

Entrepreneurs line up to experiment as the ed-tech sector gains popularity across India

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BENGALURU: Chirag Arya comes from a family of teachers. Now the Georgia Tech graduate is building a "digital classroom" called PaperVideo, which he launched a few months back.

There are big players in this space, including the unicorn Byju's that offers courses from kindergarten to class XII as well as for competitive exams. Another Bengaluru-based startup Vedantu, catering to middle and high school students, raised \$42 million in a funding round led by Tiger Global in August. Unacademy, which is also based in Bengaluru and focuses on competitive exams, had a \$50 million funding round in June.

But Arya feels there remains huge scope for entrepreneurs to experiment with new technology and design to make online learning more engaging and effective in such a massive, underserved market.

India has the largest population in the age group of five to 24, with 250 million school-going students, according to the India Brand Equity Foundation, a government trust.

The poor standard of school education, with a scarcity of good teachers, also makes a case for online resources. The Annual Status of Education report for 2018 found that three out of five eighth-graders in India struggle with simple math,



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such as subtraction.

One of the ways PaperVideo hopes to make a difference is by using machine learning to track a student's activity on the portal. "Technology can give actionable insights to students and teachers on skill gaps they need to close," explains Arya. "We can then create question sets, explanations and videos very quickly for concept-based learning."

DIFFERENTIATION IS KEY

Apart from adaptive learning, a key area for differentiation is the way that content is delivered to raise the engagement level of students, doing away with the force-feeding usually associated with study. "The concepts remain the same, but we've done a lot of A/B testing to see how to present them in a way that stu-

dents can relate to and retain," says Arya.

The need for online intervention has existed for a long time in India, but it's in the last two years that edtech has scaled up. This is reflected in the \$1.1 billion that edtech startups in India raised in 2018 and 2019, compared to a little over half a billion dollars in the previous three years, according to data from Tracxn. One of the main reasons for the uptick is internet penetration.

"Due to the Jio effect, a large number of people are now on the internet. That has made it more feasible for edtech companies to scale than in the past," says Rutvik Doshi, managing director of VC firm Inventus. An Inventus portfolio startup, Funtoot, which provides online tutorials for personalised learning in science and

maths, recently got acquired by Mumbai-based Embibe, which was itself acquired last year by Reliance. The Mukesh Ambani conglomerate had committed an investment of \$180 million to scale up Embibe, and its acquisitions are a part of that effort.

Most of the edtech tools in India are outcome-oriented to improve grades, crack exams or get certifications. Doshi sees that as a natural offshoot of the market.

"Your marks in school determine where you will do college, and your marks in college decide what kind of job you end up doing. That part of India is unlikely to change in the near future. So the primary focus of any kind of intervention has to be outcome-driven for mass-scale adoption," says Doshi.

Where the differentiation

comes is in the nature of intervention. Polish edtech startup Brainly, for example, claims that 20 million of its 150 million users are in India within a year of its launch in this country. It's a crowd-sourced platform where students and teachers post questions and get answers. Like many other edtech startups, it uses a freemium model where paying users get special features or freedom from ads.

FINDING TAKERS ABROAD

The reverse is also happening, where Indian startups find takers abroad for edtech tools in tune with holistic learning. Bengaluru-based Quizizz, for example, finds that the largest number of adopters of its multiplayer quiz game is in US middle schools.

Gurugram-based Studypath has a game-based learning product called Splash Math for kids in kindergarten to grade 5. It claims to be the fastest-growing elementary math programme in the US with a presence in 77,000 schools.

Another emerging area is corporate training. MindTickle, which had a \$40 million funding round in July, doubled its revenue this year by notching up clients like Ola, Cloudera, and MongoDB. Its platform coaches sales reps with simulated scenarios and gamified lessons.

Edtech has proved to be a slippery slope for entrepreneurs in the past, but 2020 may offer a vision of new horizons.