experience could be enhanced through multi-media content.

“The way they explained to us was fascinating,” he recalls. The analogy used was watching a play in a theatre and watching a movie. “He had a big vision, and had a set of people who formed the core management team,” adds Ravishankar.

Though he was excited about the model, it was still early days in terms of making an investment. “The risk we were taking was whether the power of technology would allow for superior outcomes in terms of education,” he points out. What also didn’t help was the context in 2014. There was no market cap in education, listed companies such as Educomp had gone bust, and investors had almost lost their appetite for this segment. “It was a difficult environment,” he recalls.

Ravishankar persisted. After a few months, he got Raveendran to present to Sequoia’s global head Doug Leone, who was in Bengaluru. There was a lot that went into building a consensus towards investing in the company. “As it was a fairly large investment, it was good to give enough people an exposure to it,” he says. Interestingly, by the time the May 2015 investment of roughly ₹110 crore came, Byju’s had beaten its revenue projection of ₹50 crore for FY14. “It was still a reasonably large investment for a relatively early model... a fairly risky thing,” he says.

Cut to 2021. The risk has paid off handsomely. The valuation of Byju’s has soared to \$13 billion when it reportedly raised \$460 million in end-March as part of its ongoing Series F round. Though the company clocked ₹2,800 crore in revenue in

## Even & Odd Numbers

Though all startups had a different and distinct business model when Sequoia first invested, there are now interesting overlaps—and rivalries

### K12 Techno Services

**2010**  
K-12 school-management company.  
**Rivals in the portfolio:** None

**Now**  
Academic support, services and solutions to schools.  
**Rivals in the portfolio:** None

### Byju’s

**2015**  
K12 supplementary learning company. Had a video product; launched the app within a month or two of Sequoia’s investment.  
**Rivals in the portfolio:** None

**Now**  
Online learning programme combining video lessons/online tutoring/personalised learning.  
**Rivals in the portfolio:** Unacademy; Cuemath; Doubtnut

### Cuemath

**2016**  
After-school math programme for K8 students offered through a network of home-based learning centres run by women.  
**Rivals in the portfolio:** None

**Now**  
Online math learning and coding program for KG-10th grade students across all school boards, spread over more than 10 countries.  
**Rivals in the portfolio:** Doubtnut; WhiteHat Jr

### Unacademy

**2017**  
Free platform for educators to create and post content focussed on test prep. Moved on from YouTube to own platform by the time Sequoia Capital India invested; teacher-focussed courses such as live classes/content.  
**Rivals:** None

**Now**  
All services; K12 learning space; and subscription model.  
**Rivals:** Byju’s

### Eruditus

**2018**  
Executive education programmes from the world’s top business schools.  
**Rivals:** None

**Now**  
Broadened focus to online degrees, bootcamps and diplomas across sectors, including health care.

Might explore coding in the future.  
**Rivals:** WhiteHat Jr, whenever the coding programme rolls out

### Doubtnut

**2019**  
Multilingual online learning platform offering solutions to queries for math problems from classes 6 to 12.  
**Rivals:** None

**Now**  
Comprehensive learning platform with doubt resolution for math and science from grades 6 to 12.  
**Rivals:** Cuemath, Byju’s, Unacademy

### Scaler Academy

**2019**  
Started as InterviewBit in 2015. Offered advanced online computer science programme for college graduates and young professional engineers.  
**Rivals:** None

**Now**  
Online classes for engineers.  
**Rivals:** None

### Classplus

**2019**  
A mobile OS that helped coaching institutes take their brick-and-mortar setups online.  
**Rivals:** None  
**Now**  
Anybody can launch their online teaching business using Classplus.  
**Rivals:** None

### KYT

**2020**  
Online platform for extracurricular learning for children.  
**Rivals:** None  
**Now**  
No change.  
**Rivals:** None

### Studyroom

**2020**  
Platform that helps educators create customised learning experiences for students.  
**Rivals:** None  
**Now**  
No change.  
**Rivals:** None

## Other VCs in Edtech



### Blume Ventures

**Portfolio:** Unacademy, Classplus, DoCircuits and flipClass

### Tiger Global

**Portfolio:** Byju’s, Unacademy and Vedantu

### General Atlantic

**Portfolio:** Byju’s and Unacademy

### Lightspeed Ventures

**Portfolio:** Byju’s and FrontRow

### Accel

**Portfolio:** Vedantu, MindTickle, EduPristine and TooStep

### Elevation Capital

**Portfolio:** Toppr, Unacademy, CampK12 and FrontRow

### Omidyar Network

**Portfolio:** Doubtnut, Vedantu, Uolo

**SOURCE** Tracxn; portfolio does not include all names

the fiscal ended March 2020, it had a revenue run rate of ₹6,000 crore for FY21 as of July. “Sequoia has been a great investor,” says Raveendran. During the early days, it extended a lot of support in marketing, branding, tech hiring and other aspects, he adds (see interview).

With the first wave of edtech having almost played out, with the first 10 million or so paying students, Sequoia is now looking to furiously expand its reach with a diverse bunch of new edtech startups that are fanning out in smaller towns and cities.

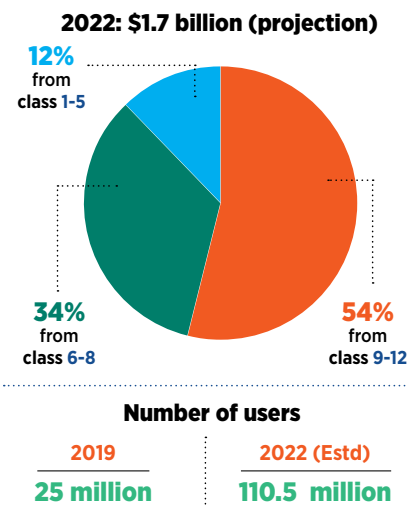
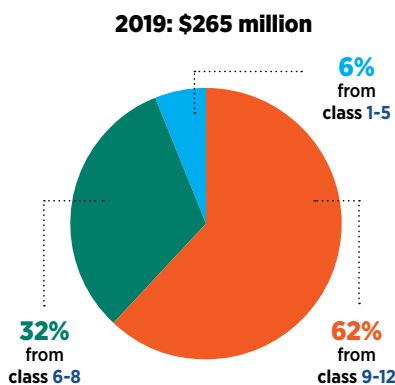
Take, for instance, Doubtnut, which started as a multilingual online learning platform offering solutions to queries for math problems from classes 6 to 12 and was backed by Sequoia in 2019. The startup has now expanded its reach beyond math by morphing into a comprehensive learning platform. “It is going beyond the first 10 million paying students,” claims Rajan Anandan, managing director at Sequoia India. What is special about Doubtnut, he explains, is that it could become a platform for students who can’t afford to pay ₹30,000 to ₹40,000 a year. “As you know, most of India can’t even afford to pay a few thousand rupees per year,” he says.

There was another reason to back Doubtnut. In the course of time, everybody will be fighting for the same set of consumers, and it would become expensive to build a brand and acquire users. “So you need a hacky way get customers, and Doubtnut’s model is to get customers cheap by using doubt clearance as a tool,” says Ravishankar.

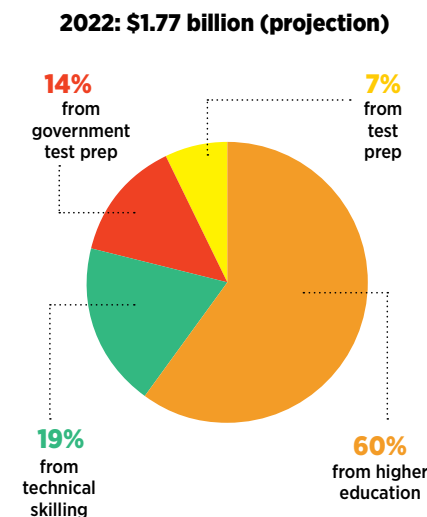
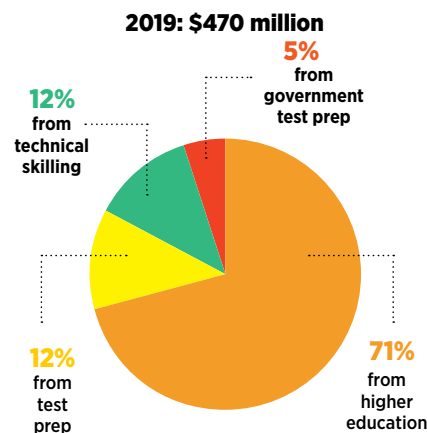
The next promising bet is Scaler, which is focussed on upskilling. In its original avatar, the startup was known as InterviewBit, and helped engineers prepare for interviews. “We asked it to focus on a bigger problem,” recalls Anandan. In India, there are 8 million university graduates. “Around 800,000 of them are in technical

## Massive Headroom for Growth

Boom in edtech market till K12



Post K12



SOURCE: Omidyar Network India-RedSeer Report 2019-20

majors,” he says. Now Scaler, he stresses, is going after these 800,000 annual graduates and focusing on helping them become world-class engineers. “It wants to create Google-quality engineers at scale,” he says.

Another interesting platform is Classplus, which enables offline tutoring centres go online. India is estimated to have about 5 lakh tutoring centres. When Sequoia partnered with the startup, Classplus had over 2,000 offline tutoring centres. “Today it has 11,000 centres, and over 1 lakh monthly active teachers,” says Anandan. “Classplus is a Shopify for edtech.” What Sequoia is also equally bullish on is “India to

the world’ edtech startups. Take, for instance, KYT, an online platform for extracurricular learning for kids. Then there is CoLearn, catering to students in Indonesia. “It is like the Doubtnut of Indonesia,” he says. Expanding its reach gives it access to a larger addressable market, and opens new opportunities.

Meanwhile, in the domestic market, the opportunity for Sequoia has brought in its wake a related set of challenges. The biggest is managing potential rivalry among the portfolio companies. When the VC fund first invested in these startups, however, there was hardly any overlap. Over the last two years, most of them

# ‘We Won’t Settle for No 2’

2

2020 was a bumper year for Unacademy. “Almost every metric is six to seven times higher in terms of revenue, user and growth,” claims **Gaurav Munjal**, its co-founder and CEO. Last September, it touched an annual revenue run rate of around \$140 million for FY21. “We hope to become the No 1 brand in education in six months,” he tells *Forbes India*. Edited excerpts from an interview:

## ON INVESTORS WITH STAKES IN RIVALS

Sequoia has strict Chinese walls. With Byju’s, it’s GV Ravishankar on board. We also have Tiger Global as a common investor, and General Atlantic. At the growth stage, when you have limited assets which are good, funds have to take multiple positions in the same space. But I have not had any problem of information going here and there.

## ON HIS AMBITIONS

My aspiration is to be the biggest in the world, and build one of the largest consumer internet companies India has seen. We have no plans to settle for the No 2 position. Our growth rate is higher than that of most others. So we will continue to build better products and go ahead with speed. Even though from a valuation point of view, the No 1 company is ahead, from a brand point of view, we have been able to get to a 50-50 stage by spending one-tenth of capital. This is because we have been very creative in our campaigns.

## ON PULL-BASED MARKETING

The biggest difference between



the No 1 player and Unacademy is that we have taken a technology-focussed approach instead of a sales-driven approach. Our revenue is driven by technology-first, brand-first and teachers-first. In test prep, you have the concept of a celebrity teacher. So if you give a student access to that Kota, Delhi or Jaipur teacher for one-fifth the cost, you open a lot of gates. That’s why it’s pull-based. We don’t say *hamara product khareedo* (buy our product).

## ON EDTECH BOOM IN BHARAT

Seventy percent of our user base is from Tier II and III cities. It will continue to grow. More students will come from Bharat because you will have internet access and \$100 smartphones... they are already on YouTube. Video consumption is fairly high now.

## ON ONLINE TEACHING

A lot of learning will happen online because people will realise it’s more efficient. And it’s not just about edtech. Growth will continue because it’s the future. You can never bet against the future. So, electric cars, fitness products will come, and fintech will get more advanced. Disruption will happen. People did move to Netflix, Hotstar and Amazon Prime Video over the last couple of years, didn’t they?

have started entering into each other’s territories. Take, for instance, Byju’s which has entered into test prep by acquiring offline coaching institute Aakash, which pits it against Unacademy. The latter has also entered into the K12 segment and is now gunning to take on the leader to become the biggest edtech player in India. Then there is coding startup WhiteHat Jr, which was acquired by Byju’s last year. A few months back, WhiteHat Jr started offering courses in math, which makes it a rival of another Sequoia-backed startup, Cuemath. And even Doubtnut.

Ravishankar is not worried. The headmaster has a strategy in place to maintain discipline in class. First, there are different people working on different startups. The move ensures strong ‘Chinese walls’. “If there is any direct conflict at any time, thanks to us being common shareholders, we can always help them kind of diverge or at least not over-compete in an unhealthy manner,” he says. “It’s a very large market. There will be multiple winners.”

Underlining the fact that the edtech market has seen the emergence of a couple of big companies, he feels consolidation will definitely play out in the future, Ravishankar explains what it will take for startups to succeed. “Most of them are well-funded. They are going to compete with each other no matter what you do,” he says. One of the success mantras, though, is to have a better mousetrap in terms of a compelling offering. “That’s what will lead to success, even if there are large companies,” he asserts. Education, he lets on, is not a ‘winner-takes-it-all business’. No one brand will have a 90 percent market share. But what one needs to always keep in mind is one simple, but often forgotten, lesson. “It’s important to make sure that we don’t lose the aspect of education in all this noise of technology,” he says. “It’s education first. And that is super important.” **F**

# 'We Don't Own A Piece Of The Founder'



**A**cknowledging that the infrastructure was not conducive for edtech a decade ago, managing director **GV Ravishankar** contends that Sequoia has been fortunate to be among the early ones to make the most of the edtech boom. The recent flurry of activity, he lets on, has deep roots of over 15 years of learning. "We didn't do anything overnight. Fortune favours those who are persistent," he tells *Forbes India*. Edited excerpts from an interview:

## ON PORTFOLIO STARTUPS LOCKING HORNS

Everybody has aspirations, capital and access to quality of talent. So they will compete. The market is still large enough for many winners. It's a long way to go for all these companies to be enduring businesses. That's what we want to do at Sequoia. We want to back these daring founders building these enduring companies. Hopefully, the next stop for many of these companies is going public at some point.

## ON FACILITATING MERGERS

It's always a sticky thing to tell a founder why don't you consider joining hands with somebody else? When the WhiteHat Jr acquisition happened, we were actually evaluating the company. We liked it... we had done a lot of market work. When we heard that Karan Bajaj (founder of WhiteHat Jr) had an open mind to being a part of a larger platform, we suggested to Byju (Raveendran) that he should call him. We do this often... we go to the bigger companies and tell them they can benefit from a particular skill set. But if you're on the side of the other company as well, we are careful. We are investors, so we can't be in the middle of it.

## ON SPEEDING

Every company that grows fast has two choices. You can either say I want to do everything perfectly right, or I will jump out of the mountain, build a parachute on my way down and take a chance. We are living in a world where speed is a significant advantage... speed of execution is

a significant advantage. If you wait till everything is perfect, the market will not wait for you. So, sometimes, you know some of the things that go wrong are derivatives of trying to do things fast. Companies don't go out wanting to do things badly.

## ON FOUNDERS WITH A STRONG VIEWPOINT

When you're successful, you start believing that you know what you're doing, and back yourself. That's the way they got success in the first place. If somebody has to listen to everybody, and then take the average answer, they'll never be successful. So, most good founders have a point of view, and this is usually different from what the consensus is. If they are right, they are rockstars, and if they are wrong, they fail. What made them successful is also what sometimes will get them in trouble. But the good founders will learn and evolve and adapt.

## ON THE FUNDER-FOUNDER RELATIONSHIP

We think of ourselves as partners. Just because we own a piece of the company, we don't own a piece of the founder. People should be given the independence to run. And our job is to govern. We don't want to be instructing founders on what to do and how to do it. Of course, we should ask the tough questions when we need to and encourage them when we have to. We take that role seriously.

## ON FUTURE EDUCATION MODELS

The acquisition of Aakash by Byju is because he's betting that life is going to come back, and for high stakes exams, people want offline touchpoints. So let's not assume technology can replace the teacher. In the future, we will see a lot of blended models—you will have both physical and digital options. You will have a teacher playing a role, but you will 10x increase the capability by using tools and technology. **F**

# The Big Small Question

As Byju's and Unacademy grow at breakneck speed, what will it take for smaller edtech players to survive?

By NAINI THAKER & NAANDIKA TRIPATHI

**A**nita Kishore recalls the first time she experienced education joining forces with technology—now popularly referred to as ‘edtech’. It was in 2013 at a seminar in the Indira Gandhi Stadium in New Delhi, with about 20,000 students attending and content being projected on a screen. “Byju [Raveendran] stood in the middle of the room, conducting a session with students learning from a ‘screen,’” she says.

A lot has changed since.

Today, Byju's is one of the largest edtech players globally, with a valuation of a little over \$13 billion. So far, it has received funding of \$2.3 billion from investors including Tiger Investments, Baron Capital, Owl Ventures and BlackRock. On March 31, Byju's raised another \$460 million as part of its ongoing series F round, led by MC Global Edtech Investment Holdings LP, with participation from Facebook co-founder Eduardo Saverin's B Capital, among other investors.

With funding flowing in, Byju's has also been on an acquisition spree—starting with Osmo in 2019, followed by online coding startup White Hat Jr last August for \$300 million, making it one of the biggest deals in the Edtech space. It also bought virtual simulations startup LabInApp last September. According to Tracxn, Byju's has acquired 11

companies worth \$1.43 billion (as of February 2021). “The vision for most of these entrepreneurs is to try and get as many products out and get access to a larger platform. We have been able to scale these businesses by giving our full support, but also giving them the autonomy to run the company freely,” says Kishore, chief strategy officer at Byju's. In the first 2.5 years since Byju's launched its app, it saw about 45 million downloads; since the Covid-19 pandemic began, there has been another 40 million.

Then there's Unacademy that has acquired six startups—Kreatryx, CodeChef, PrepLadder, Mastree, Coursavy and NeoStencil—in various sectors, in 2020 alone. The latest is Handa ka Funda, which it acquired for an undisclosed amount in March 2021. Unacademy's valuation has increased 4x, from \$510 million to \$2 billion between February and November 2020. Its total funding is more than \$400 million, including investors like Tiger Global Management, Dragoneer Investment Group and Sequoia Capital. When it comes to acquiring companies, Hemesh Singh, co-founder and CTO, Unacademy says, “Our focus is on companies that use technology in the education space in interesting ways. Also, having a good relationship and alignment with the founders is necessary.” So far, Unacademy has been focusing on prep for competitive exams, including the likes of JEE, UPSC and NEET. But from the







second half of 2020, they have started looking at the K-12 segment as well.

Over the next three to five years, there is going to be a lot of consolidation in the online education space. “I feel that across three segments in edtech—K-12, test prep and working professionals—there’s going to be one to two large players in each segment. Education is not going to be like one-player-takes-all kind of a market. There will be one player holding maybe 40 percent market share, another holding 30 percent, and the last 30 percent will be owned by multiple players,” says Mayank Kumar, managing director of upGrad.

Unlike a lot of other players in this space, online higher education company upGrad has not seen an exponential jump in growth—it has been consistently growing at about 100 percent year-on-year—since it focuses on working professionals. Kumar believes, “In the longer run, there will be consolidation, and the pace of acquisition will also increase. The two or three larger players are likely to acquire multiple companies, and the large players will be ‘large’ because of mergers and acquisitions.”

With two giants emerging, what is the future for smaller players: Stay niche or get gobbled up? Sajith Pai, director at Blume Ventures, one of the largest investors in this space, says, “These two—consolidation and the arrival of new innovative players—will keep going hand in hand.”

**S**o far Byju’s has focussed on an asynchronous app-based approach, where content is available for students to access at any time. The acquisition of White Hat Jr was to help the company move into a synchronous format and build its one-on-one live tutoring model. “White Hat Jr has done a great job in scaling this model, with over 10,000 teachers, while still maintaining an average session rating of 4.85/5,” says Byju’s Kishore. Its live tutoring model



NISHANT RATNAKAR FOR FORBES INDIA

**“The vision for most of these entrepreneurs is to try and get as many products out and get access to a larger platform.”**

**ANITA KISHORE**  
CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER,  
BYJU’S

will have an India presence, but will be focussed on international markets.

“The Byju’s acquisition was a critical step in our journey and helped us fast-track the growth initiatives. Today, WhiteHat Jr is present in multiple countries globally, and has already expanded its product offering to two subjects—coding and maths,” says Karan Bajaj, founder and CEO, WhiteHat Jr. The platform has more than 9 million registered students, of which 1.75 lakh are paying subscribers.

Test preparation for K-12 is another vertical that Byju’s is betting on big time in the hybrid space. This makes sense given the company is acquiring exam preparation firm Aakash Educational Services

(AESL) in a deal reportedly worth \$900 million (as on April 5, 2021), making it the highest valued deal in the edtech space till now.

“When AESL, which is a well known name in test preparation, joins hands with large players in edtech like Byju’s, we can provide better access of test preparation education to Indian aspirants. The number of students who write test prep for medical and IIT in India are close to around 2 million,” says Aakash Chaudhry, managing director, AESL.

Blackstone-backed AESL has a pan-India network of over 205 Aakash centres (including franchises) and a student count of more than 250,000. In June 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, AESL transferred a section of its offline classes to the Aakash digital app. “Our online education has grown more than 100 percent this year. The number of students has increased by 150 to 200 percent, and we have doubled in terms of revenues. There is a great acceptance that we are experienced from the test prep side. 2020 has been our best result year in 33 years,” adds Chaudhry.

Another likely acquisition in this space is rival Toppr. Launched in 2014, Toppr provides free resources in the form of video lectures, revision

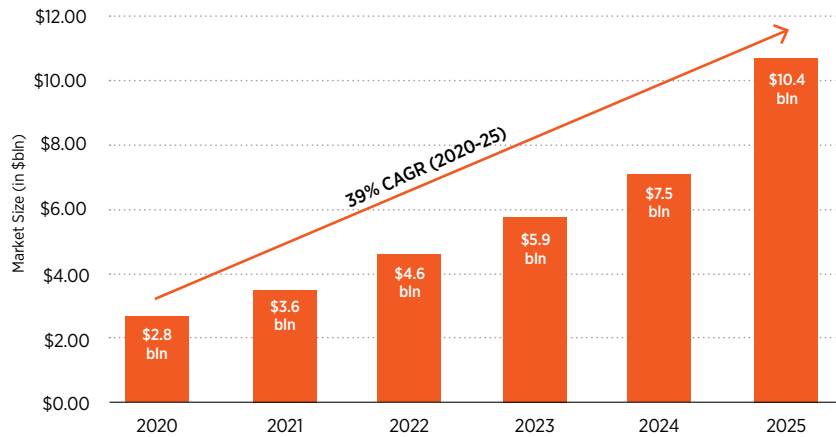
tips and artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled instant answers to doubts. “In 12 months, our traffic grew 9x, which has sustained even as schools have partially opened now. I think this is a permanent behavioural shift, as students and parents have discovered the value that edtech can provide in learning,” says Joe Kochitty, senior vice president, products, Toppr. Byju’s is reportedly in advanced talks to acquire Toppr for \$150-160 million. Toppr declined to comment on any acquisition-related query.

When Unacademy was launched in 2015, creating educational content by using technology was tough, so it started by focussing on recorded content and creating tools for educators to create content. However, recently, the startup has decided to shift focus. “We are now seeing a lot of interest in the live learning space,” says Singh of Unacademy. Live tutoring has also been a trend mirrored by other edtech players, including Byju’s.

As one of the largest players in the space, there are some advantages that come with scale. Singh explains, “Compared to where we were two or three years ago, we can now run more experiments and innovate faster. When we see something working

## The \$10 bln Edtech Opportunity by 2025

Convenience and low cost will be the driving factors for mass adoption of online education in India



SOURCE | Inc42 Plus

**“Our focus is on companies that use technology in interesting ways. Also, having a good alignment with founders is necessary.”**

**HEMESH SINGH**  
CO-FOUNDER AND CTO,  
UNACADEMY



well, we can double down faster.”

Up until two years ago, convincing parents to let children use edtech platforms was a challenge, recalls Vamsi Krishna, CEO and co-founder of Vedantu. “It was an alien concept. When we spoke to parents about Vedantu, the first question they would ask is: How can studying happen online?” As teachers themselves, the founders—Krishna, Pulkit Jain, co-founder and products head, and Anand Prakash, co-founder and head of academics—saw a lot of potential with live tutoring. “We really feel that the interaction is as critical as the content,” says Krishna. When Vedantu started, internet was at 2G and 3G, while 4G was just coming in. Since then, internet penetration has grown by leaps and bounds. Covid-19 has only accelerated Vedantu’s growth from 2.5-3x year-on-year pre-Covid to 7x now, with a 180 percent increase in overall user base.

India is now witnessing the second wave of the pandemic, but with vaccination programmes in progress, will this growth in the edtech sector sustain post the pandemic? “Definitely. The value in getting access to the best education while sitting at home, and teaching from the convenience of your home is big enough for a lot of learners





and educators to continue preferring online learning and teaching,” says Singh of Unacademy.

Within the edtech space, especially in the last year, experts believe there has been a breakout of a handful of players and the rest have either been consolidated or have lost the plot. “None of the new companies are coming into the full-stack segment, but rather finding particular niche segments for themselves, simply because the gap between the small and large players is huge,” says Krishna of Vedantu. The size of India’s edtech market is estimated to grow nearly four-fold over the next five years, from the current \$2.8 billion to \$10.4 billion in 2025, according to a recent report by Inc42 Plus. As of 2020, there are 4,450 startups in the sector and evidently there is space for smaller niche players to enter as well.

**T**he astronomical rise of edtech in India has enabled students to access quality education at an affordable price. The online education market for classes 1-12 is estimated to increase 6.3 times in the next one year and create a \$1.7 billion market. The post K-12 market is set to grow 3.7 times to touch \$1.8 billion, as per a report by RedSeer and Omidyar Network India.

The onset of the pandemic has also forced professionals to utilise their time by upskilling and learning online to perform better in their current jobs or find better ones. Bengaluru-based Simplilearn, an online bootcamp for digital skills training, saw a 100 percent growth in enrolments in the past few months. “Over the last six months, we also on-boarded over 50,000 corporate learners across 12 countries and witnessed several Indian startups and leading universities partner with us for tech-specific skilling programmes,” says Krishna Kumar, CEO and founder of Simplilearn. The startup has helped more than 2,000,000 professionals and 2,000



**“Across three segments in edtech—K-12, test prep and working professionals—there’s going to be one to two large players in each segment.”**

**MAYANK KUMAR**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, UPGRAD



companies across 150 countries.

There’s another edtech startup that is looking to fill the skill gap among job aspirants, albeit with a different model. Founded in 2019, Masai School aids tech aspirants bridge the skill gap, and helps them use latest technologies. After clearing the in-house entrance exam, the selected students go through a seven-month bootcamp, where they are taught the basics of coding as well as trained to develop an app. The interesting part is the startup follows a ‘Study Now and Pay Later’ approach, and charges the students after they have received their first pay cheque of ₹5 lakh per annum or above. Despite the pandemic last year, “The third batch of Masai School that started in

October 2019 and graduated in April 2020, saw a placement percentage of 86.1, with the highest salary going up to ₹9 lakh per annum,” says Prateek Shukla, co-founder and CEO. The company claims that the number of students who were enrolled in Masai School over the last three months is equivalent to the total number of students enrolled since its inception. “By FY22, we are positive about helping about 2,500 graduates, a 10x jump from our existing numbers,” adds Shukla.

Unlike the mainstream players, there are some who are finding their niche within the vernacular space, by taking into account the regional differences while implementing solutions. One such startup is Kochi-based Entri, founded in 2017 by Mohammed Hisamuddin and Rahul Ramesh. “We figured out early that when users learn in their mother tongue, they grasp it better even if they understand English. We capitalised on this opportunity and have been able to grow by providing courses in local languages,” says Hisamuddin. Entri is a learning app for job aspirants in India. It provides content such as mock and adaptive tests, video lessons and more in local languages. In the last 12 months, the company claims to have grown from \$700,000 annual recurring revenue



Dr. Sharmila Anand

## DR. SHARMILA ANAND: SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR EMPOWERING INSTITUTIONS FOR GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES

with GE Healthcare and TATA trust. I saw them transform into financially independent and confident professionals. I can never forget my first student, a 40-year-old cook who went through our program and got employment in a leading corporate hospital. Not only did her life change, but she also ensured her children were educated as well. Our work was recognized at the 70th World Health Assembly and I was humbled to receive the Heroines of Health Award as the first lady from India. Then I started working with leading medical institutions on Healthcare innovation and Capacity building through our short-term, cross-cultural learning programs to leading Universities and Health tech startups in the US. Now I focus on helping colleges expand internationally because, during the pandemic, the healthcare industry has seen unprecedented levels of collaborations and those who get ahead now will be the global leaders of tomorrow.

### Q How does your work impact the colleges?

A With my personal experience as an Invited speaker and as an International Advisor to leading institutions like Stanford University, London School of Tropical Medicine, University of Colorado, Sri Ramachandra College, Mahatma Gandhi Medical college, I've come to understand that colleges face three major challenges.

- Firstly, achieving and maintaining National & International Ranking and accreditation
- Secondly, achieving strong Global partnerships and cooperation and
- Finally, generating Non-Tuition revenue for sustainable growth.

