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INDIA Forbes



30
UNDER
30

Meet the young innovators and performers who are making a difference

Yashasvi Jaiswal, cricketer



Welcome to the

Forbes^{INDIA}

Digital Edition

Forever Young

This is my eighth 30 under 30 list with *Forbes India*. Which would mean I have overseen some 240 of the youngest and brightest outperformers within the country. Many of them—who by now have breached the 30 rubicon—have gone on to justify their early recognition with bigger triumphs.

This is a 30 under 30 edition, and the average age of the *Forbes India* team would be in the mid-30s. But can the young turks on the list (and those from within who teamed up to compile it) do it all without a pinch of veteran stock in their teams? It's a question pertinent to teams everywhere—startups, conglomerate top managements, sports.

The young bring in the energy, the change-the-rules-if-they-don't-work-for-us mindset, the penchant for risk and adventure. The accomplished carry the well-earned baggage of skill and experience.

Both can go wrong and fail.

Youth is of little use with no purpose and destination, haughtily hurtling along through the journey. Experience is counterproductive if the masters of the game think they know it all, looking down with disdain on the bundles of energy that enter the system; they will never know it all and will never have done it all.

Under 30 is a great road to be on, 30 is a good milestone to hit, as can be many landmarks after 30, as long as there's road ahead, the wheels are moving and there's fuel in the tank.

The *Forbes India* 30 under 30 winner in the health care category is a co-founder who combined her passion with experience from within the family. The father-daughter duo of Abhi Gholap and Devika Gholap, founder and co-founder respectively of OptraScan, is on a mission to replace microscopes with digital

pathology scanners in the fight against cancer.

Gholap senior is directing his knowhow in the global biomedical and life sciences software industry—with stints in the United States with the likes of Siemens Medical Systems and CedarTech—to build a digital health care system. Devika has been earning her spurs at the intersection of health care and investing, with roles in venture capital as well a health care investment analyst before joining up with her father at OptraScan.

OptraScan's current focus is on cancers such as breast, prostate, lung and cervical. But, as Devika tells *Forbes India*'s Manu Balachandran, "this is just the beginning and there are so many more cancers to work upon."

Spacetechnology, which is represented on the 30 under 30 list by Digantara Research's Founder & CEO Anirudh Sharma, is another example of a unique blend of enthusiasm of youth and vision of the veterans. The latter is courtesy of the brilliant minds at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Rajan Anandan, MD at Peak XV patterns, one of Digantara's biggest backers, tells *Forbes India*'s Harichandan Arakali: "Without ISRO we would not have a space sector. They developed this talent base over decades... Today we have some very young spacetechnology founders, too."

The *Forbes India* 30 under 30 class of 2025 comprises achievers from 19 categories, from enterprise technology and clean energy to agritech and design. Artificial intelligence, which holds out the promise of solving so many problems and changing millions of lives, makes its debut on the list.

This issue is about the roaring 20s—the time to, as the song goes, 'set the world on fire and 'burn brighter than the sun'. Then again, as Neil Young crooned decades ago for another generation: "It's better to burn out than it is to rust." Keep the intensity and passion going—growing up, or growing old, it's all about growing.



Brian Carvalho
Editor, *Forbes India*

brian.carvalho@nw18.com

Best,

STORIES TO LOOK OUT FOR



▲ (From left): Devika Gholap, co-founder, OptraScan; Anirudh Sharma, founder and CEO, Digantara Research and Technologies

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STYLED BY LEHAN DEVADHIA, ASSISTED BY ASMITA BHOSLE, MAKEUP AND HAIR: SANAH KEWAL

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Devan Chandrasekharan, founder & managing director, Fuselage Innovations



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Brinda Dudhat, co-founder, Morii Design



Aparna Balamurali, actor



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Marg, Worli, Mumbai, Maharashtra - 400018.

Tel: 022 68881803/04.

National Capital Region - Network18 Media &

Investments Limited, Tower 'E', Floor No. 18,

SkymarkOne, Sector 98, Plot No. H-10/A, Noida,

Gautam Buddha Nagar, Uttar Pradesh - 201301.

Tel: 0120 6401500.

Bengaluru - Network18 Media & Investments

Limited, 4th Floor, No.1/14, Unity Building Complex,

Silver Jubilee Block, 3rd Cross, Mission Road,

Bengaluru, Karnataka-560027 Tel: 080-35342001

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DLF Cyber City, Block B, Building No. 9, 7th Floor,

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Focus on India Expansion

Romita Mazumdar, founder of Foxtale, on the partnership with KOSE Corporation, growth drivers for the brand, and more **P/10**

The Future of Work

A World Economic Forum report says 170 million new jobs will be created by 2030, but 92 million to be displaced **P/12**

DRAFT RULES

Digital Data Protection: Vague and Unclear

Despite a 16-and-a-half-month wait for these rules, experts have criticised them

ON JANUARY 3, THE MINISTRY

of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) published the long-awaited Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025. They were eagerly anticipated since the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, was passed in Parliament on August 11, 2023.

These draft rules seek to protect citizens' rights in accordance with the DPDP Act, while achieving the right balance between regulation and innovation, so that the benefits of India's growing innovation ecosystem are "available to all citizens and India's digital economy", according to the Press Information Bureau press release.

They provide some clarity on, among others, how data fiduciaries should comply with certain requirements, registration and obligations of consent managers, processing of personal data by the state for subsidies, personal data breaches and details of the data retention period by data fiduciaries.

One of the more important inclusions is the creation of the Data Protection Board (DPB), an adjudicatory independent body that facilitates complaints resolution and thereby enhances transparency and



accountability. "This measure can be used to ensure data privacy has a magnified approach where each case is treated independently," explains Shrivishtha Ajaykumar, associate fellow, Centre for Security, Strategy and Technology, Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

Ironically, there is no mention of the word 'privacy' in the Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules or The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, published in The Gazette

of India. "In fact, the word 'privacy' appeared only once in the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill, 2023... which is also where it's repealing a section of the Right to Information Act," says Prateek Waghre, technology policy researcher.

Despite the 16-and-a-half-month wait, experts have criticised the rules for being "vague" and "lacking clarity". "The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, had a lot of shortcomings," explains Waghre.

The Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules are the mechanism to enforce the provisions of the DPDP Act, 2023. “We have seen the trend continue, and there are a lot of things that were in the Act, that have remained a question mark in the rules. So, it hasn’t succeeded in clarifying a lot of things,” he adds.

However, in an interview with CNBC TV18, Ashwini Vaishnaw, the minister for MeitY, clarified that this approach was intentional. “We have made sure that the rules are not prescriptive, because digital technology doesn’t stand... it evolves every week,” he said. Vaishnaw is confident that, with these draft rules, we have a good framework that continues to encourage innovation.

However, industry stakeholders believe there are areas that need further clarification and deliberation.

The Draft DPDP rules indicate there will be categories of data for which it is mandatory to process and store in India and where transfer outside India is only permissible under certain conditions.

“Larger companies have made efforts on both ends to ensure data can be localised without sharing data with the government and to allow cross-border data and easy flow of data. The rules currently mandate a government prerogative on which data can cross borders,” states Ajaykumar. The rules do not contain an absolute prohibition of data transfer, and there is still room for some discretion by the government.

The objective of data localisation is to provide the Indian government with more control over Indian citizens’ private data, enhance national security protections, “and provide accountability for the use of Indian citizens’ data by foreign entities. However, this does not address the question of government access and how certain companies may not want to share data with the government. There is a risk of losing international business, similar to what happened with Mastercard

here, if not adequately addressed,” she explains.

Mastercard was barred from onboarding new customers in July 2021 for failing to comply with the Reserve Bank of India’s data localisation norms issued in April 2018. This led to Mastercard losing a lot of business.

However, this might lead to both opportunities and challenges for the data centre business in India. First, an increase in demand for local data storage might lead to a substantial expansion of the data centre industry in India. However, reckons Ajaykumar, “scaling the infrastructure to cope with this demand has its cost in the form of investment in data centre infrastructure, security, ongoing maintenance, even climate impact and water access”.

Rule 7 of the draft rules addresses the notification of personal data breaches—“without delay, a description of the breach, including its nature, extent, timing and location of occurrence and the likely impact” are to be notified, within ‘72 hours of becoming aware of the same.’

“It is yet to be seen how companies will implement mechanisms to comply with some of the more impractical aspects such as the 72-hour timeline to provide detailed breach-related information to the DPB; and data localisation obligations,” says Probir Roy Chowdhury, partner, JSA Advocates & Solicitors.

“The proposed timelines for a data breach notification are similar to what other prominent data privacy laws such as GDPR have. The only way to adhere to such a timeline is to have a robust data breach notification procedure in place which can be integrated with your security operation control management system and data loss

prevention techniques,” says Vikas Bansal, partner, IT risk advisory and assurance, BDO India.

Hence, a better way to go about it would be establishing a one-stop reporting portal. “A unified reporting mechanism could streamline and centralise the process. This approach would minimise administrative burdens and enable companies to concentrate on effectively mitigating the breach,” explains Devroop Dhar, co-founder & managing director, Primus Partners.

The draft rules specify that parents’ verifiable consent will have to be obtained by social media or online platforms before children can create any account. “The challenge

with this is you could create a situation where you could age-gate the entire internet. What is the only effective way of verifying that someone is a minor or not? To do that you have to verify someone who isn’t a child, which means you have to do this to everyone. There is still a lack of clarity on such clauses,” explains Waghre.

Additionally, parents’ identity and age will also have to be validated and verified through voluntarily provided identity proof, as per the draft rules. Entities will be able to use and process personal data only if individuals have given their consent to consent managers, which will be entities entrusted to manage records of consents of people.

“Maintaining consent artefacts and offering the option to withdraw consent for specific purposes could necessitate changes at the design and architecture level of applications and platforms. Further, organisations will need to invest in both technical infrastructure and processes to meet these requirements effectively,” says Mayuran Palanisamy, partner, Deloitte India.

Parents’ verifiable consent must be obtained by social media or online platforms before children can create any account

INTERVIEW

‘Foxtale Will Focus on India Expansion’

Romita Mazumdar, who founded Foxtale in 2021 on the partnership with KOSÉ Corporation, growth drivers for the brand, and more

SKINCARE BRAND FOXTALE IN early January announced that it has raised \$30 million (approximately ₹250 crore) in its Series C funding round. The round saw the participation from Japanese cosmetics and skincare manufacturer KOSÉ Corporation, along with Panthera Growth Partners, Z47 and Kae Capital. The company has also forged a strategic partnership with

KOSÉ Corporation to enhance the global beauty leader’s footprint in India.

Founded in 2021 by Romita Mazumdar, Foxtale uses modern science and technology to create innovative skincare products. Along with KOSÉ Corporation, Foxtale will look to expand and elevate the R&D process for further innovation, focus on quality and

enhance product efficacy and elevate self-care experiences.

“This funding by KOSÉ Corporation will enable us to scale faster, innovate deeper, and bring effective and accessible skincare to even more people across India. Beyond growth, this partnership also marks a step towards fostering stronger global relations, blending international expertise with local



Romita Mazumdar, founder, Foxtale

NEHA MITHANKAR FOR FORBES INDIA



insights,” Mazumdar tells *Forbes India* in an interview.

The funds from the fresh fund raise will be directed towards deepening its footprint in existing markets and strengthening its R&D capabilities to drive continuous product innovation in efficacious skincare formulations. However, Foxtale is planning to focus on Indian expansion and not look at global markets, at present.

Mazumdar says, “My vision is to grow Foxtale into a ₹1,000 crore company, up from the current ₹300 crore-plus in gross revenue.” The company claims to have achieved 150 percent growth in FY25, more than doubling last year’s revenue, driven by its strong focus on D2C through its website. In a conversation with *Forbes India*, Mazumdar talks about how the partnership with KOSÉ Corporation came about, growth drivers for Foxtale, expansion plans and more. Edited excerpts:

Q How did the strategic partnership with KOSÉ Corporation come about?

We’ve been in discussions for a few months now, and I couldn’t be more thrilled about this partnership apart from our Series C funding. For me, research and development have always been the foundation of what Foxtale stands for—efficacy and high-quality products.

KOSÉ Corporation has been in the beauty industry for nearly 80 years, and their brands and products are globally recognised as some of the best. I had the privilege of visiting their R&D lab, and it was nothing short of extraordinary. It’s one of the best in the world, equipped with cutting-edge technology and driven by a relentless pursuit of innovation.

This partnership is a significant step forward for both of us—while KOSÉ brings unparalleled expertise and technological advancements, Foxtale contributes a deep understanding of the Indian market and its unique skincare needs. Together, we aim to not only create

innovative, high-quality products for Indian consumers but also play a key role in building KOSÉ’s presence in India.

Q What have been some key growth drivers for Foxtale in the last couple of years?

First, high-quality products. We spend a year in R&D before launching any product, which allows us to cater specifically to the needs of Indian consumers. All four products we initially launched continue to be our best-sellers and have a repeat of 70 percent-plus for each product.

Second, in any consumer-focussed company, business execution plays a crucial role. While product quality is our strength, our team is our key differentiator. We have a team that operates with rigour, focus, and ownership.

Q What are you hoping to learn from your partners, KOSÉ?

Through this partnership, we’re looking to deepen our understanding of advanced skincare formulations and cutting-edge R&D practices. KOSÉ’s expertise in innovation and their approach to creating globally acclaimed products are invaluable. Additionally, their experience in scaling high-quality skincare brands internationally will help us refine our strategies as we continue to bring world-class skincare solutions to the Indian market.

Q What are your expansion plans with this latest round of fund raise?

With this latest round of funding, we plan to invest heavily in R&D to develop advanced technologies that address the unique needs of Indian skin types. While we primarily focus on skincare, we recently ventured into the body care category, which has been extremely profitable. We do have plans to expand into a few more categories in the coming years.

• NAINI THAKER

Forbes India Crossword No. 21

BY MANGESH GHOGRE

Solve a customised puzzle that holds clues from the worlds of Indian business and culture, themed around this fortnight’s magazine. This issue’s theme is 30 Under 30

			1	2	3
	4	5			
6					
7					
8					

ACROSS

- 1. Pilfer
- 4. “I’m well ____”
- 6. Visual Artist and Forbes India 30U30 featured Khyati ____
- 7. Football champion Chhetri
- 8. One in a picnic buffet line?

DOWN

- 1. Fashionista and Forbes India 30U30 featured ____ Chadda
- 2. Like some birth control
- 3. “Kumbalangi Nights” actor and Forbes India 30U30 featured Anna ____
- 4. Forbes India 30U30 featured ____ George of Genrobotics
- 5. “What ____ wrong?”
- 6. Master key holder for luggage locks (abbr.)

			T	N	A
	L	I	N	U	S
N	A	H	E	R	T
E	R	A	W	A	
B	O	R			

Mangesh Ghogre is the first Indian to have constructed crosswords for The New York Times. A Mumbai-bred investment banker, Ghogre recently moved to the US on an Einstein visa, acquired for his crossword skills. He will be making bespoke crossword puzzles for Forbes India, which can be solved in under five minutes.

EMPLOYMENT

The Future of Work

A World Economic Forum report says 170 million new jobs will be created by 2030, but 92 million to be displaced

THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM in early January released its Future of Jobs Report 2025, which examines the effects of ongoing shifts in the global workforce. The report predicts that by 2030, 22 percent of jobs will be disrupted, resulting in the creation of 170 million new roles, while 92 million existing jobs will be displaced, yielding a net increase of 78 million positions. Key drivers of these transformations include technological advancements, demographic shifts, geo-economic tensions, and economic pressures, all of which are reshaping industries and professions globally.

Drawing on data from over 1,000 companies, the report says that

the skills gap remains the primary challenge to business transformation today. Nearly 40 percent of the skills required for jobs are expected to evolve, and 63 percent of employers already recognise the skills gap as a critical barrier to their success. In particular, technology skills in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and cybersecurity are anticipated to see significant growth in demand. Nonetheless, human-centric skills—including creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, and agility—will remain indispensable for success. As businesses adapt to an increasingly dynamic environment, a combination of both technical and human skills

will be essential to thrive in the future job market.

The report also identifies key sectors set for notable job growth, which include frontline roles in vital sectors such as health care and education that are projected to experience the highest demand by 2030. Simultaneously, advancements in AI and renewable energy are expected to drive increased demand for specialised technology roles. The reports suggest that as industries continue to evolve, the ability to adapt and engage in continuous reskilling will be crucial for both individuals and organisations to succeed in this rapidly changing landscape.

Technology skills in areas such as AI, big data and cybersecurity are anticipated to see significant growth in demand



10.2%

Youth (15-29) unemployment rate in the country, according to the Union labour minister



SHUTTERSTOCK

WHICH SECTORS WILL BE THE MOST AFFECTED?

By 2030, frontline roles such as farm workers, delivery drivers and construction workers are projected to experience the most significant growth in terms of job numbers. In addition, care professions, including nursing, and education roles, such as secondary school teachers, are also expected to see substantial demand increases. These trends are largely driven by demographic changes, particularly the ageing population in many regions, which is spurring growth in essential sectors like health care and education.

At the same time, advances in AI, robotics, and energy systems—especially in the fields of renewable energy and environmental engineering—are set to drive up demand for highly specialised roles in these areas. These technological innovations are reshaping industries and creating new career opportunities that require specific technical expertise.

However, certain roles are experiencing rapid decline. Positions such as cashiers and administrative assistants, which have long been essential, continue to diminish due to automation and AI advancements. In addition, graphic designers now face job displacement as generative AI tools begin to automate creative tasks, further transforming the landscape of the labour market. As the workforce adapts to these shifts, reskilling and upskilling will be crucial for workers to remain competitive in an increasingly automated world.

SKILLS GAP: A BIG WORRY

The skills gap remains the foremost challenge to business transformation in the context of global macro trends, with 63 percent of employers identifying it as the primary obstacle to future-proofing their operations. As industries adapt to rapid technological advancements

Top 10 Fastest Growing Skills by 2030



1. AI and big data

2. Networks and cybersecurity

3. Technological literacy

4. Creative thinking



5. Resilience, flexibility and agility

6. Curiosity and lifelong learning

7. Leadership and social influence

8. Talent management



9. Analytical thinking

10. Environmental stewardship

Note: The skills selected by surveyed organisations to be increasing most rapidly in importance by 2030

SOURCE World Economic Forum (2025), Future of Jobs Report 2025

and evolving economic pressures, the demand for new skills is increasing across the workforce. According to projections, if the global workforce were represented by a group of 100 individuals, 59 would need to undergo reskilling or upskilling by 2030 to meet the changing demands of the job market. However, of these 59 workers, 11 are expected to lack access to the necessary training and development opportunities. This equates to over 120 million workers worldwide who are at medium-term risk of redundancy, as their current skills may become obsolete in an increasingly automated and technology-driven labour market.

The skills gap not only represents a challenge for individual workers but also poses a significant threat to businesses seeking to maintain competitiveness and innovation. With the rapid pace of change in fields like AI, cybersecurity, and big data, organisations must prioritise strategic investments in employee development to ensure their workforce remains adaptable and equipped for the future. Additionally, efforts to bridge this gap will require collaboration among employers, governments and educational institutions, all of which must work together to create effective reskilling programmes and initiatives that

reach the workers most at risk. Failing to address this issue could result in significant disruption to the global labour market, with millions of workers facing unemployment or being left behind in the future economy.

OTHERS FACTORS DRIVING CHANGE IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Beyond skills, the rising cost of living is expected to significantly impact business models. While global inflation has somewhat eased, the report forecasts that price pressures and slower economic growth will result in the displacement of approximately six million jobs worldwide by 2030. As a result, there is a growing demand for resilience, agility, flexibility and creative thinking—skills that will be essential for individuals and organisations to navigate these economic challenges successfully.

In addition to economic factors, demographic shifts are playing a pivotal role in reshaping labour markets. The ageing populations in higher-income countries are driving an increased demand for health care roles, while in lower-income regions, the expansion of the working-age population is contributing to growth in the education sector. To address these changes, the report suggests,



LeaderBoard

businesses and governments will need to prioritise workforce strategies aimed at enhancing talent management, teaching and mentoring skills. These strategies will be crucial to bridge the gaps in supply and demand for skilled labour across different sectors and regions.

Geopolitical tensions, which are a growing concern for 34 percent of businesses globally, are another critical factor shaping the future of work. Alongside these, trade restrictions and shifts in industrial policy are altering global supply chains and influencing business operations. In response, many companies are exploring offshoring and reshoring strategies to adapt to changing trade dynamics. These geopolitical pressures are also driving an increased demand for specialised skills, particularly in cybersecurity, as organisations seek to safeguard their operations from emerging threats in a more uncertain global environment.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR INDIA?

According to Kamal Karanth, co-founder, Xpheno, a specialist staffing company, the report findings augur well for geographies like India that possess high talent density and demographic dividend. "The 78 million net new jobs projected is encouraging, especially when India is part of a small cohort of nations that would supply nearly two-thirds of new workforce entrants in the coming years. On the other hand, the job displacements and disruption through AI and technology also present potential opportunities to India."

Karanth believes that the services-centric tech powered jobs wave that India is known to ride well will give the country an edge in drawing a significant slice of displacement-linked job opportunities. "India has an early lead in the AI and GenAI space with a healthy enterprise buy-in and sponsor already in play. India is pitched to be ahead of global averages on parameters like AI

Employment Outlook

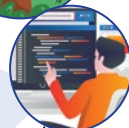
Biggest Growing Jobs

1. **Farmworkers, labourers and other agricultural workers**



2. Light truck or delivery services drivers

3. **Software and applications developers**



4. Building framers, finishers and other related trades workers

5. Shop salespersons

6. Food processing and related trade workers

7. Car, van,



motorcycle drivers

8. **Nursing professionals**

9. Food and beverage serving workers

10. General and operations managers

Largest Declining Jobs

1. **Cashiers and ticket clerks**



2. Administrative assistants and executive secretaries



3. **Building caretakers, cleaners and housekeepers**

4. Material-recording and stock-keeping clerks

5. Printing and related trades workers

6. Accounting, bookkeeping and payroll clerks



7. Accountants and auditors

8. Transportation attendants and conductors

9. **Security guards**

10. Bank tellers and related clerks

SOURCE World Economic Forum (2025), Future of Jobs Report 2025
Note: The jobs for which employment figures are expected to increase or decrease the most in real terms by 2030

exposure, DEI priorities, upskilling and redeployment by or before 2030. The lower-structured labour-market churn of 20 percent and 37 percent of talent not requiring training by 2030 are factors in favour. Overall the report is good news on many fronts for India's talent ecosystem," says Karanth.

NEED FOR CHANGE

The report suggests urgent and coordinated action from governments, businesses and educational institutions to address the profound shifts effectively. The priority among these is the need to bridge the skills gap, which can be achieved by heavily investing in reskilling and upskilling initiatives that empower workers to acquire the new competencies necessary for

emerging roles.

A key aspect of these efforts must include ensuring that workforce transitions are equitable and inclusive, providing all workers—regardless of their background, location or current skill level—with the tools and opportunities to succeed.

The report also suggests that governments and businesses should collaborate to provide social safety nets, job placement services, and ongoing learning opportunities that help individuals navigate changes in their careers. By prioritising these strategies, all stakeholders—governments, businesses, and educational institutions—can play a pivotal role in fostering a resilient and adaptable global workforce.