I've been helping colleges tackle the above challenges with our proven 3R Strategy of -Increasing their global presence thereby their Ranking, Increasing their Partnerships thereby their Global Reputation, and increasing their sustainable growth thereby their Non-Tuition Revenue,

### Q How does your work impact the students?

A Through our institutional collaborations, students gain real-life academic and industry experience. These global classrooms provide students with an international internship, student exchange, and industry mentorship opportunities, which helps them gain an edge. One of my mentees Murio from Italy gained practical hands-on experience during his internship in India and this experience helped him gain admission into John Hopkins for his masters. Whether it's the bottom of the pyramid or the top of the pyramid, students with real-life experiential learning opportunities while still in college are able to perform better in their personal and professional lives.

### Q What kind of challenges have you faced and how do you keep yourself motivated?

A As a single parent, I was faced with the challenge of balancing between work and family. I constantly battled, wanting to spend time with my teen daughter, Ashile, and also taking care of my clients who were like an extended family to me. Hence I encouraged my daughter to become an entrepreneur and I became her mentor. Teenage years are precious and each time I see a young child become a young leader, it's like seeing a beautiful butterfly emerging from a pupa. My daughter, through her venture Parentteening, helps young children become young leaders by becoming speakers and published authors. As for how I keep myself motivated? I'm not motivated, I'm inspired by the organisations and students I get to mentor every single day!

You can connect with Dr Sharmila on <http://linkedin.com/in/drsharmila>

We read quite often about corporate philanthropy led by the likes of Microsoft's Bill Gates and Wipro's Azim Premji. Their contribution, though laudable, can't be compared to the collective efforts of individual social entrepreneurs who have limited resources but are driven by a strong will to bring about a positive change. Their efforts deserve equal attention, if not more, as they put up a good fight against all odds and impact thousands of lives.

One such inspiring Social entrepreneur started the firm Inespera with the objective of Skilling, Empowering, and Transforming higher education especially within the medical and healthcare fields. She has transformed the lives of over 20,000 students and worked with leading Colleges in India and abroad.

**We recently caught up with her for an interview and here are the excerpts:**

### Q Please tell us about your background and experiences that led you to this unique and purpose-driven path.

A I am a Medical Doctor turned Entrepreneur. I was fortunate to gain cross-cultural learning experience after becoming a mother and this opened my mind to endless possibilities. I have a special place for children in my heart. Being a mother myself, I know how much parents and teachers want the best for their children/students. I also have high regard for India as a country and hence want to do my part in empowering the youth to become future Young Leaders. The best way to achieve this is by exposing them to world-class education and industry experiences. Healthcare education has been my focus and I dream of putting Indian education on the global map.

### Q How did you begin your venture? What was the big idea?

A My first project was helping rural girls go through healthcare skilling and find gainful employment along



(ARR) to \$3.5 million ARR. User registrations have grown from 1.5 million to 5 million, and it has added more than 130,000 paid subscribers. “The kind of edtech adoption that we saw during the six months of the lockdown would have otherwise taken six years to happen,” he adds.

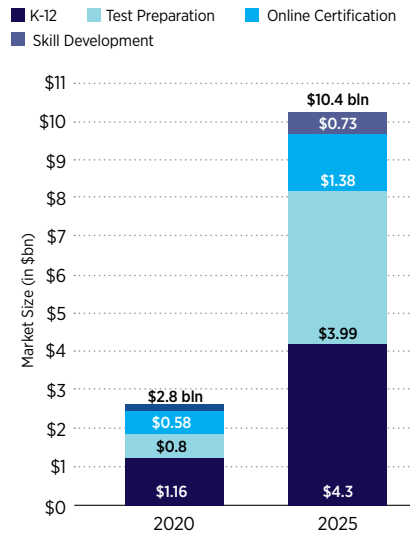
Although a lot of training centres had to remain shut during the lockdown, the founders of brick-and-mortar Ludhiana-based training centre Edusquare saw the pandemic as an opportunity to scale up their business.

They had launched YSchool in 2020 as an alternative mode of teaching, combining edtech with physical coaching centres. The YSchool learning app provides solutions for students between classes 9 and 12 to crack competitive exams. “We have gone from 0 to 80,000 users in 10 months during the pandemic for our app and online product. We aim to have 1 million subscribers by 2022,” says Anand Arora, CEO, YSchool.

When it comes to early childhood learning, startup Square Panda India has been working with the government of India on an early learning initiative, ‘Aarambh’, to develop the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECCE) ecosystem in every state. “We are working with central

## Growth Potential

India to witness 3.7x growth in edtech market size in the next five years



- K-12 learning solution will account for 41% of the total edtech market size by 2025.
- The market size of K-12 learning solutions is estimated to surge 3.7x between 2020 and 2025.
- 11.3 mln could be the total number of paid users in the K-12 learning solutions space by 2025.
- Skill development is one of the most lucrative market opportunities in the K-12 space. Coding and other STEM-related skills are currently witnessing a massive adoption.

SOURCE | Inc42 Plus

and multiple state governments, schools, communities, and impact organisations to prove Aarambh’s efficacy, effecting change in educators and young students across India’s grassroots through technologies like AI and machine learning.

**“No new company is coming into the full-stack segment, but rather finding niche segments for themselves, simply because the gap between the small and large players is huge.”**

VAMSI KRISHNA  
CEO & CO-FOUNDER, VEDANTU

Our projects across states like Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh had overwhelming responses,” says Ashish Jhalani, MD, Square Panda India. The programme, says Jhalani, will empower all stakeholders, from anganwadi workers and educators, to children. For instance, Square Panda’s AI-enabled chatbot, SquareTalk, assists early years’ educators and provides learning resources.

The sector has also seen increased investor activity due to the remarkable growth potential of players. Last year, the edtech sector saw an investment of \$2.1 billion compared to \$1.7 billion in the entire previous decade, according to a report on the e-learning industry by Anand Rathi Advisors Limited.

The industry is going through an exciting phase, with the behaviour change towards online learning expected to continue in 2021 and beyond, says Siddharth Nautiyal, partner, Omidyar Network India. “In the last one year, we have backed several new companies in the sector, including Kutuki, Masai and Uolo. The acceleration in 2020 has advanced growth for edtech companies by three to five years compared to their original plan.”

However, education globally is still one of the most under-invested sectors. It took a pandemic to catalyse the growth, and for many stakeholders—from teachers to students—to try edtech for the first time, something that would have taken four to five years otherwise.

Newer players are entering since the entry barrier in education is not that high.

Pai of Blume Ventures adds, “There will always be new founders emerging with exciting new solutions and approaches to new and old problems. Meanwhile, of course, there will be some consolidation as top companies start acquiring and giving exits to smaller companies. But both will coexist.”





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# Handa's New Funda: From Academy to Unacademy

How IITian Ravi Handa scaled up his seven-year-old online venture for MBA preparation, and eventually sold it to an edtech major

By RAJIV SINGH



he first thing that strikes you about Ravi Handa is his brutal honesty. A teacher, after all, needs to be upfront. The IITian starts the conversation by making two confessions. First, he reveals his weak spot: Computer science. “I was bad at it, and I mean really bad,” smiles the 37-year-old edtech founder of online CAT (common admission test) and MBA coaching venture *Handa ka Funda*. An IIT-Kharagpur alumnus,

Handa has dual degree (BTech and MTech) in computer science and engineering. A few weeks ago, *Handa ka Funda* was acquired by edtech major Unacademy for an undisclosed amount.

Unlike a fellow IITian who would have cashed in on the prized-engineering tag by joining some fancy multinational company and settling for a hefty pay pack, Handa was the odd one out. Reason: He knew his limitations. “I did not try apart from the campus placement,”

he concedes. Poor computer science, he underlines, would have been a major handicap. “Even if I could get a job because of the IIT brand, I was sure I would get fired once they realised I was Jon Snow,” he laughs, alluding to the fictional character in *A Game of Thrones*.

The second confession is what changed his life: Love for math. He settled for a career in coaching. In short, teaching math. “I loved the subject. I never felt that I was working while teaching math,” he says.

**“It is a pretty comfortable job to stand in front of a bunch of 40-50 graduates and explain basic math to them, something they already know but have forgotten.”**

**RAVI HANDA**  
FOUNDER,  
HANDA KA FUNDA



DEBARSHI SARKAR FOR FORBES INDIA

Apart from his love for the subject, there was one more overwhelming personality trait that kept him glued to coaching: Laziness. “I am a really lazy person and I liked the idea that it (teaching) wasn’t hard work,” he says, explaining why he got hooked to coaching. “It’s a pretty comfortable job to stand in front of a bunch of 40 to 50 graduates, and explain basic math to them, something they already know, but have forgotten,” he smiles.

Handa’s tryst with coaching started quite early as a student when he took a break for a year after he finished his school and went to Kota—the Mecca of IIT coaching. His relationship with the subject continued during his IIT-Kharagpur days when he would rush to Kolkata—some 135 km from his campus—to take part-time classes at a coaching institute. The money was peanuts, but his passion unmatched. After finishing engineering, he started teaching full time. “In 2006, I started with a salary of ₹22,500 per month,” he recounts. The amount, he stresses, was lower than the job offer that he got at a campus placement. “I do not think any IITian, or any top engineering or B-school grad, gets into coaching for money,” he reckons. What also helped to opt for coaching was zero pressure from his parents. “Both are doctors, and they gave me enough space and freedom to choose whatever I wanted to pursue since I was a kid,” he says. “There was no financial pressure on me.”

Early in his career, Handa worked at some coaching institutes in Kolkata, then shifted to Jaipur to co-found a learning company in 2010. After that, he worked at sales readiness technology firm MindTickle, and, in January 2013, started his own website *Handa ka Funda*.

The easy part was quitting the job once he realised he is not cut out for it. “Coaching was my calling,” he says. The difficult part, though, was convincing students to opt for an online medium of education. Most of the MBA and CAT coaching

**Hero Handa**

- An edtech entrepreneur, **Handa** has been running his online **CAT** (Common Admission Test) and **MBA** coaching venture **Handa ka Funda** since 2013
- Was **born and brought up** in Jaipur, Rajasthan
- This month, online edtech biggie **Unacademy** acquired **Handa aka Funda**
- An **IIT Kharagpur** alumnus, **Handa** has dual degrees (**B.Tech and MTech**) in Computer Science and Engineering

## The Journey So Far

- 2006-10**
  - ◆ Joined **IMS** as academic instructor (Math) at Kolkata in July 2006
  - ◆ Worked in the company for little over four years
- 2010-12**
  - ◆ Co-founded Jaipur-based learning company **Maurya Learning** in May 2010
  - ◆ Worked at **MindTickle** from August 2011 till December 2012
- 2013-21**
  - ◆ Started **Handa Ka Funda** in Pune in January 2013
  - ◆ Sold it to **Unacademy** in March 2021

was offline in the country: Teaching academies used to have brick-and-mortar branches; and students were used to studying from physical reading materials. The first year of operations, therefore, showed little results. Only 200-odd students joined.

Handa, though, remained undeterred. Reason: He was still not looking at coaching as a profession. “I just asked one question: Can it pay my bills? And surely, it could,” he recalls. Over the next few months and years, what started as a trickle was fast turning into a steady stream. Word-of-mouth worked; being actively present on question-and-answer website Quora helped immensely; and willingness to help students by offering some free content during the initial days added to his popularity. By the end of the last year, *Handa Ka Funda* had some 4,000 students.

So, if the going was great, what was

the reason to sell out to Unacademy in March? The reason again, Handa underlines, is not money. The biggest pull is the freedom offered by the much bigger rival to do something that Handa had not been able to do over the last few years: Focus solely on teaching. Managing an institute takes a toll on the teacher. “Now my key responsibility would be only to teach and not to think about running the establishment,” he says. The transition from employer to employee, too, has some handsome perks: No pressure of revenue target, no headache of managing the show and being worried about umpteen trivial things. Unacademy’s pitch to teachers who are founders is a simple message: You know how to teach. So please stick to teaching, and let us take care of the other things. “It’s a big load off my chest,” he says.

The edtech boom in India over the last few years has brought about a paradigm shift in the teaching landscape: Both as a full-time profession, and the money involved. Handa explains. “Now for a lot of people, teaching is not an experiment,” he says. “It’s a good way to earn a handsome living.” What the edtech revolution has also done, Handa points out, is to nudge all the part-timers to turn full-timers.

Are listening to his heart and following his passion the secret sauce to his success? Handa pauses for a while before saying, “To be honest, I just happened to be the right person at the right time. I was just lucky,” he says.

In school, he recalls, he would end up solving tough maths problems that the others would struggle for days. And what made him addicted to the subject was the compliment that would be heaped on him by his friends: *Arey wah* (wow!).

Two decades after finishing his school, Handa has still managed to get compliments. The trigger this time is to sell out to Unacademy, and the exclamation is ‘*Arey wah.*’

# Beating Bharat's Edtech Blues

On the other side of the billion-dollar edtech boom are children who have been unable to access the most basic forms of online education, and people who have been trying to bridge the digital divide

By DIVYA J SHEKHAR

**R**

enuka is silent for a long time before cautiously saying that she wants to study to become a doctor.

Standing outside her classroom at the Kannada-medium Ramagondanahalli (RG Halli) government school in Bengaluru, the 12-year-old is confident that no dream is big enough for her. Her sixth grader friends Rehana, Lasya and Anitha also have similar high aspirations.

Aspirations, which belie the difficult realities of their lives, and those of most of their peers at the school, where 70 percent students belong to migrant families. Their parents are daily-wage earners, construction workers, ragpickers or domestic helpers with an average monthly income of less than ₹15,000. Almost 60 percent of

**“When school resumed, the learning gap was so huge that 80 percent of students had forgotten basic math, science concepts and writing skills.”**

**GH RENUKARAJ,**  
TEACHER, ARSIKERE  
GOVERNMENT SCHOOL

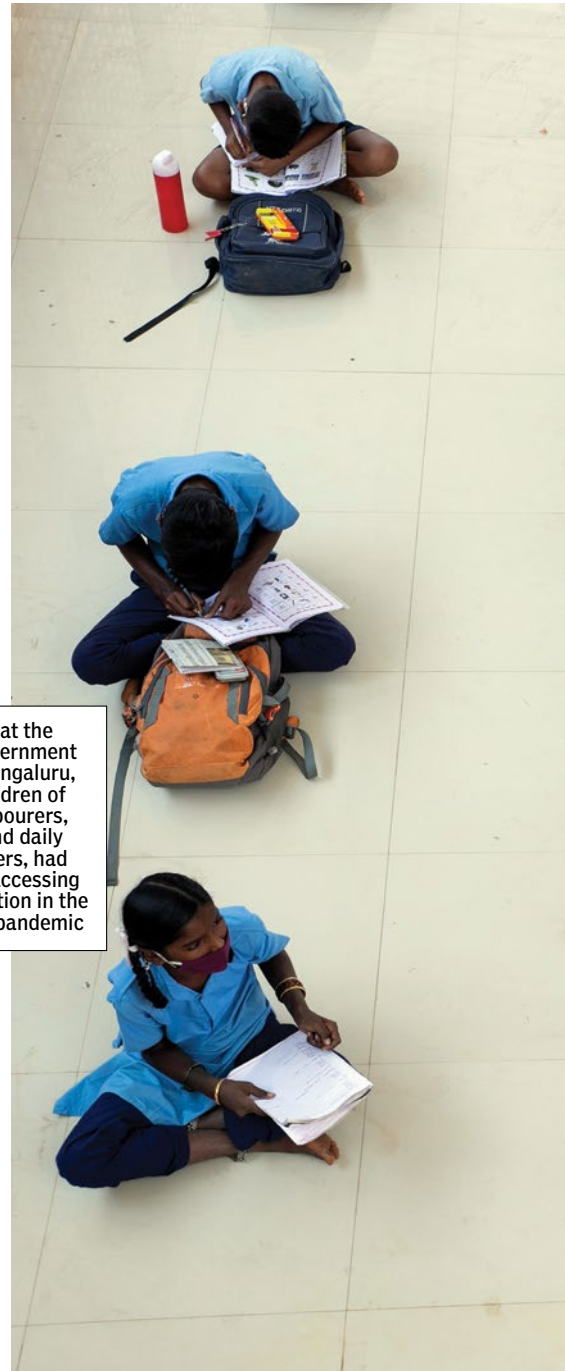


Renuka's friends have either never been to school before, or had been out of school before rejoining.

When the pandemic hit a year ago in March, Rehana's father, a construction worker, lost his livelihood and decided to migrate to his hometown in Gulbarga temporarily before returning to Bengaluru. By May, the school procured smartphones through a community donation drive. Teachers started sharing lessons through WhatsApp, conducting reading sessions and one-on-one training over phone calls. Parents were required to come in at least once a week to school to collect worksheets and library books.

But there were other challenges. Renuka, for instance, is the eldest of three siblings. Her mother, a domestic help, and her father, a helper to a truck driver, were at home through most of last year. This meant that when Renuka sat down to study, having five people in the same small room made it impossible for her to concentrate.

Their teacher Parvati, who has been with the RG Halli government school since 1995, tells *Forbes India* that she struggled to get students to study online. “I sent lessons over on WhatsApp, but so many parents did not even download the files,” she says, adding that some parents took their



Students at the RG Halli government school in Bengaluru, mostly children of migrant labourers, farmers and daily wage earners, had challenges accessing digital education in the wake of the pandemic

children out of school to make them work in menial jobs, and a few others continued only for the sake of mid-day meals. School for classes 6 and above restarted in January. “I am happy to come back to school because I just could not study at home, and could not meet my friends either,” says Renuka.

Such challenges exist even in a school like RG Halli where the government receives a good share of community support. The school was adopted by citizen’s volunteer group Whitefield Ready

in 2008. In 2019, English-medium classrooms were launched—through a public-private partnership model involving the Karnataka government, non-profit Teach for India and Inventure Academy—for children of migrant workers from Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal who could not understand Kannada, says Sumedha Rao, a lead volunteer with Whitefield Ready.

When the lockdowns were announced, with support from the Rotary Bangalore IT Corridor and

the local community, volunteers organised rations, medical support and even house rents to prevent parents from migrating away and pulling their kids out of the RG Halli school. They also reached out to startups and corporates to collect refurbished digital devices and internet support for children to continue studying with the least amount of disruptions.

Many other government or low-income private schools had to work with far fewer resources and support systems. GH Renukaraj, who





teaches classes 8 to 10 in the Arsikere government school in the Pavagada taluk of Karnataka, tells *Forbes India* that over 90 percent of the 117 students in his school are children of landless farmers. Only half those kids have access to digital devices. “When school resumed, the learning gap was so huge that 80 percent of students had forgotten basic math like multiplication and division, science concepts and writing skills,” he says. “We had to teach them all that again, plus cover the entire year’s syllabus in a matter of five months. Teachers worked additional hours to ensure children do not miss out.”

In the Urmal village in Jharkhand, only 10 percent of the 250-odd children in the local school had access to smartphones for study materials sent over via WhatsApp. So teachers printed worksheets for all students and went door to door to deliver them. They would then collect them back and make assessments within a week. To ensure students didn’t drop out and more enrolled despite the pandemic, teachers went to each individual home to speak with parents.

“Most people in this village are illiterate farmers or landless labourers who are not very involved with their kids’ education. We have to incentivise them through mid-day meals, clean uniforms and free books to ensure they keep their children enrolled in school,” science teacher Subhash Chandra tells *Forbes India*. He adds that during the lockdown, the government had telecast classes and lessons on Doordarshan for students who did not have access to smartphones. “But sometimes there was no electricity supply, so how will they watch lessons on TV?”

### DO THE MATH

The pandemic resulted in an obscene boom for startups operating in India’s edtech space. These startups raised

INFANT J



K Kamakshi and V Sumathi, teachers at a government school in Chengalpet, Tamil Nadu, say once children started working, they were not interested in studies

a total investment of \$2.22 billion in 2020, as compared to \$553 million in 2019, according to a report titled ‘The Great Un-Lockdown: Indian Edtech’ by Indian Private Equity and Venture Capital Association and PGA Labs. At least 92 startups attracted funding last year, out of which 61 received seed funding. Online education platforms, the report says, had raised \$4 billion between 2016 and 2020. Put these figures against the statistics of children struggling to access basic

forms of digital education, and the disparity appears as stark as ever. Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal said in Parliament in September 2020 that India has over 14 lakh schools. This includes more than 10 lakh government schools that cater to over 60 percent of India’s 32 crore-odd student population. In the wake of the pandemic in March 2020, all schools were forced to go online without warning. As a result, many children were left out of the

learning process, mainly due to lack of access to digital devices.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)—Wave 1 facilitated by non-profit Pratham in October 2020 revealed that about 43.5 percent of children in government schools had no access to smartphones. Other than textbooks, only about a third of students received learning materials through mediums like WhatsApp, phone calls, recorded videos or online classes.

“While 35 percent children received learning materials other than textbooks, 70 percent did some kind of learning activity in the reference week. Very few children could participate in live online classes, which was the closest thing to instruction during this period when schools were closed. So there again, you are going to have equity issues,” says Wilima Wadhwa, director of ASER Centre.

She says that states with high learning outcomes performed better in terms of distributing materials to children. As per the report, in states like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, only 21.5 percent, 21 percent and 7.7 percent children respectively had received learning materials.

Rukmini Banerji, CEO of Pratham Education Foundation, points out that for children to be able to access online classes, schools have to send out lessons on time. As per the ASER 2020 report, 68 percent of parents say that schools did not send learning materials. “Tracking what school systems send to children on an ongoing basis online is also to be taken into account.”

The field research group at the Azim Premji Foundation undertook a study in September 2020 across 1,522 schools in five states, covering 80,000 children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They found that more than 60 percent of students could not access digital learning for reasons including “absence of a smartphone, multiple siblings sharing a smartphone, difficulty in using

## Smartphone Access

| School Type       | % Enrolled Children                    |      |      |               |       |
|-------------------|--|------|------|---------------|-------|
|                   | Number of Smartphones in the Household |      |      |               |       |
|                   | No Smartphone                          | One  | Two  | Three or More | Total |
| Government School | 43.6                                   | 43.6 | 9.7  | 3.1           | 100   |
| Private School    | 25.8                                   | 50.3 | 16.7 | 7.2           | 100   |

**11.1%**

Families across government and private schools that bought a new phone for children’s education since the lockdown

**20%**

Children in government schools only have feature phones, as compared to 15.7 percent students in private schools

**12.7%**

Children in government and private schools had access to other smartphones (eg: neighbour) when there wasn’t any in their household

**SOURCE** Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Wave-1 2020 facilitated by non-profit Pratham

apps for online learning etc.”. Over 90 percent teachers in these schools said no consequential assessment of a child’s learning was possible online, while 70 percent of parents felt digital

education was not at all effective in helping their children learn.

Even though the government introduced a New Education Policy (NEP) last year, budgets have been slashed. The total budget allocation towards education for FY22 reduced to ₹93,224 crore from ₹99,300 crore last year. E-learning programmes also did not particularly receive a financial boost. “It is a tall ask for the government to make sure every child has access to digital education, but looking at the Union Budget, education is surely not the topmost priority of the government,” says Pramod Sridharamurthy, secretary, India Literacy Project (ILP).

The education non-profit equips teachers like Renukaraj and Subhash Chandra with digital content and visual aids to engage with children more effectively. They have reached over 8.73 lakh underprivileged students across 5,659 remote villages in seven states.

Sridharamurthy adds TV and radio programmes scheduled by the government provided some amount of learning to children, but it was largely a one-sided effort. “Teachers then started conducting classes in small groups of 5-10 kids in open spaces. They carried their laptops loaded with digital content and our low-cost science kits to engage with students,” he explains.

V Sumathi and K Kamakshi, teachers at a government high school



## Digital Education: Not For All?

A September 2020 report called Myths of Online Education by the Field Research Group at the Azim Premji Foundation indicates:

- ◆ Almost **60%** children cannot access online learning resources
- ◆ **90%** children with disabilities from vulnerable backgrounds said their teachers were unable to participate in online classes
- ◆ Over **90%** teachers said no meaningful assessment of children possible in online classes
- ◆ Close to **50%** teachers reported children were unable to complete assignments shared during online classes
- ◆ Around **70%** parents felt online classes do not provide effective learning
- ◆ Close to **90%** parents were willing to send their children back to school with health safeguards

in the Chengalpet district of Tamil Nadu, say these kits and digital aids help them keep children interested in studies. “Many children had no support from family towards academics. Parents sent them to work during the lockdown, because of which the kids were not interested in coming back to school,” Sumathi explains, adding that they have to constantly assuage the fears of many bright students who are worried this learning gap will affect their career or job prospects going forward.

The ASER 2020 report reveals that close to 75 percent children received support from their families in the past year. Among children whose parents had studied only up to class 5 or less, this was lower at 55 percent. Banerji of Pratham says various state governments have also taken initiatives to involve the community in helping underserved children. “In Chhattisgarh, you have mohalla classes. Odisha has a Mo School campaign where alumni volunteer to work with kids during summer holidays. In Nagpur, Maharashtra, Pratham has a radio programme in collaboration with the state government called Shale Baherchi Shala [A School Outside A School] where we see the local panchayats mobilise communities to help children do the programmes the show talks about.” According to her, there is a lot of potential to use various mediums to help underprivileged kids, and edtech companies can certainly chip in to undertake research in this space.

“Edtech for low-income communities usually involves bite-sized content in regional languages that can be grasped even by parents who are not very educated, where you help them engage with and teach children using simple household items instead of fancy toys or gadgets,” says Azeez Gupta, founder of edtech non-profit Rocket Learning that provides foundational education for children up to eight years of age.

Savita Gajanan Irshid, a nurse

## Only One-Third of Students Received Learning Materials

◆ Only about one-third of enrolled children received some kind of learning materials from their teachers, other than textbooks\*

◆ Learning materials were shared via different mediums like WhatsApp, phone calls or personal visits by teachers

◆ More private schools students across classes received learning materials, compared to government schools

| Std              | Government School | Private School |
|------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Std I-II         | 27.9              | 35.8           |
| Std III-V        | 33.7              | 40.4           |
| Std VI-VIII      | 35.4              | 42.7           |
| Std IX and Above | 34.8              | 43.4           |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>33.5</b>       | <b>40.6</b>    |

SOURCE Annual Status of Education Report - Wave 1, October 2020; \*For the reference week of the survey

from Harsul, Aurangabad, wanted her three-year-old daughter Aaradhna to learn basic concepts like addition, subtraction, colours etc. but had to homeschool her due to the pandemic. “The app [by Rocket Learning] helps her understand concepts in a way that she finds fun, and we are required to upload videos of all her assignments and lessons, so it keeps us accountable for her learning as well,” she says. “It’s a good thing we have technology available at home, so we don’t have to worry about our child missing out on school.”

Rocket Learning currently works in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, reaching 100,000 children, and around 8,000 teachers. The content is provided in Hindi and

**“Edtech for low-income communities usually involves bite-sized content in regional languages that can be grasped even by parents who are not very educated.”**

**AZEED GUPTA**  
FOUNDER,  
ROCKET LEARNING



Marathi. The startup collaborates with the state governments to enable school and anganwadi teachers to set up WhatsApp groups for their classes. Since the onboarding is done via the government, parents respond to it more seriously.

The non-profit operates close to 10,000 WhatsApp groups, where its artificial intelligence delivers interactive digital content, gamified learning, nudges to remind parents of assignments, regular report cards, and video compilations showing their child’s progress. “Efforts for these children have to be different from typical edtech interventions that we see in upper middle class homes where you have a kid in front of a computer who is motivated enough to study,” explains Gupta. “We also use real-time data to give feedback to the government on which block or district is doing well and which is not, so efforts could be shaped accordingly.”

Nooraine Fazal, co-founder of Inventure Academy, agrees that while it is easy to put curriculum online, learning needs to “have a social context, as per the needs and pace of the learners”. She wants to build the RG Halli school—where enrolments have increased from less than 200 in 2018 to over 450 today—as an example of how collaborating with the

private sector can help raise the bar for government schools in the remotest of areas. As part of this, the team is working to put out an open-source learning curriculum that can be used by non-profits, governments or other stakeholders to scale up efforts in public or low-income private schools.

Savita Gajanan Irshid, a nurse from Harsul, Aurangabad, used an app by Rocket Learning to homeschool her three-year-old daughter Aaradhna during the pandemic



### WILL EDTECH GIANTS LOOK THIS WAY?

A few large edtech companies have started approaching rural India as a potential market for their offerings, which might see them put a fraction of their resources into addressing critical access issues. upGrad, the online higher education startup, intends to make an investment of around ₹100 crore over the next two years to develop online programmes for learners spread across remote regions, particularly from a competitive exam preparation standpoint.

Arjun Mohan, CEO-India, upGrad, says people in rural areas always saw more merit in earning a livelihood than spending that time in earning a college degree. But online education has made it more flexible for them to get degrees from the best universities while continuing to earn. “Even companies are more open to hiring people with online degrees now. So we want to take our programmes to people who have restricted access to technology and then connect them to recruiters too. This will help people see that they can study without losing their livelihood and do better in life.” The startup plans to work with local partners from rural communities in order to instil trust in parents and students.

Edtech leader Byju’s has not yet considered rural India as a market, but about 65 percent of its 80 million students and over 5.2 million annual paid subscribers come from outside the top 10 cities, says co-founder Divya Gokulnath. “The internet is making

education a level playing field. We understand the inequities in the digital world and want to give children access to lessons irrespective of economic status or geographies.” Byju’s, which opened out the app for everybody during the lockdown, launched its social initiative called Education For All around last November. Its Give Initiative, launched in February, involves people donating old devices for Byju’s to load their courses for free in English or regional languages.