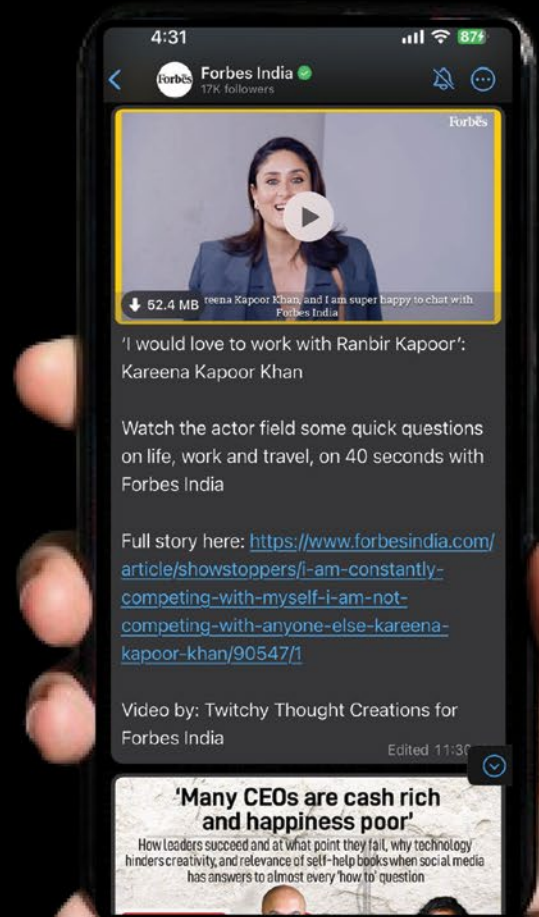
• SAMIDHA JAIN



FOLLOW THE ONE WHO

BRING TECH & LIFESTYLE TRENDS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

SCAN TO FOLLOW



UNDER

30
30

16

An Ode ^{to} Talent

The 30 Under 30 2025 list has people who dare to dream and will remind generations to come that the future belongs to those who believe in the power of possibilities

By ANUBHUTI MATTA

30 UNDER 30 LISTEES

AGRITECH

Devan Chandrasekharan, 28
Founder & managing director,
Fuselage Innovations

ART

Rabiul Khan, 27
Artist

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Rajat Arya, 28
Founder and CEO, 169Pi.ai
Chirag Arya, 24
COO, 169Pi.ai

B2B

Deepak Meena, 25
Co-founder and CEO, Flyzy

Arjit Singh, 26
Co-founder and COO
Hansraj Patel, 25
Co-founder and CTO

CLEAN ENERGY & CLIMATE CHANGE

Abhinav Shekhar Vashistha, 29
Co-founder and CTO, WeVOIS Labs Pvt Ltd

DESIGN & ARCHITECTURE

Brinda Dudhat, 29
Co-founder, Morii Design
Simoul Alva, 29
Visual Design Lead, Ripple

DIGITAL CONTENT CREATORS

Kavya Karnatac, 27
Founder, KK Create
Prakhar Gupta, 28
Podcaster

ECOMMERCE, RETAIL & CONSUMER TECH

Pallav Bihani, 29
Founder, Boldfit

Aniket Shah, 25
Founder, Swish
Ujjwal Sukheja, 24
Saran S, 24
Co-founders, Swish

Anshita Mehrotra, 25
Founder, Fix my curls

EDUCATION

Neelakantha Bhanu, 25
Founder & CEO, Bhanzu
Devulapalli Lakshmi Prachotan, 25
Co-founder, head of business development
Alluru Uday Kiran, 26
Co-founder, head of operations
Jonnalagadda Sai Krishnakanth, 27
Co-founder, head of research and development

From building businesses to addressing pressing needs to ditching high-paying jobs, meet the winners of Forbes India 30 Under 30 2025, a class full of performers who are a mix of tech innovators, health care mavericks, financial wizards, and more.

Now, in its 12th year, *Forbes India's* annual and most-awaited list has winners across 19 categories, including the newly added Artificial Intelligence.

The cohort of winners has not only launched disruptive businesses all under the age of 30, but also focussed on creating social impact through ventures that address societal issues, sustainability and community development. They are a mix of dynamic entrepreneurs, professionals, sportspersons, influencers, and creative artistes in music, film and visual arts.

We're talking of winners who've built an Internet-of-Things-enabled door-to-door smart waste collection facility for urban areas and a 25-year-old who makes maths fun to dispel the fears around the subject. We

have three friends and former roommates who went on to launch a restaurant in Mumbai where diners meet farmers to learn about the ingredients they are consuming, and the challenges faced in growing them.

Talk of the resilience the winners possess, and a 12-year-old who saw most of his family wealth lost to the 2008 financial crisis ended up becoming the youngest vice president at 27 at Bain Capital Private Equity, an investment firm.

The Forbes India 30 Under 30 is a 300-plus group of names and people we recognised before the world did.

Take 2024 sports winner Jyothi Yarraji, for instance. Last year, she became the first woman athlete to represent India in 100 m hurdles in the Olympics. Known as the country's fastest hurdler, she will be raring to go in 2025, having rubbed shoulders with the world's best at the Paris Games. The 25-year-old has received the Arjuna Award this year. Another winner, Parul Chaudhary, was also the only Indian track and field athlete to qualify for two events in the Paris Olympic Games—the 5,000 m and the 3,000

m steeplechase. For 2025, her sole focus lies on earning a podium finish at the World Championships.

Anushka Rathod, a winner in the digital content creator category, published her first book, *The Money Guide*, a graphic novel in 2024. She was also recognised in Forbes Asia's 30 Under 30 Media, Marketing and Advertising category.

Former finance winner in 2024, Seethalakshmy Narayanan, the youngest-ever vice president at Premji Invest in its 17-year history, led a \$25 million (nearly ₹265 crore) deal for wealth management firm Dezerv.

"In the private equity world, the average age of a vice president is around 35 to 38, a younger performer is perceived as being less experienced. Being a part of the list helped a lot in bridging that gap positively. Startup founders have been a lot more open to discuss deals," she says.

Here's to those who dare to dream, and will remind the generations to come that the future belongs to those who believe in the power of possibilities.

METHODOLOGY

The research process was three-fold: One was interviews by the *Forbes India* team with sources across relevant categories as well as through studies of databases and media coverage. Two, on forbesindia.com, inviting applications from, or nominations of, entrepreneurs and professionals who fit the criteria. Three, spreading the word on social media. This helped us arrive at a long list across 19 categories, including a new one—artificial intelligence—this year. The next step was narrowing down to a 'shorter longlist'—the names most likely to make it

to the top were decided in consultation with experts in each category. The last stage was finalising the winners for 2025. Armed with expert views, the *Forbes India* editorial team debated, argued, and vetoed its way down to the final list from close to a thousand nominations. We have only considered for selection those who were under the age of 30 as of February 28, 2025 (the cut-off date for selection of the list). And, in the case of enterprises that have several co-founders, we have considered only those where at least one of them is under 30.

ENTERPRISE TECHNOLOGY

Anirudh Sharma, 26
Founder and CEO, Digantara Research and Technologies

ENTERTAINMENT

Aparna Balamurali, 29
Actor

Rohit Saraf, 28
Actor

FASHION

Khushi Shah, 25
Creative director & co-founder, Shanti Banaras

Nancy Tyagi, 21
Fashion designer and content creator

FINANCE

Anant Mohta, 28
VP, Bain Capital Private Equity

Rajit Uboweja, 29
Partner, Stride Ventures

FOOD & HOSPITALITY

Raghav Simha, 27
Co-founder-operations head, Project Hum

Pragun Bajaj, 28
Co-founder-kitchen operations, Project Hum

Jatin Talreja, 27
Co-founder-business, Project Hum

HEALTH CARE

Devika Gholap, 27
Co-founder and chief product officer, OptraScan

Siddhant Dangi & Deepansh Goyal, 25, 26
Co-founder & CEO, co-founder & CTO, Nexstem

INDUSTRY AND MANUFACTURING

Divanshu Kumar, 28
CEO and co-founder, Solinas Integrity

MUSIC

Karan Kanchan, 27
Artist & entrepreneur

NGOS AND SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Rishabh Suri, 28
Co-founder & CEO, quadrat

Soumya Dabriwal, 29
Aradhana Rai Gupta, 29
Co-founders, Project Baala

SPORTS

D Gukesh, 18
Chess player

Preethi Pal, 24
Para athlete

Yashasvi Jaiswal, 23
Cricketer



Drone Deal

Ambika Chandrasekharan, a farmer from Kerala's Alappuzha district, endured tremendous hardships in the aftermath of the catastrophic floods of 2017-18. The flooding wreaked havoc in the region, severely depleting the soil's nutrient levels and causing substantial losses in crop yields.

Around the same time, her son Devan had completed his graduation in aeronautical engineering. In the hope to help his family farm land, he says, "I tried using drones for crop prescription, as per plant characteristics, instead of focusing on soil testing." After a couple of successful trials, driven by the need to address these problems and ensure immediate solutions for farmers, along with his sister Devika, he started Fuselage in 2020.

The startup specialises in the development of technologies based on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV). Internet of Things and artificial intelligence. It addresses critical challenges across multiple sectors, including post-natural disaster management, especially for farmers, along with infrastructure monitoring, and environmental conservation. "We also help farmers increase efficiency and sustainability by deploying the most advanced solution for mapping and diagnostics of farmland through dedicated UAVs/drones," explains Devan.

The company has introduced two solutions so far—the FIA QD10



Devan Chandrasekharan (28)

Founder & managing director, Fuselage Innovations

“We help farmers increase efficiency by deploying advanced solution for mapping & diagnostics of farmland.”

and Nireeksh drones. The DGCA-certified FIA QD10 drone, with its precision spraying capabilities, has been instrumental in improving crop health and managing pests effectively. The Nireeksh surveillance drone provides detailed crop monitoring and vegetative analysis through its multispectral sensors, allowing for informed



decision-making. “Fuselage has strong hardware capabilities in the drone space. The model and product have been validated by multiple incubators and organisations,” says Hemendra Mathur, venture partner-Bharat Innovation Fund, and co-founder, ThinkAg.

In the early days, the duo faced significant challenges, especially in terms of funding and infrastructure. “I approached numerous angel investors and venture capitalists, but many rejected our proposals, citing the lack of a robust support ecosystem for hardware startups,” reckons Devan. Eventually, he turned to banks and secured a ₹7.5 lakh loan. Last year he says, “we achieved a remarkable milestone—a turnover of ₹5 crore”. Fuselage Innovations has set up operations at Maker Village in Kochi—India’s largest electronic incubator facility.

Another ongoing challenge, he says, is, “creating opportunities to implement our technology

within existing ecosystems. A persistent gap remains, often stemming from traditional mindsets. For example, despite our drones meeting all Directorate General of Civil Aviation and Government of India certifications, they are frequently overlooked in state government schemes”.

The impact of using Fuselage’s solutions has been incredible. By integrating these drones into their operations, farmers have reported up to 30 percent increase in crop production and 70 percent reduction in crop management costs. Going forward, he hopes to continue scaling further and find innovative solutions for issues such as soil quality and water scarcity.

- Naini Thaker



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:
Naini Thaker & Monica Bathija |
JURY: **Hemendra Mathur**, venture partner-Bharat Innovation Fund and co-founder, ThinkAg; **Mark Kahn**, managing partner, Omnivore

Art That Asks Questions, Starts Dialogue

Rabiul Khan was born in Adampur village of the Birbhum district of West Bengal, in a family that was involved in the coal mining business. “When most people think of Birbhum, they associate it with Santiniketan, and all things cultural,” he says. “However, there has always been, what I call, a ‘camouflaged gun culture.’” It is this everyday violence and uncertainty that Khan’s father wanted to leave behind, and moved his family to the city of Dubrajpur, so that they could get access to better education.

Once in school, Khan’s artistic skills caught the attention of his teachers, who suggested that he take art classes from teachers around Santiniketan, which he did. Eventually, Khan would go on to complete his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in fine arts from Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati University, and has now established a collective, called Gabaa, along with his like-minded friends from college. He has received the Inlaks Fine Art Award in 2023 and the Prince Claus Fund Seed Award in 2024.

“We have tried to establish an interdisciplinary and researched-based practice at the collective,” says Khan. “There is a lot of conventional studio-based practice such as painting, sculpture and ceramics going on at the university here, but there were no new or research-based studios. Even while studying for my bachelor’s degree during the

Covid-19 lockdowns, I wanted to establish a space where we could incorporate such a practice. Four of us have acquired a space, which was funded by my father, where we are inviting and conversing with young artists with a new mindset to develop issue-based projects, which may be community-centric or a reinterpretation of history.”

Khan works with site-specific installations, with an effort to uphold the history of the site and generate political, social and domestic conversations that can create mutual learnings between the artists and the community; it becomes a temporary pedagogical site. “We try to ask provoking questions, because I feel we don’t ask enough questions anymore,” he explains. For instance, his research revealed that his ancestors were of Afghan origin, who have been, for centuries, systematically used by the authorities—be it the nawabs of Bengal, the subsequent British administration or the politicians of independent India—to instill violence among local people. This gave rise to his project ‘Amar Birbhum’ (My Birbhum) at Kala Bhavan

during his master’s degree, which highlighted how his perception of his land and people is very different from that of most others.

As part of his Inlaks Award residency in Mumbai, he created a project called ‘Bombay kiska hai?’ (Who does Bombay belong to?). “Everyone wants to take ownership of Bombay. I worked with the women of Koli community who are involved in fishing, created a meeting space for people of upper and lower classes, to discuss the history of the city.”

“Rabiul has always been interested in trying to work in a process-based practice, which interfaces with his own personal dialogue around his environment and lifestyle he comes from, and he has tried to interface it between the private and public situation. He has tried to explore the relationship between different kinds of spaces. He doesn’t keep things within a frame, and engages with the idea of material as a parallel memory, as a surface, as a situation,” says Sanchayan Ghosh, associate professor in the department of painting at Kala Bhavan.

— Jasodhara Banerjee

“We ask provoking questions, because I feel we don’t ask enough questions anymore.”

Rabiul Khan (27)
Artist



WATCH OUT FOR



**SALMAN BASHIR
BABA, 29**
Artist

Baba, who hails from Budgam in Kashmir, has done his bachelor's from Jamia Milia Islamia University and his master's degree from Ambedkar University. "I have been largely doing installations and performance arts, with Kashmir as an entry point into certain thematics," he says. He has been part of multiple residency programmes in India, and received the Inlaks Fine Arts Award in 2021. He has founded a collective in Kashmir for artists to come and engage in critical dialogues.



CATEGORY COORDINATOR:
Jasodhara Banerjee |
JURY: **Priyanka Raja**, co-founder, Experimenter Gallery;
Sanjana Shah, creative director, Tao Art Gallery

Artificial Intelligence

AI Innovation for Bharat

Rajat Arya and his younger brother Chirag Arya, co-founders of 169Pi AI, were keen observers of what was happening in the world of AI. They already had some experience in building a small software business, having developed a few blockchain solutions for customers in the US.

Events such as OpenAI's CEO Sam Altman visiting India, in 2023, and the controversy that followed from one of his statements over what it would take to build a large language model piqued the brothers' interest further. They started to look at how information about India was being portrayed in some of these models, and decided there was an opportunity to do something more desi, versus the West-oriented information on the internet.

That's what prompted them to start 169Pi about a year ago, Rajat recalls. The name of the startup is inspired by the square of the number 13 and the mathematical constant Pi, which is the ratio of the circumference of a circle and its diameter, he adds.

"We are focusing on small language models," Arya says. Computer scientists and engineers talk about software architectures that handle data in chunks of '64 bits' or '32 bits', he points out. The Arya brothers have built a model that represents pieces of data using only 1 bit per unit, which drastically reduces the compute power needed. The trade-off is in terms of accuracy and some other parameters, he explains.

Such solutions are still very useful for a variety of applications because they offer significantly more affordable options due to the much lower compute power needed.

An important early user for the Aryas is ISRO, India's space agency, which is testing out a PDF agent that 169Pi has created, Rajat says.

"They have tonnes of data which need to be structured. So we created a PDF agent for that. So, suppose you dump tens of thousands of files in our program, which we are giving them, it will structure the data with the help of AI," he says.

The program helps users generate tables, documents, charts and so on. And it can be integrated with other government agencies and departments, he adds.

"The PDF agent stands out by delivering streamlined, explainable AI responses that consistently outperform human capabilities across diverse knowledge-driven tasks," says a scientist with first-hand user experience of the AI software. The scientist didn't want to be named as he's not the official spokesperson of his organisation.

The potential exists to partner startups such as 169Pi to develop "Indian AI" models, the scientist adds.

169Pi's team of 11 is also developing solutions for the education sector. They are using NCERT textbooks and data to create education material for a handful of state-run schools in Bihar, and Arya hopes that it can be expanded to many more schools.

- Harichandan Arakali



Rajat Arya (28)

Founder and CEO, 169Pi.ai

Chirag Arya (24)

COO, 169Pi.ai

There're software architectures that handle data in chunks of '64 bits' or '32 bits'. They have built a model that represents pieces of data using only 1 bit per unit



WATCH OUT FOR



KUMAR AYUSH, 29
Research engineer, Google

A three-month internship as a student researcher at the Indian Institute of Science during his second year at college put Kumar Ayush on the path to becoming an expert in artificial intelligence. He won the best bachelor's thesis in his batch for his algorithm on 'retinal visual segmentation'—useful in medical imaging in identifying and analysing various structures within the retina. He went on to earn a master's and PhD from Stanford University. Ayush is now a research engineer at Google, focusing on the applications of AI research in healthcare and life sciences. He's previously also contributed to applications of computational imaging to some of the features in Google's Pixel phones.



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:
Harichandan Arakali | JURY: **Manav Garg**, founding partner, Together Fund; **Aneesh Reddy**, founder and CEO, Capillary Technologies

(From left) Chirag and Rajat Arya

B2B

Fly High

The pandemic turned out to be an equaliser. The Davids were thrilled, and the Goliaths felt grilled, and the pupils and maestros were seated beside each other. Deepak Meena explains. “All of us were at the start line,” says the 25-year-old engineer from IIT-Guwahati. Meena, along with his co-founders, Arijit Singh and Hansraj Patel, was pivoting his fledgling maiden venture during the fag end of the second wave of the pandemic in early 2022. In March 2020, just a few days before the Covid lockdown, the friends started Flyzy to digitise the airport experience. The pandemic tailwinds helped the trio, and the engineers developed a mobile app for safe and contactless air travel, and on-boarded over 10 airports. The greenhorns managed to find four angels and Flyzy became the talk of the town.

The devastating second wave of the pandemic, though, dealt a big blow. Flyzy faced monetisation issues, the co-founders ran out of money, and there was a pressing need to pivot. In May 2022, the founding team decided to sell air tickets. The task, however, was not easy. There were Goliaths: MakeMyTrip, Booking, Goibibo, Yatra and EaseMyTrip. But there was a silver lining: The pandemic. Battered by Covid, the travel industry was limping back to normalcy, OTA (online travel agencies) players were taking a

fresh guard, and the pandemic uncertainty still hampered all revival strategies. “Big, small, not-so-big, not-so-small... all of us were at the start line,” recounts Meena. “Let’s start selling tickets,” he exhorted his team.

The rookies set a modest target of ₹1 lakh. “We ended up doing a business of over ₹40 lakh in 20 days,” recounts Singh, who wanted to be an architect but ended up pursuing electronics engineering. “Perhaps I was the worst electronics engineer you would ever get to know... I realised this is not my calling,” he says. A few years later, came another realisation: A dominant chunk of tickets were bought by corporates. “They bought tickets worth ₹35 lakh. We found our mojo in B2B,” he says. For Patel, the third co-founder, this was indeed the ‘aha’ moment. A big fan of Iron Man movies, Patel always

wanted to build his Jarvis. “Flyzy was closest to Jarvis,” he smiles.

Fast forward to January 2025. Flyzy’s revenues have jumped from ₹6.8 crore in FY23 to ₹70.1 crore in FY24. It’s now clocking a run rate of ₹160 crore for FY25. “We are profitable and still without institutional funding,” claims Patel.

The early believers are excited about the growth trajectory. While companies are catering to the end-to-end travel solution for the B2C

segment, when it comes to B2B, there is a significant gap, contends Subhrangshu Sanyal, CEO at IIM Calcutta Innovation Park. Flyzy raised \$150,000 from Balmer Lawrie and IIM-Calcutta in early 2022. “Flyzy has understood the pain point and come up with a solution that has found a product market fit,” he adds.

The co-founders, for their part, have outlined their mission. “Our inspiration is OfBusiness, and we want to be a unicorn in profit, not valuation,” says Meena.

- Rajiv Singh



CATEGORY COORDINATOR: **Rajiv Singh** | JURY: **Niren Shah**, managing director and head, Norwest India; **Alok Goyal**, partner, Stellaris Venture Partners

(From left) Arjit Singh, Deepak Meena and Hansraj Patel

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Deepak Meena (25)

co-founder and CEO, Flyzy

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Arjit Singh (26)

co-founder and COO

|||||||
Hansraj Patel (25)

co-founder and CTO



Our inspiration is OfBusiness, and we want to be a unicorn in profit, not valuation.”

Deepak Meena

Clean Energy & Climate Change

It's All About the Waste

WeVois was founded in 2018, but Abhinav Shekhar Vashistha (29, co-founder and CTO) and Abhishek Gupta's (31, co-founder and CEO) waste management journey started in college in 2016. From organising zero-waste college festivals to creating an app to list public toilets, and dustbins, in Balmer, Rajasthan, or building smart dustbins, the duo isn't new to waste management.

What has changed, though, over the years, is the shift from a project-based mindset to their commitment to build a scalable, sustainable and profitable waste management business.

WeVois was incorporated in 2018 to provide an Internet-of-Things-enabled door-to-door smart waste collection facility for urban areas. This is important because traditional methods often miss 30 to 40 percent households, leading to open dumping or burning of waste.

The company's app creates an optimised route after surveying an area—including "polluters" like residences, hotels, hostels, hospitals and so on, accounting for the number of collection vehicles available and the collection time. The driver then gets an optimised route on an app, with estimated speed and time to complete the route.

Every property that has signed up for WeVois's collection services is marked with an RFID tag. The

waste collectors read the RFID tag at every collection point to mark "attendance" and ensure efficient and safe collection. The RFID system also helps calculate monthly salaries and reward based on performance.

Currently, the company is working with 20 municipalities in Rajasthan and running pilots in Dehradun and Jammu & Kashmir. It employs 1,000 workers directly while 500 others are registered on the app via other companies that use their technology for waste collection. WeVois says its employees are given social benefits, most of them for the first time, including health insurance.

However, collection is just one part of the gargantuan waste management challenge. Apart from providing a regular waste collection facility and employment for over 1,000 people, WeVois also acts as a reliable waste provider to recyclers. Vashishtha says there are enough waste processing plants in every city, but they are not operational due to unreliable or contaminated waste. WeVois also segregates waste and has set up its processing plants.

Bootstrapped from 2018 till 2021, the company received a ₹20 lakh grant from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs in 2022. In the same year, it also raised ₹4.4 crore in a seed round from Innovana ThinkLabs and UPAYA social ventures. So far, in 2025,

the company has raised ₹36 crore in Series A from Negen Capital, Vyom Ventures, Marshot (Razorpay founders), SN Capital, and other high net-worth individuals.

Vashishtha explains that the duo aims to run their venture like a business and not only a social impact venture. He claims the company has been profitable since the first month of operations and all the money raised goes into expansion, new projects, pilots and research. In FY24, the company clocked ₹33 crore in revenues and a profit after tax (PAT) of ₹2.91 crore. The company estimates it will close FY25 with a revenue of ₹50 crore with approximately 10 percent PAT.

Galloping to create 100 zero-waste cities in India over the next decade, Vashishtha is optimistic that India can solve its waste problem. It won't be easy though: "User behaviour has to change and India's densely populated cities might just make it cost-effective."

Swami Prem Parivartan aka Peepal Baba, Forbes India Under 30 jury for the category, says, "Their vision to expand presence to over 500 cities and empowering an additional 20,000 workers is remarkable. Their future potential is immense."

—Ruchika Shah



CATEGORY COORDINATORS: Naandika Tripathi, Ruchika Shah | JURY: Sumaira Abdulali, convenor, Awaaz Foundation; Swami Prem Parivartan aka Peepal Baba, founder, Give Me Trees Trust



Abhinav Shekhar Vashistha (29)
Co-founder and CTO, WeVOIS Labs Pvt Ltd

WeVois works with 20 municipalities in Rajasthan and is running pilots in Dehradun, Jammu & Kashmir



Brinda Dudhat (29)

Co-founder, Morii Design

“We focus on sustainability, ensuring artisans can work in their villages while earning fair wages.”