“We have tie-ups with over 40 NGOs working with children across 22 states. It is easier to equip a student with a learning device than build a school with good teachers in it,” says Gokulnath, declining to give numbers on the number of devices collected so far. “Edtech providers can come up with solutions that can go to the remotest part of the country... governments can come forward to set up smart classrooms. Companies can start thinking how

they can help teachers and students come online seamlessly. One step in the right direction from every stakeholder can take edtech forward to those who really need it.”

According to Gokulnath, government schools usually have children with different knowledge levels in the same grade. Edtech can help deal with that problem more easily because the content can be personalised and adapted to the child’s pace, she says. “We want to create effective, sustainable and economic models for hybrid learning, reach 5 million students by 2025 and make an impact on the way they learn.”

Banerji of Pratham says we need to invest more in gathering data around children’s learning, so that we can move forward in an evidence-based manner. “When we say children can be helped through digital means and we are concerned about equity, we must have ways to measure these things.” **F**

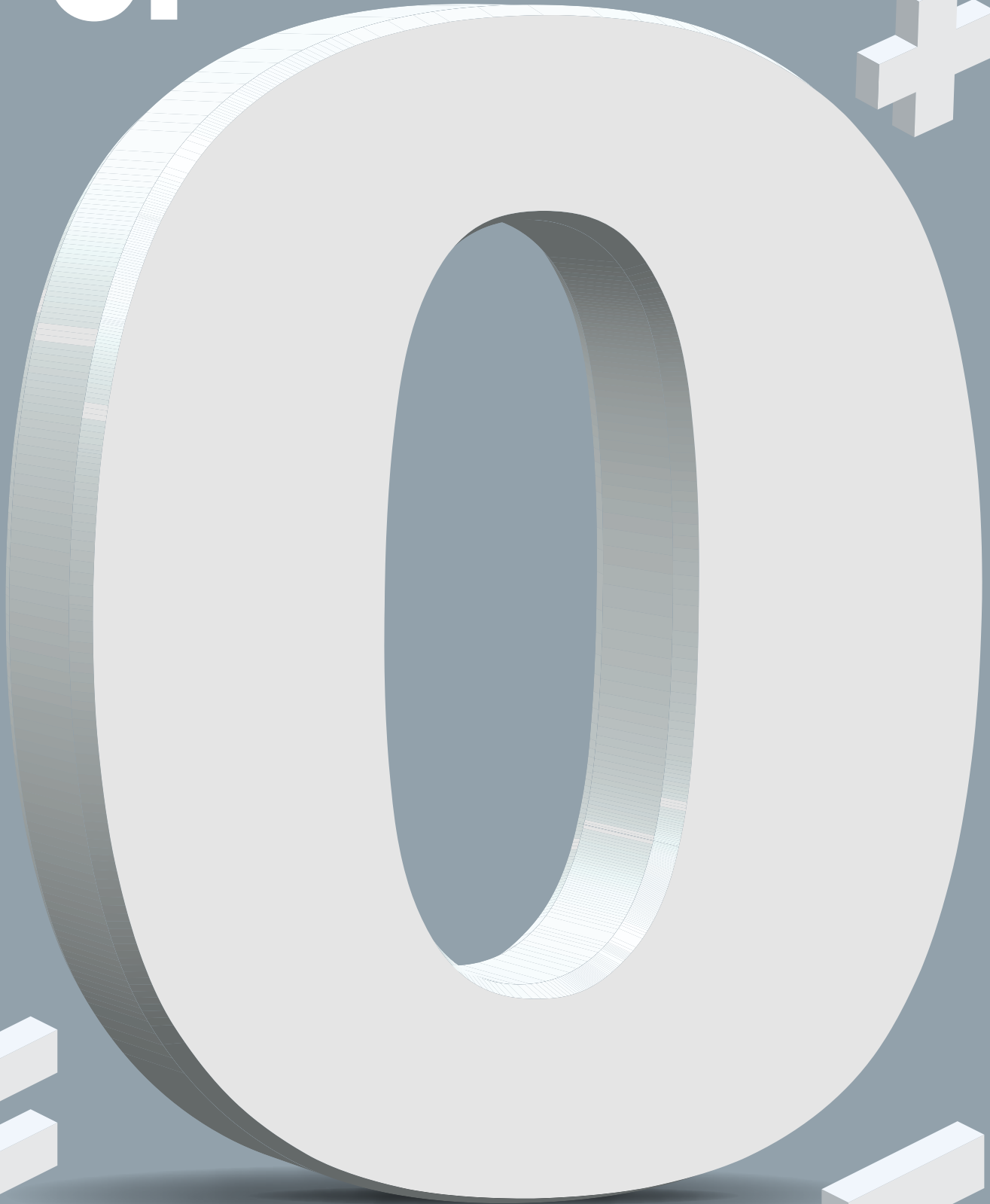
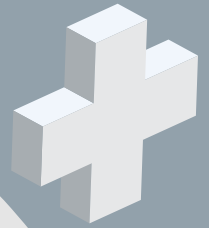


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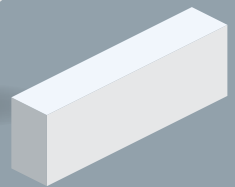
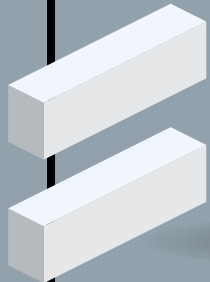
# Power Of

How a bunch of startups is trying to make math appealing by killing the fear of the subject among students

By RAJIV SINGH



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**I**t was an elementary question for 12-year-olds. “Which is the larger number: 0.19 or 0.2?” Manan Khurma, an IIT alumnus who started math edtech startup Cuemath in 2013, posed it to a bunch of chirpy eight graders in Bengaluru. Most of the replies were unexpected, and alarming. “If they are picking 0.19 over 0.2, then there is something fundamentally wrong,” he mused. But what stunned Khurma most was something else. Decimals as

a concept is introduced to the kids when they are in fourth grade. Getting a wrong reply to a question meant for fourth or fifth graders at most was disturbing. Five years later in Jamshedpur, Mahesh Singh, an HR professional, discovered something else equally disconcerting. His daughter, studying in class VI then, was struggling to solve a simple equation:  $3+6 \times 2$ . She tried multiple times but in vain. The right way is to multiply first and then add. His daughter was adding first.

Singh knew the basics was missing. He also knew another stark reality. If the concepts were not made clear to his ward, she would start running away from the subject. “This is what I did when I was in school,” recalls Singh. Mugging up formula, looking to get the right answer even without understanding the questions, and skipping the chapters he couldn’t understand a wee bit, Singh had a troubled relationship with the subject. “I dreaded math. I even bunked the classes,” he recounts.



**“The way math was taught to us was more like a horror show. And the message was ‘darna zaroori hai [you need to fear].”**

**MAHESH SINGH**  
HR PROFESSIONAL AND FATHER  
OF TWO DAUGHTERS

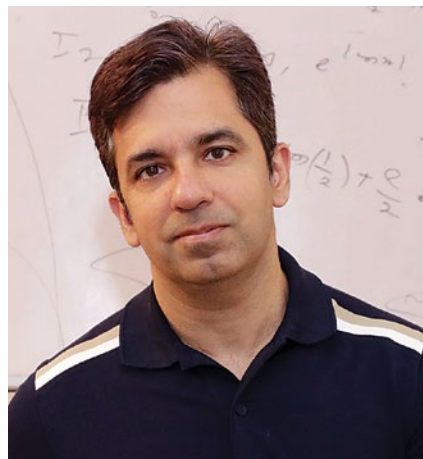
**“Once I understood the concepts, I started enjoying math. I stopped running away from it.”**

**TANUSHA SINGH** (EXTREME RIGHT)  
CLASS 9 STUDENT

Two words, both starting with F, started haunting Singh: Fear and fail.

Meanwhile in Jalandhar early this year, Sachin Gulati was trying to kill the ‘F’ factor. “We first need to decode the fear,” he said to a bunch of parents who had come for orientation class of math with their kids studying in grade 8. He too started with a simple question. “What do your kids fear the most,” he asked the anxious parents. After getting all kinds of replies, Gulati shot the right answer. “They fear the known, and the unknown,” he says, adding that both are directly proportional. If students fear the unknown, which means they don’t understand the subject, then they will fear the known, which means the chances of flunking in math becomes high. “The unknown and known feed on each other. It’s a vicious circle,” stresses the founder of bootstrapped venture TruMath.

A bunch of edtech startups, including the ones run by Gulati and Khurma, is trying to break the vicious circle of ‘known’ and ‘unknown’ by taking fear out of math, and making it appealing to students. The idea is simple: Make kids fall in love with



### TruMath

#### Name and Game

- Focussed on math for students from **class 8-12**
- Based out of **Jalandhar**; founded by **Sachin Gulati** in **2017**
- Bootstrapped; claims to have **1.8 lakh students** across all platforms

**“Math must ignite curiosity among kids, and not kill it.”**

**SACHIN GULATI**  
FOUNDER, TRUMATH

the subject which they get introduced to from kindergarten. No emphasis on marks, claims of putting kids into IIT, or getting an engineering seat or promise of transforming the little ones into Albert Einstein. There is no hard-sell except the promise of letting the child enjoy the subject by keeping her curiosity intact.

At Cuemath, Khurma’s main focus is on the basics. “You can’t learn swimming by watching a bunch of YouTube videos,” he says, explaining the approach taken by his startup which has raised over \$65 million from marquee backers such as Sequoia, Unitus and Google (Capital G). Math, Khurma underlines, can’t be learnt by watching a teacher solve problems. The students, he says, are guided towards the answer rather than giving them the solution on a platter. “It makes learning more effective,” he contends. A topic like fractions is explained using a birthday cake, while decimals is represented by the money people spend every day. Instead of completing a chapter and moving on to the next, the focus is letting students grasp the concepts by taking their own sweet time. “We make

NISHANT RATNAKAR



### Cuemath

#### Name and Game

- A math edtech startup founded by **Manan Khurma** in **December 2013**
- Headquartered in Bengaluru; spread across **17+ countries**
- Raised around **\$65 million** so far
- Last funding round was in **December 2020** when it raised **\$40 million**
- Counts **Google** (CapitalG), **Sequoia** and **Unitus Ventures** among backers
- Taught over **200,000 students**; over a quarter are from abroad
- Had **4,500 teachers** in **2020**; target for this year is **8,000**
- Posted operating revenue **₹24.43 crore** in **FY20**

**“You can’t learn swimming by watching a bunch of YouTube videos. Similarly, math can’t be learnt by watching a teacher solve problems.”**

**MANAN KHURMA**  
FOUNDER, CUEMATH

them ask ‘why.’ For long, they have been trained to ask ‘what,’” he says.

For Purna Jhunjhunwala, the big question was how to engage 3-8 year olds and make math entertaining. The founder of the bootstrapped e-learning startup Creative Galileo found an interesting technique: The toon character ‘Little Singham.’ Though math, she explains, is one of the most

interesting subjects, it scares many children. “We are making learning fun for children where concepts are represented through their favourite characters,” she adds. The idea is to transform numbers into something creative, immersive and interactive. At a young age, Jhunjhunwala points out, children need to learn to create, use number concepts, patterns and skills, and solve problems in a playful fashion. “Teachers need to talk and teach in the language kids understand,” she says.

Aanand Srinivas would agree. “Teachers think their job is to complete the syllabus,” says the co-founder of Bengaluru-based StayQrious, which was started last January. The biggest problem, he points out, is that schools don’t teach children how learning works. “It’s kind of weird, and it’s a blind spot environment,” he says, explaining his point. The blind spot in education is that kids are being asked to learn for 18 years of their life, but are never told how learning works. “It’s kind of imitating a bodybuilder by looking at what he is doing by standing outside the gym,” he says.

There is another deep-rooted problem, which has made math unapproachable. “Parents want instant results, some sort of magical pill for their kids,” says Khurma of Cuemath. The entrepreneur talks about the early part of his innings when he would struggle to get students. Reason: The rewiring phase for any student joining the startup would last for a few months. That’s the time, say six months, when the kids are made to unlearn and start from scratch, he says. But the ‘cooling period’ was not liked by parents, who were used to quick fixes. “That was a big challenge,” he adds.

Back in Jamshedpur, Singh points out another problem. Over the last decade or so in India, math has been either solely identified with engineering or computer science or commerce. “Parents and coaching

SELVAPRAKASH LAKSHMANAN




### StayQrious

#### Name and Game

- An online edtech startup for **STEM** (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) foundations
- Co-founded by **Aanand Srinivas, Avinash Anand, and Shankar Ram** in **January 2020**; headquartered in Bengaluru
- Backed by **YCombinator**, raised a **\$2 million** seed round in **July 2020**
- Investors include **Draper Associates** (backers of SpaceX and Tesla)

**“The biggest cause of anxiety in students is math. It’s a language but is not taught like a language.”**

**AANAND SRINIVAS**  
CO-FOUNDER, STAYQRIOUS

centres are responsible for this labelling, which has done more harm,” he says. A child should be allowed to enjoy the subject and then take a call of continuing with it. “You might be able to crack the IIT or get into an engineering college by mugging,” he adds. But the real problem starts once you are in. Many of Singh’s friends dropped out of engineering colleges because they couldn’t cope with pressure. It’s only when we stop glamourising Shakuntala Devi and Einstein, he adds, that the numbers will add up. 



# ‘The Middle Class Buys Dreams. The Businessman Sells Unrealistic Ones’

**A**nand Kumar starts the interview by setting the context. “Let’s get the math right,” says the mathematician. Edtech today, underlines the man behind ‘Super 30’—a programme that provides free IIT entrance coaching to 30 students from the poorest families every year—has one dominating theme. “The focus is not on how much

children are learning. The emphasis is on the valuation of the startup, on how much funding it gets,” Kumar laments, explaining how the education ecosystem in India has undergone a deplorable change over the last few decades. A few decades back, he lets on, the biggest compliment for a teacher was when students would come to them say: *kya padhate hain, sir* (you teach so well). Then the equation

tilted more towards parents, who started valuing teachers solely on the basis of number of students who cleared engineering or medical entrance. The praise now: ‘*Kya exam clear karate hain, sir* (you make them pass so well). “Now the admiration for a teacher is *kahan padhate hain, sir* (where do you teach),” he says in a free-wheeling interview with *Forbes India*. Edited excerpts:



## ON THE 'BUSINESS' OF EDUCATION

Who turned it into a business? Who glamourised it? When media writes about the hefty package of the guys from IIT and IIM at the campus placement, what kind of message are we conveying to the parents, kids and all stakeholders? When you talk about the valuation, unicorns and the funding of edtech, what are you portraying? There are news and features about top rich Indians. But have we seen anything about top teachers of India or top scientists of India? The only yardstick to judge a person is how much money is he earning or how much funding he is getting into his venture. When success gets equated with money, it's



**“When success gets equated with money, it’s natural for education to turn into a business”**



natural for education to turn into a business. It’s a sorry state of affairs.

## ON THE ROLE OF PARENTS

They are more concerned about how many marks have been scored by their wards. They are more bothered about their kids making it to IIT or medicine. They will spend whatever it takes to enrol them in all kinds of coaching. But have they asked if their child has done something creative? Has she written a poem? Has she learnt a new art or is she interested in some sports? Nobody asks a child to solve a mathematical problem in four different ways. We are just turning our kids into machines being programmed just to earn money when they grow up. Every parent wants the best teacher for their children, but ask them: Would they like their kids to take teaching as a career? If not, from where will we get good teachers? We treat our kids like an ‘unfinished mission.’ What we couldn’t do, we want our kids to become or achieve. The only reason I am successful today, if you think I am, is that my parents never put any pressure on me. They let me be whatever I wanted to be. That’s the biggest gift a parent can give, not fancy mobiles, costly gifts or cars.

## ON DECODING THE CODING MANIA

Indians, especially the ones from middle class, buy dreams. And a good businessman, a seller, knows this inherent weakness of the buyer. So they sell dreams, unrealistic dreams. They play on the mentality

Super 30 Founder Anand Kumar believes that India needs more passionate teachers

and mindset of the buyer. Take, for instance, what any parent does when they go shopping. The first priority is the kid. They will cut down on their expenses, but will want the best for their kids. What are the coding guys selling? They are also showing a dream: The kids who learn coding at an early age will become a prodigy, successful in life, and end up joining a big MNC or at best will make some app and earn millions. The reality, unfortunately, is nowhere close to the dream. I will share an instance which will expose how coding business is happening in India. Last week, a friend of mine who is unmarried, gets a call from one of the coding startups. The bait is tempting: 50 percent off if you get your son into the coding class. It’s ridiculous. That guy doesn’t have a family. You are selling a comb to a bald person. The outrageous part is how the guy on the call sweetens the deal. “Your wife came with your son last week for a free class. So we will give an additional 10 percent off if he enrolls.” Imagine!

## ON MUSHROOMING COACHING CENTRES

Look at what is happening at Kota or other coaching centres. The parents didn’t care if the child wanted to study science or medicine. They just sent them with unrealistic pressure and a dream. The coaching guys didn’t check the aptitude of the kids. They just want headcount because it means money. What’s the end result? Suicide. The failure tag is too grim for the child to bear. There are parents in Bihar who sell their land to send their children to Kota or other centres.

## ON PAUCITY OF GOOD TEACHERS

Who is getting into this profession out of choice? Find out. The need of the hour is to find passionate people into teaching. India need teachers who can make things simple for students, who can simplify and explain even the complex of things. **F**



# Liberal Arts: A Road Less Travelled

Colleges offering these courses in India have begun to gain ground, but for them to truly shine on the global map, they must be cognisant of the country's culture and challenges

By ANUBHUTI MATTA & MANSVINI KAUSHIK



Academician Pratap Bhanu Mehta's resignation from Haryana-based Ashoka University in March

not only resulted in protests by students, but also put the spotlight on universities that offer them the option of getting a well-rounded and expansive intellectual grounding in all kinds of humanistic inquiry—in the form of a liberal arts degree.

Though specialised liberal arts colleges in India are still relatively young—most of them were established only about a decade ago—they are increasingly becoming popular and beginning to gain a wider student base.

Liberal arts courses are designed to introduce students to four areas of study—arts, humanities, natural and social sciences—and enable them to critically evaluate the environment around them. According to the draft National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 document, “A liberal arts education enables one to truly develop both sides of the brain—the creative and analytical side.”

## HOW, NOT WHAT

Courses under the umbrella of liberal arts are designed with a multi-faceted approach to challenge students' understanding beyond their lived experiences. They are focussed on the 'how' rather than on 'what'.

At Ashoka University in Haryana, one can choose from 21 major and 18 minor courses



“Students are not taught what to think, but how to think,” says Dishan Kamdar, vice chancellor of Pune-based Flame University. “Such a learning system helps students develop abilities to connect the dots, hone a creative mindset, and inculcate skills to think out of the ordinary”.

The development of skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and adaptability makes liberal arts even more important in today’s times given the fact that for several



decades, the Indian education system has focussed on early specialisation and encouraged rote learning.

“This has resulted in a majority of the graduates coming out of our education system not being employable as they lack the requisite skill sets for 21st century jobs,” says professor Malabika Sarkar, vice chancellor, Ashoka University. “Liberal arts’ focus on all-round development and in shaping students’ intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical and emotional capacities not only equips students for a career but also for life.”

Every liberal arts college provides an opportunity to combine multiple academic interests into a single degree programme ranging from arts and performance, communication and design, to history, economics and even international relations.

At Ashoka University, a not-for-profit university and a philanthropic initiative that has raised over ₹1,100 crore in the past eight years through 119 individual and 27 corporate founders, students can choose from a range of 21 majors and 18 minors while making it mandatory to opt for two co-curricular courses.

At Delhi-NCR-based Shiv Nadar University, too, the course is designed to allow students to specialise in a particular subject while studying and experimenting with a wide range of other elective subjects.

“Our programmes are designed to

**“We received applications that exceeded the size of the current batch by more than 10 times, a clear indication of the rising demand for liberal arts education.”**

**DR ACHYUT VAZE**  
DEAN, JYOTI DALAL SCHOOL  
OF LIBERAL ARTS



strengthen the learner’s foundation or core with a broad multidisciplinary approach and provide depth of learning in a major subject. While there is flexibility in the curriculum, an equal focus is laid on academic rigour,” says Dr Rupamanjari Ghosh, vice chancellor of Shiv Nadar University. The university, funded by the Shiv Nadar Foundation to the tune of \$300 million, started in 2011.

**SLOW, STEADY GROWTH**

In the past few years, the awareness of liberal arts education has increased considerably, say academicians.

For instance, Bengaluru-based Azim Premji University, which began by offering two postgraduate programmes in 2011, currently operates 11 degree programmes and 30 short-term courses across the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Mumbai-based Jyoti Dalal School of Liberal Arts (JDSOLA), established in 2016, started with a batch of 60 students; today it has 120.

“During our recent admission drive, we received applications that exceeded the size of the current batch by more than 10 times, a clear indication of the rising demand for liberal arts education. We expect the demand to rise exponentially in the coming years,” says Dr Achyut Vaze, dean and academic advisor, JDSOLA, SVKM’s NMIMS.

Shivali Padmanabh, 25, who completed her liberal arts undergraduate course in 2017 from Pandit Deendayal Energy University, Gujarat, recalls it was a new concept when she signed up for it. “When I was looking for options for my undergraduate degree, I was looking for a holistic approach over any specialised degree. Liberal arts back then was a rather new concept,” she says, adding that since her graduation she has noticed a considerable increase in the number of students per batch in her university.

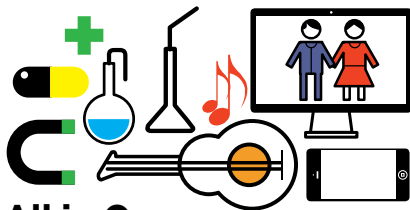
“Applications have grown manifold in the last few years, with higher



The Shiv Nadar University (left) allows students to specialise in a subject while experimenting with other electives; Flame University has seen a spike in the number of students opting for liberal arts courses

growth seen from international boards and from students who have taken international entrance tests like the SAT or ACT,” says Kamdar of Flame University, a private philanthropic initiative that receives funding through grants. “Our incoming class has more than doubled in the last few years.”

One of the factors behind the growing popularity, say experts, may have to do with the faculty chosen. At JDSOLA, candidates need to have a PhD or an MA and six to seven



### All in One

Liberal arts aims to combine various academic disciplines, including:

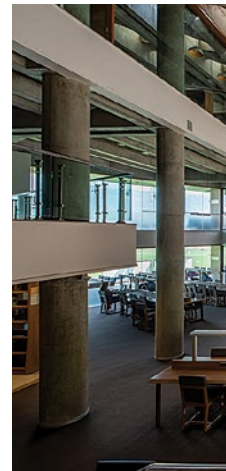
- **HUMANITIES**—art, music, theatre, literature and more
- **SOCIAL SCIENCES**—history, political science, gender studies and more
- **NATURAL SCIENCES**—physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy and more
- Mathematics, computer science, performing arts and more



### What’s In It For You

- Critical, creative, analytical, problem-solving skills
- Advance understanding and knowledge
- Questioning skills
- Better judgement
- Ethical decision-making

INFOGRAPHICS: PRADEEP BELHE, CHAITANYA DEINESH SURPUR



years of industry experience in the specialised area. Selection is done after several rounds of rigorous interviews, and once selected, they go through intensive training, informs Dr Vaze.

At Azim Premji University, says the registrar Manoj P, “We look for deep and sound disciplinary expertise.” After multiple rounds of interactions, including campus visits, the faculty’s abilities are also gauged on the basis of their display of passion for teaching, and more importantly, an openness to engage with a learning community beyond their disciplinary boundaries.

Another factor that might have worked in favour of these universities is that they are increasingly opting for foreign collaborations to stay true to their idea of exposure. Many foreign universities—from the best in business schools to Ivy League Universities—have signed MoUs with universities like Ashoka, Azim Premji, and NMIMS in India, which ensure that international professors visit these universities for classes/sessions. Some of them also offer exchange programmes.

### WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

The NEP 2020 envisions academic disciplines beyond the ‘professional versus liberal education’ binary with recommendations on de-compartmentalising Indian education. While technical institutions will be asked to integrate their curriculum

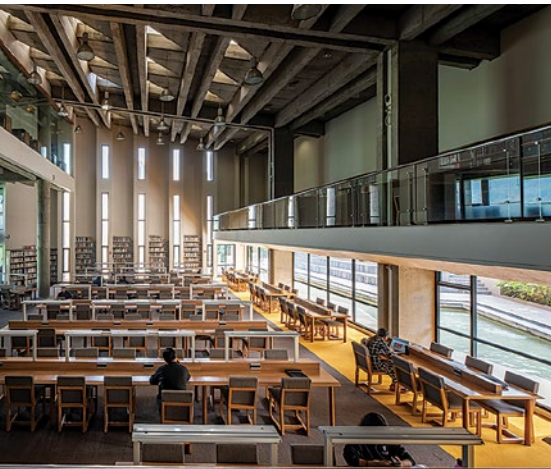
with arts and humanities, students in the latter will have the option to study more science and vocational subjects.

However, one of the biggest concerns about liberal arts education is about its future prospects, meaning how and what the degree could lead to, especially because these three- to four-year courses can cost anywhere between ₹4 lakh and ₹10 lakh a year.

Neeti Sethi, founding member, and professor of liberal arts courses at Thapar School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, in Patiala, Punjab, points out that while the purpose of liberal arts education is much beyond just securing a job, getting a job is not something that can be completely ignored since many students might have educational loans to pay off.

Besides, parents still struggle to fit such courses in the ideal educational path they imagine for their children. “There is a lot of interest for such courses in India but that comes mostly from students, not parents. People from my generation rarely understand the significance of liberal arts,” adds Sethi. This, she says, might also have to do with the limited number of degree options while growing up.

But all this seems to be changing. A 2017 Dell Technologies report predicted that 85 percent of the jobs of 2030 have not been invented yet. In this context, liberal arts universities believe that the jobs of the 21st century will require a



capacity to think critically, read discerningly, write persuasively, and be conscious of the impact of one's actions on society and environment.

"In my experience of studying higher education trends, I've seen that liberal arts courses are still misconstrued as not an equivalent of their mainstream counterparts. Majorly so because of the narrative of securing a decent job as the outcome of enrolling in a degree. This is slowly changing as students focus on education more than the need of securing a job," says Akshay Chaturvedi, founder and CEO, Leverage Edu, a higher education and career guidance platform.

Harshali Padmanabh, who is pursuing arts and business from the University of Waterloo, Canada, says the reason behind opting for liberal arts was the exposure to a wide array of subjects. "I did not know what I wanted to get out of the degree back then, but I knew I wanted to acquaint myself to newer ideas for which the degree seemed ideal," she says. "Employment is a secondary consideration. When you want to learn life skills, charting out a unique path becomes the focus."

Chaturvedi adds that though it's still an urban concept, over the last three to five years such courses are being increasingly opted for by people from Tier II and Tier III cities as well, indicating the rising

## Did You Know?

Many CEOs and celebrities have taken the liberal arts education route. Here are some famous names:



### STEWART BUTTERFIELD

CEO and co-founder, Slack; **philosophy at University of Victoria**

### SUSAN WOJCICKI

CEO, YouTube; **history and literature at Harvard University**



### BRIAN CHESKY

Co-Founder, Airbnb; **fine arts in industrial design at Rhode Island School of Design**

### HOWARD SCHULTZ

CEO, Starbucks; **communications, Northern Michigan University**



### JACK MA

Chairman, Alibaba; **BA in English, Hangzhou Normal University**

### ROBERT ALLENIGER

Chairman and CEO, The Walt Disney Company; **television and radio, Roy H Park School of Communications at Ithaca College**



### OPRAH WINFREY

American media proprietor, talk show host, actor, producer; **communications at Tennessee State University**

### NATALIE PORTMAN

Actor; **psychology at Harvard University**



As Apple co-founder **Steve Jobs** once said, "It's in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough—it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our heart sing and nowhere is that more true than in these post-PC devices."

awareness about its significance.


## GLOBAL vs LOCAL

Despite the efforts taken to put India's liberal arts universities on the global map, they have failed to grab a spot even in the top 100 over the years. The reasons might be many, say academicians.

"Universities should focus on providing quality education and their interests should be towards the concerns of the students more than those of their investors," says Balveer Arora, chairman, Centre for Multilevel Federalism, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

Azim Premji University's Manoj P believes that liberal arts courses should be designed in accordance with India's culture and challenges rather than mindlessly copying the US or an international model. "A good Indian liberal education is one that is well-designed, facilitates a better understanding of India, and affordably prepares students for a meaningful life and public good," he says.

Elucidating what the Indian education landscape has to offer, Vaze says a local perspective will further develop the creative thinking, innovation, and problem-solving abilities of students. "India has a rich cultural heritage, thriving schools of philosophies and ideologies, and a vibrant political and social life. It provides a unique, multi-dimensional, and highly specialised foundation for an education in liberal arts, giving an edge to Indian colleges that cannot be replicated abroad," he says.

Another aspect that Indian universities still lack in comparison to the ones abroad is the focus on admitting students from diverse backgrounds to enable the exchange of different viewpoints. "In India, such programmes must become truly inclusive. If the student body does not truly reflect India, and somehow becomes an island of privilege, it would not serve its intended purpose," says Manoj P. 