PHOTO BY: AMIT VERMA, DIRECTED BY: KAPIL KASHYAP

An Artisanal Collaboration

A semester exchange programme in 2015 at Tama Art University in Tokyo, Japan, brought Brinda Dudhat, a student of the National Institute of Design (NID), her first exposure to art as a form of self-expression.

At NID, a course in environmental perception helped her appreciate the village life, and later, the craft documentation course with the pastoral nomadic Rabari community in Kutch, Gujarat, further stoked her interest in the villages and their crafts.

But the turning point came in 2018 while working on a World Bank-funded project with South Asia's pioneering scenographer and design guru Rajeev Sethi, designing a collection to revive the marginalised craft of Sujani embroidery in Bihar, in collaboration with the artisans.

At the end of that project, at an exhibition in Delhi, her collection was greatly appreciated and received many inquiries, some asking if she had a brand. "That was the first time I got the confidence that if I do something, it can work," says Dudhat.

In the summer of 2019, riding on her two-wheeler in the scorching heat, 40 kilometres away from Bhuj, Dudhat went from village to village requesting the Jat embroidery artisans to work with her. She was initially met with resistance, but after two weeks of persuasion and convincing, the women agreed to team up with her. "It was a difficult negotiation, but it worked because

I promised them sustainable livelihoods with fair wages."

Later that year, with her friend Sonu Yadav's support, Dudhat registered Morii Design working with 10 to 15 women artisans creating hand-embroidered cushions, bed covers and jackets. While exploring formats, Dudhat once added a picture frame around one of their jacket panels and posted it on Instagram. It caught the attention of architect Nishil Shah who used two of their artworks in his project, and the brand started gaining popularity. Morii now focuses on one-of-a-kind textile art pieces and wall art, with the most recent and the largest piece being 5 metres by 3 metres.

With a natural and earthy palette, Dudhat's work is organic, abstract and intuitive, reminiscent of aerial views of landscapes, conceptually depicting themes like global warming and climate change. Through her artworks, Dudhat wants to generate awareness.

Today, reimagining traditional Indian crafts through contemporary textile art, Dudhat collaborates with over 165 women artisans from 12 villages across India, combining techniques such as Sujani embroidery from Bihar, Bela block printing, and Rabari embroidery with contemporary abstract designs from Kutch and Kantha embroidery from West Bengal. "We focus on sustainability, ensuring artisans can work in their villages while earning fair wages, maintaining traditions and fostering pride in their craft," she says.

Before adopting a new cluster,

Morii does a paid training workshop for the artisans to upskill them and bring back the fineness seen in 100-year-old antique embroidery pieces. "We are particular about maintaining the geographical identity of the craft," says Dudhat. "That's why we go all the way to the original places where the craft originated and work with the heritage artisans."

Apart from their products being available at their studio in Gandhinagar, Morii has partnered with a few stores and galleries in India and abroad, including The House of Things, Udaipur; Pure Concept Home, Mumbai; Under the Mango Gallery, Berlin; Salon Design, New York; and Obakki, Canada. In 2024, Morii exhibited internationally, with a solo show in Berlin and another in Perth, where Morii was invited to do an installation.

"We are building a studio and a gallery space in GIFT City, Gandhinagar, to showcase our work and sometimes host events and curated shows to promote works of other artists/designers," says Dudhat.

"Along the steep learning curve, Brinda has first and foremost mastered the ability to make friends with her teachers—the craftswomen—to engage and enrich both the maker and the designer," says Sethi. "She has found a format that goes beyond wearable art with skills to balance motifs, textures and combinations of colours, while remaining deeply committed to her craft," he adds.

— Benu Joshi Routh

Pushing Boundaries

Simoul Alva grew up watching films and reading voraciously. Both served as windows to the world of design and helped her discover the power of imagination.

A recipient of the Ratan Tata Foundation Grant and a winner of the Helen Lansdowne Resor Scholarship by J Walter Thompson, Alva's talent was first spotted when as a student at the National Institute of Design she was selected to represent India at the 44th Worldskills Competition in 2017 at Abu Dhabi. It involved competing against 30 other applicants of different nationalities on projects including packaging design, editorial, and visual identity. Alva went on to earn the medallion of excellence.

During her final year, Alva interned at Pentagram in New York, where she worked with award-winning designer Michael Bierut. She also interned at Samsung Research America's Think Tank Team and freelanced at Sagmeister & Walsh, securing full-time employment there in 2019.

At her first design role at &Walsh (previously Sagmeister & Walsh) Alva got to work on founder and creative director Jessica Walsh's team where she led the project on developing the visual identity of earth-conscious biodesign firm Geltor. The project, which took cues from the tree of life, combining vibrant colours with flowers and leaves encased in 3D spheres inspired by glass orb terrariums, received critical acclaim in publications including

the Creative Review, It's Nice That, Fast Company and Creative Boom. At &Walsh, Alva honed her skills working on brands such as Twitch, Apple, Adobe, and Parle Agro.

"Simoul approaches every project with an open mind and a desire to push boundaries," says Jessica Walsh, founder and creative director, &Walsh. "Her ability to seamlessly merge creativity with thoughtfulness and precision makes her a standout in the field of design."

In 2019, Alva's first editorial illustration in *The New York Times* for an article titled, 'Slack Wants to Replace Email. Is That What We Want?' opened the floodgates for a host of illustrations over the years for other prestigious

news publications such as The Washington Post, Wired, and MIT Tech Review, to name a few.

In 2019, Alva was invited by Adobe for their annual flagship event Adobe Max conference, where she spoke about her work and performed a demo using their 3Dtools to a global audience.

Her work has been featured and awarded a Certificate of Typographic Excellence by The Type Directors Club, D&AD, Art Directors Club, One Club for Creativity, PRINT Magazine & Communication Arts.

In 2022, Alva was commissioned to create a 3D illustration for The Museum of Living History by the Mahindra Group in Mumbai,

WATCH OUT FOR



MAKARAND NARKAR, 28
SONAL VASAVE, 29
Co-founder & Creative Director, Boomrann Studio

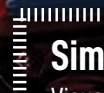
An independent multidisciplinary illustration and design studio in Mumbai, Boomrann

aims at making Indian culture more accessible on the global stage through art by breaking stereotypes about Indian folklore and presenting the universality and uniqueness of Indian customs and traditions. Cosmicpunk, a creation of Boomrann, is an art collectibles and wearable brand. They have created illustrations and animations for global brands such as Apple, Google, Spotify, YouTube, Netflix, Amazon, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Nike, to name a few, and have assisted in creating distinct visual styles for cultural icons like Manchester United, Coldplay, Paralympics '24.



MEHEK MALHOTRA, 29
Founder and creative lead, Giggling Monkey Studio and Creative Lead for Canva India

Infusing freshness in vintage Indian graphic design, Giggling Monkey Studio has worked with 50 clients across industries that include giants such as Google, Instagram, Canva, Pinterest, TikTok, and Facebook, along with smaller businesses such as Tiipoi. As the creative lead at Canva India, Mehek Malhotra steers the team to create designs that resonate with India while staying true to Canva's global ethos. Malhotra has made it to the Rolling Stone Magazine's Power 25 List in 2023, Soho House's 100 Member List, Tata Nano 25 Under 25, and has been featured in Buzzfeed, Vogue, and TED. Her home, a reflection of her personality and artistic vision, has been featured in Architectural Digest magazine and Popeye, a Japanese lifestyle magazine.



Simoul Alva (29)

Visual Design Lead,
Ripple

“Designing for products or tech that need to be explained by visualisation is what sets me apart.”

titled ‘Bridges of Tomorrow’, which offers an interactive experience showcasing the philosophy, DNA, core values, and culture of the group.

Her foray into Brand Design for tech in 2021 with financial services company Robinhood as senior visual designer & art director was one of the turning points for Alva. As the lead visual designer on the Robinhood Retirement Project, she contributed to the design identity, key visuals, typography, and colours, which won the San Francisco Design Week Awards in 2023.

“Being comfortable with ambiguity, designing for products or technology that needs to be visualised in order to be explained is what sets me apart,” says Alva.

Currently, as Visual Design Lead for blockchain fintech company Ripple, her notable projects include Ripple’s Brand Refresh, visual identity for flagship events and Ripple USD.

– Benu Joshi Routh



CATEGORY COORDINATOR:
Benu Joshi Routh | JURY: **Ashiesh Shah**, principal and founder, Atelier; **Amit Krishn Gulati**, co-founder and director, Incubis Consultants

Digital Content Creators

His Own Voice

As we wrap up our conversation, Prakhar Gupta, the brain behind and the face of Prakhar Ke Pravachan channel on YouTube, says, “I hope I was not verbose. I’m so used to asking questions that answering is a little weird.” During the half-an-hour chat with *Forbes India*, he spoke about learning to use ideas as currency, the art of listening, building his brand, and walking a fine line when engaging with the political class in India. After all, speaking with Union Minister of Commerce & Industry Piyush Goyal one day, and hosting Aam Aadmi Party chief and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal soon after is bound to put one under scrutiny.

But the 28-year-old from Faridabad is not worried about public criticism. “I’m a young guy. I’ve been doing podcasts for over a year. I will always make mistakes no matter who I’m doing a podcast with... and the more controversial it is, the more easily people will try and spot it. Social media stars will always carry society’s expectations,” says Gupta. “Hopefully, I can make more people happy. Hopefully, I can make more people sad as I go along because that is the nature of the conversation. We open each other’s minds, and from there, pleasant and unpleasant things come out. I take it as a compliment because it tells me that my conversations are engaging.”

It’s hard to miss the spark of a Columbia University graduate (in psychology and economics) in Gupta. The leap into the hyper-competitive environment of the Ivy League school taught him, he says, to trade ideas as currency, and those ideas seem to have no limits as his channel is filled with conversations about topics such as religion, science, politics and even spirituality, offering fresh and thought-provoking perspectives. He uses a simple trick to get candid responses from his guests—listen. “The camera is complicated. But the beautiful, poetic version of this is actually caring for what they’re saying, and they’ll open up.”

His favourite interactions include those with Anand Ranganathan, Jai Singh, Ravi Gupta and Parmish Verma. “Prakhar’s raw, real and unfiltered approach creates an authentic space where critical topics can be explored without sugarcoating—a rarity in today’s age,” says Verma, a rapper, singer and musician. “This clarity of intent, combined with his sharp intellect, allows him to connect authentically with his audience while maintaining a level of discourse that is both thought-provoking and meaningful.”

In a crowd of vloggers and podcasters, one has to overcome many challenges to stand out. Anushka Rathod, a 2024 *Forbes India Under 30* alumnus, says, “Building a brand as a content creator is like running a marathon



Prakhar Gupta (28)
Podcaster

“You are doing things far above your pay grade and learning as you go along.”



that never ends; it's thrilling but also exhausting. But when you do it right, the success milestones are life-changing. You gain financial independence, turn your name into a brand that people trust, and unlock doors to opportunities and networks."

And Gupta is loving building his brand as a one-person army. "I'm enjoying running my own company, making decisions, playing largescale business chess in some way. It's also so good to be in the company of guys like Raj (Shamani) and Ranveer (Allahbadia).

These are extremely smart guys, and you learn a lot from watching them. So, the fun part is you are at the edge of the zeitgeist. You are doing things far above your pay grade and learning as you go along."

- Rucha Sharma

Weaving a Tapestry

Kavya Karnatac's passion for storytelling was put to the test when she and her team were attacked by a mob while filming at India's tallest garbage dump in Delhi's Ghazipur. Undeterred, the 27-year-old content creator continued to pursue her goal of highlighting the daily struggles of people living in this neglected area, plagued by health, water and sanitation crises. The resulting video has garnered over three million views on YouTube.

Karnatac's approach to storytelling breaks the mould of traditional content creation, taking her audience on a journey that is raw and real. Her videos offer a window into the lives of everyday people, giving a voice to the unvoiced.

Since launching her YouTube channel KK Create two years ago, Karnatac has achieved significant success, garnering 973 million views in 466 videos with two million subscribers. Her investigative content has covered a range of topics, from the water crisis in Rajasthan to India's biggest coal-producing district, Dhanbad in Jharkhand, where the ground has been burning for over 100 years.

Hailing from Uttarakhand's Nainital, Karnatac pursued a master's degree in media and cultural studies from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. During her time there, she worked on a documentary film about Mumbai's Aarey forest and the adivasi

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Kavya Karnatac (27)
Founder, KK Create

“My aim is to visit India's 800 districts, experience their stories, and share them through my videos.”

community, which sparked her interest in creating cultural content.

“My aim with KK Create is to visit each of India's 800 districts, experience their stories, and share them through my videos,” says Karnatac, currently filming in Ladakh. “I envision KK Create as one of India's biggest documentary channels, telling stories of unique places and people.”

After three years of working as a video producer at digital entertainment company Pocket Aces, Karnatac decided to quit her job in 2022 and take a break. During this time, she discovered her love for creating informational videos and started populating content on her social media page.

The response was overwhelming, with Karnatac gaining 200,000 followers on Instagram within two months. She single-handedly managed everything, from research

and scripting to shooting and editing, using a friend's laptop. Despite having no experience in starting her own business, hiring people or managing finances, Karnatac persevered.

Initially, Karnatac faced challenges in securing brand deals due to her focus on cultural content. However, her persistence paid off, and today she earns around ₹15,00,000 per month. Her team has grown to 10 people, and she has collaborated with brands like Netflix, ITC, Google and Hotstar.

Karnatac's revenue streams include brand deals (60 to 65 percent), YouTube ads and viewer donations. She also works closely with the government to promote their schemes. “My personal goal in the coming years is to reduce our dependence on brands and create content that sustains itself,” she says. Her Instagram following has reached almost two million, and she has expanded her content to include long-form, on-ground videos.

Karnatac's attempt to document the culture, stories, and spirit of every district in India is commendable, says environmentalist Peepal Baba. “Her videos remind us of the invisible threads that bind our diverse land into one vibrant tapestry. This is real influence. She has the gift of making people see the extraordinary in what they might have overlooked—a quiet street, an old monument, a simple tradition. May her journey inspire countless others to rediscover and honour the treasures of our land.”

— Naandika Tripathi



WATCH OUT FOR



MALHAR KALAMBE, 27
Founder, Beach Please

Malhar Kalambe has always believed that small, collective actions can drive monumental change. Since founding Beach Please in 2017, his mission has been to protect the planet and inspire others to join the cause. Large-scale beach clean-ups, transforming idol remains into reusable items during Ganesh Chaturthi, and planning a waste management plant, every initiative by him reflects a step toward a sustainable future. In 2024, Kalambe received the National Creator Award 2024 from Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

CATEGORY COORDINATORS: Naandika Tripathi and Rucha Sharma |
JURY: Niharika Kapoor, head, YouTube Shorts Partnerships, APAC;
Raj Shamani, founder, Figuring Out and House of X

Ecommerce, Retail & Consumer Tech

Big Fat Grin

Pallav Bihani walks us through three stages of his 'fitness marriage'. To begin with, it was a 'forced' match. In 2012, the young lad suffered a slipped disc, doctors prescribed an epidural steroid as a stop-gap relief medicine, and Bilani was administered a bitter dose. 'Lose weight if you want to avoid surgery' came a stern warning. Weighing some 105-odd kilos, the class XII student was constantly body-shamed and had a fat chance of leading a healthy life had he ignored the red flag. Bihani, however, didn't. "That's how I was 'forced' into the world of fitness," he recalls.

Thanks to a disciplined fitness regime, Bihani lost some 30 kilos in three years. "Now, I was romancing with fitness," he says, alluding to the second stage of his marriage. "I was eating, drinking and thinking fitness," he adds. Three years later, in 2018, he graduated to the third stage. "I fell in love with fitness and started Boldfit," adds Bihani, who worked in the family business of medical equipment and pharmacies for two years in Bengaluru, took a loan of ₹10 lakh from his father in 2018, and rolled out Boldfit, a D2C brand of fitness and sports products.

Why Boldfit? There were umpteen fitness and sports products brands. So, why add one more?





Pallav Bihani (29)

Founder, Boldfit

“We want people to think of Boldfit when it comes to India.”

Bihani reckons that there was a yawning gap and a pressing need. Boldfit was not a vitamin. It was a painkiller. Bihani explains, that the sports and fitness market in India behaved like a pendulum. On one side was a raft of premium multinational brands that were prohibitively expensive and catered to a niche, and on the other end were countless *desi* companies that pedalled cheap products. What was missing was a high-quality yet affordable offering for the masses. “Boldfit was the answer,” says 29-year-old Bihani. “We bridged that gap between price and aspiration,” he underlines.

Fast forward to November 2024. After a bootstrapped journey of over six years, Boldfit raised its first institutional funding round of \$13 million led by Bessemer Venture Partners. Starting with two yoga mats in 2018, Boldfit shipped over a million fitness products last December. “In FY24, we clocked a revenue of close to ₹140 crore and are profitable,” he claims, adding that the company is clocking a run rate of ₹300 crore for FY25. The Bengaluru-based startup had previously raised \$8.37 million from its existing angels, including Indian cricketer KL Rahul.

The backers are delighted with the progress. “In under three years, he’s built India’s largest online-first sports brand,” contends Anant Vidur Puri, partner at Bessemer Venture Partners. Boldfit, he underlines, is the leader in this multi-billion-dollar sports and fitness market.

Bihani, for his part, is looking at ‘identity’ leadership. Every country, he underlines, has its identity in sports: Germany has Puma; America has Nike; Japan has Onitsuka Tiger; France has Decathlon. “We want people to think of Boldfit when it comes to India,” he signs off.

- Rajiv Singh

Ecommerce, Retail & Consumer Tech

Really Swish

The right questions, as wisdom goes, will always get you the right answers.

Early last year, Aniket Shah reached out to a score of consumers in Bengaluru with a question. The query was not if food could be delivered in 10 minutes. It could be done. Players had experimented in the past, and there were pilots around it. The big, and the right, question was: Was the ‘food preparation to delivery’ done correctly? Was anything missing in the experience? The answer triggered the rollout of Swish, a 10-minute food delivery app.

Founded in August 2024 by Aniket Shah, Ujjwal Sukheja and Saran S, Swish manages the entire process—from food preparation to delivery—and operates within a geographical radius of 1.5 to 2 kilometres. The startup operates several cloud kitchens in Bengaluru’s HSR Layout, Koramangala and Bellandur areas, and has raised \$2 million in its maiden funding round led by Accel last year. “We discovered that food delivery in 10 minutes should be done and controlled by the first party,” reckons Shah, an alum from IIT-Kharagpur who has had stints at Citi, Jupiter, Pillow and Meesho. “From the making of food to delivery to controlling the entire food stack, everything should be fully owned and managed,” he says.

Swish, Shah claims, has a distinct playbook. “One needs to set up large kitchens from scratch. I don’t think anybody does that except big restaurant players,” he contends.





Aniket Shah (25)

Founder, Swish

Ujjwal Sukheja (24)

Saran S (24)

Co-founders, Swish

“From the making of food to delivery to controlling the food stack, everything should be owned and managed.”

Aniket Shah

Swish, he claims, has over 70 unique stock-keeping units (SKUs), covering diverse categories such as indulgences, snacks, beverages and meals. “We have a unique and good business model, and the category has high gross margins,” he says, adding that he has found a right fit in his co-founders. While Sukheja has had stints at Pillow and Zamp, Saran has worked with Pharmeasy, Pillow and Polygon.

The segment is heating up. While Swiggy and Zomato are getting aggressive with their 10-minute food delivery play, a bunch of smaller players, too, has jumped into the frying pan. Shah, though, is not scared of competition. “We are lucky to have fearlessness as a trait. We thrive in challenges,” he says, adding that the under-one-year-old startup has angel backing from a bunch of top dogs, including former Swiggy Instamart head Karthik Gurumurthy.

Sakshi Chopra, one of the jury members for the 30 Under 30 category, was impressed with the vision of the founders. “All delivery businesses will become more hyperlocal over time and the same holds for food delivery,” says the managing director at Peak XV. Swish, she adds, has good founders and has a large addressable market. It also caught the attention of another jury member. “They are building something truly ambitious, and the founders should be lauded for the breadth of ambition,” says Archana Jahagirdar, founder and managing partner of Rukam Capital.

Meanwhile, Shah reckons that food is a massive opportunity. While the traditional food delivery models have solved the planned meals, they don’t have answers for a bigger problem. “We are taking a stab at the unplanned meals,” he says.

- Rajiv Singh

(From left) Ujjwal Sukheja, Saran S and Aniket Shah

Ecommerce, Retail & Consumer Tech

Perfecting the Curly Wave

Anshita Mehrotra struggled with hair care products. To manage her curly hair, Mehrotra resorted to products made for straight hair. Or, she had to turn to importing curly hair care products, which would cost a lump sum. During one such instance of ordering them from abroad, Mehrotra's mother suggested that she should give a shot at making her own products. And, thus began the journey of Fix My Curls in 2019, a project-turned-venture that makes and sells hair care products specifically for curly hair.

At the time, Mehrotra had taken a gap year from her studies at the University of British Columbia, and began working on her new venture, learning the ropes from her mother Shaily Mehrotra, the founder of Fixderma, who later became a partner in her daughter's venture and put in capital.

For research, Mehrotra got curly hair products from all over the world, studied them, found out the pain points that women with curly hair faced, including herself, and started her formulation process, while also learning bits by surfing the net. "My hair was constantly lacking moisture, there weren't any products for curly hair styling that I could find in India. That's what I made up for with our formulations," says the 25-year-old founder. By August 2019, they had five products ready and were launched on Amazon

under Fixderma for the first year. "When Covid hit, I realised that I wanted to make this something more than a project and I opened up my own company, and website. I think before that I was testing the market for eight months," she says.

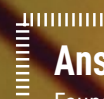
Today, the Gurugram-based company has its products available pan-India on its own website, Amazon, Nykaa, and quick commerce platforms with the latter bringing in 15 percent of revenue for it, as per Mehrotra. Besides that, Fix My Curls products, which include hair butter, hair mask, leave-in cream, and volumising mousse besides other products like shampoos and conditioners, are also present in more than 15 countries including Germany, Switzerland, the US, and the UAE, serving lakhs of people both in India and abroad.

Last year, the company raised just shy of a million dollars from Amazon Sambhav Fund, India Quotient and DSG Consumer Partners. Hariharan Premkumar, managing director and head of India at DSG Consumer Partners, and his team thought of Mehrotra as a mission-driven founder who was keen to solve personal pain points through their business. "Anshita is irrationally passionate, obsessed about the product, frugal, and capital efficient, which are qualities we admire," says Premkumar.

In the coming few years, Mehrotra wishes to add 15-20 more products and have her own salon spaces or pop-ups where people can get their curly hair treated.

Mehrotra also wants to soon enter the rest of the hair care industry. "For now, we are very happy to be the ones pioneering in the curly hair space. I think there is so much to do in this space itself in the next couple of years," says Mehrotra.

- Samidha Jain



Anshita Mehrotra (25)

Founder, Fix My Curls

“We are very happy to be the ones pioneering in the curly hair space. There is so much to do in this space.”



WATCH OUT FOR



RITHISH KUMAR, 28
Co-founder, Pee Safe

Rithish Kumar joined Pee Safe in 2017 and was subsequently elevated to the position of co-founder in 2023. His expertise in scaling direct-to-consumer brands has been instrumental in Pee Safe's growth. Initially launched with just one product—a toilet seat sanitiser spray—Pee Safe now has 35 offerings across five categories. In FY24, the company's operating revenue was ₹57 crore. In 2023, it raised \$3 million in a Series B funding round, with participation from Natco Pharma and investors Nithin Kamath and Nikhil Kamath.



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:

Harichandan Arakali, Rajiv Singh, Samidha Jain | JURY: **Anil Rai Gupta**, chairman and managing director, Havells; **Chirag Chadha**, partner, Elevation Capital; **Sakshi Chopra**, MD, Peak XV; **Archana Jahagirdar**, founder and managing partner, Rukam Capital; **Amit Jain**, co-founder, CarDekho

Taking the Menace Out of Maths

Neelakantha Bhanu started competing in maths championships when he was 10 or 11, and holds several world records in the subject. By the time he was 17 or 18, he was being invited to schools, colleges and companies to talk about how people can strengthen their maths skills. He conducted around 500 stage shows over three to four years across 23 countries in which he “used to present how quickly maths can be done or how mathematical skill can really be developed in an individual”, says Bhanu. Part of his efforts were also aimed at spreading the word on how maths can be fun, or be part of pop culture, and dispel the fears around the subject.

One of the projects he worked on was for the Government of Telangana to build a numeracy development project called Infinity, which has now been rebranded to Bhanzu. Starting with 30 government schools in the first year, the project expanded to 3,000 to 5,000 schools in the second and third years respectively,

(From left): Bhanzu co-founders Jonnalagadda Sai Krishnakanth, Devulapalli Lakshmi Prachotan, Neelakantha Bhanu and Alluru Uday Kiran

“The idea is to get to 100 million kids in five years, and become the world’s largest maths education company.”

Neelakantha Bhanu

Neelakantha Bhanu (25)

Founder & CEO, Bhanzu

Co-founders:

Devulapalli Lakshmi

Prachotan (25)

Co-founder, head of business development

Alluru Uday Kiran (26)

Co-founder, head of operations

Jonnalagadda Sai

Krishnakanth (27)

Co-founder, head of research and development

age, Bhanu says, “I knew that I want to get into education policy, government work at some point of time.” After completing his bachelor’s degree, he got offers to directly join a PhD programme to continue research in maths and job offers from other sectors as well. However, it was during the pandemic that he realised the best way to create an impact was through education.

Bhanzu, which conducts classes entirely online and is looking to also have an offline presence in a year or year and a half, has launched in the US, UK and some parts of the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Australia. Recently, Bhanzu raised its Series B round of founding from \$16.5 million from a bunch of venture capitalists.

“We were the first investors in Bhanzu, even before the platform was actually launched,” says Shuvi Shrivastava, partner, Lightspeed Ventures. “The founder and his mission, his unique ways of thinking about maths and pedagogy,

in which, through a network of volunteers, the team aimed to teach maths in the best possible ways.

“Three out of four children around the world are scared of mathematics, because of lack of relatability and confidence, and that has repercussions in the career the child chooses,” he says. The government programme was successful, with classes being streamed online during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite his deep involvement with maths from a very young

is something that was very important to us. The market opportunity is massive, not just in India but across the world, among Indians and Asians. And we are seeing the numbers now, with a lot of the revenue coming from outside India.” The fact that Bhanu, a globally known maths wizard, is the face of the company has been an added advantage.

“The idea is to get to 100 million children in the next five years, and become the world’s largest maths education company, from India to the world,” says Bhanu.

—Jasodhara Banerjee

WATCH OUT FOR



ANOUSHKA SINHA, 22

Founder, Anupam Foundation

She is the founder of the Anupam Foundation, a youth-led grassroots initiative tackling systemic barriers to education and empowering underrepresented communities, particularly girls, by advocating for equal opportunity. It uses tools like digital storytelling, advocacy training, leadership development programmes, and policy consultations. It amplifies youth voices at decision-making platforms like the United Nations General Assembly, Commission on the Status of Women, Conference of the Parties, and the High-Level Political Forum. The organisation’s work also includes community engagement, skill-building workshops, mentorship initiatives, and developing a pipeline of changemakers driving inclusive and sustainable progress, reaching over 100,000 individuals. Through the Anupam Scholarship fund, Sinha also helps underprivileged youth to access education.



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:

Divya Shekhar and Jasodhara Banejee

| JURY: **Namya Mahajan**, co-founder, Rocket Learning; **Sandeep Sancheti**, vice president of research relations & academic advisory, Elsevier (India)

Enterprise Technology

Aiming for the Stars

44

With the launch of Digantara Research's SCOT satellite, Founder

and CEO Anirudh Sharma and his co-founders have joined an elite club of space tech entrepreneurs who are building space surveillance and intelligence technologies.

Digantara, a Bengaluru startup, announced the launch on January 14. SCOT stands for space camera for object tracking. It was among the 131 satellites onboard SpaceX's Transporter-12 Falcon-9 rocket that lifted off from the Vandenberg spaceport in the US.

As one of the world's first commercial 'space situational awareness' satellites, SCOT is engineered to track 'resident space objects' with high frequency and precision, the company said in a press release. Especially with low-earth orbits becoming commercially very important but also increasingly crowded, SCOT is purpose-built



Anirudh Sharma (26)

Founder and CEO, Digantara Research and Technologies

“There are over 11,000 active satellites in orbit. Think of what we’re building as Google Maps for space.”

to monitor smaller space objects, deliver higher revisit rates, and provide enhanced tracking accuracy, according to the release.

“With SCOT, we are taking a crucial step in achieving surveillance superiority, ensuring not only a safer and more sustainable space environment but also towards safeguarding sovereign assets in the face of an increasingly contested space domain,” Sharma said in the release.

“There are over 11,000 active satellites in orbit, and that number will only increase. We need a mechanism to navigate an orbit and understand what’s happening. Think of what we’re building as Google Maps for space,” Sharma tells *Forbes India* in an interview.

SCOT will be deployed in a sun-synchronous orbit, enabling it to track objects in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) with greater efficiency than existing sensors, which are constrained by weather conditions, geographic limitations, and restricted fields of view, according to Digantara. The satellite offers persistent monitoring, detecting and tracking objects as small as 5 cm across.

This success has been several years in the making. Sharma and his co-founder Rahul Rawat started tinkering with an early

idea while in college in Punjab, in 2018. They’d learnt of a satellite club their friend Tanveer Ahmed was running in Bengaluru.

The trio stepped up their efforts from 2020, after graduation, with degrees in engineering, and with incubation and grant support from the Indian Institute of Science.

“Without ISRO, we wouldn’t have a space sector in India. They developed this talent base over decades,” Rajan Anandan, managing director at Peak XV Partners, one of Digantara’s biggest VC backers, points out. “What changed, the big trigger, was the deregulation, and private space industry became possible in India. Today we have some very young space tech founders too.”

“Digantara has a solid shot at building the world’s first space-based system for tracking objects in orbit,” Shailesh Lakhani, a managing director at Peak XV who led the firm’s investment in the startup, had said in a blogpost at the time in June 2023.

That’s beginning to come true.

— Harichandan Arakali



CATEGORY COORDINATOR:
Harichandan Arakali | JURY: **Aneesh Reddy**, founder and CEO, Capillary Technologies; **Manav Garg**, founding partner, Together Fund



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Fierce and Fabulous

In the 10 years of her career as an actor, Aparna Balamurali has done some 30 films, and has a National Award to her credit. She had started acting serendipitously, but now wants to make the most of opportunities.

In 2024, she had significant roles in two well-received dramas and thriller projects, Tamil film *Raayan* and Malayalam film *Kishkindha Kaandam*. The next film she has announced is also a thriller directed by Jeethu Joseph (of *Drishyam* fame). In the future, however, she wants to “get into something a little more lighter, cooler, something towards humour”, Aparna says on the phone. “I’m trying to get scripts with a lot more variation.” She has just returned to her home in Kerala after shooting for a Kathak-based dance sequence in Varanasi for a yet-untitled Malayalam film, and has a two-day break before she goes right back to another film set.

Aparna credits her love for art to a childhood surrounded by dance and music. Her parents are singers and musicians, but she decided to learn dance first. She started with Bharatanatyam, and then learnt Mohiniyattam and Kuchipudi. She also trained in classical music, and has done playback singing

for a number of songs, including a track in *Maheshinte Prathikaaram* (2016), which kickstarted her acting career. “Everything in my childhood was about art, but I had not thought about getting into acting at any point,” says Aparna, who was studying architecture when the opportunity came her way. Actor Unnimaya Prasad, who was her teacher in college, suggested that she audition for *Maheshinte Prathikaaram*.

Aparna had worked in a handful of Malayalam and Tamil films when she was offered the script that would clinch a National Award for her performance. She took on the role of



Aparna Balamurali (29)

Actor

“Everything in my childhood was about art, but I had not thought about getting into acting at any point.”

feisty entrepreneur Bommi opposite superstar Suriya in Sudha Kongara’s Tamil film *Soorai Pottru*, which was inspired by the life of Captain Gopinath of Air Deccan. “*Soorai Pottru* onwards, I knew that acting is what I want to do in my life. My passion towards cinema changed,” says the self-taught actor, adding that she has had her share of challenges in the last few years, from struggling to stay positive when she has no film offers in hand to body shaming, but she has learnt to move ahead with confidence.

“Actors generally say they pick roles that stay with people, irrespective of screen time, and Aparna has done just that through her career. She has picked characters that add immense value to a film,” says writer and film critic Ashameera Aiyappan. She adds that Aparna’s nuanced performances and self-assuredness, despite pressures from the entertainment industry to conform to a certain physical stereotype, lends freshness and charisma to her on-screen presence.

Aparna, who also runs a clothing brand and an event management company, says it is an exciting time to be an actor in Malayalam cinema. “People are experimenting a lot, coming up with new ideas, so the possibilities seem never-ending. There is a lot more to explore,” she says.

— Divya Shekhar

Entertainment

Stuff of Dreams

The only reason Rohit Saraf pursued acting as a career was because his father wanted to see him on the big screen. He had promised to earn enough money to produce films for his son, who, on the other hand, wanted to be a dancer, having watched dance shows on television since he was a toddler. At the age of 12, in 2008, when Saraf lost his father, he decided to give acting a real shot. “It was my attempt to keep him alive,” he says, wistfully.

Saraf moved from Delhi to Mumbai, having cracked an audition for a Channel V youth show, and lived in a rented apartment in Oshiwara. Once he got used to facing the camera, he realised it is a whole new world. “It’s so fulfilling creatively and as a human being—you can experience different emotions and play varied characters,” says the 28-year-old, who dropped out after the 10th grade.

The youngest of five children, Saraf did not have a Plan B, and approached his craft with honesty and sincerity. “I was driven

PHOTO BY: AMIT VERMA, DIRECTED BY: KAPIL KASHYAP



Rohit Saraf (28)

Actor

“I need to be courageous enough to wake up every day with a new dream.”

enough to work hard to chase my dreams,” he says.

In the first year, Saraf did two television shows, four commercials and a film. “I was barely free... I thought I’ll be a superstar in a year,” he recalls. That is when he was exposed to the uncertainty of the film world. Two-and-a-half years after he had shot his first movie, he got to know it was shelved. All this while, he had refused work because he was advised not to overexpose himself. “I had stopped giving auditions, so people stopped calling me for parts as well,” he reminisces. Keeping his financial and other struggles aside, the youngster decided to put his head down and work hard.

Saraf hit the refresh button with small parts in films such as *Dear Zindagi* (2016), *Hichki* (2018) and *The Sky Is Pink* (2019). Last year, he starred in *Ishq Vishk Rebound* and *Woh Bhi Din The*. But it was the Netflix series *Mismatched* (2020)—now into season three—that was the turning point of his career.

Akarsh Khurana, director of *Mismatched* along with Nipun Dharmadhikari, says Saraf went through extensive auditions before clinching the part. “Rohit is an insightful actor. He comes across as a casual guy, but he does

a lot of homework. He takes his work seriously and doesn’t make a big deal about it. As an actor, he gets the brief immediately... he’s extremely receptive,” says Khurana, adding that Saraf has understood things that work and do not work for him, and prioritises things in that manner.

This year, Saraf will be seen in Mani Ratnam’s *Thug Life* with Kamal Haasan and Dharma Productions’ *Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari*. Khurana believes that Saraf is on the right path. “The sky is the limit for him. I do know that with the upcoming stuff that he has already shot for and is saying yes to... he is pushing himself to break out of a mould. He’s got what it takes to break out in a big way,” he says, adding that Saraf is a warm, caring individual with a “rooted, family-boy quality to him”.

Saraf, who loves painting, listening to music and taking photographs of people, is only raring to go. “Dreams are for people who are courageous,” he says. “I need to be courageous enough to wake up every day with a new dream.”

— Kunal Purandare



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:
Divya Shekhar & Kunal Purandare
| JURY: **Sajid Ali**, filmmaker; **Suresh Triveni**, filmmaker

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Nancy Tyagi (21)

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Fashion designer and
content creator

“ I want my label to be the most well-known, and that my outfits are liked by all.”

PHOTO BY: MADHU KAPPARATH; DIRECTED BY: KAPIL KASHYAP

Sew Damn Good

Nancy Tyagi was extremely concerned about the health and safety of her mother who worked in a coal factory in Delhi. “I wanted to get her to quit that job,” she says. The escape route she charted for her mother eventually landed Tyagi in Cannes.

During the Covid-induced lockdown, Tyagi, who had moved to Delhi from Barnawa village in Uttar Pradesh for UPSC coaching, used her mother’s savings for her classes to purchase a camera, and, with the help of her brother Ahaan, she started creating fashion content to post on Instagram and YouTube.

From recreating Shantipriya aka Deepika Padukone’s look from *Om Shanti Om* to her “favourite” Aishwarya Rai Bachchan’s ‘Ramta Jogi’ look, Tyagi tried every trick in the book to garner views. The duo would create videos to participate in the MeeshoHaul, GRWM (Get Ready With Me), and 100 days of Outfit from Scratch challenge trends on social media—in the latter, one could see the self-taught designer

picking up fabric from Seelampur market in Delhi and turning it into an outfit using her mother’s manual sewing machine. Creating dresses for her doll with scraps of fabric had been a favourite activity for Tyagi when she was little.

Undeterred by the body shaming comments she received on her posts, Tyagi gradually gained followers and was discovered by Monk Entertainment, a talent management, influencer marketing, and video production company in 2023. “The day we discovered her account, we realised Nancy’s story had potential that we could not even fathom. Her talent was unique, and her creativity knew no bounds,” says Viraj Sheth, CEO and co-founder Monk Entertainment.

With the help of the team at Monk, Tyagi landed the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of showcasing her talent on the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival in 2024, for which she created four outfits in four months. Made using 1,000 metres of fabric and weighing 20 kg, her pink ruffled gown with a long trail made fashion aficionados sit up and take notice. Her second look, of a hand-embroidered saree, caught actress Sonam Kapoor’s eye and she posted an Instagram story with the comment “Best outfit in Cannes... make me something.”

“We believed Cannes would be the right platform for her to

showcase her designing skills and I’m just happy our hunch was right. While I knew she would seize the moment, the way she did and the way it was received was far beyond our imagination,” says Sheth.

The red-carpet debut at Cannes catapulted Tyagi to fame and since then she has received many collaboration opportunities from CaratLane, Lakmé, Pond’s, Dot and Key Skincare, and Clinic Plus, to name a few.

With a following of 3 million on Instagram and 2.49 million subscribers on YouTube, Tyagi says “*Zindagi change ho gayi hai. Kabhi socha nahi tha (my life has changed in a way I could never imagine)*.” She continues to spend most of her time working on shoots, designing outfits, and planning promotional activities.

Recently Tyagi took a break from work and travelled to Maldives with her family. She also got her first car. While she wants to continue being a content creator, she wants to prioritise designing. Projecting into the future, she says, “I want my label to be the most well-known, and that my outfits are liked by all.”

Talking of her mother’s reaction, Tyagi says with a smile, “My mother couldn’t be more proud. All day, she calls people up and keeps talking about me.”

— Benu Joshi Routh

Fashion

Heritage Reimagined

Shanti Banaras, a luxury brand that sells designer Banarasi sarees, lehengas, and other Indian clothing, was born out of a recognition of the decline of real zari—an intricate weaving technique using real gold and silver threads—in Banarasi sarees, which is increasingly overshadowed by the powerloom industry and mass production. “Shanti was created to fill this niche—dedicated to preserving this unique craftsmanship and offering it as a luxurious, timeless investment in an increasingly mass-produced world,” says Khushi Shah, creative director and co-founder of Shanti Banaras.

From the fourth generation of a family that has been involved in the business of handwoven Banarasi sarees, Shah, who grew up in Banaras (Varanasi), still recalls accompanying her grandfather through the narrow alleys of Ramnagar to meet the master weavers and watch them at their looms, creating intricate Banarasi textiles using the traditional kadiyal and uchant weaving techniques. She would also go to their wholesale manufacturing store often. “I caught the pulse of the market at a very young age, and I knew that

after completing my education, this was what I wanted to dive into.”

Even before joining college, Shah was actively involved in shaping Shanti’s brand identity development and positioning. “My education at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), New York, gave me a deep understanding of the global luxury market and the technical nuances of textiles, enabling me to identify the untapped opportunity to revive the art of real zari—a symbol of heritage, making each saree a valuable heirloom.”

Shanti Banaras is an extension of a wholesale manufacturing brand called YNGS, started as a pop-up in Varanasi in 2015 by the family, which was taken forward with a Shanti Banaras retail boutique in 2019 by her brother Amrit Shah. The brand also has retailing outlets in Delhi and Mumbai.

Her brother now handles the wholesale business and design aspect, while she has been involved in the conceptualisation, brand identity development and marketing of the Shanti Banaras retail stores. “Every day it’s a constant effort to change the visual narrative, to change the experience at the store and the entire experience of buying a Banarasi saree,” says Shah.



Khushi Shah (25)

Creative director & co-founder, Shanti Banaras

“We’ll create an artisan village and museum to preserve traditional weaving techniques.”

Unlike a traditional Banarasi saree store with *gaddas* (mattresses) on the floor, Shah wants to provide the experience of a luxurious premium jewellery brand. “At the stores, our thoroughly trained staff explains the concept of real zari,” says Shah. Along with every purchase, the buyers are given a certificate of authenticity. “The experience is akin to buying a precious product like a piece of jewellery.”

Shah is consciously trying to break away from the stereotypical association of Banarasi silks with an older and traditional generation by changing the narrative and showing her brand through a modern lens. By changing the visual imagery and styling in her campaigns, she has also been successful in attracting a younger audience towards the brand.

According to Shah, the younger generation often lacks awareness of what ‘*sacchi zari*’ truly means. Shah has been hosting pop-up events in various cities within India to meet her customers and increase awareness about real zari.

Going forward, Shah says, “We will invest in blockchain to verify the authenticity of every real zari piece, making it traceable and transparent. We also plan to create NFTs of exclusive saree designs and Banarasi motifs. The brand aims to partner with auction houses like Christie’s and Sotheby’s, showcasing limited edition real zari pieces as collectible luxury items.

“Our artisans remain at the heart of Shanti. We’ll create programmes and a physical artisan village and museum to preserve traditional weaving techniques.”

“We are trying to give these timeless pieces the spotlight they deserve and putting Banarasi handloom at the forefront of fashion. This is how we are turning heritage into a global statement.”

Sunil Sethi, chairman of the

Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI), who has closely followed Shah’s journey with Shanti Banaras, says, “I am truly impressed by her entrepreneurial acumen. Despite being at a relatively nascent stage, she has taken bold strides, from establishing a retail presence to participating in B2C exhibitions, showcasing her commitment.”

What impresses him the most is the marketing, which is very subtle and discreet, with the focus on handloom textiles and the city of Banaras rather than heavily promoting the brand itself. “These elements align beautifully with the flavour of the decade, reflecting a deep understanding of contemporary consumer preferences and a commitment to preserving heritage.”

– Benu Joshi Routh

WATCH OUT FOR



HUMERA TAMBOLI, 29
CEO & founder,
Sensing Wear LLP

A trained industrial product designer with a BA in footwear design, Humera Tamboli’s personal struggle with sensitive skin and not being able to find sustainable wellness wear in the Indian market motivated her to pivot towards innovating skin-safe materials that reduce the impact on the environment. Sensing is India’s one-of-a-kind wellness brand that is committed to creating skin-smart, eco-conscious everyday wear clothing blending nature, innovation, and mindful design to craft garments that are soft, breathable and gentle on even the most sensitive skin. Each piece is created from pH-balanced fabrics made from blends of beechwood. Sensing’s clothing is not only designed to perform with its unique odour-free and moisture-wicking properties, but also returning to the soil at the end of its life.



CATEGORY COORDINATOR:

Benu Joshi Routh | JURY: **Nandita Abraham**, dean, BITS Design School, Mumbai; **Anuj Sharma**, sustainable fashion designer and professor

Finance

Making Deals Count

Ananant Mohta is young to the corporate world, but has seen and learnt that life can be both wretched and glorious. At 12, he saw most of his family wealth lost to the 2008 financial crisis. It got him to save pocket money and start investing in the stock markets.

At Bain Capital Private Equity, where he became the youngest vice president at 27, he had the opportunity of relocating to their Hong Kong office, but then China's economy started to weaken, and he stayed back. Mohta carried the wish to graduate from a US business school, but then came a promotion to VP at Bain, which has helped him build his CV.

Then he got married which, indirectly, stalled a decision to move towards doing an MBA. "I thought I was a planner, but things did not necessarily go the way I planned them. I've learnt now the need to try to excel wherever you are and not get impatient," Mohta tells *Forbes India*.

Mohta, the youngest of three siblings, was always academically strong and keen to dabble in the world of finance, investing and the

economy. He carried these strengths while studying at New Delhi's Shri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC) and later becoming a chartered financial analyst (CFA) between 2015 and 2019.

His father runs a bed and breakfast hotels business around tech parks in Bengaluru, where the family grew up while his mother has a workshop to manufacture and sell bed linen. Mohta was among the two candidates who got college placements, working at management consultant firm Kearney, as a business analyst, for a year.

But his real skills were honed at private equity firm Bain Capital—where he joined in January 2020—despite teamwork dynamics changing rapidly each time the pandemic surged till end-2021. Luckily for the private equity ecosystem there was enough to work for.

In 2022, Bain Capital closed a near-\$500 million deal to pick up a substantial stake in asset and wealth management services firm 360 One (formerly IIF Wealth). "I had proactively tracked the business even when new at Bain. The business was going through a transition. I thought it was

opportune to go get something done," Mohta recounts of a time in October 2021. His bosses agreed. The 360 One stock has risen to ₹1,183 levels at the BSE on January 17 from a low of ₹407 in April 2023.

Mohta had "peeled the onions" for another important deal of chemical firm Novopor (formerly called Porus labs), where the mandate was to buy out the business and run it. The deal closed in June 2023. He was part of the team which executed the deal to exit lender Axis Bank after six years in late 2023. He speaks now about maintaining "balanced advocacy"—a judgement which is neither completely biased nor bullish.

One of his mentors, Havells India Chairman and MD Anil Raid Gupta, says, "Anant is not just a talented and hardworking boy, he is also a complete personality, carrying the family with him, though he is the youngest." Mohta is a close friend of Gupta's son Abhinav and knows him from his SRCC days.

There is more for Mohta to achieve. "I will continue to be in the world of finance, which I love, but at some point, I wish to explore something more entrepreneurial."

— Salil Panchal



Anant Mohta (28)

VP, Bain Capital Private Equity



I will be in the world of finance, but at some point I wish to explore something more entrepreneurial.”



Making Great Strides

Rajit Uboweja (29)
Partner, Stride Ventures

“Contributing to fundraising was a major turning point in my professional growth.”

Rajit Uboweja proudly points out that he is one of the youngest partners in the global venture debt industry.

After completing a Post Graduate Programme in Management from Indian School of Business, he joined Stride Ventures as an Associate in 2020. As a core team member, Uboweja claims that he has played a pivotal role in building the global venture and private debt fund in areas of deal sourcing, fundraising, exits, and providing strategic support to portfolio companies.

“I have been an instrumental part of the team that raised \$400 million across Stride’s first three India-based venture debt funds,” Uboweja highlights. “Contributing to fundraising was a major turning point in my professional growth.”