# The Home School of Thought

Concerns over a monotonous, formal education system coupled with edtech's innovative approaches bolster the homeschooling proposition. But is India ready for it?

By MANSVINI KAUSHIK



When Harshita Arora was introduced to computer science in Class 7 in 2015, she started exploring the subject beyond the specified CBSE syllabus. Her teachers at Pinewood School, Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh were supportive, and introduced her to coding even when the syllabus didn't account for it. Curious to know more, she started researching and developed a passion for programming. "The internet was a relatively new concept for me. I'd come back from school and spend all my time trying to learn more about coding. It was fascinating to see this whole world of builders who were using their programming skills to build great companies," she says.

By the time Arora was 15, she realised that she wanted to create an application, and that school was a constraint on the time she needed. "I knew what my goal was and that schooling wouldn't help me achieve that. I started looking for alternatives online and was introduced to the concept of homeschooling," she says. She started reaching out to parents who were homeschooling their children to know more about the possibilities.

Her parents, however, didn't see it as a viable option. "They wanted me to complete school, go to college, and get a job like everyone else. They worried that if my plans for developing an application failed, it would be difficult to get admitted to

colleges in India as homeschooling doesn't have any legal status," she explains. With Elon Musk as her role model, Arora was confident that the formal education system will only be a roadblock. After multiple discussions and introducing her parents to some successfully homeschooled children, they agreed.

With the internet as her teacher, Arora started homeschooling in 2016. A year later, she started

**NAME :** AGASTYA AMDEKAR

**AGE:** 10

**HOMESCHOOLED SINCE :** 2016

**WHY HOMESCHOOL:** Parents wanted to customise education as per their child's needs

**"Not only do parents need to be educated and have a knack for teaching, but also one of the parents has to be available for the children at all times,"** says mother, **Amrutha Joshi Amdekar.**

developing a cryptocurrency tracker application to track prices of 1,000-plus cryptocurrencies from over 19 exchanges, and in January 2018 launched Crypto Price Tracker. "After a series of unexpected successes with the app, Redwood City Ventures acquired it in March 2018. That opened up an array of opportunities for me. I came to San Francisco and have since co-founded AtoB—a technology startup in the Bay Area."

Arora is one of the select few children who achieved success by



NEHA MITHBAWKAR FOR FORBES INDIA

choosing a rather unconventional alternative to schooling. There are more like her. In 2010 and 2016, Sahal Kaushik and Malvika Joshi, two homeschooled children, came into the limelight when they were admitted to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), respectively.

Supriya Joshi, Malvika's mother, who started homeschooling her two daughters in 2003, is one

of the pioneers of advocating homeschooling in India. She says initially her approach towards education was looked down upon; it was only after the academic success of her older daughter that people around her became curious about homeschooling, "It's surprising to see how the success of homeschooling is more important to parents

than understanding what it stands for," says Joshi.

Homeschooling, an alternative approach to education, is a way of learning outside the defined parameters of school education and puts the parents/guardians in charge of their child's all-round development. What and how to teach is determined by the parents who might

Amrutha Joshi Amdekar with her son Agastya (10) during a fun homeschooling session at their Mumbai residence





Harshita Arora's homeschooling helped her focus on coding, leading her to San Francisco where she co-founded a startup

elder daughter would ask why she can't study subjects in-depth... why does she have to stop after understanding the basics. These questions indicated that she wanted to be in charge of her own learning, and so pulling them out of school to let them develop according to their capabilities was the ideal thing to do."

Max Fernand is another

homeschooling parent in Mumbai who says schools do not acknowledge individual brilliance. "A typical classroom is filled with 60 students. One teacher

cannot do justice to a room full of unique children," he says. Having homeschooled both his children, Fernand highlights its perks. "My daughter reads history and science as per CBSE, mathematics as per US curriculum and English from another curriculum. So one can merge the best aspects of various curricula to suit a child's aptitude."

The Covid-19 pandemic has made parents more curious about homeschooling. "I get calls from a number of parents exploring homeschooling," says Amrutha Joshi Amdekar, who has been homeschooling her 10-year-old son for the last four years. "I know a couple of parents who started homeschooling as a response to the increase in the time they could make for children. They started educating them by introducing several unexplored aspects of learning, which they were proud to post on social media," she says, adding that as life goes back to normal, these parents might enrol their children in schools again.

Amdekar emphasises that homeschooling is a demanding "job" that needs an adult's complete attention. "Not only do parents need to be educated and have a knack for teaching in a way that their kids understand, but also because one of the parents has to be available for

not follow the curriculum of any education board. Parents either choose not to enrol their children in schools or—as is most prevalent in India—when a school's approach doesn't align with a child's needs, they pull their children out of school.

Reliable research on homeschooling, its rising prevalence or outcomes is sparse. While there are no estimates of the number of homeschooled children in India, the cities of Mumbai, Pune, Bengaluru and Hyderabad seem to have most of the homeschooling communities.

## WHY HOMESCHOOL?

In India, the concept initially catered to specially-abled children who needed more parental support. But with the rise of concerns over a stringent education system, parents like Joshi started experimenting with the approach. Other reasons include concerns about bullying, child abuse, inefficient teaching practices and children wanting to build careers outside of academics.

"I have questioned schooling since I was a child, but back then people didn't pay heed to my concerns. The questions resurged when I had children; they were curious about the world around them, and we noticed that even after enrolling them in the best of schools, their emotional intelligence wasn't being acknowledged," says Sharadha Gerg (36), who has been homeschooling her two daughters since 2015. "My

**NAMES:** SHAMBHAVI AND ADYA DAS

**AGE:** 12, 8

**HOMESCHOOLED SINCE:** 2016

**WHY HOMESCHOOL:** Parents didn't want their children to be part of stringent formal education

**"My children were curious, and would ask questions indicating that they wanted to be in charge of their learning. Pulling them out of school to let them develop according to their capabilities was the ideal thing to do,"** says mother **Sharadha Gerg.**

the children at all times,” she says.

Homeschooling has also got a boost because of edtech companies that cater to the curricula of various education boards. While most parents refer to these online platforms to understand different concepts, they try not to restrict their children to the curricula. “Khan Academy, Unacademy, Byju’s and the likes do offer innovative digital learning methods that are great to understand concepts... but we do not just follow their syllabus. When my son wants to understand a subject listed for Class 8, he gets to do that now. If he was in school, he couldn’t have been able to make time for that,” says Amdekar.

Akshay Chaturvedi, founder and CEO, Leverage Edu, an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled marketplace that helps students with higher education and career guidance, believes homeschooled children have a higher chance of excelling. “Over four years of operations, we’ve seen that homeschoolers do extremely well when it comes to competing for seats in the best colleges across the world. This is also because the homeschooled kids are raised on the principle of curiosity and creativity as opposed to a stringent, monotonous exam system, which mirrors the requirements of higher education across the world,” he says.

### IS HOMESCHOOLING LEGAL IN INDIA?

The approach to alternative education varies globally. Homeschooling is legally recognised in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, Mexico, Chile and the US. Some have chosen to regulate home-education strictly. It’s outlawed in Germany, while last year French President Emmanuel Macron proposed tougher regulations on home education to combat religious extremism. Parents in the UK are required to ensure their children receive full-time education “suitable” to their ages, although what that should involve is undefined.

MADHU KAPPARATH



**“Over four years, we’ve seen that homeschoolers do extremely well when it comes to competing for seats in the best colleges across the world.”**

**AKSHAY CHATURVEDI**  
FOUNDER AND CEO,  
LEVERAGE EDU



In India, homeschooling is still not recognised; there is no policy defending or opposing it. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, stipulates eight years of formal education for all children, but doesn’t mention any alternative approach.

In 2009, a public interest litigation (PIL) filed before the Delhi High Court by Shreya Sahai (14) contended that Section 18 of the RTE Act does not recognise any other mode of education except through formal schooling. In April 2010, the PIL that sought amendment to the RTE Act was dismissed by a HC division bench, which asked the petitioners to make a representation to the Ministry of Human Resource Development

(MHRD), asking for its vision on homeschooling. Consequently, the MHRD filed an affidavit stating that there is nothing illegal about homeschooling and that the RTE Act doesn’t come in its way. However, the lack of a policy still raises concerns about whether homeschooling is equivalent to formal schooling.

For homeschooled children to be eligible for higher education in India, proof of competence needs to be produced. This can be done by appearing for the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) examinations that offer Open Basic Education for children up to 14 years of age. Children can take up exams at A, B and C levels, which are equivalent to Classes 3, 5, and 7, or they can opt for Secondary Education Course and Senior Secondary Course, equivalent to Class 10 and 12 exams respectively. They can also opt for the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), which is a part of the Cambridge Assessment International Examination (CAIE). After clearing any one of these exams, children are eligible for college admission.

However, homeschooled children still face problems during college admissions in India. “Colleges need a school-leaving certificate and a migration certificate, assuming that every homeschooled child would have been enrolled for primary schooling at least, which wasn’t the case with our son; he was homeschooled since the beginning,” says Fernand. His son had taken the NIOS exams, which are equivalent to CBSE’s Class 10 and 12 exams. Fernand and his wife then questioned the college’s policy. “We told them that denying a child a seat despite him clearing the NIOS exam would mean they claim that NIOS doesn’t have as much value as other boards. They eventually changed their policy,” he says. In response to the increase in homeschoolers, in 2019 the Maharashtra government launched an Open Educational



Board to facilitate homeschooling.

There are very few Indian websites that provide information, study material or guidance about homeschooling. Swashikshan—Indian Association of Homeschoolers—is one such website that was created by a group of homeschooling parents in Mumbai in 2012. “When we started, there was almost no help available for parents. A few of us decided to create a bank of resources, providing literature, answering FAQs, and organising sessions for parents,” says Supriya Joshi, founding member of the website. As long as she was a homeschooling parent, she contributed to the website. “Now both my daughters are grown-ups, so I’ve stepped back. The website is now run by volunteers and parents currently homeschooling.” The website, however, isn’t as active as in the initial years; questions uploaded on it in the last two years remain unanswered.

### WHAT DOES THE NEP SAY?

When the New Education Policy (NEP), 2020, was introduced, homeschooling parents were hopeful of getting a few answers. However, the document only mentions it in the context of the Right of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 2016.

While the final document didn’t have a targeted approach to the future of homeschooling, the drafting committee had proposed a few actions to be taken to facilitate it. “Over two and a half years of discussions, homeschooling was brought up many times. The committee had come up with three to four possible actions that could be taken, and we also proposed that it should be recognised under RTE Act, 2009. Though every aspect didn’t make it to the final vision document, the crux of it was reflected in the policy, even though indirectly,” says MK Shridhar, member, Central Advisory Board of Education, and member secretary of Karnataka Innovation Council and Karnataka Knowledge Commission.

TV Kattimani, vice chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh, another draft NEP committee member, agrees: “Homeschooling was widely discussed, and members agreed that it is a very progressive approach to education.”

The committee also considered making homeschooled children eligible for CBSE, ICSE and state board exams, which are out of bounds under the current regulations. “When this point was raised, a member

**NAME: GABRIELLE FERNAND**

**AGE: 15**

**HOMESCHOOLED SINCE: 2010**

**WHY HOMESCHOOL:** Parents focussed on child’s all-round development

**“Every child is unique and education methods should be altered according to their capabilities, and not the other way around,”** says father, **Max Fernand.**

pointed out that homeschoolers are already eligible for the NIOS and IGCSE exams. But other members agreed that homeschoolers should be allowed to sit for all kind of exams,” says Kattimani. The proposition did not make it to the final document.

### DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Homeschooling is opposed by many. “Why do we need a deviation from formal education?” asks Ashok Agarwal, lawyer and president of All India Parents Association. “Schools provide a unified platform where well-educated teachers, tried-and-tested teaching approaches and thoughtfully formulated syllabi aim at developing a child’s perspective in an age-appropriate manner. Nobody should be allowed to play with the lives of children, not even the parents.”

Agarwal argues that the government should not take a stance on homeschooling. “Once you start

acknowledging homeschooling as a mainstream alternative, the sufferers would be the poor children, whose parents might end up pulling them out of schools to reduce their expenditure and not teach them because of lack of resources or knowledge or time. No one will be able to account for how those parents are homeschooling. It will only further alleviate the education divide in the country,” he says.

A rise in the number of homeschoolers—as a response to the pandemic and increasing awareness—revives old worries. A child’s social development is one of them. Another fear is that a wider acceptance of homeschooling will undermine the efforts undertaken to improve schools.

The strongest argument, though, relates to abuse. Children could face emotional or physical abuse at home; a lack of interaction with the outside world may hinder their ability to express concerns, or an outsider’s ability to spot abuse or neglect.

Regulators in the UK worry that parents can use home education as a cover to send their children to unlicensed schools with a fiercely religious curriculum. In 2011, the death of Dylan Seabridge (8) from scurvy caused outrage in Britain. His parents had never enrolled him in a school. A 2018 study of six school districts in Connecticut, US, showed that more than a third of families who had withdrawn their children from schools in the previous three years had been the subject of at least one report of child-neglect or abuse.

Despite these concerns, parents who are homeschooling their children are convinced that as India begins to appreciate individuality, there will be a further surge in homeschooling. “The aim of education should be imparting knowledge benefiting a child’s all-round development. Every child is unique, and education methods should be altered according to their capabilities, and not the other way around,” says Fernand.

FROM  
"YOU'LL HAVE  
TO WORK THE  
WEEKEND."



TO  
"WE REALLY  
SHOULD  
CATCH UP  
ON THE  
WEEKEND."

# FILA CELEBRATES OUTSTANDING AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP THAT STANDS TALL, ESPECIALLY IN TIMES OF CRISIS



**Virat Kohli**, Indian cricketer



**Abhishek Ganguly**, Managing Director,  
PUMA India and Southeast Asia

Every year, for the past decade, Forbes India has been celebrating corporate excellence, visionary leadership and innovation at The Forbes India Leadership Awards (FILA). The event for 2020-21 took on a greater significance than before, as the unprecedented year gone by saw true leaders guiding their organisations to safety, then normalcy and finally to excellence, through turmoil and hardship on the dual fronts of health and economy.

The flagship awards for 2020-21, held virtually keeping in mind the safety of the guests and audience, kicked-off with a welcome address by Brian Carvalho, editor, Forbes India. He explained the motivation behind the awards and remarked on how leadership in the year of the pandemic took on a new meaning as leaders faced Herculean new challenges on all fronts.

## **Voice of Wisdom**

The first session, 'Voice of Wisdom', was a special interaction between NR Narayana Murthy, co-founder, Infosys and Harichandan Arakali, editor (technology), Forbes India. They deep-dived into various current themes, including the challenges before entrepreneurs and what they should do in the post-Covid world, while also touching upon the iconic industry stalwart's hopes for future leaders of India Inc and how he found his own purpose in life. Alongside the roles and duties that he highlighted for corporate leaders and the government, he emphasized, "The responsibility of corporate leaders is to demonstrate self-control over greed. They should

demonstrate large-heartedness and generosity and ensure that the lowest earning employees are given increments even before the senior management. This should be followed more stringently during times of hardship." He also advised leaders to focus on multiculturalism, diversity, sustainability and social responsibility.

## **Young Minds Building an Innovation Nation**

Next up was a very engaging panel discussion themed 'Young Minds Building an Innovation Nation', in which Manu Kumar Jain, Global VP, Xiaomi and managing director, Mi, India, navigated a conversation with very young entrepreneurs – Nikhiya Shamsher, founder, QuitPuff, Rutik Thorat, researcher and Akarsh Shroff, co-founder, Grey Night. These brilliant, highly-motivated and focused youth – all aged between 18-20 years – shared inspiring insights into their life, their work and how they started their respective enterprises.

## **Playing Hero Off Screen**

The FILA event blazed on with a captivating session titled 'Playing Hero Off Screen – in conversation with Sonu Sood'. Moved by the plight of migrants, who sought to reach their far-flung hometowns during the early lockdowns, even if it meant travelling for days on foot with no scope for food or water, the Indian actor and producer intervened to help them. In a candid conversation with Kunal Purandare, editor-desk, Forbes India, he shared how he took up the cause of getting

them home more comfortably and what began with a single bus became a mammoth effort that eventually led to international evacuations as well.

### Leading from the Front

One of the most scintillating sessions of the evening was 'Leading from the Front - a tête-à-tête with Virat Kohli'. It featured a fast-paced exchange of views on various facets of leadership, between two dynamic young leaders from very different walks of life - Abhishek Ganguly, managing director, PUMA India and Southeast Asia and Virat Kohli, Indian cricketer and current captain of the India national team.

The conversation began with Abhishek Ganguly asking the Indian skipper what qualities he believed made for a great cricket captain and whether there were cues that leaders from other walks of life could pick up from these. Virat Kohli responded, "One can be a very smart tactician, but I believe leadership is way more than that. If you want to lead by example, you must first commit to a lifestyle as an individual. A leadership cannot be a dictatorship wherein you give orders and expect others to follow; people need to learn from your commitment to excellence, and other values, and then buy into your vision. That, to me, is leadership! It's very important to actually live the advice that you give."

Quizzing him about the flipside of being a leader, Abhishek Ganguly inquired if there were any unfavourable traits that could inadvertently creep into the lifestyle of a leader, which one should try to avoid. Virat Kohli explained that sometimes when one lives in a space of leading by example, one could overlook the functioning capabilities of individuals that one leads. "That's where man-management becomes essential for any good leader. It entails bringing out the best in your players or colleagues or people you work with. It's all about understanding what conversations need to be had with different individuals." He pointed out that eventually, the goal of any leader is to get the job done and for that, he or she needs to know how much can be expected of people, reasonably. Without this sensitivity, team members could feel overwhelmed and unable to even perform up to their capacity.

Their conversation traversed a variety of other issues that a leader may face. Some of the insights that Virat Kohli revealed included that while selecting a new team-mate, he would choose character over skill, any day. He also shared that being a captain has its good side and bad; on the one hand, it gets lonely at the top and there is no space to do anything for yourself. But on the up-side, it is a great honour to lead the cricket team of the country and do your best to bring home a victory.

It emerged that experience has been a great teacher to Virat Kohli. It has taught him to stop responding to criticism and just keep doing what he does best. He believes that criticism is just someone else's point of view and everyone has the right to voice their opinions. But that does not necessarily mean that these opinions must be taken seriously by someone whom it is targeted at. Different people have different ways of looking at the same thing - some will see the glass as half empty while others see it as half full.

One must just keep one's head down, work hard and do what one has to do. The outcomes are out of one's control, but the hard work one puts in is definitely within one's control. "As long as I understand that I'm working to the best of my abilities every day and I'm absolutely committed to my team, I am answerable to no one other than myself," he averred.

On the subject of success and failure, he said, "Success is enjoyable and makes one feel good. However, failures teach you a lot more, especially about yourself. Success and failure are a part of life and good and bad phases will keep coming along. The point is to learn from the bad phases, not necessarily to prepare for the good ones but to become better insulated from the bad ones that may follow."

Virat Kohli also talked about balance being the key in life. "In cricket, everything - batting, bowling, fielding - is all about balance. Keeping a balance in life and staying as steady as possible around a central state of emotion, rather than fluctuating far above and below it too often, will ensure that you enjoy peace at the end of the day. Finally, peace of mind and a good sleep at night are all that a human being needs."

Abhishek Ganguly pointed out that Virat Kohli's fitness journey has always been an inspiration to a lot of people in India and abroad and asked him to talk about his ideals on the subject. The Indian cricket captain advised that

one should never limit oneself with respect to how much one can do, physically. "Being a better version of yourself physically, makes you realise that your body can do more and you become optimistic and positive. Even at your workplace, being fit makes you look forward to your work and enjoy it more."

A few years ago, Virat Kohli launched his athleisure brand 'One8' in collaboration with Puma and that gave Abhishek Ganguly a chance to witness a completely different side of the Indian cricket skipper. "You have a very strong business mind. I've seen this when we built the Puma One8 range together. You have incisive ideas on product, consumers and pricing and I hope one day when you have the time, you will put more of your mind into that," concluded Abhishek Ganguly, wishing Virat Kohli well for all his future endeavours, on-field and off-field.

## Forbes <sup>INDIA</sup> Leadership Awards 2020-21

In Association with



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Rahul Agarwal, CEO & MD, Lenovo India

### **Power Couples Busting Myths on Gender Roles**

The next exciting and invigorating session, moderated by Rahul Agarwal, CEO & MD, Lenovo India, was 'Gender Mender- Power Couples Busting Myths on Gender Roles'. It featured two high profile couples – Agnello and Nandini Dias, Creative Chairman, Dentsu Aegis Network and CEO (India), Lodestar UM, respectively and Rajesh and Shilpa Sehgal, MD and partner, respectively, at Equanimity Investments. These successful couples were meeting targets and fulfilling responsibilities, professionally and personally, while working from home. They showcased how gender dynamics have evolved in the workplace and at home.

Both couples candidly shared their views on how being together 24 hours a day, while managing professional and home-related duties, opened their eyes to some interesting new facets of their partners, even though they had known each other for many years. Without domestic help for a considerable part of the last year, they explained how their roles and responsibilities got allocated or redistributed, oftentimes involving grown-up children in sharing chores and job rotations.

The discussion also touched on more sensitive issues like the possibility of fostering gender equality at the workplace and at home, at a more general level, with respect to Indian households.

Another power couple Rahul Agarwal engaged in conversation was Suresh and Priyanka Raina, co-founders of the Gracia Raina Foundation. The former Indian cricketer and his wife shared their lockdown experiences and learnings and also shed light on their philanthropic ventures.

*'Gender Mender- Power Couples Busting Myths on Gender Roles'*  
*"Very clearly, the last one year has pushed us to think about things that we may not have considered relevant in the past." - Rahul Agarwal, CEO & MD, Lenovo, India.*

Rahul Agarwal concluded saying, "Very clearly, the last one year has pushed us to think about things that we may not have considered relevant in the past," adding that although it evoked interesting insights, points of view were constantly evolving.

### **And the award goes to...**

The highlight of the evening was the award announcements, which included three new categories, dedicated to philanthropy and Covid19 innovation, among others that honoured the best in entrepreneurial leadership.

The jury, comprising Harsh Mariwala, founder & chairman, Marico; Ashu Suyash, CEO & MD, Crisil; Gautam Kumra, senior partner & MD, McKinsey & Company, India; Saurabh Mukherjea, founder, Marcellus Investment Managers, Sandeep Naik, MD and head – India & Southeast Asia, General Atlantic and Puneet Bhatia, co-managing partner & country head, India, TPG, Capital Asia, selected winners from sterling short-lists created by the Forbes India team for each category, on the merit of their ability to put their enterprises on a new growth trajectory by taking bold decisions and creating value for all stakeholders.

The awards for different categories were announced between the sessions, throughout the evening. The first FILA-2020-21 award for the evening was presented to Naveen Tewari, founder & CEO, InMobi Group, for Outstanding Start-up Entrepreneur. The winner of the Gennext Entrepreneur Award was Sharvil Patel, managing director, Cadila Healthcare. The award for the Best CEO, Private Sector went to Salil Parekh, CEO & MD, Infosys. A new category, the Covid19 Innovator Award was bestowed on Prashant Warier, CEO and co-founder, Qure.ai. The other two new categories of awards were Best Philanthropist - Professionals and Best Philanthropist – Promoter, which went to Amit and Archana Chandra, co-founders, ATE Chandra Foundation and Azim Premji, founder- chairman & non-executive director, Wipro, respectively. The FILA – 2020-21 Lifetime Achievement award was presented to Cyrus S. Poonawalla, chairman & MD, Serum Institute of India and chairman, Poonawalla Group. Finally, the prestigious Entrepreneur of the Year award was conferred on Byju Raveendran, founder & CEO, Byju's.

# Six (and more) Degrees of Fakeness

How inaction against the rash of fake universities across the country may be incentivising the mushrooming of more such institutions

By MANSVINI KAUSHIK



imal Kumar (name changed) is a practising homeopathy physician in Jaunpur, Uttar Pradesh. At least

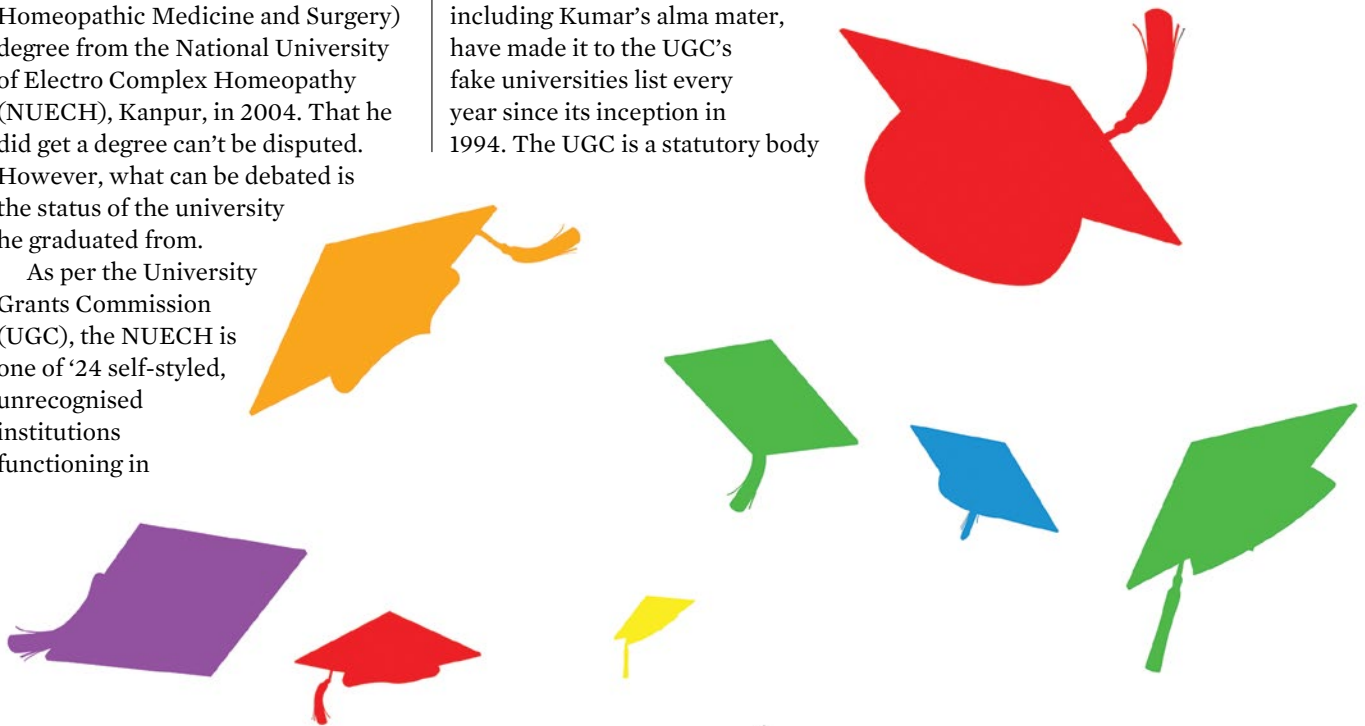
that’s what he calls himself. He received his BHMS (Bachelor of Homeopathic Medicine and Surgery) degree from the National University of Electro Complex Homeopathy (NUECH), Kanpur, in 2004. That he did get a degree can’t be disputed. However, what can be debated is the status of the university he graduated from.

As per the University Grants Commission (UGC), the NUECH is one of ‘24 self-styled, unrecognised institutions functioning in

India in contravention of the UGC Act, 1956’. The UGC has put up the list (*see box*) on its website and has no qualms in labelling them ‘fake’. These self-proclaimed universities are not authorised to confer degrees, yet 11 of the 24 institutions, including Kumar’s alma mater, have made it to the UGC’s fake universities list every year since its inception in 1994. The UGC is a statutory body

under the ministry of education that has the mandate to maintain higher education standards in the country.

“A family friend told me about the university... at that time, I didn’t know it wasn’t recognised. Today,





no one cares where I got the degree from... that I have it and the licence to practice is what matters,” says Kumar, adding that there were 40 students in his batch who were taught by five professors. Kumar didn’t have to go through a selection process; he submitted his documents and was admitted to the institute after a general round of questioning about his family background and education.

According to the UGC, there can be five types of degree-granting institutions in India: Central universities, which are established by an Act of Parliament and are funded by the central government; institutes of national importance—such as IITs and IIMs—established/declared by an Act of Parliament; state and private universities that are established by an Act of the state legislature and funded by state governments and/or are self-financing institutes; and institutions deemed to be universities that are declared by a government notification, on the advice of UGC, under Section 3 of the UGC Act, 1956.