Over the past four years, Uboweja has led investments in over 50 of Stride Venture’s 160 venture debt portfolio companies and has deployed around \$170 million across early and late startups in diverse sectors, including consumer and B2B commerce. Some key portfolio venture debt companies include Sugar Cosmetics, Zepto, The Whole Truth, Vahdam Teas, and Nat Habit.

Gaurav Agarwal, co-founder, Nat Habit, recalls how Uboweja helped the direct-to-consumer company navigate a challenging patch. “Nat Habit was looking to raise venture debt to elongate the runway and not use debt to accelerate growth,” he says. “Rajit understood the business needs and took a bold bet to give

terms not common in the industry to help Nat Habit raise debt.”

Ishpreet Singh Gandhi set up Stride Ventures in 2018. The founder and managing partner has seen Uboweja evolve as a professional and develop skillsets across various areas of investing such as understanding the business of portfolio companies, structuring deals and exits. He believes Uboweja will lead the firm in its next phase of growth.

“Rajit was always very sharp with numbers and good at building relationships, and he has also successfully developed investing skillsets beyond deal sourcing,” Gandhi adds. “The next five years will be about diversifying his skillsets and delving deeper.”

Uboweja, who graduated from Shaheed Sukhdev College of Business Studies and had a brief stint at an investment bank, says being on the Forbes India 30u30 list was a long-held aspiration.

“Having witnessed a number of our portfolio companies’ founders be a part of this list over the past five years, I am super stoked to get the honour to be a member of the Class of 2025,” he exclaims. “I hope to contribute to the forum’s legacy by continuing to create impact and serving the Indian startup ecosystem.”

— Neha Bothra

CATEGORY COORDINATORS:
Salil Panchal and Neha Bothra |
JURY: **Bhavik Hathi**, MD and co-head, Global Transaction Advisory Group, India-Alvarez & Marsal; **Ashish Kashyap**, founder, INDmoney

Keeping Farmers at the Forefront

Friends and roommates Raghav Simha, Jatin Talreja and Pragun Bajaj had once brainstormed an idea to launch a restaurant while studying at the Institute of Hotel Management, Aurangabad.

Bringing it to fruition meant quitting their high-paying jobs at some of the country's top five-star hotels such as the ITC Royal

Bengal, JW Marriott and even the Michelin-starred Eleven Madison Park based in New York, US.

"That was the biggest challenge before we began our journey," recalls Simha, 27. The trio finally launched Project Hum, a farm-to-table fast-casual restaurant in September 2022, in Bandra, Mumbai.

In a country, where eateries

based on this concept are burgeoning, the USP of Project Hum, other than popularising clean eating, explains Simha, is that it connects diners with farmers they source the produce from.

"We don't buy anything from mandis (marketplace) or suppliers. We want to stay as

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Raghav Simha (27)

Co-founder-operations head, Project Hum

Pragun Bajaj (28)

Co-founder-kitchen operations, Project Hum

Jatin Talreja (27)

Co-founder-business, Project Hum

“We don't buy anything from marketplaces or suppliers. We want to stay as local as possible.”

Raghav Simha



local as possible,” says Simha.

The menu changes according to seasons to incorporate ingredients based on the harvesting cycles. So does the ‘Farmer of the Month’ at the restaurant—a board depicting the source of the seasonal ingredient and the farmer who cultivated it. Another initiative, ‘Meet the Farmer’, gives diners an opportunity to spend time with the farmers listening about their challenges and triumphs, and learning about agriculture.

The kitchen gets its supplies from

three farmer producer organisations (FPOs)—each comprising more than 75 farmers—across Maharashtra’s cities and villages such as Junnar, Nashik, Thanegaon and Nanded.

“By working closely with the farmers, not only do we ensure that the freshest harvest is brought to the restaurant, but also served at its best state,” says Simha. Additionally, he says, “With this model, we also reduce the carbon footprint incurred with long-distance transportation of food.”

With sustainability at the heart of the project, the food is served in trays and disposable bowls made of sugarcane bagasse, thus saving 6,000 litres of water per day.

Today, the restaurant makes approximately 400 orders daily, including dine-in and deliveries, and has clocked in a revenue of ₹4.48 crore in FY24.

In October 2024, actor Agastya Nanda invested in the project.

“Apart from its excellent selection of clean and health-oriented foods, the care and consideration with which the team conducts themselves stood out for me,” says Nanda. “It truly surprised me to discover how delicious healthy food can be. The team is on the path of immense growth and I’m certain they can catapult the health food sector to great heights.”

The trio launched a second outlet in Mumbai’s Versova in January, adding a breakfast menu and a healthy bakery,

(From left) Jatin Talreja, Raghav Simha, and Pragun Bajaj

both not on offer at their Bandra restaurant. In the next couple years, they want to introduce the restaurant in other cities as well.

While they touch new milestones, they are also aware of the challenges that may come their way. But the trust earned from their patrons, and the growing community, is enough to keep them going, says Bajaj.

“Project Hum is my second home,” says Nicole D’Souza, a Mumbai-based patron. “I visit it thrice a week and if it’s any less than that, it’s only because I’m unwell or out of town,” she says.

— Anubhuti Matta

WATCH OUT FOR



AISHWARYA ADGAONKAR, 29
Co-founder, Centro Hotels

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Centro is a modern, design-led mid-market hotel brand. It is owned and operated by SARC Hospitality, co-founded by siblings Aishwarya and Chaitanya Adgaonkar (33). Centro was launched in 2019 with an aim to set the standard for hospitality in India’s Tier II and III cities. They claim to have an average occupancy rate of 95 percent and their average room rate has grown from ₹1,800 in 2019 to ₹5,600 in 2024. Additionally, as of 2024, they’ve achieved a year-on-year growth of 49 percent, claims Aishwarya.

She says their mid-term goal is to expand to at least 25 properties across India, having already received interest from cities like Ranchi, Mysuru and Chandigarh. They’ve also signed Letters of Intent for properties in Nashik and Nagpur in Maharashtra, she adds.



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:

Anubhuti Matta & Darielle Britto |

JURY: **Kapil Chopra**, chairman of the board, EazyDiner, and founder, The Postcard Hotel; **Pooja Dhingra**, founder and CEO, Le15; **Ranveer Brar**, celebrity chef and actor

Breaking the Brain-Computer Interface

For Siddhant Dangi and Deepansh Goyal, it all started from college. The two were hostel neighbours at BITS Pilani, with a common love for science and building things ground up. It began with drones, those that could go up to 47 kilometres per hour before a chance conversation with a surgeon, who specialises in amputee prosthetics at the Army Hospital (Research And Referral) in New Delhi, introduced them to the world of neuroscience and brain signals, and changed their lives forever.

“One of our most memorable projects was a thought-controlled bionic arm,” says Dangi. “I wondered, what if these arms could respond to the brain’s natural thoughts?” That eventually led the duo to delve into the world of neuroscience to understand brain signals and how to make technology capture them reliably. Back then, they felt that the existing solutions were unreliable or prohibitively expensive. “So, we took on the challenge of developing affordable hardware that offered near-medical-grade accuracy,” says Dangi, who co-founded Nexstem with Goyal in 2020.

In 2021, Nexstem launched Nexstem V1, an EEG (electroencephalogram) headset

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Siddhant Dangi & Deepansh Goyal (25, 26)

Co-founder & CEO, co-founder & CTO, Nexstem

“In 10 years, Nexstem will have the same transformational impact on neurotech as Nvidia has had on AI.”

Siddhant Dangi



that would capture electrical signals. The success of the device led to a focus on capturing bio signal acquisitions, which have the potential to be used across areas such as medical, gaming, digital health and defence, among others.

Today, Nexstem works to democratise brain-computer interface (BCI) technology and leverage its expertise in neurotech research and engineering to create a comprehensive BCI ecosystem, known as Nexstem Instinct. The ecosystem also includes a headset with adjustable electrodes that can record, visualise and analyse EEG data.

“In a world where innovation keeps changing every day, we need more people and startups ready to take on big challenges and create bold ideas,” says Vibhore Sharma, CTO of Info Edge and an investor at Nexstem. “Nexstem is one of the few startups from India working on solutions for the world. Having seen Siddhant and Deepansh’s journey from the start, I’m confident Nexstem will play a big role in shaping the future of BCI and HCI (human-computer interaction) globally.”

Over the next two years, the company intends to deploy Instinct suites across the world’s top 700 neuroscience research institutes alongside increasing its portfolio. “In 10 years, Nexstem will have the same transformational impact on neurotech as Nvidia has had on artificial intelligence,” Dangi says.

— Manu Balachandran

Siddhant Dangi (left)
and Deepansh Goyal

Health Care

On a Mission to Replace Microscopes

For Devika Gholap, the mission is clear. Her father, Abhi Gholap, who runs Pune-based OptraScan, and she want to eliminate all microscopes in the world and replace them with digital pathology scanners in the fight against cancer.

These devices, which Devika says cost a fraction of the devices that are currently featured in the global market, could help in democratising treatment and making treatment options affordable for the public. They help scan slides from biopsy or other sources in addition to adding features such as storing, archiving, real-time sharing and reporting, features that are often missing while using microscopes, to help pathologists come to a quicker conclusion.

The technology-enabled service also quickens the review process

PHOTO BY: CHRISTOPHER C. LEE; IMAGING BY: KAPIL KASHYAP
BACKGROUND IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK



Devika Gholap (27)

Co-founder and chief product officer, OptraScan

“Our scanners have a small footprint and are designed to be lightweight.”

and makes for faster decision-making, especially while seeking multiple opinions in the line of treatment. The company’s current focus is on cancers such as breast, prostate, lung and cervical, and it is busy adding newer areas of focus. “This is just the beginning and so many more cancers to work upon,” says Devika, co-founder and chief product officer of OptraScan.

Last year, the company raised \$30 million from Molbio Diagnostics, taking the total funding to \$40 million since being set up in 2016. “Our scanners have a small footprint and are designed to be lightweight, making them ideal for fitting into small workspaces without compromising on the performance,” adds Devika. “We prioritise accessibility and affordability, making digital pathology accessible to a wider range of users.”

The idea to start a company that focuses on digital pathology for the Gholaps came about after Devika’s grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, before passing away. “The diagnosis process was cumbersome, and it took a long time, which affected treatment,” Devika says.

“Different doctors and pathologists had differing opinions. So, there was always the itch to do something around cancer diagnosis.”

That prompted Devika, who studied biomedical engineering, to foray into building a technology aimed at reducing time in the process, removing contaminations of samples while transporting and making the entire process seamless while improving efficiencies. “We are the only Indian company doing this, and we can do it at a fraction of the cost of those developed by global medical equipment makers,” she adds. “This assumes significance in underserved regions where labs struggle with high costs and limited access to advanced tools.”

“Devika has balanced offerings of leadership, problem-solving and organisational skills,” says Dr Nitin Salunke, president and CEO of California-based Supira Medical. “She is dedicated and committed to making health care accessible to the masses which she is realising through her contribution at OptraScan.”

— **Manu Balachandran**



CATEGORY COORDINATOR:
Manu Balachandran | JURY: **Vishal Bali**, executive chairman, Asia Healthcare Holdings; and co-founder & chairman, Medwell ventures; **Meena Ganesh**, chairperson, Portea Medical

Gold in the Gutter

For Divanshu Kumar, being an entrepreneur was serendipitous. A college project incubated at IIT-Madras turned into a large business for the enthusiastic boy from Gaya, Bihar. Kumar developed robots to clean septic tanks and manholes as a safer and alternative solution to manual scavengers. That was the stepping stone for founding Solinas Integrity in 2018.

Despite manual scavenging being banned in India in 2013, it still exists. Manually cleaning, carrying, disposing or handling human excreta from dry latrines, drains and other sanitation systems lead to hazardous diseases and deaths. Around 928 sewer workers died between 1993 and 2020, with the highest casualties in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, according to the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), a government-appointed organisation that oversees the conditions of sanitation workers.

Kumar, co-founder and CEO of Solinas Integrity, is driven to find a permanent, and effective solution to the cruel practice of manual scavenging. They were approached by a team of manual scavengers to develop safer solutions for manhole and septic tank cleaning. Over the course of one year, they worked on a prototype and expanded it to clean water pipelines. Kumar completed his graduation in mechanical engineering from IIT-Madras and later earned a master's degree in product design.

He recalls the pain and endurance it took to build robots which could clean blocked drains, septic tanks and even inspect

pipelines as narrow as 90 mm. "Once we got the confidence in 2021-22 that we had the right product and we were solving a real problem, we never looked back. The seed funding in July 2022 gave us the capital we needed to further grow and pushed us to where we are today," adds Kumar.

Moinak Banerjee, 31, joined Solinas in 2020 and is currently CTO and co-founder. Initially, apart from Kumar and Banerjee, there was another co-founder, Bhavish Narayani, who was Kumar's lab mate at IIT-Madras. However, Narayani exited the company in 2024.

Kumar claims that Solinas Integrity is the first company in India to leverage robotics and artificial intelligence to solve the problem of water and sanitation in a holistic manner. "Our solution in pipeline inspection and management is not only reducing cost, minimising labour efforts but also saving water and preventing flooding in urban areas," Kumar adds.

Currently, Solinas works in two aspects: Cleaning of septic tanks, drains and sewers, and inspection and cleaning of water pipelines. Based out of Chennai, the company has developed two robots: Endobot and HomoSEP. Endobot crawls through a water and sewer pipeline of any material and of diameter ranging from 90 mm to 1500 mm.

"HomoSEP is India's first septic tank and manhole cleaning robot that comes with cleaning blades, suction mechanism, storage and transportation option," says Banerjee. One of the key advantages of HomoSEP is its ability to homogenise hard sludge,



Divanshu Kumar (28)

CEO and co-founder, Solinas Integrity

“We want to build a ₹500 crore business by FY30, impacting over 100 Indian cities and 10 countries.”



transforming it into a slurry for more effective pump-out.

A third service provided by Solinas is Swasth AI which is a cloud-based storage and data management solution. The data collected through EndoBot is processed for defect localisation with GIS tagging and a customised report is generated in the Swasth AI dashboard. It has filed for 10 patents and has received patents for two products.

Solinas has raised capital worth \$5 million from a clutch of marquee investors, including SBI Ventures, deeptech firm 8X Ventures, Rainmatter, Veltis Capital, family office of Weizmann Group and Ramesh Mangaleswaran (as angel). The company closed FY24 with an Ebitda loss of ₹2.8 crore and a revenue of ₹4.5 crore. It estimates to close FY25 with revenues of ₹15 crore and is expected to break even based on a large order book.

“Solinas’ work is in line with the government’s mission of providing clean water and sanitation to every household. It fits well in our portfolio of allocating funds towards clean water and sanitation,” says Suken Shah, principal investment officer (Neev Fund), SBI Ventures.

Solinas sells robot cleaners and offers maintenance services to clients mostly in government civic bodies, housing societies and factory units. Its clients include Suez, Veolia, Jindal Water, L&T, Daimler, and municipal corporations like Chennai, Aurangabad and Sangli.

“We envision to build a ₹500 crore business by FY30, impacting over 100 Indian cities and 10 countries in eliminating manual scavenging,” Kumar says.

- Nasrin Sultana



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:
Nasrin Sultana and Samar Srivastava
| JURY: **Koushik Bhattacharyya**,
managing director and head, industrials,
Aventus Capital; **Bhushan Sawant**,
managing partner, Sawant Partners

Music

In Da Groove

In 2015, 18-year-old Karan Kanchan attended the Mad Decent Block Party at Mumbai's Mahalakshmi Race Course, where he witnessed artistes such as Major Lazer and Giraffage perform live for the first time. The experience left a lasting impression on him. It was at that moment that he made a promise to himself: One day, he would perform at that very venue.

Fast forward to 2024, and Kanchan took the stage at Lollapalooza's second edition, debuting with his show, The Karan Kanchan Experience. With a vision to fuse music from diverse genres with dynamic visuals, lighting and sound, he created a truly immersive theatrical experience—one that left an unforgettable impression on the audience.

Today, says Ankur Tewari, singer-songwriter, music supervisor, sonic designer, "Karan is the hottest beat maker in the current scene. He has the grooves, but he doubles it up with a collaborative personality and entrepreneurial knack."

Kanchan has worked with multiple music artistes and produced songs across genres from 'Ishq Nachaawe' (*Kho Gaye Hum Kahan*, 2023) along with Rashmeet Kaur and Yashraj to 'Baazigar' along with Divine. "There are many producers out there who might be better than me, but understanding the artiste is where the main game is," he says. "When collaborating with so many artistes, you need to make space for them to feel comfortable and be their most

vulnerable self while creating art, and I try to allow them to be that."

In addition to producing music, he's set up Concertancy, a consultancy that helps music artistes produce better live shows. His team is working with the likes of Diljit Dosanjh, King and Jasleen Royal, among others.

Kanchan came across an electronic dance music (EDM) video in 2012, when he was in school, and that's when he became curious about how these sounds are made. "I started convincing my parents since I was in class nine that I want to pursue music professionally," he says. "Eventually, they saw how dedicated I was and supported me to pursue this dream."

Back in 2015, while at the Mad Decent Block Party in Mumbai, he noticed how every artiste had a unique sound. "I realised I needed to find my own," he recalls. Inspired by the diversity of music he encountered, Kanchan set out on a journey of exploration, delving into genres as unexpected as Japanese classical music.

Over the years, he has explored all kinds of music from Japanese trap to Indian hip hop, among many others. "He has been the backbone and literally been the main producer for many hip-hop/EDM/pop artistes. Some of the biggest works coming out of the hip-hop/Indie scene have his might behind it. His discipline, music skills and dedication to the craft are exemplary," says Padmanabhan NS, artists & label partnerships head, Spotify India.



Karan Kanchan (27)

Artist & Entrepreneur



Understanding the artiste is where the main game is.”

Kanchan credits his growth to meeting the right people and gaining knowledge from them. “Also, being curious about the technological and creative aspect, and consistently training myself trying to get better at every aspect of making music.”

Looking back, he says, “It was a one-second decision, of clicking this random YouTube-recommended EDM video... it pretty much changed my life. Then, it was just a domino effect.” He adds. “After all these years, I’m still as curious as I was on day one.”

— Naini Thaker



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:

Naini Thaker and Samidha Jain |
JURY: **Ankur Tewari**, singer-songwriter,
music supervisor, sonic designer;
Padmanabhan NS, head, artists and
label partnerships, Spotify India

NGOs and Social Entrepreneurship

Championing Menstrual Health

Millions of menstruators in India, particularly in rural areas and from disadvantaged backgrounds, struggle with menstrual taboos and period poverty, where they are treated as ‘impure’, cannot afford quality products, or access water and sanitation facilities to manage their menstrual hygiene. This not only makes them miss school or work, but also negatively affects their health.

Soumya Dabriwal and Aradhana Rai Gupta, through their social enterprise Project Baala, have been working to provide quality, low-cost menstrual products, and create awareness about menstrual hygiene and health. Since 2017, their enterprise has reached a million beneficiaries across 28 states in India, apart from Ghana, Nepal and Tanzania.

Dabriwal started building the venture while she was pursuing an economics degree from the University of Warwick, and soon joined hands with Gupta, her childhood friend who has an MBA from Cornell University. They are both from business families, and were sure they want to get into entrepreneurship, but in the impact space.

The first product by Project Baala was a sanitary pad reusable up to two years. “It has antimicrobial treatments, an absorbent core and is leak-proof,” says Dabriwal. Their

manufacturing base is in Delhi-NCR and they have since expanded the portfolio to sustainable menstrual cups and biodegradable pads. In 2025, they are working with Swedish scientists to launch hydrophobic pads, which “will last up to five years, use one-tenth of the water needed to wash reusable pads, and are biodegradable,” says Gupta. They sell their products through a grassroots network of around 500 women from the community, apart from 70-odd non-profits who help them reach difficult communities and disseminate knowledge.

The major source of revenue, almost 90 percent, is from B2B partnerships with corporates, grant-giving organisations and international aid organisations,

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Soumya Dabriwal (29)
Aradhana Rai Gupta (29)
 Co-founders, Project Baala

“The new hydrophobic pads will last up to five years and are biodegradable.”
Aradhana Rai Gupta





to implement their social impact work, apart from government grants and contracts. The duo claims that their revenue has increased from around ₹2.5 lakh in the first year of operations to ₹5 crore as of November 2024. They are aiming for around ₹10 crore revenue this year.

“Project Baala has the right blend of heart and head in terms of solving a social problem in a transformative manner, where the solution is there to stay, sustainable and owned locally,” says Sudarshan Suchi, chief development officer, Reliance Foundation. “The initiative is designed keeping ground realities in mind, through collective action, and yet has a very entrepreneurial mindset.”

Gupta’s and Dabriwal’s future goals include expanding to countries like Philippines, Singapore and Bhutan, and use technology to build a comprehensive database on menstrual health in India. Going forward, they want to position themselves as a knowledge-provider and think-tank on women’s health.

— Divya Shekhar

Soumya Dabriwal (left) and Aradhana Rai Gupta

NGOs and Social Entrepreneurship

Plate Impact

When he chose to turn entrepreneur instead of going the family business way, Rishabh Suri decided he would look at trying to solve the waste problem. After exploring opportunities in categories from e-waste to solid waste, he narrowed down on agri waste, planning to make tableware that would give back to the Earth.

In 2020, he, along with brother Rohan Suri, incorporated qudrat and tied up with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research in Thiruvananthapuram where it took a couple more years of trial, error and research to finalise the raw material and the final product. “Around November 2022, we started getting some production off the line,” says Rishabh.

While they made ₹1.5 lakh in pilot sales, in FY24, they had sales of ₹51 lakh of tableware made from rice husk and rice straw—tableware they say is not only sturdy, microwaveable and freezable but also free of any adhesives and coatings, making it safe for animals eating from trash cans or when it decomposes into the soil in 30 days.

“The company is completely bootstrapped, my family and I have put in around ₹2 crore and we are

close to around ₹1 crore in funds from the government and grants,” says Rishabh, whose firm also sells tableware and takeaway packaging made of sugarcane bagass, rice flour and tapioca starch, manufacturing for which is outsourced to partner firms. Clients include Chaayos, The Leela, and the government of Meghalaya. “B2B is where most of our revenue is now coming in from. Though this may change going forward,” he adds.

The company has a manufacturing plant in Thiruvananthapuram and, besides India, is present in Nepal, the US, UK, Canada, Mexico, France, Luxembourg and Tanzania.

“Rishabh envisions tapping into the vast export potential of his startup’s product. His strategic focus is on identifying and entering key international markets with high demand, ensuring maximum growth and global reach for the business,” says Kiran RS, incubation team mentor and lead-ICT and Finance, Pusa Krishi, ZTM & BPD Unit at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute from which qudrat has received a grant of



Rishabh Suri (28)
Co-founder & CEO, qudrat

“ We should be able to replace at least a billion pieces of plastic by the end of the fifth year.”

₹25 lakh structured into three milestone-based tranches. “qudrat has already received the second tranche, showcasing its consistent progress and commitment to delivering results,” he adds.

In the past 21 months, results also include the environmental impact. “Each plastic disposable gets replaced by a sustainable alternative and in our 21 months, we crossed 5 million over there. And we are close to around 1 lakh kg of plastic that we’ve replaced,” says Rishabh, adding that the impact is also in terms of using agricultural waste as well as the CO2 emissions of manufacturing of plastic versus the more sustainable alternatives. And while the plan is to grow 4x each year to achieve ₹100 crore in revenue by 2027-28, the mission is also that “we should be at a level where we should be able to replace at least a billion pieces of plastic by the end of the fifth year”.

- Monica Bathija



CATEGORY COORDINATORS: **Monica Bathija and Divya Shekhar** | JURY: **Gayatri Vasudevan**, chairperson, LabourNet; **Atul Satija**, founder and CEO, The/Nudge Institute

The World at His Feet

In 2013, D Gukesh had watched Magnus Carlsen beat Viswanathan Anand, India's first Grandmaster, to win the World Championship held in his hometown of Chennai. Eleven years later, Gukesh scripted a fairytale ending to the story as he brought home the World Championship crown back to India as its youngest winner.

It took till the 55th move of the final game of the 14-match bout between defending champion Ding Liren and Gukesh, and a rookie error by the Chinese Grandmaster, for the teenager to change the course of

history. "I've been dreaming about this and living this moment since I was six or seven. [Now] I'm living my dream," the 18-year-old said in his post-match press conference.

Gukesh, who emerged out of India's vibrant chess ecosystem studded with 85 Grandmasters, was a story waiting to happen. Born to doctors—father an ENT and mother a microbiologist—he took to chess at the age of seven. Once Gukesh became proficient, his father gave up his job to travel with him to tournaments and he was pulled out of formal schooling to focus on the sport. It's a call that his parents

questioned occasionally, but their conviction was vindicated when Gukesh turned 12 and became the country's youngest Grandmaster. He hasn't looked back since. Earlier in the year, he won an individual and a team gold in the Chess Olympiad—his performance rating of 3056 was the highest in the tournament.

His composure and his ability to remain unfazed are exceptional, and he brings the same attitude and strategy to every game, says Anand, himself a five-time World Champion and the torchbearer of India's chess revolution. "For instance, his win in Game 11 [of the World Championship] was met by quite a stinging defeat in Game 12, but he took it in his stride and kept working," says Anand, who mentors Gukesh in the WestBridge Anand Chess Academy. "There's a kind of consistency that you see with him and that makes him very strong because, if you're his opponent, you feel it's hard to break him," he adds.

Despite the World Championship being his first, Gukesh wasn't looking to play safe, but pushed for a confrontation in every game—if he applied pressure consistently, he believed, "eventually that'll produce an error by the opponent", says Anand. This attitude, backed by thorough preparation is what brought him success at the prestigious event. "He prepared diverse ideas in many different openings. Some didn't work, like Game 1, but many worked, like Games 3, 7, 13," observes Anand.

At 18, Gukesh has achieved what many aspire to once in their lifetime. And this is just the beginning.

—Kathakali Chanda

D Gukesh (18)
Chess player

“I’ve been dreaming about this and living this moment since I was six or seven.”

Diva Dipti: The Empowering Journey of a Self-Made Icon



Diva Dipti

In the ever-evolving world of PR and luxury brands, Diva Dipti stands out as a radiant example of resilience, determination, and grace. A single mother raising a 14-year-old daughter while excelling in a high-pressure career, Dipti's story is one of empowerment and inspiration.

A Journey of determination and Self Belief

From humble beginnings, Diva Dipti carved her path in the competitive PR and luxury industry wherein she has associated with international brands like Mercedes Landmarc Cars, Kia Motors, Debeers Forever Mark, to name a few...

She attributes her success to hard work, self-belief, and the ability to multitask responsibilities with poise. Her social media profile mirrors a glimpse into her journey, showcasing not just her professional achievements but also her role as a dedicated and inspiring Mother.

"Believing in yourself and facing all challenges teaches You, gratitude in life," says Dipti, who has mastered the art of multitasking without compromising on either her career or personal commitments.

Empowering People Through 'UNITE'

Her Non Profit Organization is a community driven by a deep passion for lending a helping hand to the society.

Diva Dipti's influence extends beyond her professional accomplishments. Through her community initiative, UNITE, she is empowering people to chase their dreams and achieve their goals.

By fostering connections and sharing resources, Dipti is creating a platform for women to thrive, proving that success is best when shared.

A Star on the Ramp

Her association with high-profile events, including the prestigious BOMBAY TIMES FASHION WEEK, further cements her status as a style icon. Her work with luxury brands and her presence on the runway embodies her versatility and her ability to inspire through fashion and elegance.



Diva Dipti awarded by Shri Bhagat Singh Khoshyari Ji and Shri Ramdas Athawale

A Role Model for Modern Women

Diva Dipti's story resonates with countless women who aspire to balance their personal and professional lives. Her journey exemplifies that being a single mother or facing challenges should never deter one from reaching for the stars.

Indeed, Diva Dipti is a true diva, not just for her achievements but for the way she motivates and uplifts others, one step at a time.

She motivates people to look for strength within and conquer challenges with grace and poise!

Top of the Charts

Yashasvi Jaiswal's early tryst with the Mumbai maidans is well-known by now. The 10-year-old from Uttar Pradesh's Bhadohi had landed up in the city in 2010 to play cricket, and spent over two years at a club tent at the Azad Maidan, in abysmal living conditions and selling pani puris to survive, before a coach spotted him and took him in. That was 2013.

By the end of 2024, Jaiswal had done enough to redeem the struggles of his past. In a year the Indian top-order batters were panned for a dismal show, he emerged as the second-highest Test run-getter, and was the highest Indian run-getter in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. All four Test centuries he has scored since his debut in July 2023 have been 150+, two of them double centuries. But what's shone through is a key attribute imbibed from the maidans—the ability to put a price on his wicket.

“Maidan cricket in Mumbai has been important for me, especially for playing Tests. Here, the mindset is to score big, not just a century. No one notices a century,” says Jaiswal, who idolised Sachin Tendulkar while growing up. “When people around you speak about big runs, the idea gets implanted in your head. That's why my quest always remains to score big runs.”

If scoring big is his thing, so is going the distance. In 2024, he hit the highest number of sixes struck in Tests in a calendar year—at

36, he has overtaken explosive batters like Brendon McCullum and Virender Sehwag. Jaiswal credits the Indian Premier League (IPL) and Rajasthan Royals (RR), his IPL franchise, with honing his six-hitting ability. “The tournament has helped me learn how to score quickly,” he says.

IPL 2021, says Jaiswal, was a key turning point for his career. In the previous season, he managed just 40 runs in three matches at a strike rate (the number of runs per 100 balls) of a meagre 90.90—but his statistics have only crept up ever since. 2023 was a standout season where he totalled 625 runs in 14 matches, with a century and five 50s. “Zubin [Bharucha] sir has been my mentor for some years now, and, at RR's high-performance centre in Nagpur, they have given me a nice setup to prepare well,” says Jaiswal.

Bharucha, the director of high performance for RR, recalls the first day they saw Jaiswal at the trials. “Normally, at trials, nobody really knows what type of ball the bowlers are capable of bowling until you have seen a few. However, this didn't stop him from walking across his stumps on the very first ball and flicking it over the fine leg fielder for four,” says Bharucha. “There was no need to see anymore... even if he had got out on that ball, we would have selected him, given that one of keys to being a successful batter is courage.”

Adds Bharucha: “While his hunger was comparable to some of the greats we have seen at RR before, like Rahul Dravid, there





Yashasvi Jaiswal (23)

Cricketer



I am not afraid to face any bowler. I always know that I will find a solution to all problems.”

was little understanding around the methodology to eliminate his errors and develop new skills. The conversation that we had with him was that if he wanted to be better than the best, huge sacrifices would need to be made.”

“I can sacrifice everything for cricket,” says Jaiswal. And it’s not a mere lofty statement. He has spent days at RR’s high-performance centre hitting thousands of balls, perfecting shots by playing them over and over. “There were many occasions when there was blood on his palms,” says Bharucha. “But he never left the field till a particular problem was resolved.” If there was ever a proof of the pudding, it would be in the way in which he hit, with absolute ease, Jimmy Anderson and Mitchell Starc for three consecutive sixes and four boundaries in an over, respectively.

Jaiswal has an inherent trust in his abilities. ‘I believe’ and ‘I trust’ are tattooed on his two arms, and it’s a maxim he lives by. “I am not afraid to face any bowler,” he says. “I always know that I will find a solution to all problems.”

With his selection for the Champions Trophy, the young batter has now completed his entry into all formats. But whatever the format may be, his cricket philosophy remains constant: “I look forward to scoring many runs, I look forward to winning many championships for India,” he says.

—Kathakali Chanda

Preethi Pal (24)

Para athlete

“I want the media to tell people about us so that more athletes emerge in para sports.”

PHOTO BY: MADHU KAPPARATH; DIRECTED BY: KAPIL KASHYAP;
JEWELS: KALAKOSH JEWELLERY

On the Right Track

Preethi Pal created history when she made her Paralympics debut at Stade de France in Paris last year. The para athlete from Hashimpur village in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, won two bronze medals—in the women’s 100-metre and 200-metre T35 (the category is for runners with coordination impairments such as hypertonina, ataxia and athetosis) sprint events. Pal became the first Indian woman to win a medal in track events at the Paralympics or Olympics.

A mere 10 minutes before the event, the 24-year-old was focussed on calming her nerves in the cold room. “It is a matter of just 10 minutes when we step out of the cold room, reach our marks, take positions, and the gun goes off. We (athletes) either win or lose, but our lives change forever,” she says. Pal’s legs were shaking, and she was worried about making a mistake before the gun went off that would ruin her entire race.

But as she stepped on the track, the noise of the crowd calmed every doubt in her mind. Her focus was automatically pinned on hearing the sound of the gun going off. Her coach’s words echoed in her mind: “You just have to repeat what you have done in training, nothing extra. That medal is yours;

you just have to grab it.” When she completed the race for the third position on the podium, the ‘India, India’ chants validated that she had done everything right.

Young Pal discovered that she only needed her toes to run even if she couldn’t walk properly. At 17, she found reels made by blade runners while scrolling on social media. That and meeting para athlete Fatima Khatoun inspired her to take up running. She had complete support from her family, which shut out the naysayers from the day Pal was born. However, the poor farmer’s family could only do so much, especially regarding her diet. Her intake was limited to rotis, and when she could buy a glass of juice, it was the best possible nourishment at the time.

It wasn’t until she convinced her current coach, Naik Gajendra Singh of 227 company of the Indian Army’s Army Service Corps, that she fully understood what goes into preparing to compete at international events. Singh had one condition: He would drop her if she said no to training even once. Working with Singh meant moving to New Delhi, training at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, sticking to a protein diet and changing running techniques to match international standards.

With the help of the Khelo India initiative and later support from the Olympic Gold Quest, Pal is now a transformed para athlete. She is gearing up for the World Championship in New Delhi in September. But Singh says, “We are not focussed on changing the colour of the medal. We are focussed on improving her timing. We compete with ourselves, personal best *karna hai, bas* (improving the personal best time is more important). Our 100 percent goes

into giving India our best.”

Two bronze medals at the World Championships, two at the Paralympics, and an Arjuna Award are just a few achievements that Pal was able to unlock this year. Now, she only wants fans to appreciate para games as much as they admire other sports. “People tuned to Jio Cinema to watch the Olympics, but the Paralympics still did not receive good viewership. I want the media to tell people about us so that more athletes emerge in para sports,” she says. “Para athletes receive support when they participate in international events. I want everyone to support them when they are at the grassroots.”

“Even if two out of hundreds of girls are inspired by what Pal has achieved, and they do something for the country, that would be our ultimate validation,” says Singh.

— Rucha Sharma

WATCH OUT FOR



PRAVEEN KUMAR, 21
Para athlete

Praveen Kumar is a Paralympic gold medallist in the men’s high jump T64 category. The 21-year-old registered a dominant victory at the Paris Paralympics last September with his 2.08 m jump. The jump also set a new Asian record and improved his personal best. This isn’t Kumar’s first Paralympics medal—at Tokyo 2020, he became the youngest para athlete to win a medal when he clinched a silver in the category.



CATEGORY COORDINATORS:

Kathakali Chanda and Rucha Sharma | JURY: **Suhail Chandhok**, sports broadcaster, CEO, U Mumba, and co-founder, Elev8 India Sportz; **Siddharth Sharma**, head of content-sports, RIL-Disney JV

Class of 2024

Our listees from last year are making rapid strides and leaving a lasting impact in their respective fields

BY TEAM FORBES INDIA

BREAKOUT STARS

Seethalakshmy Narayanan
Vice president,
Premji Invest



FINANCE

SEETHALAKSHMY NARAYANAN
Vice president, Premji Invest

She continued to have a successful year after being featured on the list. As part of the private equity arm of billionaire Azim Premji, she led a \$25 million (near ₹265 crore) deal for wealth management firm Dezerv. Other existing investors Elevation Capital, Z47 (formerly Matrix Partners India) and Accel also participated in the fund raise. She also doubled down on an existing portfolio investment of Mintifi, a supply chain financing platform.

PHOTOGRAPHS: MEXY XAVIER

Forbes India Impact: “In the private equity world, the average age of a vice president is around 35 to 38, a younger performer is perceived as being less experienced. Being a part of the list helped a lot in bridging that gap positively. Startup founders been a lot more open to discuss deals.”

SPORTS

SUMIT ANTIL
Para athlete

He gave one of the most impressive performances of 2024 on the field.

At the Paris Paralympics, he became the first Indian male para-athlete to defend his gold medal at the Games. With the javelin throw of 70.59 m in F64 class (for athletes with a leg amputation who compete with prosthetics in a standing position), he also set the new Paralympics record.

HEALTH CARE

DR NADEEM AHMED

Manager, chairman office, Department of Health, Abu Dhabi

Since appearing on the list, Ahmed has moved to Abu Dhabi where he is manager in the office of the chairman of the Department of Health, Abu Dhabi. He provides strategic advisory support, focusing on transformation mandates that enhance health system quality, performance and outcomes across critical sectors, while also driving the execution of priority programmes for Abu Dhabi.

Forbes India Impact: “Being on the list has further solidified my authority in AI and wellness by enabling global collaborations with leading experts.”

DIGITAL CONTENT CREATOR

ANUSHKA RATHOD
Digital Content Creator

She published her first book, *The Money Guide*, a graphic novel in 2024. The book has sold over 50 lakh copies. She was recognised in *Forbes Asia's 30 Under 30 Media, Marketing and Advertising* category. Rathod also became India's voice for Moniify, a global platform delivering innovative business and finance news to entrepreneurs, investors, and professionals in fast-growing economies.

PROVEN PERFORMERS



Rashmika Mandanna
Actor

SPORTS

JYOTHI YARRAJI

Track and field athlete

In 2024, she became the first female athlete to represent India in 100 m hurdles in the Olympics. While she finished 35th in a field of 40 hurdlers, India's fastest hurdler will be raring to go into 2025, having rubbed shoulders with the world's best at the Paris Games. The 25-year-old is being bestowed with the Arjuna Award this year.

PARUL CHAUDHARY

Track and field athlete

She was the only Indian track and field athlete to qualify for two events in the Paris Olympic Games—the 5,000 m and the 3,000 m steeplechase. Although she failed to qualify for the final in either, she clocked her season's best timing

in the steeplechase. For 2025, her sole focus lies on earning a podium finish at the World Championships.

ENTERTAINMENT

RASHMIKA MANDANNA

Actor

She followed the success of *Animal* (December 2023) with another blockbuster, *Pushpa 2: The Rule* last year, that collected over ₹1,220 crore at the box office. The 28-year-old has highly anticipated films such as *Chhaava* and *Sikandar* lined up in 2025.

RADHIKKA MADAN

Actor

The actor started the year with a strong role opposite Akshay Kumar in Sudha Kongara's *Sarfira*. The film failed at the box office, but Madan's

performance was recognised and appreciated. She then starred in singer-composer Jasleen Royal's single 'Sahiba', where she showcased her dancing skills. She will next be seen in the Hindi film *Subedaar*, alongside Anil Kapoor.

FINANCE

VISHNU ACHARYA

Head of strategy and M&A/
investments, Razorpay

In the previous calendar year, he played a key role in helping the company launch Razorpay Ventures, a VC-fund backed by Lightspeed and Peak XV to invest in B2B seed-stage startups. **Forbes India Impact:** "This global recognition has amplified credibility and created positive signalling for me which has allowed me to better navigate the startup ecosystem."

MUSIC

DOT AKA ADITI SAIGAL

Singer, actor

Over the last year, DOT has been working on her new album 'Sea Creature on the Sofa'. Apart from the album, she performed at Bandland 2024, a rock music festival in Bengaluru for the first time. She is working towards her next performance at Lollapalooza in March 2025, while also auditioning for exciting new roles.

Forbes India Impact: "Winning the Forbes India Under 30 title has been a great honour. It has inspired me to work even harder and put all my energy into the things that count."

ECOMMERCE AND RETAIL

VARUN SANGHI

Head, CarTrade Ventures

Last year, OLX India was not profitable. Varun Sanghi focussed on driving a rapid turnaround and achieving profitability within two quarters. Post-acquisition, he led the complex transition of technology and platforms from OLX's global entity to OLX India, ensuring a seamless integration. The most exciting part was crafting a comprehensive strategy to build India's largest used shopping platform, driven by product and technology innovation. **Forbes India Impact:** "This journey

has been transformative for me. The recognition marked the start of a remarkable journey.”

CLEAN ENERGY & CLIMATE CHANGE

ANUPAM KUMAR & ARVIND BHARDWAJ

Co-founder and CEO; co-founder and CTO, Mini Mines

In the last year, Mini Mines has scaled its operations, established a commercial plant, and its team has more than doubled from 15 to 38. Its commercial operations commenced in January 2025. The founders also received the Confederation of Indian Industry Startuppreneur of the Year award.

Forbes India Impact: “The recognition has played a pivotal role in helping us secure partnerships with industry leaders like Samsung and Glencore, significantly expanding our client portfolio,” says Bhardwaj.

B2B

SPRIHA BISWAS

Founder, Trysna

Leveraging her expertise in voice-based AI, she launched Trysna, a gaming studio pushing the boundaries at the intersection of AI and games. Over the past year, she has been focussed on developing their first game, blending speech and behavioural AI with immersive storytelling. The project has

attracted early user interest and investor attention.

Forbes India Impact: “The recognition gave me visibility, opened doors, and helped build a team for my venture. It reignited my confidence in my abilities.”

SHREYANS CHOPRA

Founder and CEO, Mstack

Mstack is experiencing an extraordinary growth phase, doubling its business every quarter while achieving significant breakthroughs in R&D and leveraging AI to revolutionise supply chain processes. The company’s innovative platform is reshaping the specialty chemicals industry, delivering efficiency, and streamlining procurement on a global scale. Last year, the startup closed a \$40 million Series A funding round, led by Lightspeed and Alphawave.

Forbes India Impact: “Forbes India’s 30 Under 30 amplified Mstack’s profile, especially in the US, where it has played a pivotal role in attracting world-class talent.”

ART

VIRAJ KHANNA

Artist

For Khanna, 2024 ended with his show at the Untitled Art Fair in Miami, US. He was showing with Rajiv Menon and was selected as one of the

best booths at the show. He also showed with Art Exposure at Art Mumbai.

Forbes India Impact: “Being featured as a listee has been really great for my career. What I find most helpful is how people in every industry immediately pay attention to anything I have to say.”

NGOS & SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

HUNNY BHAGCHANDANI

Founder, Torchit

He founded Torchit to build innovations for persons with disabilities. In 2024, the Ahmedabad-based social enterprise scaled its products like Jyoti AI (smart glasses for visually impaired people) and Saarthi (smart mobility aid to detect obstacles in real time and provide instant feedback through tactile vibrations), empowering over 400,000 lives. He launched EnableMart, an online marketplace for assisted mobility solutions, with 150 resource centres. In 2025, he plans to expand Torchit globally.

Forbes India Impact: “Life, after being on the list, has brought more visibility to Torchit and opened doors to impactful collaborations.”

INDUSTRY & MANUFACTURING

RAMA KRISHNA MENDU & CHIRAG JAIN

CEO, co-founder; CTO, co-founder, EndureAir Systems

EndureAir delivered one-of-its-kind logistics drone, aimed for navigating challenging and remote terrains, Sabal 20, to the Indian Army. Sales escalated four times in the last one year. It has also received interest for orders from DPSUs. EndureAir may also look at strategies for exports.

Forbes India Impact: “It helped in boosting confidence and team building. The recognition contributed to the overall brand and will definitely help when we start exports.”

HEALTH CARE

ARYAN CHAUHAN

Co-founder, Zivov

Zivov, a Gurugram-based healthtech startup that Chauhan co-founded with his mother, is trying to solve the problem of diabetes with a tech-first approach that ranges from personalised remission plans to continuous glucose



Spruha Biswas
Founder, Trysna

Young and Visionary: Anwesa Parida's Story of Leadership

At 29, Anwesa Parida, the Chief Growth Officer of The KariGhars, is a name that has become synonymous with transformation and innovation in the Indian interior design industry. A proud honoree of Forbes 30 Under 30, Anwesa's journey is a tale of individual achievement and testament to the power of adaptability, strategic thinking, and a relentless pursuit of excellence.

A Journey Fueled by Dedication

Anwesa's rise to a leadership position at a young age was not driven by ambition for power but by a responsibility earned her leadership roles.

Turning Challenges into Opportunities

As a young leader in a competitive industry, Anwesa has faced her share of skepticism, particularly from more experienced peers. Instead of viewing this as an obstacle, she embraced it as an opportunity for growth. "Leadership is not about cloning yourself but about harnessing the strengths of your team," she explains.

One of the earliest lessons in her leadership journey came from her initial approach to product rollouts. Including all teams, regardless of performance, led to inefficiencies and diluted results. Recognizing this, she pivoted to piloting projects with high-performing teams while nurturing underperformers. This strategic shift delivered better outcomes and taught her the importance of leveraging strengths while driving holistic growth.

Spearheading Innovation

In her journey, Anwesa Parida revolutionised operations by optimising inventory management with bulk delivery systems and location mapping, cutting costs without sacrificing service. Her automation tools and dashboards streamlined workflows, enhancing accuracy and saving time. By doubling office space and introducing performance-based incentives, she boosted productivity and drove a PAT increase, showcasing her ability to align innovation with impactful results.



Anwesa Parida
Chief Growth Officer, The KariGhars

The Mentors Who Shaped Her Journey

Anwesa Parida credits her leadership values to her parents, whose careers instilled in her a profound sense of discipline, ethics, and adaptability. Growing up as an Air Force kid, she witnessed firsthand the importance of integrity, resilience, and balance in navigating life's challenges. Her father's unwavering discipline and agility, paired with her mother's perseverance, shaped a leadership style rooted in excellence and ethical decision-making. "Excellence isn't just a goal; it's a way of life," she reflects, carrying forward the values that continue to inspire her in dynamic situations.

Vision for the Future

The interior design industry in India is evolving, driven by demand for personalized, luxurious solutions and sustainable practices. Anwesa believes these factors will define its future. "Personalization is becoming a key differentiator, while eco-friendly practices are no longer optional," she explains. She envisions leveraging AR/VR tools to provide immersive design experiences

aligned with sustainability. Anwesa is also committed to fostering continuous learning and innovation. "Leaders must champion the harmony between personalization and sustainability," she emphasizes.

Balancing Growth and Leadership

Leading at a young age requires striking a balance between personal growth and professional responsibilities. For Anwesa, the two are interconnected. "Growth and leadership are symbiotic," she says. Inspired by Satya Nadella's "learn-it-all" mindset, she actively seeks new skills and feedback to refine her leadership.

Delegation also plays a key role in her strategy. By empowering her team and trusting their expertise, Anwesa creates space for higher-level strategic thinking and development.

Building Credibility and Respect

One of the challenges of being a young leader is establishing credibility among older, more experienced peers. Anwesa approaches this with a combination of fairness, humility, and results-driven actions. "Respect is earned through consistent efforts and thoughtful problem-solving," she notes.

By showing respect for her colleagues' expertise and leading by example, she has cultivated a culture of trust and mutual respect. "True leadership is about uplifting those around you and aligning your contributions with broader organizational goals," she adds.

A Legacy of Transformation

Anwesa Parida's journey at The KariGhars showcases innovation and purpose-driven leadership. "Leadership was never my initial aspiration," she reflects. "My goal has always been to be a reliable asset to the business." Her transformative solutions and steadfast ethics propelled her to leadership, embodying, "With great power comes great responsibility." As a trailblazer in interior design, Anwesa continues to inspire, paving the way for future visionaries.



Vishal Tolambia, founder, Humanity Centred Designs

monitoring (CGM) devices and drawing insights from them. The company has emerged as one of the largest CGM providers in the country, Chauhan claims, even as he ramps up offerings in the diabetes-tech space.