Fake universities, on the other hand, are unrecognised institutions that do not have accreditations and are not established under any Centre, state/provincial Act as per section 22(1) of the UGC. On October 7, 2020,



## Fake Universities in India

Twenty-four self-styled, unrecognised institutions are functioning in contravention of the UGC Act; they have been declared ‘fake universities’ and are not empowered to confer any degree

### DELHI

1. Commercial University
2. United Nations University
3. Vocational University
4. ADR-Centric Juridical University
5. Indian Institution of Science and Engineering
6. Viswakarma Open University for Self-Employment, India
7. Adhyatmik Vishwavidyalaya (Spiritual University)

### KARNATAKA

8. Badaganvi Sarkar World Open University Education Society, Belgaum

### KERALA

9. St John’s University, Kishanattam

### MAHARASHTRA

10. Raja Arabic University, Nagpur

### WEST BENGAL

11. Indian Institute of Alternative Medicine, Kolkata
12. Institute of Alternative Medicine and Research

### UTTAR PRADESH

13. Varanaseya Sanskrit Vishwavidyalaya, Varanasi and Jagatpuri, Delhi

14. Mahila Gram Vidyapith/Vishwavidyalaya, (Women’s University) Prayag, Allahabad
15. Gandhi Hindi Vidyapith, Prayag, Allahabad
16. National University of Electro Complex Homeopathy, Kanpur
17. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose University (Open University), Achaltal, Aligarh
18. Uttar Pradesh Vishwavidyalaya, Kosi Kalan, Mathura
19. Maharana Partap Shiksha Niketan Vishwavidyalaya, Pratapgarh
20. Indraprastha Shiksha Parishad, Noida Phase-2

### ODISHA

21. Nababharat Shiksha Parishad
22. North Orissa University of Agriculture & Technology

### PUDUCHERRY

23. Sree Bodhi Academy of Higher Education

### ANDHRA PRADESH

24. Christ New Testament Deemed University

\* Bhartiya Shiksha Parishad, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh—the matter is subjudice before the district judge, Lucknow

SOURCE UGC

the UGC issued an annual list with 24 such universities operating in India.

*Forbes India* spoke to a few students and alumni of such institutes, most of whom were unwilling to share details about the examination

procedures their universities follow. Some didn’t plan to put the degree to use for employment while many others didn’t know what to do once they got the degree.

“There is a demand for diplomas and degrees, and so these universities exist. The GER (gross enrolment ratio) in India is 26.3 percent, indicating the wide gap between education providers and seekers; this is where these universities come in by guaranteeing education and providing degrees. However, the purpose of fake universities usually is to mint money at the expense of the aspirations of mostly the underprivileged youth,” says Sandeep Sancheti, vice chancellor, Marwadi University, Rajkot, and former president of The Association of Indian Universities.

*Forbes India* tried to speak to Rajnish Jain, secretary & CVO, UGC, who is in charge of releasing the list every year, but he couldn’t make time for an interaction.



**“The problem of fake universities is present in most modern societies... the purpose usually is to mint money at the expense of the aspirations of mostly the underprivileged youth.”**

**SANDEEP SANCHETI**  
VICE CHANCELLOR, MARWADI UNIVERSITY, RAJKOT



While Uttar Pradesh has eight unrecognised institutions on the list, Delhi has seven, and Odisha and West Bengal have two each. Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala and Puducherry have one each. “Southern states have taken better actions to educate people about such things, which to my knowledge are not as common in other parts of the country,” says Sancheti.

A number of these institutions have deceptive names; the aim, it seems, is to sound as genuine as possible. For example, Netaji Subhas Open University is an authentic varsity in Kolkata, West Bengal, whereas Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose University in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, is a fake university. United Nations University, Delhi, is evidently inspired by the United Nations University, a global think tank and postgraduate teaching organisation headquartered in Japan. Vishwakarma University, Pune, is a UGC-approved varsity while Vishwakarma University for Self-Employment, Delhi, is not.

VS Mahajan, dean of Vishwakarma University for Self-Employment, who claims to graduate around 1,000 students every year, isn't losing sleep over UGC approval. He says the institution's vision is different. “Our purpose is to educate students with real skills and not to hand out fancy degrees. It's an aptitude-based university. We are not doing anything wrong. We are making a skilled labour force,” says Mahajan, who boasts of receiving a letter from the ministry to promote SWAYAM, a digital education programme initiated by the Government of India (GoI). “If they consider us fake, why do they want to do business with us?” he asks.

Mahajan claims it is the only university generating crores of jobs. He says its graduates have been recruited “for all types of jobs by GoI”, but doesn't get into details of the jobs.

The university also awards honorary doctorates in fields ranging from neurosurgery to social work,



**“Our purpose is to educate students with real skills and not to hand out fancy degrees. It's an aptitude-based university. We are not doing anything wrong. We are making a skilled labour force.”**

**VS MAHAJAN**  
DEAN, VISHWAKARMA  
UNIVERSITY FOR  
SELF-EMPLOYMENT

along with degrees and diplomas. Ravindra Bhole is one of the recipients of a doctorate in social service. “I got a WhatsApp forward which had the link to a form that asked me about my contribution to social work... based on that I received the doctorate,” he says. “It's not an educational qualification, it's an award they offer to people who have made a significant contribution to their respective fields.”

According to Bhole, who wasn't aware that Vishwakarma also offers degrees apart from providing doctorates, the institution has a noble cause: To certify people ignored by renowned universities. “Experience is the biggest teacher and Vishwakarma awards that. People do


not always have the resources to opt for fancy degrees. There is nothing wrong with honouring skills and someone's on-field efforts,” he says.

The Institute of Alternative Medical Sciences, Kolkata, established in 2009, offers multiple courses in “alternative medicine”. Its website mentions that candidates can even avail of a Registered Medical Practitioner Certificate. *Forbes India's* efforts to speak with the dean did not yield results. However, when we approached the institute as a student, the management detailed the admission process and the fee structure for various courses offered.

News reports suggest that the question of why the UGC has not taken any action against such universities was asked to education minister Ramesh Pokhriyal in the Lok Sabha in December 2019. He said the UGC had sent letters to state governments to take appropriate action against fake universities in their jurisdictions.

“The problem of fake universities is present in most modern societies and countries. We have seen in the past how a fake university in the US lured Indian students; the problem is common across countries, although the extent may vary,” says Sancheti.

“To stop such universities from deceiving our youth, we need individual efforts as much as UGC's active intervention. The UGC not only releases this list every year, but also promotes it via various news portals and has taken legal action against some of these universities. We need to be more conscious and aware while choosing a university,” says Sancheti, adding, “If the judiciary could also act faster on the open cases against such universities, it would help in eliminating them earlier and protect the students.”

As Sancheti puts it, if action against such universities is delayed, it will only be an incentive for more such institutions to mushroom across the country. 

# A Billion-Dollar Dream For Freshworks

Girish Mathrubootham is taking a cue from the rapid growth of Silicon Valley software startups to reach scale and velocity

By HARICHANDAN ARAKALI



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**F**or a fairly long time, Girish Mathrubootham resisted the move to America with a strong belief that world-class business software can be built from India. The founder and CEO of Freshworks had established a US presence fairly early, but product development at the company, which makes cloud software for customer engagement, still happens in India. And until mid-2019 Mathrubootham was running the show from Chennai, where most of the company's staff is based.

A few years ago, when it hit \$100 million in revenue, there was

celebration within the company, as also in the nascent Indian software-as-a-service ecosystem. Mathrubootham and Freshworks were feted as big, genuine successes. However, “every time I travelled to the US, I’d find that there were so many companies at \$100 million, and they’re really small,” says Mathrubootham speaking to *Forbes India*.

He also realised that companies like Salesforce, Zendesk, HubSpot, Splunk, Palo Alto Networks and others had gone from \$200 million or \$300 million to a billion dollars in revenue in a matter of a few years. “That was fascinating to even think about. It can only be done in the

Valley,” he says, referring to Silicon Valley. And that changed his mind.

He surprised investors—who in the early years of the startup would ask him if he wanted to move, only to be told ‘no, I want to build this from India’—and his staff by announcing he was moving. In fact, at an all-hands company meeting, ‘why are you moving to the US’ was the most asked question and the entrepreneur’s response was “I felt like an Indian athlete who had won the chance to compete in the Olympics, so should I go or not?”

“I moved to the US in 2019 on the day India lost to New Zealand in the world cup,” Mathrubootham, an avid

sports and cricket fan, recalls. “When [Mahendra Singh] Dhoni got out, I changed my flight. I was going to go to London to watch the final, but changed and flew to San Francisco.”

“We may win or lose. That’s fine. I’m fine with that. But we had to go and run. We had to really see if we can take Freshworks from where we are to crack the billion-dollar-revenue mark in the next few years.” Last month, Freshworks announced it had crossed \$300 million in annual recurring revenue and that the company ended 2020 with growth of more than 40 percent.

“I wanted to really learn from the leaders who had not only seen scale, but also velocity. I didn’t want to take 10, 15 years to grow. I wanted to grow fast.”

And Freshworks has already been doing that. It took the startup 18 months to get to \$1 million. From \$1 million to \$100 million took five years and two months, and only another 18 months to double it, which was not long after Mathrubootham moved to the US. Freshworks got to \$300 million in the next 14 months.

## PRODUCT FOCUS

Building products that are relevant to customers is fairly straightforward to think about, but incredibly difficult to execute and succeed at, but that is probably the main reason behind Freshworks’s success. Freshworks was founded in 2010 as Freshdesk and Mathrubootham started out with one eponymous helpdesk software. Today his venture offers a suite of products for customer engagement and employee engagement. And Covid-19 only made companies like Freshworks more relevant because every business now needs to sell online and requires the tools to do so effectively and efficiently.

Freshworks’s products are omni-channel, helping businesses talk to their end customers via not only the conventional methods of phone or email or texting, but

through Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Apple business chat and any other internet-based channel that might become popular.

The products are used by customers in 125 countries, while the US has always been its biggest market—contributing between 40 and 50 percent of its revenue. In comparison, Silicon Valley companies tend to have 80 percent or more of their revenue from the US and even as they become bigger companies, they tend to have 60 percent or more of their sales in the US, Mathrubootham says. The lower share of revenue from the US means “we have so much headroom to grow”, he adds.

**“The US expansion has been executed exceptionally well, and we still see an enormous upside from having a physical presence in the West.”**

**RAVI MEHTA**  
FOUNDER, STEADVIEW CAPITAL

“Girish understands the importance of culture in building a lasting franchise, and we agree with his approach of having been thoughtful about scaling, focussed on achieving both product-market fit and a proven distribution strategy before broadening Freshworks’s footprint,” Ravi Mehta, founder of investment firm Steadview Capital, said in an email. Steadview invested \$85 million in Freshworks in January 2020, picking up a stake from existing investors. “The US expansion has been executed exceptionally well, but even now, two years later, we still see enormous upside from having a physical presence in the West,” Mehta added.

The startup serves customers ranging from small businesses with, say, 250 employees to enterprises with more than 5,000 employees. In the SaaS (software-as-a-service) world, typically, customers don’t start out as million-dollar customers. There is a ‘product-led growth’, meaning, usually, a few developers or a small team starts using a product, and it becomes popular and soon the entire company might adopt it.

“The most compelling, unique aspect of Freshworks is how well it has executed on broadening its offering to include a comprehensive suite of SaaS products,” Mehta said. While the original Freshdesk customer support product itself has a bright future, the successful expansion into modules across IT helpdesk (called FreshService), sales force automation (FreshCRM), human capital management (FreshTeam), and others—totalling more than eight products today—makes investors bullish about Freshworks’s prospects, he added.

Mathrubootham has also made 12 tuck-in acquisitions for talent and technology. For example, AnsweriQ, which was purchased in 2020, helps businesses tap existing customer data to build self-service experiences and automate complex customer workflows. Another acquisition, Flint, provides intelligent automation and cloud computing capabilities so that IT organisations can quickly adapt to the needs of an increasingly remote workforce.

Over time, there is potential for Freshworks to overlay an intelligence layer across its products, supporting novel, data-enabled use cases for its customers—making its products more valuable to its customers. That will contribute to a “durable long-term growth outlook,” Mehta said.

## NET DOLLAR RETENTION

Another factor that continues to help Freshworks’s growth is the compounding effect of the SaaS model,

where customers don't make large upfront investments in buying and installing software, but tap affordable subscriptions and rent the software off the internet. In the older, on-premises world, if a company sells \$100 million worth of software one year, it will need to sell \$120 million to grow 20 percent the next year.

In the SaaS world, it's a recurring revenue model. Taking into account that some customers may leave or reduce usage, while others may expand, SaaS companies aim for a healthy positive growth in a metric they track seriously, called dollar-based net retention or net dollar retention. And when a product is successful, typically, there is an expansion of the existing customer base. A 20 percent expansion is doable, Mathrubootham says. If on top of that, the company adds another \$20 million in new sales (in the \$100 million example), a growth of 40 percent is achievable, he points out.

That's what helps successful SaaS companies in the Valley to go from \$200 million or \$300 million to a billion dollars in a matter of a few years, he says. The really difficult part of this process is, of course, actually engineering it—figuring out what will make the products ever more indispensable for the existing customers so that they will use more of it, while attracting new users.

This is what Mathrubootham set out to learn from those who had “been there done that”. Including how to build a strong pipeline of sales, how to ensure the company is closing enough deals, how to hire the right people and ramp up operations, how to divide customer segments into different categories and so on.

“My mission now is to try and marry the art of Indian entrepreneurship and the science of Valley scaling,” says Mathrubootham. In India, people lack experience but work from the heart, he says, so entrepreneurs tend to hire young, smart recruits willing to

## Freshworks's Funding Rounds



| Announced Date | Number of Investors | Money Raised | Lead Investors                   |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Jan 1, 2020    | 1                   | \$85M        | Steadview Capital                |
| Nov 4, 2019    | 3                   | \$150M       | Accel, CapitalG, Sequoia Capital |
| Jul 31, 2018   | 3                   | \$100M       | Accel, Sequoia Capital India     |
| Nov 1, 2016    | 3                   | \$55M        | Sequoia Capital India            |
| Apr 20, 2015   | 3                   | \$50M        | Tiger Global Management          |
| Jun 12, 2014   | 3                   | \$31M        | Tiger Global Management          |
| Nov 21, 2013   | 2                   | \$7M         | Accel                            |
| Apr 26, 2012   | 2                   | \$5M         | Tiger Global Management          |
| Dec 2, 2011    | 2                   | \$1M         | Accel                            |

**SOURCE:** Crunchbase, company statements

learn by doing. While the success of Freshworks, Zoho and a handful of other Indian-founder-led US startups is slowly making the ecosystem in India a bit more mature, there is still a dearth of the “been-there-done-that” experience. Therefore, when a tech entrepreneur dreams of going from \$300 million to a billion dollars, he or she has to necessarily turn to Silicon Valley.

### VALLEY HIRES

In Silicon Valley, there is just the advantage of being able to hire people who have already seen this product-led growth journey in other companies like Google or Facebook or Salesforce or Walmart Labs—in multiple disciplines, be it marketing, engineering or cybersecurity.

Mathrubootham now wants to “keep the heartbeat in India, but the brain in the Valley”. His sense of urgency in wanting to grow fast is palpable, and the people who can help him do that are in the US, even though about half the sales are still closed from India.

CFO Tyler Sloat is an example. Sloat, an MBA from Stanford University, joined Freshworks in April 2020 from Zuora, a public company today that makes subscription

billing software. He had spent 10 years with Zuora and helped take it public; Sloat has also previously held board member positions at different business tech companies in the US.

In October 2020, Mathrubootham hired Jose Morales as chief revenue officer. Morales was head of global field operations at Atlassian, which he had joined when it was a \$60 million company some 10 years ago. Today the company, which provides team collaboration and productivity software, has \$1.6 billion in revenue.

On March 23, Freshworks announced it had hired Stacey Epstein as chief marketing officer. Epstein's startup-to-exit marketing accomplishments include taking SuccessFactors from \$10 million in annual recurring revenue through six years of triple-digit revenue growth, a successful IPO, and subsequent acquisition by SAP for \$3.4 billion. She went on to join the founding team of ServiceMax at less than \$1 million in revenue and helped lead the company through five years of 100 percent growth to its nearly \$1 billion acquisition by GE. “She is a great leader,” says Mathrubootham.

And in Prakash Ramamurthy, Mathrubootham found someone who could take over the product development reins from him—a role very close to his heart. “I was very wary of giving it to someone who didn't understand our culture and DNA of building products,” he says. “I finally found somebody I was confident about, whom I could hand over building products and I can focus on building the company.” Ramamurthy joined Freshworks in October 2019 from Oracle, where he was a senior vice president and general manager for a \$2 billion business comprising systems management and security products at Oracle Cloud.

“Girish is a product visionary who can execute,” Puneet Kumar, a vice president at Steadview, said in an email. “His imagination and

development of a comprehensive B2B SaaS suite is ultimately at the heart of what makes Freshworks special.” This takes enormous customer empathy in understanding current and potential pain points, and, to that end, Mathrubootham is among the best entrepreneurs the investment firm has worked with, Kumar said.

**US IPO**

Freshworks has raised about \$400 million in eight rounds of funding, according to data from Crunchbase and the company (Steadview’s investment was a secondary purchase). In November 2019, when Freshworks announced a \$150 million funding round (Series-H) led by existing investors Sequoia Capital, Google’s CapitalG and the startup’s first VC investor Accel, it was valued at \$3.5 billion after the investment.

These lead one to ask if Mathrubootham is also preparing to take his venture public, but he has a slightly different view. “We don’t have a definite timeframe,” he says. “But we are a VC-funded company and every VC-funded company knows that at some point when the timing is right, you have to consider what are the possible options.”

Mathrubootham points out that Freshworks is well-capitalised for now and doesn’t really need to raise more money. “We haven’t even touched the last round of funding... so if you look at the scale and growth, like we can be public today,” he says.

Many companies go public even sooner. Today, in this market, there are companies with \$100 million or \$200 million in revenues that are already public. “So we can go, and we are carefully evaluating all our options. When we decide to go, it will be a proud moment for all of us as probably the first Indian SaaS company to go public here in the US, I think. It is a matter of pride and we wouldn’t shy away from talking about it. We would, in fact, celebrate it. So we are looking at our options carefully and I think we

are in a good spot in terms of being able to choose,” says Mathrubootham.

He adds: “We are aware the markets are now super hot, it’s a great time to go public, but we believe great companies can go public at any time. You don’t have to try and time the market.” He acknowledges that he and his top executives and investors are talking about it.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, a lot of expenses such as on travel were cut, which meant Freshworks was actually cashflow positive for a few quarters, but, on the whole, the company is still investing in its products and growth. Therefore, it isn’t far from breakeven, but it’s not yet profitable either.

**“Girish’s development of a comprehensive B2B SaaS suite is at the heart of what makes Freshworks special.”**

**PUNEET KUMAR**  
VICE PRESIDENT, STEADVIEW CAPITAL



In the meantime, there is no dearth of challenges. One of them is getting experienced and talented people to come work for Freshworks. The tech talent market is “super hot” and everybody is hiring, Mathrubootham says. He also worries about fatigue from the pandemic. While work-from-home provides flexibility to his 3,500 staff, “how long can you jump from Zoom call to Zoom call”, he asks. “I draw energy from meeting people and there are many others like me.” Like businesses world over, Freshworks too must figure out if it will ever return to having offices large enough to have thousands of people, or if a hybrid model has to be adopted.

A more serious concern is an ongoing lawsuit brought by

competitor Zoho Corp, in a court in California. Zoho has alleged that Freshworks stole trade secrets from it. Mathrubootham and Freshworks’s co-founder Shan Krishnasamy are both former employees of Zoho, started by entrepreneur Sridhar Vembu some 25 years ago. Mathrubootham worked at Zoho for nine years and rose to become a vice president before quitting to start Freshworks.

“While we can’t get into specifics on the pending litigation we are pleased with the judge’s ruling to date which has limited the claim to a single instance by a former employee (of Freshworks). We look forward to a speedy resolution,” says Mathrubootham.

Vembu and Zoho are seen as the pioneers of SaaS startups in India and in Chennai, in particular. In more recent years, Zoho and Freshworks have created a cascading effect, with at least 65 new SaaS ventures started by former employees of the two companies, consultancy Bain and Company noted in a report in December 2020.

Mathrubootham is betting the future of Freshworks on the belief that an “iPhone moment” is imminent in the world of business software. Just as consumers ditched multiple gadgets—from MP3 players to cameras—and took to the smartphone, businesses are looking for that one solution that will help them manage every customer interaction at every stage, he says.

Today, typically, businesses have to buy or rent separate software to manage different activities such as marketing, sales and support and even something for integration. “Our bet is that the world is moving towards ‘customer 360,’ where businesses want to understand everything about their customer,” Mathrubootham says. And Freshworks is building its products around the idea of unified customer records—unifying interactions and data from marketing, sales and support. “That is what will help us go to a billion dollars and beyond.”

# Changing How Small-Town India Shops

CityMall founders Angad Kikla and Naisheel Verdhan are building a network of micro-entrepreneurs through their app in smaller cities

By HARICHANDAN ARAKALI

**S**unita Yadav is a school teacher in a village called Tint, about two-and-a-half hours by car west of Delhi, in Haryana.

The closest city is Rewari, some 15 km away. A friend told Yadav about CityMall, “a digital app” as she calls it, and she signed up last September.

Yadav, 44, is a mother of two, and offers private tuitions to help run her household and pay for her sons’ education. And CityMall, a community networking-based online commerce app, adds about ₹15,000 a month to

her income, from the commission and incentives she makes, selling mostly groceries to her friends and neighbours. She has 50 to 60 households that are regular customers.

CityMall’s founders Angad Kikla and Naisheel Verdhan, both engineers and repeat entrepreneurs, have added some ‘gamification’ to the app—popular startup parlance for providing incentives for users to do more, similar to how certain achievements in video games can open rewards or new levels and so on for players.

Yadav has cracked three or four

levels—based on the number of customers she has brought in and the sales she has notched up—and is a proud ‘silver director’ among CityMall’s micro-entrepreneur partners, all of whom are called ‘community leaders’ by the founders. Kikla and Verdhan started the venture in 2019, but the current model of building a social commerce network around community leaders is a little over a year old, because the duo first experimented with getting customers to buy in groups through WhatsApp.

They were also selling ‘long-tail’



Angad Kikla (left) and Naisheel Verdhan, co-founders of CityMall, at their warehouse in Basai Dhankot village, Haryana

products, such as cheap hair curlers imported from China. The ‘Aha’ moment happened when they realised that a packet of Maggi instant noodles was way easier to sell to more people and at a higher frequency. From there, it was only a few steps more to shifting focus to groceries, converting some of the group-buying customers into community leaders, and offering them an income via commissions instead of savings on purchases.

Today CityMall has some 20,000 community leaders in eight smaller cities and towns—Rewari, Dharuhera, Pataudi, Sonipat, Bahadurgarh, Jhajjar, Rohtak and Panipat. Using the app, they aggregate orders from their local communities and CityMall ships the products to them the next day; the community leaders then deliver the goods to the end-customers or the customers collect it from the leaders.

“We aim to put a lot of data analytics in the hands of the community leaders to help them become successful micro-entrepreneurs,” says Kikla. Over time, the data from the app and the analytics from CityMall help the community leaders understand who their top customers are, or who might want to leave; they can also figure out what they can up-sell and cross-sell.

There is also an app for end-consumers, although they can send their shopping lists through WhatsApp. Over a period of time, however, most people are converted to the idea of using the app to place their orders, says Kikla. This is because of a combination of superior cataloguing that’s possible on the app, compared to WhatsApp, and the gentle nudging from the community leaders. There are over 3,000 products on offer on CityMall, and when individuals place orders through the app, they automatically get aggregated on the community leader’s app.

The consumer app is about 16 MB to download on Google Play Store and there are over 1 lakh downloads, as of March-end. In addition to new

## “We aim to put a lot of data analytics in the hands of community leaders to help them become successful micro-entrepreneurs.”

**ANGAD KIKLA,**  
CO-FOUNDER, CITYMALL

deals and discounts every day, and the convenience of easy returns and refunds, CityMall is also trying to engage end-users with other features within the app. “Horoscope is one of the top features that we have,” Kikla says, because many are interested in it. Such features also entice end-users to open the app every day, which sometimes translates into new orders.

Typical of most apps today, first-time users enter their mobile number, get a one-time password for verification, and enter their location. In this reporter’s case, the app returned a message, saying CityMall was currently not operating in the selected location, in Bengaluru. In Tint, however, the app would have stored the address and gone on to show the home page with the day’s deals and offers. ‘Every day the right

price’ is CityMall’s motto. Much of this happens in Hindi, the language that the app uses by default, as CityMall is targeting Hindi-speaking regions first.

WhatsApp remains an important conduit between community leaders and their end-customers. The community leader often sends links to the day’s deals through WhatsApp. For end-customers who don’t have the CityMall app, the link takes them to the Google Play Store, from where they can download the app; for end-customers who have the app, the link leads to the app page showing the day’s offers. At the backend, CityMall uses WhatsApp’s business APIs (application program interfaces).

### GROWTH PATH

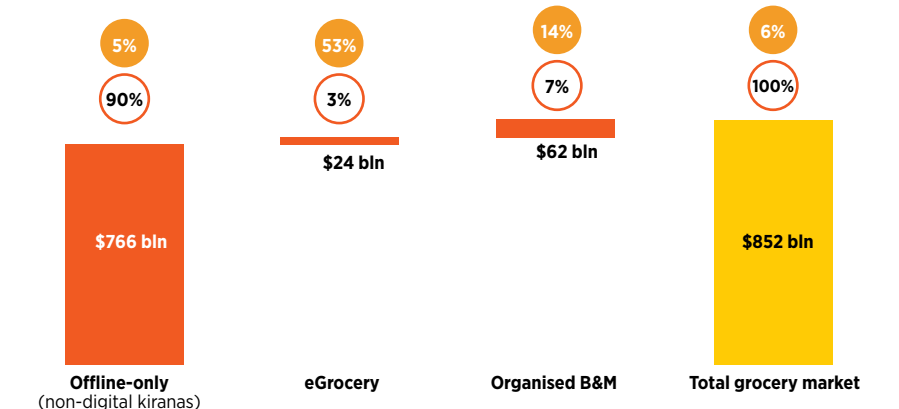
“We were initially grocery-focussed,” Kikla says. “With maturity, we are also seeing demand for FMCG [fast moving consumer goods] products, and in the last three to four months, we have realised that the platform is much more horizontal than what we had envisioned it to be.”

The community leaders are now also selling shoes, T-shirts, cookers, electrical appliances and so on. “In fact, the fastest growing category for us right now is what we call general merchandise and long-tail categories. We also are finding good

## Indian eGrocery: A Massive Opportunity

It is projected to penetrate 3 percent of the total grocery opportunity in 2025, at a market size of ~\$24 billion

India grocery-split by different channels (2025 Est) CAGR over 2019 Penetration of overall grocery spend



SOURCE RedSeer

traction with feature phones.”

Buoyed by these trends, CityMall is experimenting with new categories, including fruits and vegetables, and even insurance, offering “the most commoditised ones”, such as two-wheeler insurance. Overall, the founders have been looking at building an alternative distribution channel in the form of community leaders. While the hook to building that channel is groceries, once that trust is established between the end-consumer and the community leader, other products can also be sold, they reckon.

The community leaders pay CityMall directly, and collect payments from end-customers. Cash is still king, but the government-backed Unified Payments Interface (UPI) is also becoming popular. Experienced community leaders have even started giving credit to their end-customers out of their own pockets, Kikla says.

In addition to individuals and households such as Yadav’s, CityMall also enlists small local shops like those that offer mobile phone top-ups or electrical repairs. Through most of 2020, sales volume on CityMall has grown 35 percent month-on-month, on average, Kikla says, while declining to give specific numbers.

The venture raised \$3 million in seed funding in June 2020, from early-stage venture capital (VC) firm Elevation Capital, WaterBridge Ventures and a few other investors. In March, it announced a Series A investment of \$11 million, led by Accel, also an early-stage VC firm, with Elevation Capital and others joining in. Kikla and Verdhan want to use the money to expand operations to 20 to 25 smaller cities and towns. Eventually, they want to touch 400 cities.

It is also building its own logistics network, including warehouses and hubs. CityMall purchases products from a range of sellers—small local mills and farms, all the way to national brands. And because the established logistics providers don’t operate in the



Sunita Yadav, a school teacher, and CityMall ‘community leader’, delivers groceries in her neighbourhood in Haryana’s Tint village. This, she says, has helped her create an identity for herself apart from earning money

small towns that CityMall is focusing on, the startup is partnering with owners of trucks and small fleets of tempos and commercial vehicles in the unorganised transport sector.

“In a way, we have also decentralised the network,” Kikla says. This is because the last-mile delivery is the responsibility of the community leader. And since the leader also doubles as a marketing and sales agent, CityMall’s costs on such activities are lower. This is important because unlike a metro dweller placing a ₹2,000-order on Big Basket, India’s biggest online groceries seller, Yadav’s customers would typically place orders of ₹300 to ₹500. Some customers, of course, buy an entire month’s supplies in one go.

“For all these customers, price is greater than choice, which is greater than convenience,” says

Akarsh Shrivastava, a vice president at Elevation Capital. So even if the CityMall model is able to create, say, a 5 to 10 percent price advantage over other options, including buying from the local grocery store, it will attract and retain customers.

### MARKET OPPORTUNITY

The market opportunity, per se, is large. Groceries in India are a \$600 billion market today, with almost all of it bought offline; online sales account for 0.3 percent or so. Some industry estimates project the market size to hit a trillion dollars in five years. A better estimate to look at, perhaps, is the projection for social commerce. And here, grocery isn’t the leading category yet—fashion is, followed by beauty and personal care products, according to Bain & Company, a consultancy.

Overall, social commerce will grow tenfold from today’s levels to between \$16 billion and \$20 billion, by sales volume, in 2025, Bain estimated in a December 2020 report. From there, it could go to between \$60 billion and \$70 billion by 2030, according to the report, written in collaboration with Sequoia Capital.

Another projection is that the e-groceries segment will grow to about \$24 billion dollars by 2025, growing at 53 percent compounded annual growth rate from 2019 levels, according to consultancy Redseer.

“Grocery isn’t a severe pain point per se, and people have solved their groceries issue wherever they are,” Shrivastava says. It is a business where price sensitivity is high and profit margins are low. In China, social commerce market leader Pinduoduo is succeeding with its ‘team purchase’ model because the critical mass of consumer density and frequency of purchases exist there. The US-listed company reported a monthly active user base of 720 million for December.

India, despite the rapid increase in people with access to mobile internet, has only about 154 million households that made purchases online in 2020,

Redseer estimates. And the long-term success of CityMall hinges on building this alternative channel to the point where, say, Yadav’s customer routinely turns to the CityMall app as a default behaviour. “That’s when they would have created a large business,” Shrivastava says.

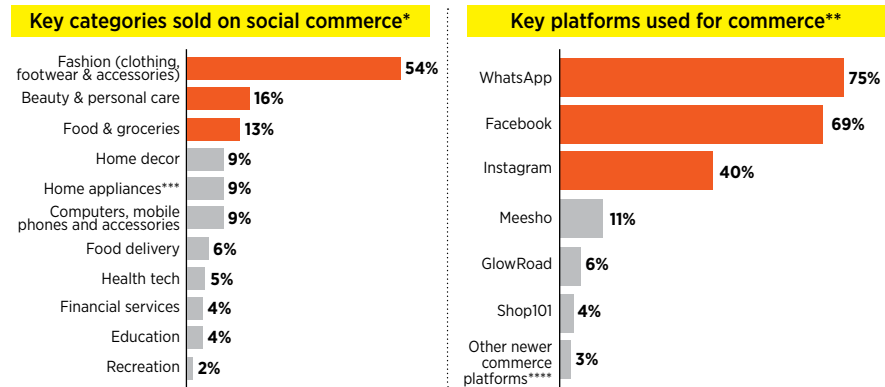
It’s fairly early days for the young venture to be profitable. Sticking to only the current eight cities and going really deep in those few markets could get CityMall to profits in two years, but “the point is to build a very large business”, the venture capitalist says. That means going from city to city and at some point to multiple new cities simultaneously. It also means spending a lot more money. Profits will have to wait.

**RISE OF SOCIAL SELLING**

The bigger picture is that ventures like CityMall are getting small-town India to change its behaviour and go online for everyday needs, which represent a large opportunity. People like Shrivastava are betting that in five years, there’ll be at least three or four more unicorns in the ecommerce sector. They will catalyse the creation of hundreds of thousands of micro-entrepreneurs, who will be like grocery stores in themselves—minus many of the inefficiencies of the current brick-and-mortar model. And since groceries is a high-frequency activity, it offers something akin to an annuity income.

And a new breed of social commerce startups is leading this change. Meesho is perhaps the largest, focusing on apparel, with millions of women on its network selling to their friends and neighbours. Meesho is reported to have landed a \$250-million investment from SoftBank Group, making it a unicorn in the process. Bengaluru’s GlowRoad is the next biggest platform, according to Bain, followed by Mumbai’s Shop101. Jaipur-based DealShare is another venture that started out by offering deals on

**Fashion, Beauty & Personal Care Products In Demand; WhatsApp, Facebook Preferred Channels**



\* Includes all platforms that a retailer/supplier uses for selling  
 \*\* Includes all categories sold by the seller  
 \*\*\* Also includes kitchen appliances, kitchen tools and other kitchen accessories  
 \*\*\*\* Includes newer commerce platforms (for example, SimSim, BulBul.TV, DealShare, Mall91)

SOURCE Bain & Company, Sequoia India

WhatsApp. It has raised \$21 million in its third major funding round.

Gurugram’s Bulbul uses video streaming to engage customers with marketers—often called influencers in social media parlance—who explain the product features. Other ventures trying to build social commerce-based businesses include Mall91, EkAnek and SimSim. Even ecommerce giants like Flipkart have started experimenting with social commerce. Last July, Flipkart announced it was offering continuous video feeds of influencers promoting various products under its 2GUD brand.

**MORE THAN JUST ECOMMERCE**

Back at CityMall, there are early signs of product-market fit, and business model and category fit as well, Shrivastava says. And once the trust is established between community leaders and their end-customers, it opens up the possibility of selling products in multiple categories. China’s Pinduoduo even sells iPhones today.

If companies like CityMall succeed, there may be a larger revolution in the works, more important than selling groceries online. “I’m college educated, but in Haryana, people don’t allow women to go out and

work,” says Yadav. “Staying at home, I offered tuitions and eventually managed to join a small private school in the locality.” Today she teaches children from kindergarten to class 10. Her husband works at a petrol station some 25 km away.

“I realised that this app opens up the digital world to us and helps me build an identity for myself in my community. And I dream of bringing it to my entire village,” adds Yadav, who estimates there are a thousand households in her village.

She went from neighbour to neighbour and beyond, and convinced people to download the app on their smartphones and start placing orders with her. She has, on occasion, gone herself to a market in Rewari to purchase groceries for her customers. “Today they just pick up their phones and send their orders to me,” she says of her regular customers.

“The money is one thing, but CityMall has helped me create an identity for myself in my entire village... people know me,” she says. “Earlier, my constraints were such that I had to cover my head to just step out, but today, I get to speak with everyone with confidence. There is a sense of happiness in my family and in me too.” **F**

# Closing The Loop

Rajat Verma of Lohum Cleantech wants India to make its own lithium-ion cells for electric vehicle batteries

By HARICHANDAN ARAKALI

**M**ost countries don't make their own lithium-ion cells for the batteries that power their electric vehicles (EVs) or energy storage systems. They import the cells from China, mostly, but also Korea and Japan, and then assemble those cells into battery packs for various applications.

In India, even battery packs are imported if one looks at applications like cars, other four-wheelers, and buses, although, of course, there are very few of these in the country. In the case of two-wheelers or three-wheelers, however, a fair amount of local assembly of battery packs happens. And there are various companies doing this.

Rajat Verma's Lohum Cleantech in Delhi stands out in two respects. One, in addition to making 'first life' or new batteries, the entrepreneur is also building a strong line of business out of 'second life' batteries—separating out the still viable cells from used batteries and repurposing them into batteries for suitable lower power applications. Two, he runs perhaps the only enterprise in the country involved in commercial extraction of raw materials from the cells.

For now, Lohum extracts lithium, cobalt, nickel and manganese (from the cathode of the cell), and graphite (anode) and ships them to the commodities market. "Our hope is, in a couple of years, either we or one of

our partners will actually provide a complete closed-loop solution," Verma tells *Forbes India*. That means, the raw material recovered would go back into a cell manufacturing process, new cells would be made and put back into new battery packs—all within India.

Thus far, one of the reasons companies in the electric vehicle sector in India have focused only on battery assembly and not cell manufacturing is because competing with China is tough. Currently, China has about 250 GWh (gigawatt hours) of annual capacity, which is about three-quarters of the global capacity. And China has plans to raise this capacity to nearly two terawatt hours by 2025-26, Verma says.

China's success results from its large domestic battery demand, at 72GWh, and control of 80

**Two months ago, Rajat Verma raised \$7 million in fresh funds, which will be used to more than double Lohum's capacity to 700 megawatt hours and build a knowledge base on the battery lifecycle**



percent of the world's raw material refining, 77 percent of the world's cell capacity and 60 percent of the world's component manufacturing, according to data from Bloomberg New Energy Finance's (BNEF).

## STRATEGIC METAL

The reason it is important to make cells in India is also that the metals that go into them, such as lithium, are geo-strategic commodities, Verma says, and India's known reserves are very small. India imported about \$1.2 billion of lithium-ion batteries in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2019—tripling from the previous fiscal year—and an additional \$929 million in the subsequent eight months,



*The Economic Times* reported in February, citing Harsh Vardhan, union minister for science and technology.

An ecosystem that relies entirely on imports of cells will be costlier to build and sustain in the long run. And as the world moves to electric vehicles, without its own cells, India would merely go from being dependent on imports of fossil fuels to imports of lithium-ion cells.

India has an advantage on the labour front, Verma says, and an Indian plant with an annual capacity of a one gigawatt hours' worth of cells can be competitive with a Chinese factory with 10 times that capacity, Verma says. "No one has done that anywhere in the world and

we do hope that we can be among the first to get there," he adds.

Two months ago, Verma raised \$7 million in fresh funds in an investment led by Baring Private Equity Partners. The immediate use of the money is to more than double Lohum's capacity to 700 megawatt hours, build a stronger team, and bolster ongoing efforts to build an extensive knowledge base on the entire battery lifecycle.

Lohum currently has an installed capacity of 300 megawatt hours per annum, which is roughly split half and half between new packs and recycled ones. For comparison, one megawatt hour worth of batteries can power approximately 500 two-wheelers.

Verma also wants to expand the

Besides making new batteries, Rajat Verma's Lohum Cleantech is also building a strong line of business out of 'second life' batteries

company's service network. Today, it is present in about 100 cities, but Verma wants to be "everywhere, deeper, stronger". The network services batteries sold by Lohum and also collects back used ones. As Lohum builds partnerships with more OEMs (original equipment manufacturers, such as auto companies) it will need to be present in every city that they are present in—for both two-wheelers and the three-wheelers.

Lohum also provides batteries for stationary energy storage systems, for applications in the telecom sector, for example. The company also

offers its own battery management system, communication systems, thermal management system, and vibration management system.

**SECOND LIFE AND BEYOND**

With the ‘second life’ or used batteries, Verma says very few around the world are trying to understand what is happening at the individual cell level. In most cases, people just gauge the available capacity and put the batteries back in the market, whereas at Lohum, used batteries are disassembled, good cells separated out and put back into use, and bad or ‘dead’ ones earmarked for raw material extraction.

“We have developed extensive heuristics and an extensive database around how to understand what will be the remaining life in a cell. And that is one of the core strengths of the company. Ultimately, we analyse everything at the cell level,” Verma says. Lohum has collected more than 1.5 million miles of second life mobility data—including through IoT devices—and no one has done something like that anywhere in the entire global EV ecosystem, he claims.

By revenue contribution, battery sales account for the biggest chunk, while the material extraction operation brings in about a tenth of Lohum’s business. The venture has made rapid strides in improving the productivity of the extraction business. With over 2,000 iterations of tweaking the process, the machinery used and so on, yield has gone from 60 percent to 90 percent over the last three years or so. “I want to get to 97-99 percent,” Verma says.

The purity of metals and the carbon extracted is also high now, he says, with cobalt sulphate at 99.9 percent and graphite at 99.5 percent. The complexity of the ‘hydro-metallurgical’ processes involved becomes higher when there is a mix of raw materials as in the case of the lithium-ion cells. “How do you take all of them out with the highest yield, with the lowest operating



Besides lithium-ion batteries for EVs, Lohum also provides batteries for stationary energy storage systems, for applications in the telecom sector etc.

expenditure, without polluting the environment? That’s the problem we are trying to solve here,” Verma says.

Investing in Lohum, “we had a very strong thesis that over the next 10-15 years, EVs would take some of the share out of the IC engine market”, Arul Mehra, partner at Baring Private Equity, tells *Forbes India*. The technology is getting better and the cost of batteries continues to fall.

Lithium-ion battery pack prices, which were above \$1,100 per kilowatt-hour in 2010, have fallen 89 percent in real terms to \$137/kWh in 2020, BNEF said in a release in December last. By 2023, average prices will be close to \$100/kWh, the research service projects. Costs are already hitting \$100 per kWh at the cell level, but building battery packs takes the price higher by about a fifth.

**THE \$206 BILLION OPPORTUNITY**

By 2030, India’s EV market could be worth nearly \$206 billion, said a December 2020 forecast by Delhi-based think tank Council on Energy, Environment and Water, at its Centre for Energy Finance. Between now and then, India will need investments of \$177 billion from OEMs in vehicle production, \$2.9 billion for the deployment of charging infrastructure and \$12.3 billion in battery manufacturing, the research organisation estimates.

Competition will rise, just as it did in telecom, DTH or ecommerce,

Baring’s Mehra anticipates. Baring’s bet on Lohum hinges not just on Verma’s ambition to close the loop on battery production, but the venture’s overall global prospects. Mehra points out that Lohum’s extraction technologies will find interest overseas too in markets including the US, Europe and Australia.

“He has got a very large market size, a differentiated product that makes money, and he’s been accepted by a large number of OEMs, so there is no product risk so to say,” Mehra adds. “He is a really good founder, who understands technology, understands business and manages people well.”

Verma doesn’t name customers, citing non-disclosure agreements, but says Lohum is a supplier to both leading two-wheeler makers—both low-speed and high-speed—and the larger makers of e-rickshaws and the L5 (large auto) segment. Lohum also supplies batteries to the telecom sector with customers among systems integrators and power companies. The venture is also running pilots with some of the large solar power companies in the country.

Two companies that have announced the intention of setting up cell manufacturing in India are also collaborating with Lohum to test the performance of the chemicals it extracts from the cells. Lohum has an annualised revenue run rate of more than \$8 million and aims to hit \$90 million in three years, it said in

a press release in January, when it announced the funding led by Baring.

Lohum already has operations in the US in Washington DC and Los Angeles, and is working with OEMs for battery pack and recycling solutions. The venture expects to set up its first recycling plant in the US by 2022. “We see a very unique opportunity because the entire world is shifting to battery power at the same time in two of the largest global industries—mobility and energy,” Justin Lemmon, co-founder and head of international operations, said in Lohum’s January funding press release.

In India, because of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid and) Electric Vehicles (FAME subsidy plan, now in phase II), auto makers are especially trying to localise batteries for the three-wheelers. Today, about 70 percent of batteries for the two-wheeler and three-wheeler categories are being made in India. As one looks at cars, other four-wheelers and buses, however, almost all the batteries needed are imports, Verma says.

In these cases, the volumes are relatively low, expertise is being slowly developed locally but the technology is in its nascence within India. For example, with these more advanced batteries, one needs state-of-the-art thermal management and cooling systems. “We are certainly developing the engineering capacity, but it’s still early days,” he adds.

Verma is an engineer by training. He went to IIT Kanpur and then to Stanford University. He worked briefly in the space industry in the US, designing heat shields for re-entry vehicles, but turned to software at a startup called Kintana, where he was the technical lead. The startup was acquired by a company called Mercury Interactive, which in turn was bought by Hewlett Packard. Verma went back to school, to Harvard University this time, and earned an MBA.

He came back to India and worked in private equity for a bit, but always saw himself as an entrepreneur. Electronic waste looked interesting; it was “thoroughly unorganised, brutally competitive, extremely fragmented”, and Verma felt technology could make a difference. He acted as an advisor to companies on managing electronic waste and started studying what kinds of capabilities could be built in India.

This eventually led to him spotting lithium-ion batteries as an opportunity that would become more mainstream, and Verma started Lohum in 2017. He has factories in Noida.

One obstacle to the faster growth of India’s EV ecosystem is money. While investors like Baring Private Equity and a few other venture capital firms have taken an early interest, banks are still holding back, Verma says. “Banks still have not understood what an electric vehicle is all about. I think they’re still struggling with that concept.”

As ventures such as Lohum acquire more data, it will make a dent in the costs involved in making batteries and related systems, which typically make up 30-50 percent of the cost of an electric vehicle.

Second, more engineering talent is needed. “Today, the EV ecosystem reminds me of how the software ecosystem was back in ’98, ’99—you know, two or three guys coming out of a good engineering school, pursuing an EV of their own,” Verma says. The good news is, the EV ecosystem globally is seeing an increase in entrepreneurial ventures and investor interest. India will follow suit quickly, Verma says.

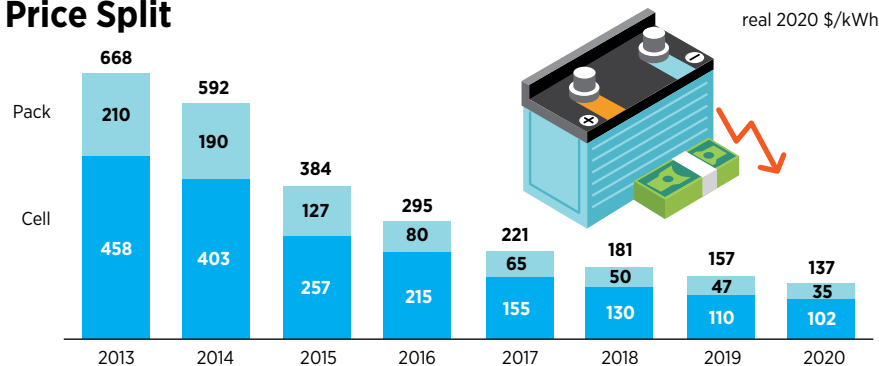
It will also help if the government takes a longer-term view on its policies and extends plans like FAME II to at least 2025, if not beyond. And it could accelerate the adoption of policies—currently in draft stage—on recycling to provide incentives to recyclers, he says.

The entry of Elon Musk’s electric car company Tesla into the Indian market will also help, Verma believes. Tesla could be the large player India needs, to play the role of the anchor around which the entire ecosystem can develop, he says.

Today, Lohum imports the cells for its ‘first life’ batteries, and the repurposed batteries are made largely from cells taken out from the used batteries the company collects back. Of late, it has also started sourcing them from other markets. Verma believes India can become a dominant player in the recycling ecosystem worldwide. The technology is available within the country, there are people available to work in such factories, and there is strong demand for the batteries that can be made.

“If we can do this successfully, and we certainly see the government supporting this vision, then India will never be only dependent on imports for the raw material. That’s at least something that we are trying to push as part of our vision.”

## Volume-Weighted Average Battery Pack And Cell Price Split



SOURCE: BloombergNEF

# All For Claps

Applause Entertainment CEO Sameer Nair, who has witnessed highs such as *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, wants to develop a full-blown studio that makes more than just movies

By KUNAL PURANDARE

**O**n a flight back from London, Amitabh Bachchan told Sameer Nair that if they replicated the format accurately and got everything right, “*faad kay rakh denge* [we’ll make it a monster hit]”. The year was 2000 and Nair, who was then programming head at Star Plus, had taken the megastar to the sets of *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire* in the UK to convince him to host the Indian adaptation of the game show. Bachchan and his family were reluctant, and understandably so. It was a time when the actor was making a comeback to films after a brief sabbatical in the 1990s. And a legend of the 70 mm screen hosting a quiz programme on television was a crazy idea at the turn of the millennium. “I was fixated on Mr Bachchan. His was the only name on my list. I really pursued him,” recalls Nair. Bachchan eventually relented and became the cynosure of all eyes on Indian television after

**“I am obsessed with detail. Our business should be obsessive. You have to be crazy. It’s not just a creative medium... there’s an art, science and magic to it.”**

**SAMEER NAIR,**  
CEO, APPLAUSE ENTERTAINMENT



*Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC) was first aired on Star Plus in July 2000. The rest, as they say, is history.

A media and entertainment industry veteran, 56-year-old Nair has had several highs in a career spanning more than 25 years. His latest bet, Applause Entertainment—a content and intellectual property (IP) creation studio, a venture of the Aditya Birla Group, set up in 2017—is currently basking in the success of *Scam 1992*, a web series based on the life of ‘Big Bull’ Harshad Mehta. Since the 10-episode show was streamed on digital platform SonyLIV in October 2020, it has been winning multiple awards, including one for Best Web Series at the Dadasaheb Phalke International Film Festival Awards 2021.

“It’s always good to have a big success... one can’t deny that. It’s a logical evolution from where we started. And a validation of what we are doing and what we set out to do. What the show did was it drew a whole bunch of existing viewers to Applause and SonyLIV. More people take us seriously now,” says Nair, CEO of Applause.

A self-confessed Steven Spielberg fan, Nair had been wanting to incorporate something like Applause since 1999. His inspiration was the Academy Award-winning filmmaker’s Amblin Entertainment, a classic movie studio. However, with *KBC* becoming a game changer and his



Amitabh Bachchan promoting *Kaun Banega Crorepati*, a show brought to India by Sameer Nair

subsequent elevation as COO and CEO at Star India keeping him busy with revamps and launches, the plan remained on the backburner.

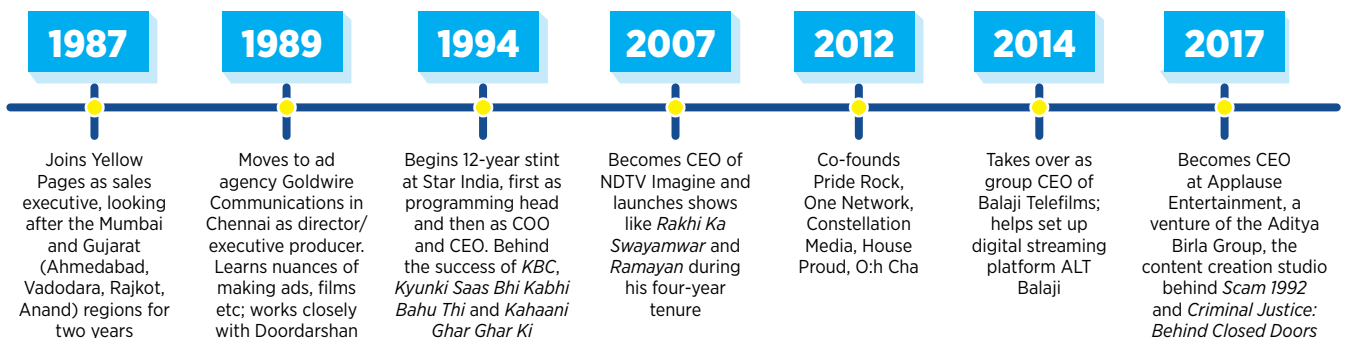
A chance meeting with Kumar Mangalam Birla, chairman of the Aditya Birla Group, in 2016 reignited his desire to create a studio that would focus on content creation, invest in making the show, license the finished series instead of waiting for it to be greenlit or commissioned, and make its own IP. Birla shared the same vision and they ‘revived’ Applause after Nair’s three-year contract as group CEO of Balaji Telefilms came to an end the following year. [The Birlas had a company named Applause Entertainment that had produced the Bachchan-starrer *Black* in 2005. It had

since been dormant and Nair chose to use the same name for the studio.]

**B**orn and brought up in Mumbai, and belonging to a family whose maternal side was full of teachers, Nair wanted to become an astrophysicist and dreamt of getting into the IITs. “I had a scientific bent of mind, but it was good enough only till Class 12. Then it became heavy duty, which is why I like science fiction more,” he says. He got his bachelor’s degree in economics instead and pursued a diploma in hotel management. The ‘foodie’ even went for an interview to The Leela in Mumbai, but left in a huff after he was made to wait for 40 minutes. Ironically, when he was at Star, he

## The ‘Show’ Man

Sameer Nair has been a media and entertainment industry pioneer for over 25 years. He’s seen a time when Doordarshan was the only channel aired in India and then played a key role when satellite television changed the landscape





A still from *Scam 1992*, the award-winning web series created by Applause Entertainment; (right) Applause has adapted foreign shows such as *Criminal Justice* and *The Hostages* for the Indian audience

spent a lot of time at the five-star hotel because it was close to his office. “I could well have been employed there... I was suitably qualified,” he says.

Nair then set his eyes on the advertising industry, but first joined Yellow Pages as a sales executive in the late '80s, looking after the Mumbai and Gujarat regions for two years. Later, he spent four years at Chennai-based advertising agency Goldwire Communications, where he worked closely with Doordarshan, and learnt the nuances of making advertisements, documentaries and films.

The turning point, however, came during the 12 years that he spent at Star India—at a time when satellite TV changed the landscape—where he was responsible for bringing some of the defining shows on TV such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Ki*, *Koffee With Karan*, *The Great Indian Comedy Show* and *Sarabhai vs Sarabhai*, among others. But it is *KBC* that has remained the coveted trophy on his illustrious CV. Nair had not anticipated the popularity that the show would garner, but understands why people still associate him only with it despite having done a variety of work in his professional life. “*KBC* had many firsts attached to it. And it became such an absurd success that it dwarfed everything else. It became a BC/AD [before and after] thing in

TV,” he says, adding that he vividly remembers Bachchan shooting the first promo of the show on the sets of *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire* in London. “He did it in one take. The

### Knowing Nair: CEO Talk

**On the success of *Scam 1992*:** “*Scam* is a success for the industry and it’s a great statement from the audience... many thought people won’t get a financial story. The applause should go to the audience. This emboldens content creators to do new things.”

**On multiple digital streaming platforms:** “The platforms are helping each other build the ecosystem. We are in the process of building a culture or habit. There’s no one who’s better or worse... we are not competitors. We are a studio that supplies content to them. We are working with them to serve customers.”

**On OTT censorship:** “We’ve always had some form of regulation—the Censor Board and a self-regulatory board for TV, for instance. As creators, everyone must exercise some responsibility. Freedom is one thing, but responsibility is the other side of the same coin. What regulation inadvertently does is that it elevates the quality of storytelling. If there’s complete freedom, the quality of art goes down. All rebellions/disruptions have happened because of obstacles.”

**Key takeaways from his career:** “What has stayed with me is what my first boss at Yellow Pages told me: ‘Communicate clearly, be polite and you’ll get away with anything’. And then my boss at Goldwire said: ‘You must not chase money, you must chase success/excellence. If you do that, money chases excellence’. I took that to heart.”

foreign crew on set was stunned and full of admiration for him.”

In subsequent years, Nair continued to make an impact as CEO at NDTV Imagine and Balaji Telefilms. While at the former, he was instrumental in the success of shows like *Ramayan* and *Rakhi Ka Swayamwar*, he helped the latter launch digital streaming platform ALTBalaji and raise money for it. Once he achieved that, he knew the time was ripe to fulfil his long-cherished dream.

By August 2017, when Nair took charge of Applause Entertainment, the OTT space was witnessing hectic activity, with the likes of Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Hotstar establishing themselves in India and eyeing a lion’s share of the booming market. Zee5 and SonyLIV had also finalised their launch plans. Besides, the availability of not-so-expensive smartphones and easy and cheap internet access meant that the potential to acquire subscribers was huge.

“We wanted to create content because we had anticipated a need that would arise with so many platforms coming up,” says Nair. Applause has so far followed a three-pronged strategy—creating originals, opting for book adaptations and adapting foreign shows such as

*Criminal Justice* and *The Hostages* for the Indian audience. “In a way, Applause is first-of-its-kind, not one-of-its-kind,” he adds.

A stickler for perfection with an eye for detail, Nair’s meticulous involvement in projects is seen as a positive by those who have worked with him. “He gives full creative freedom, but if he feels strongly about something, he’ll make it known. What was pleasantly surprising is that he is hands-on with the company he runs. He seems interested in the details and the nitty-gritties,” says Arjun Mukerjee, who directed Applause Entertainment’s web series *Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors* (2020) with Rohan Sippy. “He is down to earth and seems one of the crew rather than the head of a company. He is pleasant to deal with and has no airs.”

Deepak Segal, head of content at Applause, has worked with Nair for over two decades. He says Nair gives the final sign off only after the team comes up with what it thinks is the best. “Actually, it is his gut feeling which is usually right. Sameer looks at a situation from all angles and can pre-empt pitfalls,” he adds.

It’s early days for Applause yet, but Nair is quick to absorb the learnings over the last three-and-a-half years as he now looks at expanding the company. He wants to focus on making things bigger, better and brighter. And instead of producing economically priced shows that do not have much of an uptake in a growing market, the entrepreneur is keen on ensuring distinctive and unique offerings. That apart, he claims to have gotten better at anticipating budgets and is learning to make season twos, eight of which are in the pipeline.

Applause is also venturing into movies (theatrical releases), documentaries, animation, reality shows, gaming content and other unscripted forms of storytelling. It’s producing a film directed by Aparna Sen, starring Konkona Sen Sharma;



**“It is [Sameer’s] gut feeling [about the show], which is usually right. He looks at a situation from all angles and can pre-empt pitfalls.”**

**DEEPAK SEGAL,**  
HEAD OF CONTENT AT APPLAUSE

has joined hands with Drishyam Films for a movie on Major Mohit Sharma, who was posthumously awarded the Ashok Chakra; and is remaking the Tamil hit *Aruvi* with actor Fatima Sana Sheikh playing the lead role.

Content in regional languages is another area that it is banking on. So far, Applause has produced three Tamil shows, one in Gujarati and recently shot a Kannada-English one with standup comedian Danish Sait. “The kind of content we are making... it’s not designed to shock. The idea is to tell good stories, provocative stories,” says Nair. “We are taking the same hub-and-spoke model and expanding. Our focus is to build a full-blown studio. We are a strong creative, business and commercial fore... we bring finance to the table, we monitor and supervise the production process and monetise it.”

Pratik Gandhi, the lead actor of *Scam 1992*—based on journalist Sucheta Dalal and Debashis Basu’s book, *The Scam: Who Won, Who*

*Lost, Who Got Away*—is bullish about Applause’s line-up. “It’s going all out, exploring a lot of different subjects and formats. It has an interesting mix of content in its portfolio,” he says, while giving credit to Nair for being unafraid of pushing the boundaries. “Despite having such a rich legacy and wealth of experience, he has a fresh approach... he is ready to explore. He’s open to trying new things... it is rare in this industry. He’s a soft-spoken, gut-based guy with a clear vision: He wants to be driven by content, not by faces or any other factor.”

Agrees Segal: “Sameer has a big vision for Applause. And he is not inching towards it, but moving by leaps and bounds to achieve his goals.”

**D**espite holding senior positions in a demanding industry, Nair finds a lot of spare time. “This is not a job... I am on a perpetual vacation,” he insists. The ‘family man’ escapes to his farm in Karjat, on the outskirts of Mumbai, at every given opportunity; he finds it therapeutic even as the five dogs, six cows, 16 goats and 20 chicken make it a busy place. The sports lover also enjoys playing squash, tennis and table tennis. He even took membership at a golf course in 2004, but did not go there for 16 years. Just when he developed an interest in the game and began playing there in January 2020, the lockdown came into effect. And he’s taken a liking to yoga in the last three years.