Forbes India Impact: “Being on the list has amplified Zivov’s credibility—doors open faster, and people listen closer... such recognition fuels the drive to achieve more.”

FASHION

VISHAL TOLAMBIA

Founder, Humanity Centred Designs

Last year, he was chosen for the Global Citizen Youth Leaders Awards across the Asia-Pacific region. He established Humanity Centred Designs’ third store in the UK within one-and-a-half years of inception, and plans to open another this summer. Tolambia collaborated with and supported 14 additional micro and small enterprises in Rajasthan—specifically in Jaipur and Pushkar—collectively employing over 180 artisans.

Forbes India Impact: “Being featured on the list has been transformative... it amplified our mission on a global stage, attracted new partnerships, and significantly accelerated our journey toward uplifting micro and small enterprises.”

VISHESH KHANNA

Co-founder, AK-OK

He has enrolled in the MA fashion design programme at Central Saint Martins—considered the No 1 fashion

programme in the world. And AK-OK has recently launched its collection at Saks Fifth Avenue and is opening doors at the Jio World Plaza in Mumbai and Dhan Mill in Delhi for three standalone stores.

Forbes India Impact: “Being on the list opens so many doors for you... it pushes you to challenge yourself much more. Connecting with other winners with a like mindset is also important for learning different perspectives.”

DESIGN

NETRA AJJAMPUR & ABHISHEK DURANI

Co-founder and creative director; co-founder and managing partner, Studio Sorted

They collaborated with entrepreneurs and chefs to build identities of brands such as Smash Guys, Junys and Fervor, and the viral Habitat Cafe in Hyderabad. And they were instrumental in the brand development of South India’s largest and most luxurious upcoming brewery. Sorted Type, their foundry, marked the first design studio of its kind in India and the team at Studio Sorted also launched Panic Press, a culture clothing brand.

CHRISTOPHER RICHARD

Co-founder & director of industrial design, Studio Carbon

The studio completed over 36 projects, collaborating with partners worldwide. Its in-house fittech Startup ‘Hyperlab’ featured on Shark Tank India, bagging a deal twice that of the ask. Hyperlab is the official ‘Innovation

and Technology partner’ for the first International Olympic Research Conference in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports & Bharat Centre of Olympic Research & Education Rashtriya Raksha University. The studio also won ‘India’s Best Design Studio 2024’ award in the ‘Open Design Studio’ category at the CII Design Excellence Awards 2024. **Forbes India Impact:** “It helped in the translation of pitches and building credibility. We got service inquiries from big names and have seen an increase in inbound leads.”



Ankit Alok Bagaria & Abhi Gawri, co-founders, Loopworm

AGRITECH

ANKIT ALOK BAGARIA & ABHI GAWRI

Co-founders, Loopworm

From R&D and launching products to expanding geographies, it has been a busy year for the founders of Loopworm. They sold over 400 tonnes of sustainable insect proteins and fats in the last 12 months to aquaculture feed and pet food manufacturers; they had a breakthrough in the production of recombinant proteins without using a bio-reactor, and they launched new products and secured export-related certifications and approvals to ship their products to Europe, the US, Japan, Southeast Asia, Ecuador and Chile.

Forbes India Impact: “Being recognised in this esteemed list has significantly enhanced our visibility within the industry and beyond. The recognition is helping us forge new relationships, expand our network, and accelerate the growth of Loopworm,” says Bagaria.

Kartik Khairnar: India's Youngest Stock Market Expert and Visionary Entrepreneur!

At just 25, Kartik Khairnar has redefined the benchmarks of success in the financial world, earning accolades as India's youngest stock market expert and fund manager. Hailing from Nashik, Maharashtra, Kartik's journey from a teenage novice to a celebrated financial expert managing ₹165 crores in assets is nothing short of extraordinary.

Kartik's foray into trading began at the young age of 17. Armed with curiosity, determination, and a thirst for knowledge, he generated ₹14 lakh in profit during his first year—an achievement that cemented his confidence in the stock market. From there, his journey has been a masterclass in persistence and self-belief, inspiring thousands of young investors across the nation.

Awards and Achievements

Kartik's accomplishments are a testament to his unparalleled expertise and vision:

- ♦ **India's Youngest Stock Market Expert:** Recognized in the India Book of National Records at just 22 years old.
- ♦ **Founder & CEO of Trading Capitals:** Launched in 2017, the firm has grown into a beacon of financial guidance.
- ♦ **Business Excellence Award 2022:** Honored for his outstanding contributions to the financial industry.
- ♦ **Amazing Indian Personality Award 2022:** Acknowledging his record-breaking achievements.
- ♦ **Entrepreneur of the Year:** India's Most Sparkling Star award.

Transforming Financial Education

Kartik's innovative approach to trading extends beyond his personal success. He is the founder of Trading Capitals Institute, headquartered in Nashik, with branches in Pune and several other cities across Maharashtra. The institute is dedicated to equipping aspiring traders with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of the financial markets.

Understanding the need for a space that merges learning with the real-time application, Kartik conceptualized the



Kartik Khairnar
CEO & Founder, Trading Capitals

Kartik Khairnar's story is a reminder that age is no barrier to achieving greatness. By leveraging knowledge, embracing innovation, and staying true to his vision, he has transformed not only his own life but also the lives of countless others.

Chaillionaire Chai Cafe. This unique venture is a premium stock trading and business meetings cafe – allowing visitors to trade, learn, and connect with like-minded individuals over a cup of chai. The initiative exemplifies Kartik's vision of democratizing financial literacy and creating a culture of collaboration among traders.

A Visionary Fund Manager

Kartik's role as a fund manager overseeing ₹165 crores is complemented by his personal portfolio, valued at over 4.8 million dollars. His disciplined approach to trading is rooted in extensive research, an eye for detail, and a commitment to staying ahead of market trends.

His philosophy is encapsulated in his advice:

"Without knowledge, do not start trading. Education and preparation are the foundation of success in the stock market."

Kartik has also ideated Millionaire Club which aims to set new benchmarks in the entrepreneurship industry with its innovative approach. It will be tailored to each member's unique needs.

A Legacy of Empowerment

Kartik's impact extends beyond the stock market. He has ventured into funding promising startups, providing them with the financial backing to achieve their potential. His entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to share his insights make him a beacon of hope for young Indians aspiring to succeed in trading and business.

Kartik Khairnar's story is a reminder that age is no barrier to achieving greatness. By leveraging knowledge, embracing innovation, and staying true to his vision, he has transformed not only his own life but also the lives of countless others. In doing so, Kartik has proven that with determination and the right mindset, financial independence is within reach for anyone willing to put in the effort.





‘Women Must Advocate More For Themselves’

Meenakshi Dagar, CFO, Lenovo India, speaks about the poor representation of women in leadership positions in finance, involving men in gender conversations and improving workplace participation of women

By ANITHA MOOSATH

Much has changed since the time she joined the finance profession two decades ago, says Meenakshi Dagar. There is better acceptance of the value of inclusion, with companies seeing empowerment of women as a way to achieve parity.

Being empowered is what profoundly shaped Dagar’s career at Lenovo India, where she joined in 2015. For the past three years, she has been the chief financial officer (CFO) and alongside, has been leading the company’s diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) agenda. Dagar believes that systemic changes and organisational efforts apart, the ultimate drive for

“Organisations need to guide women and make their journeys easier, offering them equal opportunities for career progression.”

MEENAKSHI DAGAR,
CFO, LENOVO INDIA

change must come from women themselves. Edited excerpts:

Q Of all the leadership positions you have held, which has been the most challenging?

Being the CFO is the toughest of all. You have to take care of multiple stakeholders across the business. There are many who rely on you to make the right decision from a market perspective as well as with respect to internal policies, processes, efficiencies and growth. These responsibilities put you in the spotlight all the time and invariably bring various challenges. Being the CFO of a tech company brings the extra responsibility of understanding the nuances and implications of our offerings so that they can be leveraged for our own P&L.

Q How has the role of a CFO evolved over the years?

In today’s context, CFOs are no longer just responsible for financial management. They are advisors who help the business grow while also fulfilling their fundamental responsibilities regarding compliance, controls, governance, policies and processes. Unlike earlier, they also have to work closely with the leadership team. While the CMO, CTO and CEO will have their

specific requirements, the CFO is at the centre, connecting the dots. Their role is crucial in influencing leaders and bringing them together, making future-oriented decisions like investing in the right resources and technology, and recognising value that goes beyond mere profit.

Q Have you ever run into situations where your age or gender worked against you?

Many years ago, I remember correcting a male colleague who pointed out to me that women are supposed to be delicate, and not aggressive and assertive. But compared to the time I joined the profession 20 years ago, there is much more education and awareness about the value of inclusion and the need for mutual respect in the workplace. Bias is not explicit in the corporate agenda or KPIs although you may experience it when you are out in the field—for instance, in meetings with low representation of diversity. There may still be people who doubt your capabilities because of your gender.

I have been fortunate to have had the right ecosystem around me. But I have had to put in extra effort in certain situations and for certain tasks compared to a man with the same career path.

Q Only a few women make it to CFO roles even when they have the right skills. Is this due to lack of support from organisations?

In my career, I have never seen any resistance in the corporate setup to being offered a job or position if one is qualified and competent. Of course, as in many other industries and functions, women representation is poor in finance and data shows that there are very few women in CFO positions. Clearly, there is much to achieve in terms of parity. Organisations need to guide women and make their journeys relatively easier, offering them the right environment and equal

SHUTTERSTOCK



Organisations need to foster a culture of inclusion and that must extend beyond gender

opportunities for career progression. We definitely have a long way to go, but I think the journey has begun, supported by legislation that boosts the progressive efforts being made.

What is perhaps more important is a substantial shift in our approach to bringing about change. It is not enough—as many of us do—to place the onus entirely on men in leadership. I strongly believe that women need to advocate more for themselves. I have noticed that, unlike men, most women shy away from articulating their needs, aspirations and achievements. This mindset stands in the way of career progression. They, sort of, linger in the shadows and their accomplishments go unnoticed. Also, even those who are highly competent are lost in self-doubt and some are ready to sacrifice their careers for family reasons. Women need to be more assertive, break barriers and ultimately carve their own paths. For instance, regarding the CFO role, I said I was ready to take it, trusted myself and the organisation trusted my readiness.

Secondly, you have to build the right ecosystem and support system around you. Men or women, no one can conquer the world alone. In the corporate world too, you always need allies, mentors, a support system, a trust system, the right set of leaders, and the right set of managers. Now, how do you build that? While you have this responsibility, it's equally important for the leadership team to contribute.

Q Do you believe women are often held to a different set of standards?

When it comes to KPIs and expectations for a given role, it is the same for everyone regardless of gender. But for a woman to reach the same level as a man, it may be a longer or more difficult path due to multiple dynamics, peer expectations or sometimes unspoken performance bars.

Q What makes an inclusive workplace?

Women experience both highs and lows in their personal and professional

lives. It's the organisation's responsibility to create the right environment during their highs—allowing them to capitalise on the opportunities and grow and thrive in their careers. And also support them during their lows through mentorship, flexible work arrangements and so on. Whenever I interview women who have taken a career break, I notice that they lack confidence. They need to be assured that it's perfectly fine to have taken a break and that their skills and competencies are intact. This is the responsibility of all corporates and all men in leadership.

It's also a fact that women always strive to be the best, the most ideal and nice all the time. But that it's not always “nice” women that make history. To leave a mark, you have to be bold in pursuing your goals and make an impact.

Q You also lead Lenovo India's DEI agenda. Tell us more about it?

Lenovo's DEI paradigm is centred around 'empowerment'. As the CFO today, or as the finance controller nine years ago, my experience of empowerment has been the same. And that's the culture we want to offer anyone and everyone in the organisation. Our idea of inclusion extends beyond gender. For instance, leadership and management teams are educated about the LGBTQI community. Voluntary gender identification is promoted so that we can better build around our equal opportunity goals. This year, we have also planned a workplace audit training to ensure better representation of the differently abled.

We have been actively promoting young talent too, helping them enter STEM-related fields. Since 2021, we have been partnering with TNS India Foundation for a 'Campus to Corporate Careers' programme that provides training for college students at our manufacturing plant in Puducherry. To date, nearly 400 students have secured placements.

“It's a fact that women always strive to be the best, the most ideal and nice all the time. But it's not always 'nice' women that make history.”

At this facility, women now make up over 30 percent of the assembly line, which was traditionally considered a male bastion.

Q Can involving men in gender conversations make a difference?

Absolutely. But still, men are in the majority in most leadership meetings at corporates. They should ensure that there are no barriers to growth for women who have risen through the ranks based on merit. They also need to ensure a no-prejudice, no-bias culture in all policies and processes related to hiring and employee development. Men should draw on their experience to mentor women employees, helping them leverage their strengths and make the most of opportunities.

Q In what ways does Lenovo nurture female talent?

I have been with the company for nine years and I was given that platform and empowerment to grow within the organisation and become the CFO. It's 27 percent women in my team now. There are two in leadership roles too, who have been internally promoted. The Asia-Pacific market, including India, has 29 percent women representation in technical roles. And at the global level, Lenovo has set a target of 27 percent female executive representation by FY26.

We have something called the Accomplisher Series, built around the four Cs—care, connect, culture

and capability. That takes care of flexi work hours, facilities like day care, mentorship, and so on. There are also programmes for the level of women directors and above to ready them for C-suite roles.

Q Your advice for those aspiring to be CFOs...


First is to have a futuristic vision—looking beyond today's cost efficiency and investing in areas that will ensure the organisation's long-term sustainability.

The second is to drive transformation—making the organisation agile and adaptive to cope with the external environment and embrace change.

The third is to have financial resilience and a strong risk appetite—being aware of multiple risks that exist in the data-driven environment and building infrastructure and processes needed to mitigate them.

Q To bring more women into the workforce, where should the change begin?

The responsibility starts with us. As women, it is not necessary to always let go of our dreams. Be bold enough to talk about your objectives, competencies, and growth requirements. It's your responsibility to make it clear, first to your families and then to the outside world. Men in the family as well as leadership also need to actively support women, and organisations need to foster a culture of inclusion.

As a girl from a small town in Uttar Pradesh, I have navigated my way to where I am today. I was clear about what I need and that definitely helped. But it has been a really tough journey, especially coming from an agricultural family that was totally business-oriented. While there are signs of change in some urban areas, gender stereotyping and patriarchal mindset are prevalent all across. The situation is worse in Tier II and III cities. 

‘There are Areas Where India will Lead AI Innovation’

Christopher Young, executive VP at Microsoft, on the company’s aim to become a platform for customers to take up AI development, and how India’s tech products ecosystem will be a source of world-class AI innovations

By HARICHANDAN ARAKALI

An important aspect of Christopher Young’s work as executive vice president of business development, strategy and ventures at Microsoft is to help “corporate” or top leadership at the company think about “what’s gonna move the needle for us in the long run”, he says, over a three-, five-, seven-year horizon or even further out. “Where should we be thinking about placing our long-term bets?”

Young and his team have helped Microsoft work on complex partnerships—one of the best known today is with OpenAI—which help fill gaps in Microsoft’s product portfolio, scale various business operations, and continually make Microsoft a more prominent presence in multiple tech ecosystems.

This has led him and his team to work on a wide range of technologies, from cybersecurity to autonomous vehicles to artificial intelligence (AI) for consumer PCs.

Another role he dons is that of an evangelist of the company’s AI products, such as its Copilot and its “agentic” capabilities, meaning its ability to fulfil various tasks on behalf of human users instead of merely returning useful information in response to various queries.

During a recent visit to Bengaluru, Young sat down with *Forbes India* to



talk about how Microsoft's aim is to become a platform on top of which customers in every market can take up AI development and innovation.

In this conversation, he also spoke about how the company's large team in India will play a role in this, as well as how India's growing tech products ecosystem will be a source of world-first AI innovations, in areas such as health care. Edited excerpts.

Q How is AI adoption among businesses changing, and anything noteworthy in India on that front?

Globally AI adoption is happening in a few of different ways. Copilots such as the GitHub copilot are becoming very popular among developers in tens of thousands of organisations.

Similarly, the Microsoft 365 Copilot, which corresponds with all of our Microsoft 365 products, is seeing strong adoption. In India too, many of our partners such as the large IT services companies, for example, are using GitHub Copilot for their developers across the board. Companies such as Infosys and Wipro are also using Microsoft Copilot both internally and on behalf of our joint customers.

We're also starting to see specific vertical use cases emerge. For example, I met with a startup in Bengaluru that's focussed specifically on enabling retailers to use AI in their marketing stack. For products businesses, AI is helping them reduce time taken, effort, expense and the complexity involved.

Customer support is another well-known area today in which AI is making a big difference. AI is helping (human) agents be better, faster at answering questions, doing follow-ups and so on. Microsoft has deployed AI in its own customer support, as you can imagine.

AI is also helping us write up cases after the fact, which helps us learn from the interactions. Overall, AI is really shrinking the amount of time people have to

spend. It's improving their overall satisfaction. It's improving our ability to help our customers.

Q In his keynote at your recent Ignite conference, CEO Satya Nadella spoke about AI doubling every six months. Explain.

What Satya is referring to in that case is the capability of AI is changing quite rapidly. And it's enabling more and more use cases. If you rewind the clock back a year, one of the knocks on using generative AI was around mathematics. Like if you asked it to solve a problem, it might give you an approximated answer as opposed to an exact answer. It wouldn't calculate the answer for you. That's all changed now.

“The AI tools are becoming more intuitive. Not only are the tools themselves scaling and getting better, but so is our ability to use them.”

We recently had a big election. I asked Copilot to calculate for me under different scenarios what would be the tax implications of some of the different policies that the incoming administration has talked about implementing. Today, AI is not only able to give me the answer, but to walk me through the calculations that it was doing as part of the answer. That's an example of how it's evolving.

I would say the tools are becoming more intuitive. We're getting much better at figuring out how to get the right answers out of our AI agents as well. This is another important thing. Not only are the tools themselves scaling and getting better, but so is our ability to use them, to provide

the right context for these agents to be able to give us better answers.

And then there is this path of agentic AI—the ability for these AI agents and co-pilots to do work on our behalf. AI is evolving from just being able to give you good answers to being a companion that will perform a task on your behalf. We weren't there six months ago, but that's all happening in real time.

Q Are you finding that your customers are willing to bet important business decisions on these emerging AI capabilities?

Every customer I have talked to, large, medium, small companies all around the world, everybody's going down the path of adopting more and more AI. Every CEO today has to have an AI strategy or the board will be dissatisfied.

Here in India, I was talking to the head of product at a medium-sized company and he said to me, “five or six months ago, I wasn't sure about Copilot, but today every time somebody asks me for more resources or solving a problem, my first question back is, are you using Copilot (yet)?”

In other words, technology heads are themselves asking if everyone in the organisation is bringing AI into their workflows. People are learning the capabilities, becoming more familiar. Only a year ago, and for a lot of this last year, we were telling people, just use it, just try it, and you'll start to see the power and potential.

So (today) I don't see much scepticism. It's more about what people are working through questions like how do I make sure I've got the right data policies in place, governance security models, responsible AI principles, programs, and processes. Today it's not a question of if but when organisations will embrace AI. What they're thinking about is how do I do this well?

Q Thus far, much of the investment,

especially in this wave of AI over the last five years, has been driven by very large tech companies such as Microsoft. Do you see large 'non-tech' businesses jumping in, like financial companies or even manufacturers?

If you look at BlackRock's commentary on their AI investments, which we spoke about at Ignite as well, it's an example of how financial institutions have moved quite fast to implement AI. Many of them have been using versions of AI for a long time, in areas such as fraud modelling, for example.

Now, increasingly, they're starting to roll out AI tools to their teams, and they're starting to think about how they can roll out AI tools to their customer base. Enterprises such as manufacturers or retailers and financial services providers will be large consumers of the AI stack, whereas for the 'hyperscalers' the investments have to go into the whole 'AI stack', everything from the data centres all the way to the Copilot, in Microsoft's case.

We are also releasing tools, like AI Foundry, which will allow third parties to use different models and develop more use cases and solutions. All of these will be very useful across verticals, and that's how we see the AI investments balancing out.

On the use cases side, I'm very optimistic about the idea and category of 'AI for good and AI for all'. Here in India, I've just been blown away by some of the companies that I've met. For example, I met a company that's literally for \$50 bringing high school education to students who didn't have access to it. All you need is a mobile device.

And this conversation about AI for good would be incomplete without talking about health care. Last year, I spent a lot of time with a number of organisations in Southeast Asia. And one of the themes that came up time and time again was just for people who are trying to

get diagnosed for certain types of cancers, because there weren't enough doctors in countries like Vietnam, for example, you couldn't even get your X-rays diagnosed.

With AI, they can work through the backlog much more quickly, and even identify cancers that were harder to spot with the human eye, and make a meaningful improvement in health outcomes for patients.

Q In all these different areas, from autonomous vehicles to how we'll get a cup of coffee in the future, what's the role you see Microsoft playing?

Our view would be that we will enable much of this innovation. Microsoft is a platform company, which means that we enable customers to build on that platform. There's so much promise and there's so much yet to be done. In some cases, we'll bring our own tools, like our own copilots.

The other aspect comprises all the foundational platform capabilities that will make innovation like autonomous driving or robotics possible. A robot serving coffee won't be science fiction in the foreseeable future.

With all the investments in training AI, and developing tools, there's almost no aspect of our lives where I think it gets left out—in our personal lives too.

Q What role do you envisage for your own large team in India and the growing tech products ecosystem here?

India plays a huge role in the big picture. Number one, we have large numbers of team members and so all the product announcements that we made at Ignite, for example, would have ties back to teams that are in India. We have such a huge Microsoft population in India that we've team members working on a number of products, from consumer copilots to M365 Copilot to Azure, AI Foundry and all the foundational elements as well.

[Microsoft generally doesn't break out region-specific numbers, but reliable industry estimates put the company's workforce in India at more than 22,000 employees.]


And then obviously we also look at India as a really important market, where there's tremendous amount of innovation going on. I've been really impressed by this notion of quick everything in India. There's quick commerce, but I'd broaden that and say there's quick everything.

It's not just being able to buy groceries or goods, but actually being able to buy services and have those services delivered. One example that blew me away the other day was you can get a blood test result in six hours. You can get your blood drawn (at home), six hours later you can have the results. We don't have anything like that in the US today.

India's really innovating in ways that we aren't even seeing in the Western world.

And then as Microsoft provides the AI platform, the large IT companies are going to enable a lot of these AI use cases, transform how they deliver services. India has a multifaceted role to play in AI, from being a market, to local innovation, to being home to our large team developing global products, to our partners bringing their services to global customers around our platform.

So India is an incredibly consequential country as it relates to realising the AI opportunity. And I will tell you, when I was here a year ago, I felt like there was still a bit more of a gap between what was going on in Silicon Valley around AI and what was happening in India. That gap has significantly narrowed.

Again, in health care, I expect that we will see AI innovation happen more quickly in India than it will happen in the US. Partly out of necessity. We may be learning from you on what's possible with AI in some of these health care use cases. 

From Being Rejected for a ₹15,000 Job to Running a ₹2,000 Crore Company: The Story of Indrajeet and His Revolutionary iQuanta

During his pre-final year of college, Indrajeet attended an interview as part of his campus placements. With a button missing from his shirt, the interviewer asked him to leave without even starting the conversation. Indrajeet recalls, “They were offering ₹15,000 a month, and I was rejected without even speaking a word, just because of a missing button.” Laughing, he adds, “That’s when I enrolled in a typewriting course as a backup plan as I had few backlogs in my grads.”

Indrajeet then started preparing for CAT & joined a Facebook group for CAT aspirants. Initially a small community of friends, it soon became something truly remarkable. Students posted their doubts and queries, and other members offered solutions. Indrajeet quickly became the most recognized member, solving doubts in less than a minute, sometimes even in seconds. What began as a prep activity turned into an obsession. “I was awake almost 24/7, barely sleeping and spending all my time on my phone. My parents were concerned, but I told them I was preparing for CAT. However, seeing your child glued to a mobile phone 24/7 doesn’t exactly reassure parents.”