Apart from reading voraciously, he also consumes a lot of content. “I am a genuine consumer. I am always seeing the content that I make, as a consumer,” says Nair. It is perhaps this single-minded focus that makes churning out good content an obsession for him. “I am obsessed with detail. Our business should be obsessive. You have to be crazy. It’s not just a creative medium... there’s an art, science and magic to it,” he says. And when done right, he knows, it can lead to a thunderous applause. **F**

# IPL's Summer of Content

As the 2021 season, the second to be played behind closed doors, kicks off, action on the social media front hots up for better reach, engagement and revenues

By KATHAKALI CHANDA & NAINI THAKER

**I**n March, minutes after Jasprit Bumrah announced his wedding with presenter Sanjana Ganesan on social media, Indian Premier League (IPL) team Rajasthan Royals (RR) sent a congratulatory note to the Mumbai Indians (MI) speedster with a tongue-in-cheek postscript: “We hear Maldives is great in April-May.” We don’t know if the cricketer has made a mental note as he sharpens his yorkers at the MI nets, but with its tease of a post, RR has sounded the bugle for IPL 2021’s social media play.

Five years ago, much of the IPL chatter (barring controversies like Lalit Modi’s ouster or spot-fixing) would emanate from the field—say, a Chris Gayle blitzkrieg or a lethal Lasith Malinga spell. Now, one can rattle off the number of Virat Kohli’s 50s as easily as the pairs of gloves tucked in his kitbag (11, Kohli revealed during an edition of RCB’s Bold Diaries during the last season). As cricketers fight it out on the field for the most glamorous T20 league trophy in the world, there’s an equally engaging tussle for attention on social media that has fans hooked. Will Rahul Tewatia topple spin king Shane Warne in the ‘hit the ball’ challenge, can Pat Cummins control the ping-pong paddle just as well, or whether Dinesh Karthik can cook fish better than British commentator Isa Guha are questions that draw almost as many eyeballs as the duel on the pitch. And franchises are doffing their hat to the curiosity, pumping in money and resources to

generate videos, memes and behind-the-scenes glimpses that would have been unthinkable some seasons ago. As Vaibhav Dhar, the marketing head for Delhi Capitals (DC), puts it succinctly, “In IPL, the war of content is real.”

DC’s digital media budget has increased three-fold, while it has more than doubled for RR and Punjab Kings; Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) and Sunrisers Hyderabad (SRH) have put in around 40 percent more in their digital purse, all channelling much of the spending towards better equipment and people. During a typical season, KKR’s social media team, which includes a specialist to shoot on the phone, churns out over 300 videos in 60 days. “The world is changing. Earlier, the travelling entourage for social media would have one person, now we have eight to nine. Three years ago, no one would think of taking along a video editor. Now, everyone has one,” Dhar adds.

**“Four to five years ago, all the brands were interested in was where an I on the jersey. Now that ecosystem has changed.”**

**VAIBHAV DHAR,**  
MARKETING HEAD, DELHI CAPITALS

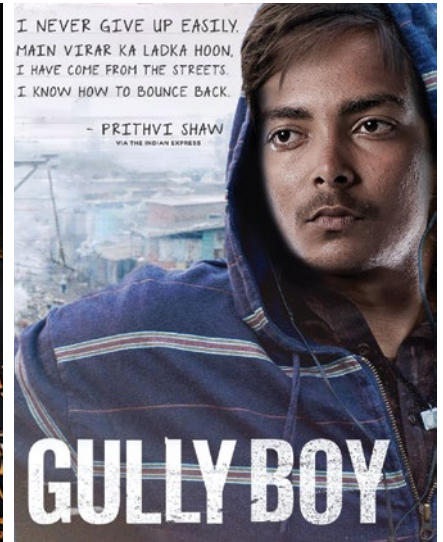
The glut for IPL content received a veritable push in 2020, as the tournament was first postponed, and then left India amid a Covid-19 surge to head to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in September. The focus shifted from matters merely cricketing to allowing fans a peek into the lives of players, both at their homes during the lockdown and the hotels and dressing rooms they were inhabiting in a bio-bubble. What started with podcasts, video series and webinars during the early lockdown months—with stalwarts like Rahul Dravid speaking on mental health for RR, or KKR’s Eoin Morgan giving a lowdown on the on-ground Covid situation in the UK, for instance—transformed into peeks of practice or team bonding sessions once the players gathered in the UAE. Cricket fandom bonded big time as their heroes were humanised through glimpses of Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) players acing a quiz on TV series *Friends*, or MI’s Hardik Pandya and Suryakumar Yadav belting out a cover of ‘*Badan pe sitaare lapete huye*’.

Says Srinath Bhashyam, general manager of SRH, “Because players couldn’t play for months due to the pandemic and missed the connect with fans, they were more forthcoming with interactions and opening up about their lives. Staying together also forged bonds between seniors and juniors. Such interactions gave us more opportunities to create quality content.”

Pushing out content online has also moved the needle for Punjab Kings (formerly Kings XI Punjab). “Close to 80 to 85 percent of our marketing budget is allocated to digital marketing. Of that, we are putting in a lot more money in creating video content,” says Raghu Venkatraman, head of digital and marketing. In a season that saw a series where coach and spin legend Anil Kumble turn into a match analyst before and after, the franchise clocked a 5.5x rise in videos and 3x rise in content interactions compared to 2019.



COURTESY: ROYAL CHALLENGERS BANGALORE



COURTESY: DELHI CAPITALS

(Clockwise from top left) Owner Shah Rukh Khan or star player Shakib Al Hasan, who does it best? Kolkata Knight Riders tries to find out; glimpses of camaraderie among the Sunrisers Hyderabad teammates; Delhi Capitals gives Prithvi Shaw a shout-out on Instagram after the Vijay Hazare trophy; Danish Sait dressed as Mr Nags has India and Royal Challengers Bangalore skipper Virat Kohli in splits; Punjab Kings has some fun with Ravi Bishnoi and Aussie Moises Henriques (right)

That a robust digital media strategy would give teams valuable equity in the years ahead and amp up engagement with fans was evident to RR as they returned to the IPL fold in 2018, after serving a two-year ban over corruption charges. “Instead of trying to grow the number of followers, we tried to focus on creating quality content that would automatically bring back fans onto our social media channels,” says Jake Lush McCrum, the COO.

In 2019, RR roped in digital media agency Interactive Avenues and, together with its in-house crew, set about lending a personality to the brand on social media—honest, cheeky, but also with an ability to stomach a joke at itself. Consider RR’s biryani banter with SRH, calling for a large biryani order on Zomato

after they won a game against the Hyderabad team; SRH trolled them back after winning the return leg, asking for the order to be cancelled as their opponents found it to be too spicy. “Daal baati should do just fine,” it wrote, invoking the culinary obsession of the state.

“We don’t want to be followed just by RR fans, but all cricket and IPL fans, because of our content. We noticed such banter with other teams brought us a lot of followers. SRH fans began to follow us after the biryani episode and RCB fans too when we offered free safari passes to Virat and AB [de Villiers] ahead of their game with us,” says Atishay Agarwal, head of content for RR. As a result, RR, once minnows in the social media game, had a 950 percent rise in video views (at 350 million), and added 1.1



COURTESY: PUNJAB KINGS

million followers on social media in 2020, compared to 219,000 in 2019. McCrum wants to channel their entire social media fanbase to the app, which then helps the franchise parse their likes and dislikes, customise content that, in turn, benefits their marketing partners too. “The most important thing for the future for me is the transition of fans from third-party to first-party data,” he says.

Hitesh Rajwani, founder and CEO of Social Samosa, lauds

RR's strategy of deploying benevolent ribbing, especially on Twitter, for stoking engagement. "They've picked up battles with other teams and engaged in gimmicks like the biryani banter, which blend well in the social media universe," he says. It's also one of the reasons why RR, despite a poor showing on the field, picked up a record following during the 2020 season.

But that seems more of an exception than the rule. "Usually on-field performances relate directly to the social media performance. The team that wins the most, gets more leverage also from TV and media, so sports fans would want to follow that team first. Five-time champions Mumbai Indians is one of the most followed teams on social media with 6.6 million followers on Instagram, the highest, 6.3 million on Twitter, second next to Chennai Super Kings (CSK), and 13 million on Facebook, highest after KKR [as of March 31]," says Rajwani.

Much of the social media play is chiselled by a motley crew of in-house content teams working in tandem with external agencies, who manage the digital footprint with a two-pronged focus—season and off-season. "While the season is high-octane, with fans spending time on social media, the task really is to plan for the off-season. This is where the in-house content team and we operate like a hub-and-spoke model, where we constantly bank content for off-season. So, the in-house team is more in control of the content during the season, while we keep the community engaged during the off-season," says Namrata Parekh, co-founder and director of digital media agency Meraki Sport and Entertainment, which has been working with KKR since last season. Adds Achint Gupta, head of media and content for KKR, "During the season, it is all about hardcore cricket content—how the matches are unfolding and how the players are performing, but once the season ends, the fun aspect of the content takes over."

COURTESY: SUNRISERS HYDERABAD



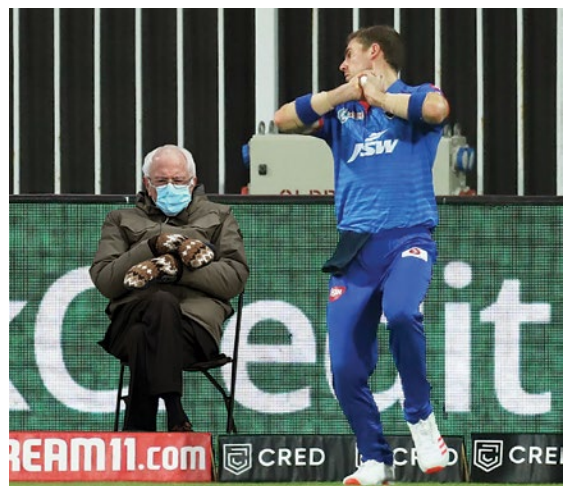
Many IPL franchises like Sunrisers Hyderabad (left), Kolkata Knight Riders and Delhi Capitals (top and bottom right) latched on to the trending Bernie Sanders memes for greater traction

For the Kolkata-based team, Meraki divides content into three buckets—hygiene (for everyday posts), hub (content tailored to thematic spikes like auctions and new signings) and hero (large pieces that warrant an independent plan, like the season's campaign #TuFanNahiToofanHai). But, while that sets the overarching theme, the flow of content remains fluid. That the flexibility has worked is evident from the fact that the franchise has doubled its video views since 2019, and recorded approximately 2 billion impressions on its social media platforms in 2020 alone.

Though digital remains an unpredictable beast, there is a broad pattern in raw and unstructured content doing well. A video of Punjab Kings player Ravi Bishnoi practising on his terrace with his mother during the lockdown went viral, as did one after a CSK-RR match with spinner Imran Tahir teaching a few tricks of the trade to newbie Riyaan Parag. "I was at the boundary



COURTESY: KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS



COURTESY: DELHI CAPITALS

end and Jake [Lush McCrum], who was up in the stands, shouted out and asked me to have a look. A conversation between two opponents on the field, captured by chance, did so well," says Agarwal of RR.

DC had a similar experience with an Instagram Reel of captain Shreyas Iyer in changing attires through frame transitions. "It got featured on Instagram's global page and had over 2.8 crore views. If you come to think of it, we hadn't even planned it, and made it on the go," says DC's Dhar.

Iyer is a natural on social media and has taken to it like fish to water, so have youngsters like KKR's Shubman Gill, Kamlesh Nagarkoti or Shivam Mavi. Even senior players like DC's R Ashwin and Shikhar Dhawan, and SRH's David Warner have carved a niche for themselves with engaging content, and have proved there is no such thing as a geriatric divide. "For KKR, Andre Russell, 32, and Dinesh Karthik, 35, are among the most social media-savvy players



Rajasthan Royals' video that had international cricketers like Jos Buttler discussing periods tied in well with its marketing tie-up with menstrual hygiene startup Niine as the principal sponsor

along with Gill," says Gupta.

And players like Sanju Samson are learning to live with the constant chase of the camera, even though the RR captain wasn't comfortable with it earlier. "On the ground, I don't enjoy the camera following me much. But through the IPL seasons, I've gotten used to it, and have begun to enjoy it," says Samson.

The pursuit of quality digital content has propelled RCB to bring on board the multi-hyphenate Danish Sait—RJ, comedian, TV host, actor and writer—in an avatar of Mr Nags, a loveable jester and host of the RCB Insider. Modelled on Star TV's Apple Singh, played by actor Satya Mishra during the 1999 cricket World Cup, Nags, the only travelling comedian with an IPL team, attempts to bring forth the "irrelevant and the irreverent with the cricketers in a make-believe world", says Sait, a departure from the taut, charged-up match atmosphere. In February, RCB became the first IPL team to hit 2 million followers on YouTube, and much of it can be attributed to its video team, which, adds Sait, works well because it is managed by creative people who are allowed the freedom of ideas.

**N**ot just for the song and dance, but their burgeoning social media presence has brought IPL teams marketing tie-ups, and sponsorship conversations are increasingly veering towards digital outreach as a key part of the deliverables. RR broke the clutter last season with its video featuring

international stars like Jos Buttler and David Miller talking about periods, in association with its principal sponsor Niine, a menstrual hygiene startup. It earned headlines and was one of the key initiatives that brought Niine a 3 percent pan-India market share. Says Dhar of DC, "Four to five years ago, all the brands were interested in was where am I on the jersey. Now that ecosystem has changed. They still ask those questions, but now a major part of the sponsorship commitment is what sort of video coverage am I getting. The world in terms of content is revolving around interactions and videos."

Hence, a social media strategy is often tied in with the overall marketing objective of a franchise. It could range from going deeper into a market, to strengthening connections with existing fans, or growing the fan base or honing a niche to build a brand positioning. "Say, a franchise wants to make a deeper foray into a particular geography. For that, we start with research about the geography by studying other categories that have entered the area," says a spokesperson of digital agency Sportz Interactive, which works with multiple IPL teams.

The teams also leverage their local connect to gain a bigger traction and a higher rate of engagement, which would rake in more endorsements. CSK puts out content in Tamil, KKR wishes its community on Doljatra (as Holi is celebrated in West Bengal), and SRH brings in references to its famed Hyderabad culture and cuisine.

Says Bhashyam of SRH, "Foreign leagues that have existed for over

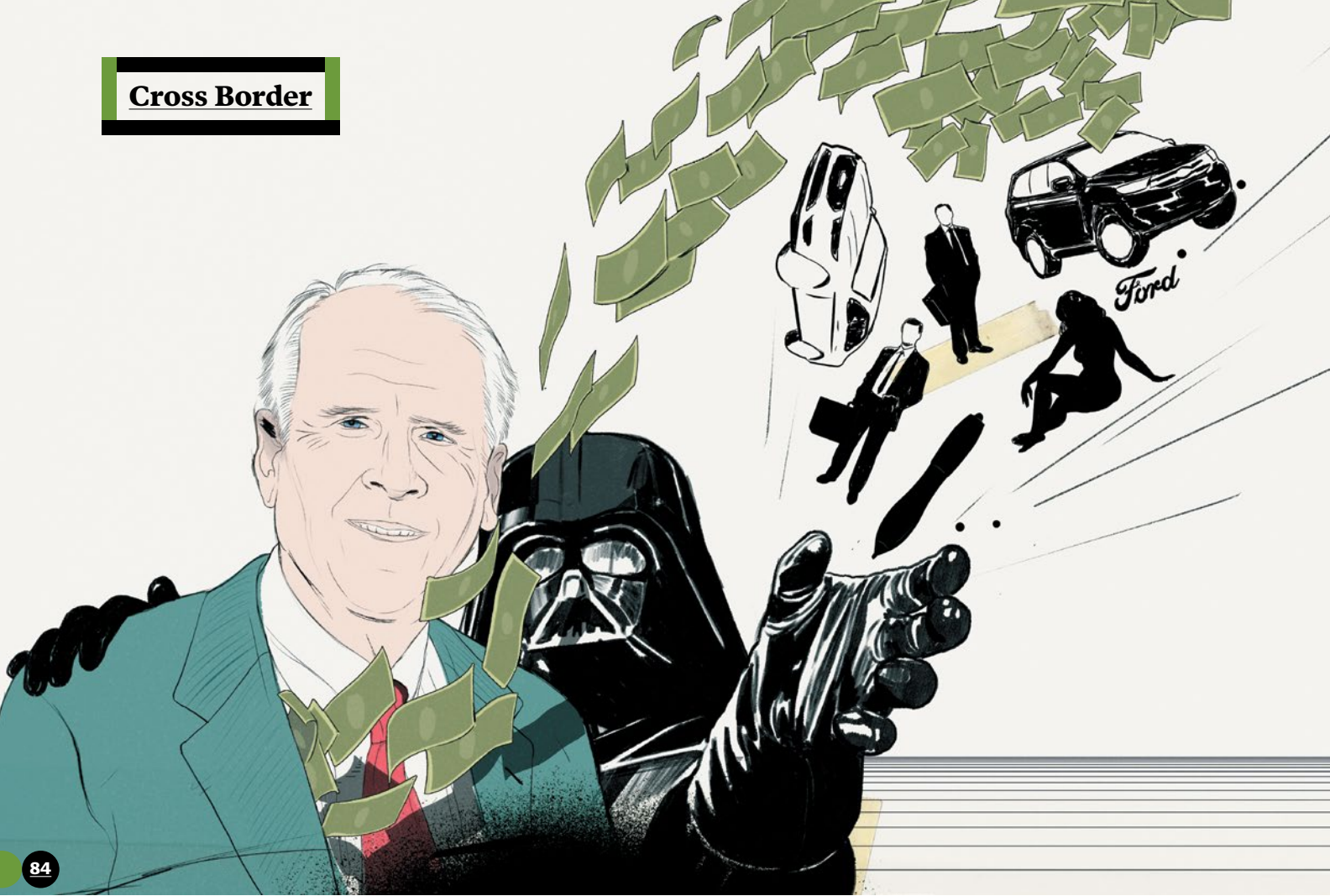
100 years have supporters with defined geographical affinities. The city takes ownership for that team, while in IPL, the fan support is sometimes based on the players that play for them. The onus is on the franchise to take ownership for the city that you're playing for and become a part of its culture."

With the digital focus slowly shifting towards regional, in August RR became the first team to join ShareChat, a vernacular social media platform that took off once TikTok was banned. In seven months, it has developed a follower base of 700,000.

The localisation journey began for DC in 2018, with its rebranding from the earlier Delhi Daredevils, after the JSW Group stepped in as co-owners. The team that started off with the tagline 'This is New Delhi' recalibrated their slogan to 'Yeh hai Nayi Dilli' to reach out to the wider Hindi-speaking north Indian population. Says Dhar: "It was our campaign for eternity—it means we aren't going to come out with a new hashtag every year and won't confuse our audience. Our reach and engagement rates have more than doubled once we started using Hindi taglines and doing more interviews in Hindi."

As consumer behaviour patterns dictate digital content, long-form is now clipped into snackable bites while text is watered down from journalese to colloquial. "And memes continue to be the currency for any sports property right now," says Rajwani of Social Samosa. Perhaps this explains why most of the franchises jumped on to the Bernie Sanders memewagon, and latched on to the trending US Senator who sat wrapped up in woollens and mittens at US President Joe Biden's swearing-in.

As matches for the 2021 season are held in isolation, digital will continue to play a crucial role in connecting players to fans. And if the last season is anything to go by, the action in the backroom will be as frenzied as the one on the field. **F**



# America's Most Manipulative Billionaire

The inside story of how Bob Brockman, the secretive billionaire who allegedly masterminded America's biggest tax-evasion scheme, used 'Darth Vader' contracts to overcharge auto dealers and finance Robert F Smith's private equity empire

By CHRIS HELMAN

**E**ver since Ford Motor Company began selling its Model T in 1908, few pieces of technology have been as important to car dealer profit margins as the DocuPad.

The 45-by-29-inch flat screen sits atop a salesman's desk, giving him the ability to quickly coax customers through what would normally be mountains of paperwork. By enabling car buyers to check boxes with a

stylus and sign contracts on the interactive screen, the DocuPad takes the friction out of a car salesman's stock in trade—the upsell.

In a 2019 court deposition, the secretive Robert Brockman, 79, whose enterprise software company, Reynolds and Reynolds, sells DocuPad, offered a rare peek into the microeconomics of car sales. Brockman said the DocuPad enabled finance managers to upsell by at least

\$200 per transaction in a business where margins on every car sold or leased are typically razor-thin. "You recover the initial cost of DocuPad very, very quickly," Brockman said, alluding to the \$10,000 startup fee, plus an ongoing \$1,000 monthly licence. "And then, from that point on, it is a massive generator of profits."

Naturally, a dealer can get the DocuPad only if he's also a licensee of one of Brockman's integrated

dealer management systems—digital platforms for everything from parts inventory and service scheduling to the machines that secure the thousands of keys at an average dealership. When you have thousands of captive dealers locked into multi-year contracts, those fees turn into \$1 billion, with annual income estimated to be \$300 million. And Brockman controls 98 percent of it through an offshore trust, a stake worth at least \$3 billion.

Brockman's ability to quietly pile up billions came to a crashing halt in October 2020, when he was charged with masterminding the largest tax-evasion case in American history, accused of hiding some \$2 billion in income from the Internal Revenue Service (IRR) over the last two decades. Brockman has pleaded not guilty to all charges and is free on a \$1 million bond. Neither Brockman nor his attorneys have responded to *Forbes*'s requests for interviews.

Brockman's alleged scheme helped hide profits gushing from one of the nation's most successful private equity (PE) firms, Austin, Texas-based Vista Equity Partners, founded by the nation's richest Black person, Robert F Smith. Last October, Smith signed a non-prosecution agreement with the Department of Justice (DoJ) and confessed to what would have been a host of tax felonies tied to secret offshore accounts set up at Brockman's behest. Starting in 2000, Brockman committed \$1 billion in capital to Vista's first fund and taught Smith the ins and outs of running an enterprise software business. He continues to hold large interests in several of Vista's \$73 billion in private equity funds. Smith has already paid a record \$139 million to get the IRS off his back and agreed to cooperate with investigators in the case against his one-time benefactor and mentor.

The saga has all the drama and intrigue of a crime novel, involving a *Playboy* model, a network of offshore accounts and an encrypted

email system in which Brockman referred to Smith as "Steelhead". Brockman's attorney, an Australian named Evatt Tamine, who functioned as the billionaire's nominal trustee, was known as "Redfish". The IRS was "the House" and Brockman, the tip of the pyramid, was "Permit".

A months-long investigation by *Forbes* reveals that the alleged tax evasion is not the first, or only, sin Brockman may have committed during his impressive career. On his way to amassing a net worth estimated to be \$6 billion, the Houston-based entrepreneur has left a trail of hundreds of arbitrations and lawsuits from auto dealers who are his core customers, claiming that his underhanded tactics cheated them, too, out of hundreds of millions.

**B**orn during the Second World War to a physiotherapist and a gas station owner, Robert Brockman grew up in St Petersburg, Florida, and graduated summa cum laude from the University of Florida in 1963, a member of its business honor society. While serving in the US Marine Reserves, he worked in marketing at Ford and then joined IBM in 1966, becoming a star selling mainframe computer services to auto dealers.

In 1970 he left IBM, launched



Faced with a billion-dollar take-it-or-leave-it scheme from Bob Brockman, financier Robert F Smith or 'Steelhead' took the bait

Universal Computer Services and taught himself how to program at a time when it involved feeding decks of punched cards into hulking machines. Soon he was providing dealers with printed weekly reports on parts inventory.

"Brockman was the first provider who could enable an owner to synthesise the financial statements of his 10 dealerships into one. He was doing this in the 1980s," marvels Paul Gillrie, a veteran auto-industry consultant. By the late 1980s Brockman had dozens of computers installed at dealerships, and he introduced what remains one of his core software operating systems, called Power. On his personal website, since taken down, Brockman, who holds 21 patents, wrote: "I'm still a programmer at heart. And although I had to give up hands-on programming many years ago, I still stay very closely involved in all of our product decisions."

By the early 1990s, Ford decided it didn't want to be in the IT business, so it sold Dealer Computer Services to Brockman's Universal Computer Services for \$103 million. The deal came with a stipulation: Ford would allow Brockman to continue using the Ford blue oval, brand, letterhead, address and even the same employees for five years, incognito.

"When Brockman took over, it was like a frog in boiling water," according to a consultant who advised dealers on arbitrations. "Ford was so laid-back and easygoing. The dealers trusted them, and Ford took very good care of them." The dealers liked the tech upgrades—even the era's clunky monitor beat the microfiche and paper volumes they were used to. "Brockman computerised it all, created a superior system." And then, according to a typical case, he leveraged that goodwill by signing dealers to contract extensions "with the intention of locking in dealers beyond the life of their computer systems, in order to impose costly

system upgrades". Some dealers were irate when they realised that they hadn't been dealing with Ford at all—and had little recourse against charges like \$12,000 for the installation of a 500-megabyte hard drive or \$2,400 for a printer.

Those who tried to get out of their contracts met the buzzsaw of Brockman's litigation team. He had created what an industry insider refers to as "the Darth Vader contract" because it enabled his attorneys to destroy rebellious dealers. Many upgrades or new services came with lengthy contract extensions. Says Gillrie, "When you have a contract that gives you a monopoly on your customer for 30 years, you don't have to listen to anything they say."

In 2010, Jay Gill, a Fresno, California-based entrepreneur with 10 dealerships, was hit with a \$3 million bill when he acquired Livermore Auto Group, which had been paying \$35,000 a month to Brockman's company. They settled for about half that. "Brockman made his money by screwing people," Gill says. "Anytime you asked for something or you needed something, he would automatically extend your contract without you knowing. When you have a 12-inch-thick contract, it's somewhere in there."

Not even the threat of bankruptcy could free dealers from Brockman's grip. When Orville Beckford, a Black dealer in Florida, was struggling despite a recapitalisation by Ford in 1994, Brockman went after Ford for the money and in a letter castigated it for backing what he asserted was an inept manager: "I would like to avoid this—however, short of paying 'blackmail' to this dealer, I see no other answer than to fight him legally to the end." Beckford sued Brockman for defamation and won \$250,000 in a jury trial.

Over the years more than 100 dealers, beaten in arbitration, refused to pay off their contracts with Brockman's companies and wound

up in federal courts. "Unfortunately, Ford created this monster," Gill says. "I know unequivocally that I wouldn't do business with this guy, even if it was free."

**D**ealmaker Robert Smith had no such reservations when he met Brockman in the late 1990s. Fresh out of Columbia Business School and a rising star in Goldman Sachs' investment banking department, Smith was talking to Brockman about doing a buyout of his growing software business.

Brockman didn't need financing from Goldman. His UCS had oodles of excess cash—which he apparently had no intention of sharing with Uncle Sam. According to the statement of facts signed by Smith in his non-

## When Brockman took over, it was like a frog in boiling water. Ford was laid-back, and the dealers trusted it

prosecution deal, Brockman agreed to seed Smith with \$1 billion in the 2000 creation of Vista Equity Partners—on the condition that Smith cooperate with him in creating what the DOJ's indictment refers to as a "conspiracy and scheme and artifice to defraud".

In 1997, Brockman, via his Bermuda-domiciled A Eugene Brockman Charitable Trust, set up a holding company in Nevis called Spanish Steps Holdings. Under Spanish Steps he created a British Virgin Islands company called Point Investments. This firm would act as Brockman's straw buyer for investments in Vista. According to Smith's statement, Brockman, in a

"take it or leave it" proposal, insisted that Smith hold half his carried interest in the initial Vista Fund II via a "perfected foreign trust" like his own. Presumably, this way Brockman could take comfort in knowing they were in it together.

"I had one of those in-the-mirror moments," Smith, 58, told *Forbes* in 2018, in a cover story, before any hint of criminality had emerged. "I looked at myself and asked, 'If I don't do this, how will I feel about it ten years from now?'" According to his statement, Smith had a relative of his then-wife, Suzanne McFayden, create a Belize-based trust called Excelsior, through which Smith funded his offshore investment company, Flash Holdings.

It's legal for corporations to set up subsidiaries in tax havens to own patents and other high-margin intellectual property (IP)—software makers have long parked IP in Ireland, for instance. Likewise, hedge funds and private equity investors set up offshore trusts in which to direct proceeds of their carried interest. Such structures' legality tends to be contingent upon how much control the ultimate beneficiaries have over the assets, and what they do with it.

Brockman could have gotten away with having his businesses held through the A Eugene Brockman Charitable Trust had he been able to show that he was a passive beneficiary—rather than the control freak that Smith alleges him to have been: "It became apparent to Smith that despite paperwork that indicated to the contrary, Individual A [Brockman] completely controlled Individual A's foreign trust and related foreign companies, and made all substantive decisions regarding all of its transactions and investments." Including, of course, the decision not to disclose any of it to the IRS. As Brockman said of himself in a 2019 deposition, "As you probably can tell, I'm into the details, big time."

In his statement, Smith explains

## Tycoon Tax Cheat Hall Of Fame

A long line of big-time tax evaders precedes **Robert F Smith's** admission last year of stowing \$200 million in foreign accounts. Depending on the outcome of **Bob Brockman's** trial, he could soon trump them all



**Walter Anderson**

Telecom and spaceflight “astropreneur” pleaded guilty in 2006 of failing to report \$365 million in income he diverted offshore. Received a nine-year prison sentence and was ordered to pay \$23 million in restitution; he was released in 2012



**Leona Helmsley**

Famously quipped, “We don’t pay taxes; only the little people pay taxes.” Sentenced to 16 years for writing off millions in home remodeling as a business expense. Died in 2007; left \$12 million to her dog



**Igor Olenicoff**

Russia-born developer behind California’s Olen Properties pleaded guilty in 2007 to hiding \$200 million offshore. Escaped with just two years’ probation and a \$52 million bill for taxes. Now 78 years old, he’s worth \$4.3 billion



**Ty Warner**

Beanie Babies mogul pleaded guilty to depositing a secret \$80 million in a Swiss bank in 1996 and failing to report \$24 million in income. Paid Feds \$70 million but avoided jail. Now 76, he’s worth \$4 billion



**Sam and Charles Wylie**

Brothers behind arts-and-crafts chain Michaels hid profits in offshore trusts. Nabbed by Feds in 2010. Sam (left) settled for \$500 million. Charles died in 2011; Sam, 86, lives in a Dallas old-folks’ home

that he was incentivised to deliver returns on Brockman’s \$1 billion because Brockman had the power to replace him by forcing Vista to sell him their general-partnership control interests at Brockman’s price. Brockman controlled Smith with an iron grip the same way he did the car dealers.

With Brockman’s capital, Vista Fund II acquired the likes of SirsiDynix, Applied Systems, BigMachines, Brainware, Surgical Information Systems and SER

Solutions. Brockman was intimately involved in directing the Vista team on how to apply his playbook of operating principles focussed on cost reduction and product consolidation. According to someone familiar with Vista’s early days, the budding private equity firm applied IBM’s process-oriented approach, learnt from Brockman, to acquire and grow software companies: “Everything that Vista knows about software came from Bob Brockman.”

One smart strategy employed by Vista has been software roll-ups. Take

the case of former Vista portfolio company Ventyx—an Atlanta firm focussed on industrial management software. In 2005, Vista paid \$70 million for MDSI, added Indus in 2007 for \$240 million, then merged them into Ventyx. It then rolled in Global Energy Decisions and NewEnergy Associates and Tech-Assist in order to add key applications and market share. Then, in 2010, Vista sold Ventyx to Swiss power and automation giant ABB for \$1 billion. Vista then distributed \$799 million of the proceeds to an account at Swiss bank Mirabaud that was controlled by Brockman’s Point Investments.

Brockman also appeared to use Vista as a straw buyer to help him roll up other dealership software providers. In 2005, UCS acquired call-tracking and measurement company Callbright. The next year, Vista Fund II (all Brockman’s money) acquired Callbright’s competitor Who’s Calling—which it later sold to Brockman as well. According to Preqin, Smith’s first Vista fund, launched in 2000, went on to return more than 29 percent annually. If that return is to be believed, it would mean that Brockman and Smith multiplied the initial \$1 billion more than tenfold.

**A**s Brockman was directing Vista’s growth from behind the scenes, his business was flourishing. In 2005, his software company reportedly had \$530 million in revenue and \$100 million in profits, with 2,600 employees. His computerised parts catalogue was installed in nearly 2,500 Ford and Lincoln-Mercury dealerships.

But Brockman was facing a big problem—Ford had developed its own electronic parts catalogue. In 2005, Ford refused to renew Brockman’s exclusive licence unless he agreed to a three-year wind-down of his existing contracts. Brockman sued, alleging violation of antitrust laws, but eventually dropped the suit.

His exclusive deal over, Brockman

had to do something to replace the business. He then enlisted Smith to help with the deal of his career—a leveraged buyout of Ohio’s Reynolds and Reynolds in 2006 for \$2.4 billion. Brockman put up \$300 million in equity; Vista added \$50 million (of Brockman’s money). Deutsche Bank arranged the loans. The industry was shocked, assuming that much larger Reynolds would be buying UCS, not the other way around. Now Brockman had thousands of new clients to transition to his Darth Vader contract.

Almost immediately, there was a culture clash. A buttoned-up ex-Marine, Brockman was not well-liked at easygoing Reynolds. He prohibited employees from smoking, even during off hours, and reportedly monitored time spent on bathroom breaks. In a deposition, Brockman described his frustration with the company’s data security: “When I got to Reynolds, it’s kind of like I had been spending my life, you know, mopping and polishing the floor. And I inherited this house, and it has two inches of water on the floor.”

In 2008, during the Great Recession, Reynolds debt sold off in a flight to quality. Seeing his company’s loans trading as low as 35 cents on the dollar was too good for Brockman to pass up. Even though he had personally signed credit agreements barring him from buying any of Reynolds’s subordinated debt without the approval of first-lien holders, Brockman secretly bought about \$20 million of Reynolds debt in 2009, according to an IRS investigation. To do so, Brockman, through his Aussie attorney Tamine, used funds held by Edge Capital Investments (like Point Investments, Edge was a Caribbean entity set up via a trust controlled by Brockman’s longtime CFO, Don Jones, “as a cover to shield Brockman’s ownership”, according to an IRS investigation). A year later, when Deutsche arranged a refinancing of Reynolds debt, Edge redeemed Brockman’s notes at par,

netting \$72 million on the trade and depositing the funds into an offshore account. According to the affidavit of an IRS investigator, “Tamine, at the direction of Brockman, then laundered approximately \$57 million of the proceeds” through Brockman’s other accounts and companies, “including several of Vista Equity Partners’ funds”.

Some of the untaxed profits from

## **At Reynolds, he prohibited employees from smoking, even during off hours, and reportedly monitored time spent on bathroom breaks**

Brockman’s lucrative trade allegedly went to fund his passions. His Frying Pan Canyon Ranch near Aspen, Colorado, was purchased for \$15 million. He also directed his attorney to purchase a 209-foot luxury yacht named Albula, complete with a helipad, for \$33 million. Brockman, an avid fisherman and hunter, was also fond of zipping by private jet to Córdoba, Argentina, for the hemisphere’s best dove shooting.

Smith was enjoying life too. In 2009, he relocated with Suzanne, his wife of 22 years, to Switzerland. The next year he redirected more than \$30 million of his own untaxed capital gains into an account at Swiss Banque Bonhôte through which he bought two Alpine ski chalets in Megève, France. The family also maintained homes in Texas, California and Colorado.

Enter the 2010 *Playboy* Playmate of the Year, Hope Dworaczyk, with whom, his wife discovered, Smith was having an affair. This became an

immediate concern for Brockman’s team. In August 2011, according to emails uncovered by Department of Justice investigators, Brockman’s CFO Jones, a.k.a. “King” wrote to trustee Tamine, a.k.a. “Redfish”: “Bob called concerned about the Robert Smith situation and what effect a nasty divorce might have on us. We agreed that if his business is dissected by her attorney, Point would be an initial target.” Indeed, in her divorce petition, Suzanne McFayden, who met Smith when they both attended Cornell in the 1980s, demanded full ownership of their homes, comprehensive support for their children, a prohibition against them ever associating with Dworaczyk and a “strict accounting of all monies expended” for Smith’s mistress’ benefit. And in what was perhaps her toughest ask, McFayden’s lawyers demanded that Smith get up to date with his taxes.

**A**s Mr and Mrs Smith negotiated a divorce settlement, Brockman was looking for the exit.

In late 2012, he came close to striking a deal to sell Reynolds and Reynolds to KKR for \$5 billion, but backed out. In 2013, Brockman attempted a dividend recapitalisation of Reynolds that would have valued the company at \$5.3 billion and increased debt from \$900 million to \$4.3 billion. A Moody’s report at the time estimated Reynolds’s “free cash flow” that year at \$350 million, with 40 percent margins. Brockman reportedly planned to take out \$2.5 billion in cash. But this deal too fell apart. Bizarrely, after loans had been finalised and allocated to investors, all the trades were reportedly unwound and the issue withdrawn. Brockman then cancelled a well-publicised pledge of \$250 million to Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, which he had attended before transferring to the University of Florida.

Vista was likewise feeling pressure. In a 2012 memo, Tamine told

Brockman that he was beginning to encounter uncomfortable questions. “It is the involvement of Point Investments, an unknown non-US investor, which generally causes the compliance issues.” When “pressed on Point’s beneficial ownership,” Tamine wrote, “I have walked us through with minimal disclosure.”

At the end of 2013, Banque Bonhôte notified Smith that it intended to participate in the DOJ’s Swiss-bank programme and would be informing US authorities of his account.

Realising the jig was up, Smith hurriedly filed an IRS application in March 2014, seeking inclusion in its amnesty programme for Americans who had failed to disclose their offshore accounts. A month later, his application was denied.

When Smith and McFayden finalised their divorce later in 2014, Brockman loaned Smith \$75 million, according to court documents. That same year Vista wound down Brockman’s Fund II and exited its small stake in Reynolds and Reynolds.

Smith celebrated his newfound freedom in July 2015 by wedding Dworaczyk in a lavish, star-studded affair at Villa Cimbrone on Italy’s Amalfi Coast. Musicians Seal and John Legend performed.

Less than a year later, in June 2016, the alleged co-conspirators went into high gear in anticipation of a federal grand jury investigation. Tamine was dispatched to Oxford, Mississippi, to visit Don Jones’s widow, who was in possession of incriminating evidence, including floppy disks and hard drives. Said Tamine in an encrypted memo, “As you know, I even cut short the trip to Argentina to get back to Oxford to destroy more drives that had been discovered.”

By 2017, Tamine could see the writing on the wall. In a memo to Brockman he wrote: “Even if Robert Smith clears up his problems, the target is well fixed on me and we need to anticipate that we’ll be audited at some point.”

In September 2018, agents in Bermuda raided Tamine’s home.

As the government closed in, Smith began upping his charitable giving. Around the time the IRS rejected his amnesty plea, Smith set up a foundation with hundreds of millions of dollars connected to the profits of Vista’s first fund. In 2016, he and his foundation pledged \$50 million to Cornell University’s engineering school and \$20 million to the National Museum of African American History

## The saga has all the drama of a crime novel, involving a *Playboy* model, a network of offshore accounts and an encrypted email system

and Culture. Most famously, Smith delivered a commencement speech at Morehouse College in May 2019, announcing that he would spend \$34 million to pay off the student debt of the entire graduating class of the historically Black college.

Brockman, too, sought to burnish his philanthropic bona fides, donating \$25 million to the Baylor College of Medicine and tens of millions more to erect buildings at Centre College and Rice University. Tamine, in a memo to Brockman, wrote of the importance of appearing charitable: “These activities would work as a strong barrier against an attack from the IRS.”

On October 15, 2020, US attorneys dropped their bombshell about Smith and Brockman. In exchange for an agreement not to prosecute, Smith would pay \$56 million in taxes and penalties on unreported income plus another \$82 million in penalties for

concealing offshore accounts. Further, he would abandon his claims for \$182 million in refunds derived from his philanthropic giving and earlier payments to Uncle Sam. “It is never too late to do the right thing,” said US attorney David Anderson. “Smith committed serious crimes, but he also agreed to cooperate”—against Brockman—which “has put him on a path away from indictment.”

Smith continues to preside over Vista, and only a handful of investors have shown signs of concern. New Mexico’s Educational Retirement Board has withdrawn a \$100 million commitment, and the Virginia Retirement System, which has \$350 million invested with Vista, says it is monitoring the situation. In late November 2020 Vista’s longtime president, Brian Sheth, announced he was leaving the company, implausibly telling *Forbes* it had nothing to do with Smith’s confessed transgressions: “I know for Robert and Vista the best is yet to come.” Vista now boasts \$73 billion in assets under management.

In November, Brockman stepped down as CEO of Reynolds to prepare for his trial. So far, Bermudian and Swiss authorities have frozen his accounts, and Tamine is cooperating with the authorities. Brockman’s attorneys say he is suffering from early-stage dementia. So far his lawyers have persuaded the court to transfer the case from San Francisco to Houston in recognition of Brockman’s declining health.

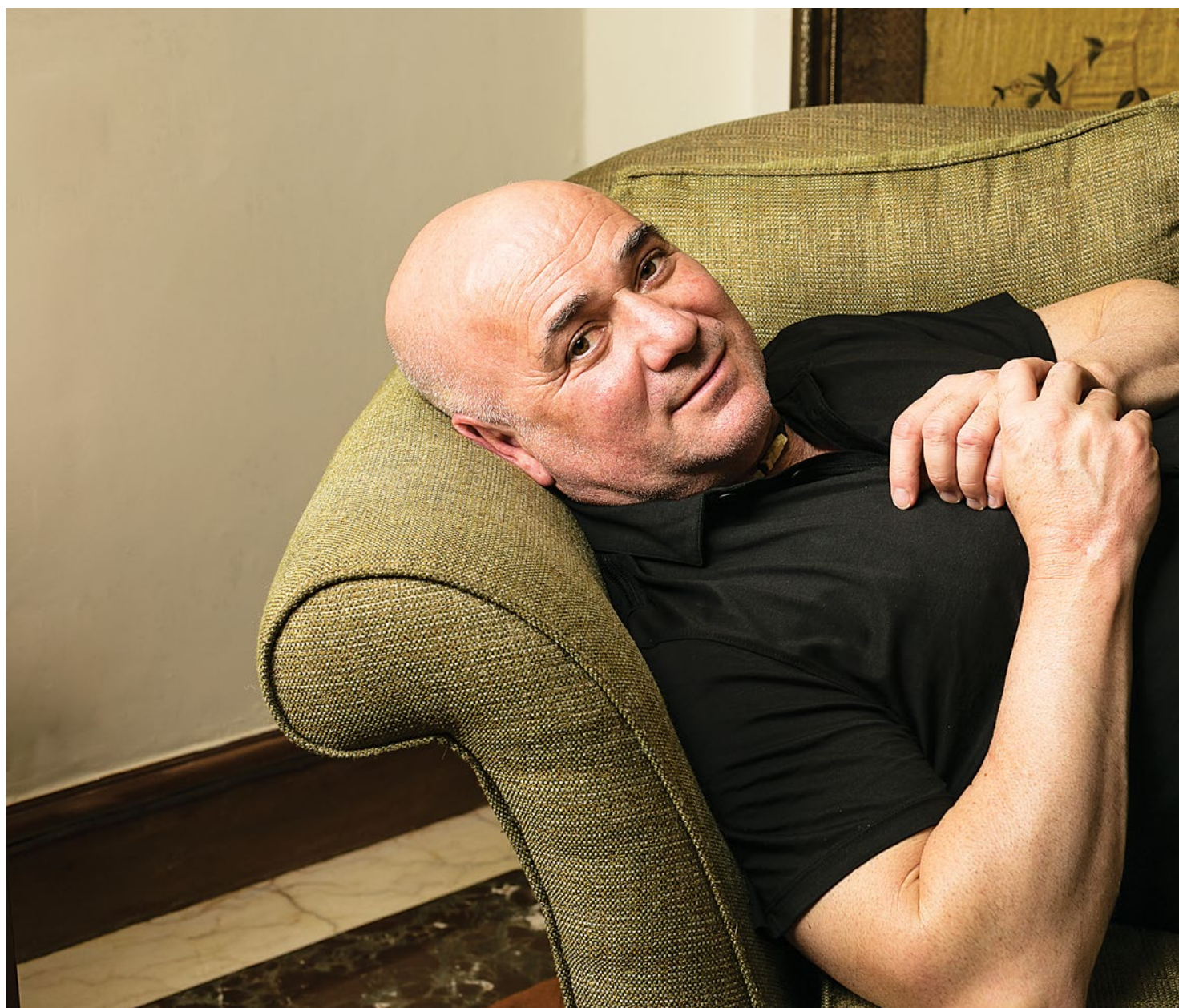
Federal prosecutors dismiss Brockman’s symptoms as an “amorphous malaise” and point to his lucid deposition testimony from 2019, as well as a lengthy memo he sent to Reynolds’s vice chairman in May 2020 foreshadowing an all-too-familiar behind-the-scenes role he was planning: “My intent is to work 4 or 5 more years helping teach the next generation everything I know about how to run the company efficiently.” <sup>P</sup>

• WITH REPORTING BY ANTOINE GARA

# YOUR EDUCATION SHOULDN'T BE TIED TO YOUR ZIP CODE: ANDRE AGASSI

*Tennis legend-turned-philanthropist on his ambitions to transform early-stage learning and bring about a generational change through technology-enabled education*

By KATHAKALI CHANDA AND NAINI THAKER



**A**ndre Agassi throws us off a bit when he asks if this is going to be a print story or video. As we fumble with a long-winded answer on it being both—multi-format journalism, you see—he stops us with a calming wave of the hand, “No no, it’s fine. Just that if you’re going to write during the interview, I won’t speak too fast.”

With a mentorish lilt in his tone, Agassi almost makes you forget his CV that boasts eight Grand Slams, an Olympic medal and a fake mane that had its own fan-following (but that’s another story). In the Zoom ‘classroom’ that we’re in, the 50-year-old is an education evangelist, expressing his



◀ Andre Agassi-led edtech startup Square Panda will invest \$50 mln in India over three years towards early-stage education

disappointment at a stagnant system while also plotting feverish attempts at rewiring it. “If I took you back 200 years and showed you a classroom, you’d know what it is, because that’s exactly how it is today,” he says. “I’m looking to change it.” As he segues from simple statistics to complex neuroscience research on early-stage learning, it’s clear that this is a man extremely comfortable in his skin, a far cry from the times when he held deep hatred for a game he excelled in.

21st century skilling is a subject that comes up often in the conversation and Agassi goes to great lengths to explain how he’s walking the talk at the 100+ charter schools he’s established across the US. “And that’s why I am in Delhi too,” says the largest stakeholder in edtech startup Square Panda, which facilitates early learning through artificial intelligence (AI). Also the chairman, Agassi announced during his short stay that the company is going to invest \$50 million over three years towards early-stage education for 5 million primary school children.

In a freewheeling conversation with *Forbes India*, the 50-year-old shared his insights on the education system, his effort to recalibrate it, and how the empty-nest syndrome is creeping upon him and his wife, German tennis legend Steffi Graf. Edited excerpts:

**Q You set up the Andre Agassi Foundation for Education way back in 1994 to focus on public education. What makes education a subject so close to your heart?**

Despite appearing to be successful at what I did as a tennis player, I lived a life very disconnected because it was never my choice to play tennis. The disruption led me to a breaking point where I was going to quit at a very early age. And then I demanded from myself that just because I couldn’t choose my life doesn’t mean I can’t take ownership of it. And I wanted to find my reason for playing, I wanted to find something bigger than me that I was still connected to. Then, I saw the show ‘60 Minutes’ in which two guys rolled up their sleeves and systemically changed the lives of children who had no choice [through the charter school system]. When you are in an impoverished neighbourhood, when you don’t have opportunities or equity in society, there is really no choice. I made it my mission that day to create a choice for kids through education. To me, that’s the future they’re choosing and that’s connected to the lack of choice and lack of education I fought in my life.

**Q Tell us a bit about the significant milestones for the Foundation. What have you achieved in 27 years?**

I started by helping children in need for the first four years of my Foundation and then I realised I was just sticking band-aid on a lot of issues; that's when I specifically focussed on education. End of the 90s and heading into the 2000s, I took a \$40 million mortgage and built my own charter school in the most economically-challenged area of Las Vegas; it was a K-12 school with 1,200 kids. And then I spent the rest of my career trying to pay for it and making it sustainable. During that process, I was quite frustrated, not because of the difficulties in educating these children, but that I had 1,200 kids in the school and 3,000 on the waiting list. That made me twice the failure of the success that I was. As a result, my mission was to figure out a way to scale it.

That's when a gentleman named Bobby Turner [real estate investor] stepped into my life. We got together sharing our passion and frustration in the public education space and put together a scalable, sustainable solution to expand the mission through the private sector. With the Turner-Agassi Charter School Facilities Fund, we have, in nine years, managed to build over 125 best-in-class charter schools across the US. My frustration with philanthropic work was that, while it feels really good, you are always aware of who you can't help. That doesn't feel so good at all. And it's also not incredibly scalable. Plus, waiting on governments is never an easy solution. So, we need to innovate and many of the stakeholders needed to come to the table to figure it out. That led me to the truth in social impact investing: If you can find the right metrics that work for equality and equity, and is also sustainable from a return on investment standpoint, you really have something that you can scale fast.

That being said, I realised that all the schools that I built shared one central sore spot—early childhood literacy and second-hand English learning. So many children in America don't speak English, but their beautiful native tongue, as their first language. While that should always be the case, learning English is the key to 21st century skills—it

changes the life trajectory of a child dramatically if they can cross the rubicon of going from learning to read to read to learn. That's what made me invest in Square Panda, an edtech company that deals with early-stage learning through its technology platform.

It was another milestone in my life when, six years ago, I was made keenly aware of the neuroscience that goes behind each individual brain, and that about 85 percent of the neurocircuitry develops at a really young age, between the ages of 2 and 8. I went to Stanford [University] and met with a neurospecialist, Bruce McCandliss, who showed me how they put electrodes on children's heads, like a shower cap, while they play or read or do some activity, and you can see the neuro-receptors firing on what's working and what's not. It makes you realise there's a topography going on inside every individual brain. That's why I believe technology can play a huge role in assisting teachers to be better at what they do, and also speed up a child's ability to learn and grow. We brought a great team together, created a game-based system that keeps a child engaged, but behind that is real PhD neuroscience that's constantly learning each child. You need that immediate feedback, you can't just test a child every three months to see how well they're doing.

**Q And with such learnings, how do you plan to create impact in future?**

For me, it's always about how many children I can reach. That's why I am in Delhi at the moment because Square Panda is an Indian company. I saw a huge need, there is a huge discrepancy, an economic divide in education. The quality of your education shouldn't be tied to your zip code. Here, I saw the most opportunity to impact more children. Don't get me wrong, we are in America as well, in the fifth largest school district in the country and expanding there. But the truth is this is about all our children. In India, the mother tongue is so crucial to maintain and to speak, but when you talk about 21st century skill, you can't ignore that learning English brings about a systemic change in generations. Where you are from and where you live should always be respected and we're very localised, but we need to assist teachers in learning how to teach it. We've run pilots throughout multiple places in India and, as a result, have strong relationships and rollouts happening in Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh, for example. I have dreams of impacting everybody, so when you ask me what's next, it's the next child.

**Q What made you invest in Square Panda?**

The founder Andy Butler came to me for my

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**"WHEN YOU ARE IN AN IMPOVERISHED NEIGHBOURHOOD, WHEN YOU DON'T HAVE OPPORTUNITIES OR EQUITY IN SOCIETY, THERE IS REALLY NO CHOICE. I MADE IT MY MISSION TO CREATE A CHOICE FOR KIDS THROUGH EDUCATION."**



experience in the education space and my obvious awareness of how we can balance philanthropic and for-profit work, and scalability and sustainability. I heard him and piloted it in my own schools. And when I saw the dramatic increase in speed of literacy—it raised the speed for the slowest learners by 30 percent and even the best learners by 7-10 percent—it compelled me to get involved.

**Q When you set up the fund with Bobby Turner in 2011, you leveraged commerce for philanthropy. There is a common perception that making money is antithetical to doing good. To you, how did the two meet?**

How do I choose so many ways that there are to refute that perception? You know what the number one teaching tool in the world is? It's YouTube. When my daughter wants to make something special for her parents, she goes to YouTube, follows videos and makes a beautiful dinner. On the other hand, a farmer with a broken tractor on an island in the South Pacific also goes to YouTube to fix it.

Businesses and technology and their interface with impact and humanity, if done right, is a tool to make a difference. If it was just about business then, God bless you, go work for a living. For me, it's

about how you impact as many children as possible.

Besides, look at the scalability it brings. It took me 15 years to build one school, it took me another 10 to build the next 125. That's 70,000-80,000 children. Mind you, lots of money has gone into building the technology, lots of philanthropic hearts have come together to recognise the need to raise and invest money to build an AI platform that has an ecosystem that lets you walk your child through to learn English, or even their literacy, as if you have a personalised PhD tutor. You want to talk about bridging the economic divide, technology is the only thing that creates the greatest equality. Politicians haven't been able to do it, redistribution of wealth hasn't done it.

When I was raising the fund, I spoke to a lot of wealthy companies and individuals. And they said we love what you are doing, but it doesn't have enough returns for us. If you go to my Foundation, on the other hand, they will also tell you that they love what I am doing, but that they're sorry they can't help me make money—they are charged with giving it away. So I'm like, wait a second, is there a possibility that the two groups can sit in a room and figure this out? What do you say that we come to a compromise here and really change the world?

▲ During his playing years, Andre Agassi set up a foundation to help children from underserved communities



“LIKE ANY GOOD BUSINESS, A GOOD MARRIAGE IS ONE THAT STAYS PRETTY NIMBLE TO THE SEASONS OF LIFE. LIFE REQUIRES YOU TO BE PARTNERS, SO YOU BET ON PEOPLE—I BET ON HER [WIFE STEFFI GRAF] AND SHE BET ON ME AND WE ARE GRATEFUL EVERY DAY FOR THAT.”

**Q How similar or different are the gaps in early-stage education and schooling in India and the US?**

In America, 66 percent of children don't read at the grade level by the fourth grade. A majority of those incarcerated in our country are illiterate. If a child can't read and process content, s/he is falling further and further behind. When I see India from my vantage point, I see that if a child knew 21st century skills of communication in English as well, they would move from a certain history of upbringing to possibly, say, interfacing with the tourists at a nice hotel being a concierge. That's life-changing, as then they're equipped to help their children. I don't claim to understand the landscape here from all parts of education, but I know one thing: No child is more important than another.

**Q How has the Covid-induced global shutdown affected education for the underserved?**

It's been a disaster. In the US, we take three months away from school in summer. When you watch a child come back from summer, they spend a month to two learning what they forgot. They call it the summer slide. Now you look at a year of schools being closed due to lockdown, and you have what I call the Covid slide. If a three-month break needs two months to get back, imagine what a year will do to you. I think we could lose a generation over it unless we figure out ways to speed the learning up.

**Q While remote schooling due to the pandemic has given wings to edtech, one flipside is that it excludes kids from underprivileged backgrounds. How can online learning be made more inclusive?**

A lot of people need to come to the table to solve this. You have to provide something that's incredibly affordable. You have to provide a level of efficacy that's helping them. You can call yourself an edtech company, but the question is what's really going on with the system—the back of house, the learnings, the neuroscience, how it's helping the teacher? If you go deep into what we do, it's powerful to take everything we've known at some of our greatest universities and finally have a distribution vehicle that can supply at a scale that it becomes incredibly affordable.

**Q Tennis legend vs education evangelist: Which is your favourite role and why?**

I mean it when I say I hated tennis with a dark and secret passion. If you read my autobiography, it's written on the first page. What was good about tennis? It taught me a lot, I got to meet a lot of people, but also the fact that when I was playing, I could impact people for a few hours. It felt very personal to me. That was one of the tools I used to prepare myself for the battle at hand, as I watched these people take time out of their lives to come and watch me. But what I am doing now is offering someone a break in life, I am giving life in one sense. It's not even close in my mind about what I value more or what interests me more.

**Q At 50, you have a chock-a-block schedule. How do you spend your downtime? Do you and [your wife] Steffi [Graf] still follow tennis closely?**

We follow it and I help people along the way. I like to stay engaged with the game. Tennis has given me the platform to live the life I am living now, and I try to respect it by staying connected to it. Like any good business, a good marriage is one that stays pretty nimble to the seasons of life. You're asking me about my life at a time when our son went away to college and our daughter is 17 now, and parents much older. Life requires you to be partners, so you bet on people—I bet on her and she bet on me, and we are grateful every day for that. We're going to have more time now as empty nest approaches, and you can already feel it a little bit. The only thing we are sure about is that we won't add any more animals to our life. We have three dogs, a hamster, a fish, a bunny, and two stray cats we've nurtured in our home. We have too many heartbeats going on in there. **F**



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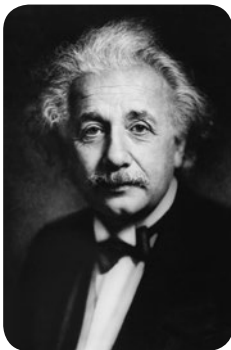
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The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity.

—**DOROTHY PARKER**

Education is a progressive discovery of our own ignorance.

—**WILL DURANT**



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It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer.

—**ALBERT EINSTEIN**

The illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read. It will be the person who does not know how to learn.

—**ALVIN TOFFLER**

Good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourth pure theatre.

—**GAIL GOODWIN**



Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.

—**OSCAR WILDE**

The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you.

—**BB KING**



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The only fence against the world is a thorough knowledge of it.

—**JOHN LOCKE**

Nine-tenths of education is encouragement.

—**ANATOLE FRANCE**

The mere imparting of information is not education.

—**CARTER G WOODSON**



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The highest result of education is tolerance.

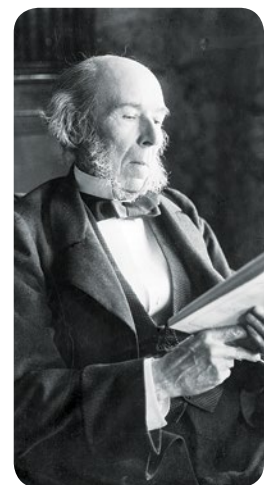
—**HELLEN KELLER**

Children have to be educated, but they have also to be left to educate themselves.

—**ERNEST DIMNET**

Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.

—**ROBERT FROST**



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The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.

—**HERBERT SPENCER**

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