Seeing many CAT Toppers thanking Indrajeet for help, new CAT Aspirants demanded him to help in a bit more structured manner by charging a meagre amount. That’s when iQuanta was

born. Just months after starting the group, Indrajeet secured ₹20 lakh in enrollments during its first year—an amount he had hoped to earn after graduating from a top MBA college. “My parents couldn’t believe it. They thought

it was a fluke. It wasn’t until I gifted them their first apartment in 2017, two years later, that they realized it was real.”

Fast forward to 2025, and iQuanta has grown to over 150 employees and is on track to achieve a ₹120 crore ARR individually and ₹200 crore ARR at the group level, all while maintaining the highest EBITDA in the industry. Despite being bootstrapped, iQuanta has made five acquisitions, the most recent being ATP Star Kota—a company of renowned IIT educators with more than 3 million learners on its platform—and Clapingo, a language learning platform used by over a million users & 14 Cr Revenue.

Apart from CAT, iQuanta has forayed into IIT, NEET, iSkills, IPMAT, CUET, CLAT, Language Learning etc.

iQuanta’s growth comes at a time when major VC-backed ed-tech companies like Byju’s and Unacademy are struggling to stay afloat, laying off thousands of employees, and others like Vedantu and PW are facing hundreds of crores in losses.

Indrajeet concludes, “I see iQuanta as a platform where like-minded individuals can come together, share their aspirations, resolve their issues, and learn from one another. Ed-tech has focused too much on live classes and missed the social experience that school or college provides. We’re bringing compassion and fun back into ed-tech, and the students seem to agree. We have the best results, the highest engagement, a rockstar team, and we’ve only just begun.”



Indrajeet

Inside Salesforce India's Playbook

Under Arundhati Bhattacharya, the tech giant has grown into a ₹9,116 crore-company in the country. It's only in recent years that it has moved into top gear, accelerating its growth and presence across India

By NAINI THAKER



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SELVAPRAKASH LAKSHMANAN FOR FORBES INDIA

Arundhati Bhattacharya,
chairperson and CEO,
Salesforce India

In 1978, Nand Kishore Chaudhary founded Jaipur Rugs to revive the traditional art of rug-making. His broader vision was to offer marginalised weavers, especially women, an opportunity to earn a sustainable livelihood. As the brand grew, it moved its focus from B2B to B2C, selling directly to interior designers, architects and end customers via its website and stores. Managing data manually and finding meaningful insights became tough. “While we had a CRM (customer relationship management) tool, its capabilities were limited. We needed a more intelligent platform to centralise our data, automate our processes and strengthen reporting,” says Yogesh Chaudhary, director, sales, Jaipur Rugs.

Enter Salesforce. Its various products have helped the brand streamline its lead-to-order management process for all orders. “By improving employee experiences, we’ve improved customer experiences. Queries are answered quicker, order processing is smoother and shipping timelines have reduced,” says Chaudhary. Today, the brand works with over 40,000 artisans across 600 villages. Jaipur Rugs wants to build self-service kiosks in their stores, where customers can browse their inventory, and visualise products through Salesforce AI (artificial intelligence) products.

Salesforce entered the Indian market in 2005, but it’s only in recent years that the brand has moved into top gear, accelerating its growth and presence across the country. A key turning point came four years ago when Arundhati Bhattacharya, former chairperson of State Bank of India, made a career shift and joined Salesforce, marking a new chapter in the company’s journey in India.

“At the time there were only about 2,200 people in the team—we could fit the entire sales team in an IndiGo flight,” recalls Bhattacharya. Though

the banking veteran had retired, she says, “I was not satisfied with the non-executive portfolio because I couldn’t make any impact. I still wanted to see what impact I could make. So I was quite excited to get this opportunity in a very different industry.”

In the last four years, the tech giant’s India business has grown by about 4x. In November, Salesforce India saw its total revenue go up by over 36 percent to ₹9,116.3 crore in FY24, according to its regulatory filing with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs’ Registrar of Companies. For the last two years, India has been the fastest growing operating unit for Salesforce, globally.

“India is a hub of innovation and talent for us, and strategically important to our global success. We are thrilled about the ecosystem we are cultivating in India and the

Salesforce announced that India is expected to create 1.8 million jobs and \$88.6 billion in new business revenue by 2028. Currently, Salesforce India has 850 team members in the sales and distribution department, and over 13,000 employees overall across major cities, including Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Gurugram, Mumbai, Pune and Jaipur.

A recent IDC report indicates that the Salesforce economy in India, led by AI, will create close to 11.6 million jobs globally, of which 1.8 million will be in India.

THE INDIA MOMENTUM

Salesforce has been a late entrant in the Indian market. “We have a lot of catching up to do,” admits Bhattacharya. Today, Indian enterprises are embracing Salesforce’s products from cloud computing

“We are thrilled about the ecosystem we are cultivating in India and the role we’re playing in fuelling the AI revolution.”

role we’re playing in fuelling the AI revolution,” says Srini Tallapragada, president & chief engineering officer, Salesforce. “The growth and achievements of Salesforce in India are a testament to our incredible leadership in the region, the potential of the country and growing relevance of India globally. We have a strong growth trajectory and are committed to further investments here.”

The company on December 11 announced that its Indian and Asean activities will be a single operating unit, under Bhattacharya’s leadership, effective February 1, 2025. The major countries in this region will include Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, apart from India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

During its annual World Tour Essentials Mumbai event in June,

to social media integration, voice technology and AI to enhance productivity and improve customer interactions. Currently, the software giant has both legacy and SME (small and medium enterprises) customers across industries, including HCG, Pidilite, IndiGo, Jaipur Rugs and Amara Raja Energy, among others.

In early 2024, Salesforce announced the launch of its public sector division in India to cater to government agencies and public sector organisations. It wasn’t present in the public sector in India earlier, since many governments didn’t have cloud policies. “But things have changed and people have realised that cloud is a safe venture, and there can be a lot of applications on the cloud,” says Bhattacharya. “In fact, a number of government applications, the India public stack, much of it sits on the

cloud. So, to that extent, the public sector companies have become open to the solutions we bring to the table.”

The company recently announced the launch of Public Sector Einstein 1 for service—a version of their enterprise AI platform—including CRM, AI and data capabilities. These solutions are also available on a public cloud infrastructure, called Hyperforce, a next-generation infrastructure architecture built for the public cloud. This would help government agencies meet their data residency, data control and security obligations.

According to Salesforce, generative AI could unlock a \$1.75 trillion productivity opportunity annually across many functions and levels of government. “Today, citizens expect better, faster service that’s tailored just for them across every platform they use. Building a 360-degree view of citizens to deliver services based on a unified data platform with trust at the core and deep industry expertise will unlock tremendous potential for government organisations,” says Arun Kumar Parameswaran, managing director, sales & distribution, Salesforce India.

Since the last two years, Salesforce India has created 14 industry-wise verticals within the organisation. “We continue providing all our services, but with an industry lens. This makes our implementation a lot better, and subsequent upgradation easier,” says Bhattacharya.

The 14 verticals include health and life sciences, auto, manufacturing, travel & hospitality, BFSI—which has multiple sub-verticals such as insurance and wealth management, among others. Adds Bhattacharya: “For India, we are closely looking at the BFSI sector, which is also a point of interest globally, since it is digitally far more mature. Additionally, travel & hospitality and retail are big sectors too.”

“Salesforce has significantly intensified its focus on India’s

Salesforce: Powering Growth With Cloud in India

India is one of the fastest growing operating units for the tech giant for the last two years



In 2016, the company opened the Hyderabad Centre of Excellence and expanded it in 2023, establishing India as a leading talent and global innovation hub for the company

Salesforce India saw its total revenue rise by 36 percent to ₹9,116.3 crore in FY24

Salesforce currently has 13,000 employees in India across six offices—Bengaluru, Mumbai, Delhi/Gurugram, Hyderabad, Jaipur and Pune

There are over 2 million Salesforce developers in India, and more users of Trailhead than any market outside the US

The launch of Salesforce’s Public Sector division in India is aimed at empowering government agencies and public sector organisations to build trusted citizen experiences



Digital Lending for India, Salesforce’s ‘Made for India’ product, for loan origination, will exclusively serve customers within the country

Salesforce is investing in its physical presence in India by committing to a new Salesforce Tower in Bengaluru. This will be one of 10 tower investments Salesforce has made in key markets, including San Francisco, New York, Chicago, London, Dublin, Sydney, Tokyo, Atlanta and Indianapolis

growth trajectory by focusing on industry-aligned solution-building, strengthening dedicated infrastructure and fostering a local partner ecosystem to broaden its presence,” says Rijo George Thomas, senior research manager, IT services research, IDC Asia-Pacific.

To cater to its BFSI clientele, it also launched a Digital Lending solution—a ‘Made in India’ product—for loan origination, which will provide banks and lenders with a platform to digitally approach consumer lending. “This platform is expected to serve customers only within India. It will be a unified platform for intake, underwriter review, and pre-disbursement operations for applications for home, auto and personal loans. This solution will ensure faster time-to-value and reduction in loan processing time,” says Parameswaran.

Earlier, industries such as manufacturing would only focus on manufacturing. Now they are also looking at servicing, for instance, since it has larger margins. “Our competitors are coming from all kinds of areas... it isn’t necessarily another player in the same area, which is where customer experience plays a

big role. Customers want a unified and connected experience. That’s where Salesforce can make a difference across industries,” Bhattacharya says.

For instance, HCG uses a comprehensive ecosystem of solutions, including Salesforce’s Marketing Cloud, Sales Cloud and Services Cloud. “By using the Salesforce Sales Cloud, we are able to reach patients faster. This streamlines resource allocation and saves more time. In fact, the response time for patient inquiries has reduced from 45 minutes to 23 minutes, and over 75 percent of patients are able to stay connected with their doctors after a hospital visit,” says Sudeep Dey, CIO, HCG.

When Salesforce launched in India, the intention was to provide SMEs with the applications they couldn’t afford. Over time, it turned into an enterprise IT company as it scaled up. Currently, the company has a ‘Salesforce Starter Suite’. “This is an all-in-one suite for email outreach, sales, service and commerce tools, built specifically for small growing businesses. It is extremely easy to get started on and has a collection of our products which are packaged to make adoption easy, including our Sales Cloud, Marketing Cloud and

Service Cloud,” says Sanket Atal, managing director of technology & operations at Salesforce India. “This helps small businesses focus on their core competencies since all the other peripheral tasks are being taken care of efficiently.”

AI PLAY

In September 2024, the company launched ‘Agentforce’, which represents the next evolution of Salesforce—an agentic layer where AI agents work alongside humans to drive customer success powered by AI, data and action. “Salesforce is democratising AI for businesses of every size and industry, so every company can become an AI enterprise,” says Parameswaran. “Our pioneering formula of CRM+AI+Data+Trust helps everyone get their data together and embrace AI safely and securely across every team and employee, so they can harness AI to fundamentally transform their business.”

These autonomous agents powered by AI go beyond chatbots and copilots, analyse data, using advanced reasoning abilities to make decisions and take action. For instance, AI agents can do things like resolve customer cases, qualify sales leads and optimise marketing campaigns. This distinguishes the real value of agents from copilots and chatbots that get stuck in a restricted loop.

“There is a cost of AI today, which is driven by supply and demand related to GPUs (graphics processing units), and it is not going to get solved for the next three years. There is a race for everybody to build GPUs, and there’s one player who is so far ahead that whatever supply comes, everybody else is still not going to be sufficient for you to power all the AI in the world,” says Parameswaran. The biggest issue that will continue to exist for the next 18 to 36 months will be the unit cost of executing AI at scale. He adds, “How do you deal with data? For the longest time, we

have been working with structured data. But now, the innovation we’re working on is, how we can bring both structured and unstructured data to these models, and get them to be a lot more efficient on data cloud.”

With Agentforce, companies don’t need to spend millions of dollars and countless hours to DIY their AI, training and retraining LLMs (large language models). “Instead,” adds Bhattacharya, “it provides a single platform with the apps, the data, the platform service and the agents all tightly integrated to lower operational costs and speed time to value. We believe this is what AI is meant to be.”

Currently, Heathrow Airport and companies like Capita, Secret Escapes and Bionic use Agentforce

“Agentforce provides a single platform with the apps, the data, the platform service and the agents all tightly integrated.”

to augment their employees, expand their workforce and improve customer experiences.

NAVIGATING CHALLENGES

India has an abundance of digital talent. But when it comes to adoption of cutting-edge digital technology, Bhattacharya says, “India is in a bit of a laggard quarter.” The reason is many of India’s core industries are part of the public sector or belong to legacy industries. “These industries often have difficulty in accepting technologies like complete digital transformation—they always ask ‘Why?’. Additionally, they have large technical debts, which means you have to sweat that asset completely before changing to something else,” she says.

In 2014, as AI and machine learning started picking up, companies realised

that bigger storage and compute capacity on premise would be tough, which is when cloud came in. “Yet,” says Bhattacharya, “there were a lot of questions around security, audit, inspection etc. But when ChatGPT came along, things started evolving fast—everybody started feeling that they had to get into it without wasting any time.” Digital transformation is now on every board meeting’s agenda.

The startup industry, on the other end, is not laggard. It is digitally mature, and adopts the best and most updated technologies. The company also runs a Salesforce Startup Program to help startups. “The programme has provided unparalleled access to resources, mentorship and a vibrant community of innovators. This support has been instrumental in helping us refine our product, and go-to-market strategy, and ultimately accelerate our growth,” says Rajat Shukla, co-founder of customer insights startup AppEQ.ai.

In addition to supporting the startup ecosystem, Salesforce in India also works with multiple engineering colleges to offer courses and internships. It runs a platform called Trailhead, which provides training courses. The community has 2 million developers in India—more than any market outside the US.

The larger challenge in India, though, as per Bhattacharya, remains capability building and keeping in sync with regulatory compliance requirements. “I might be innovating very fast, but how do I ensure that my partners keep pace with that? In many cases, we are not implementing what we’re selling... it’s the partner ecosystem that’s doing it. So, the ecosystem needs to evolve as quickly as we evolve, and that is not always easy,” she says.

Four years into her second career stint, Bhattacharya is only just getting started. “In the near future, I would want Salesforce to be relevant to all industries and empower many more SMEs,” she says. 

Carte Blanche

Commoditised segments, value-for-money products, and a 30x jump in revenue in five years. Under Shubhkart, Aditya Pittie has churned out fascinating consumer brands from the shelves of supermarkets

By RAJIV SINGH



Both sides were evenly matched. Both factions could flex their muscles to drag the other into submission. Both the camps swore by their unshakeable beliefs. For Aditya Pittie, though, the neck-and-neck fight between his heart and mind made the tug-of-war emotionally exacting. In 2005, the

grad from King's College London joined the family business of real estate in Mumbai. Back then, Pittie was just 21. Over the next few years, the dutiful son polished the family silver, aced the nuances of running a media empire with spiritual channels Sanskar TV, Satsang TV and Shubh TV, and by 2014, the young next gen proved his mettle. A glowing

report card sedated his mind, nixed all wavering thoughts about businesses outside the boundaries of the family, and reassured the merits of building on the legacy. There was no need to deviate.

Pittie's heart, though, pined for an independent way of life. A deeper introspection nudged him towards an uncomfortable question: What is better? A cosy life or building something from scratch? While the former would have certainly ensured the financial snugness that comes with family businesses, the latter would have brought in its wake one definite thing: Loads of uncertainty. Though Pittie had scaled the family business, he was still not the founder. The young entrepreneur had an irresistible itch to undertake the 'zero to one' journey.

What also stoked his impulse was a compelling need to go through

“I am not wooing the users who are outside the supermarts... that's why I don't advertise, and my brands are not on TV.”

ADITYA PITTIE,
MANAGING DIRECTOR, PITTIE GROUP

House of Consumer Brands

There are multiple sub-brands housed under the parent brand Shubhkart

WELLNESS BRANDS

Nirmal (incense sticks and dhoo products)

Darshana (puja powders, oil, and ghee)

Nitya (brass, steel, copper, and silver products such as bells, diyas and plates)

Tejas (wicks and candle products)

Surabhi (camphor range)

Gaugaurav (range of puja items made from cow dung, ghee and natural herbs)

PERSONAL CARE BRANDS

Coco Baya (body wash, face wash, moisturiser)



Bodify (handmade soap, body lotion, body and face wash)



HOME CARE BRANDS

ChakaaChak (cleaning solutions for home and homecare products)

Oxyzap (pods, powder, detergent, bar for washing clothes)



Cleanzap (washing clothes)

Powerzap (cleaning bathroom, toilet, drain)

Freshzap (air freshener)

Shinezap (dishwash)



Abzorbzap (keeps belongings damp free)

FOOD BRANDS

Yumify (chutney, sauces, mayonnaise)



Three Pillars of the Pittie Empire

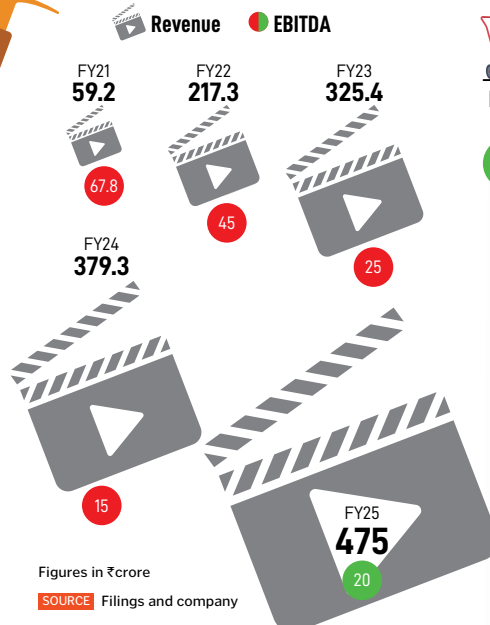
Consumer Division

From puja essentials under the mother brand **Shubhkart** to home care products under **ChakaaChak** and personal care items, the consumer division has been growing briskly. The brands are available across supermarket chains such as Reliance Retail, Spencer's, and DMart, ecommerce platforms such as Amazon and Flipkart, and quick commerce platforms



Media Division

Operates under **IN10 Media**; owns channels such as **EPIC, ShowBox, Filamchi Bhojpuri, Gubbare, Ishara and Nazara**; digital vertical has **EPIC ON & DocuBay**; production division consists of MovieVerse Studios and Juggernaut Productions; music arm has Let's Get LOUDER; technology vertical houses Stream-Sense; news segment has Latesty; gaming business has Platanista



Logistics division

The business consists of the distribution of ayurveda, FMCG and herbal products of Patanjali in organised trade across India



Figures in ₹ crore

SOURCE: Filings and company

the rites of passage: Entrepreneur to founder. “Unless you have built a business, no matter how hard you work, you will always be perceived as a surrogate,” Pittie said to himself, mustered courage, and initiated a heart-to-heart talk with the patriarch who sensed the uneasiness of his son. “For me, it was about moral and not legal ownership,” underlines Pittie, who took the first bold step in his solo journey by launching Baba Ramdev-backed Patanjali’s products across modern trade (MT) formats such as supermarkets in 2014.

Pittie was convinced about the upside of the bet. “It was a ‘made in heaven’ opportunity,” he recounts, alluding to the move of marrying rustic ayurveda with

sleeky supermarkets. There was a downside as well. For the kirana-driven mass brand, supermarkets meant a trimmed appeal as only a niche section of consumers preferred shopping in the air-conditioned alleys. Undeterred, Pittie took the plunge, and the gambit paid off handsomely. Patanjali started clocking big numbers at Reliance Retail, Spencer’s and DMart. Pittie was credited for the blockbuster performance of Patanjali across modern trade.

Though Pittie reaped success, a few years later he found himself in an eerily similar predicament. He cracked the distribution of Patanjali but was yet to build something from scratch. The products flying off

the shelves were not his brands. A weird sense of emptiness haunted him, and the founder found himself torn apart by a familiar tug of war. This time, though, the stakes were high because of the distinctive product and marketing playbook that he was toying with.

There were two pointed questions. First, can consumer brands be built out of commodities? There were precedents. Take, for instance, salt. Tata built a formidable brand out of this commodity. There were other examples in cement, edible oil and spices. So, there was enough headroom for more brands in FMCG. Second, can brands be built and sold only in supermarkets? The critics and naysayers were quick



Mr. Jayakumar Murugesan
Managing Director, Sameera Groups

In the dynamic world of real estate, young leaders are often the driving force behind innovation and growth. Among these trailblazers is Mr. Jayakumar Murugesan, the Managing Director of Sameera Groups. His energy, vision, and entrepreneurial acumen have positioned him as one of the most promising figures in South India's real estate industry.

A Young Leader with Global Expertise

Jayakumar is a leader who seamlessly blends international exposure with local expertise. Holding a Master of Science in Real Estate from the USA, he brings a global perspective to the highly competitive Indian market. This combination allows him to approach real estate with a balance of creativity and pragmatism, propelling Sameera Groups to the forefront of the industry.

Transforming the Real Estate Landscape

One of his most significant contributions has been his ability to adapt to evolving market trends and consumer needs. Under his visionary guidance, Sameera Groups has evolved from a land bank generator to India's largest township developer. It has now established itself as a leader by delivering exceptional residential, commercial, and township projects. The company's townships, in particular, are prime examples of modern living.

These self-sufficient communities offer more than just homes—they provide a holistic lifestyle with community halls, shopping malls, recreation centers, schools, colleges, hospitals, and more. Strategically located to ensure seamless connectivity, these townships blend urban luxury with natural landscapes, creating integrated living spaces that

TRANSFORMING THE REAL ESTATE LANDSCAPE: THE VISIONARY JOURNEY OF MR. JAYAKUMAR MURUGESAN

meet the demands of modern consumers. His leadership has not only elevated the company's stature but also garnered widespread recognition, including the prestigious 'REISA Awards for Best Gated Community Plotted Development 2021' and the 'Times Business Awards for Best Plotted Developer 2022.' Furthermore, his extraordinary vision and determination earned him the 'Times Business Awards Real Estate - Most Enterprising CEO 2022.'

The real estate industry is known for its challenges, from market fluctuations to regulatory complexities. As a young entrepreneur, he not only embraced these challenges but also turned them into opportunities for growth. His resilience, agility, and ability to forecast market trends have been instrumental in Sameera Groups' continued success.

Inspired by a Legacy of Excellence

Behind every successful leader is a story of inspiration, and for Mr. Jayakumar, that inspiration is his father, Mr. Murugesan, the Chairman of Sameera Groups. With his father's guidance and foundational work, he cultivated a vision to expand Sameera groups' horizons beyond the normal while remaining true to its core values. His leadership reflects a forward-thinking approach, driven by a commitment to take the company to new heights.

Under his dynamic leadership, Sameera Groups has achieved remarkable milestones, selling over 150 million sq. ft. of residential development.

His leadership philosophy involves a strong commitment to ethical business practices. This approach not only enhances the company's reputation but also ensures sustainability in its ventures. By balancing profitability with ethical values, he has set a benchmark for responsible business in the real estate industry.

Championing Innovation and Technology

Innovation is also at the heart of this leadership stance. He is an early adopter of cutting-edge technologies and global financial models, such as Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), to navigate the evolving landscape of the Indian market. His approach ensures that Sameera Groups stays ahead of the curve, delivering value to customers and stakeholders alike.

It must be noted that his vision extends beyond real estate, as he is focused on transforming Sameera Groups into a diversified conglomerate with interests spanning warehousing, education, healthcare, hospitality, and more. He envisions Sameera Groups as a trailblazer in South India's real estate landscape, particularly with its groundbreaking ventures in warehousing and township development.

One of his other notable achievements is the launch of Sameera Warehousing, which has secured major international investments and made significant strides in just two years. With nearly 2 million square feet sold, the division is on track to achieve 10 million square feet in the next two years, reflecting his ability to drive growth in emerging sectors.

A Glimpse into the Future

The future of Sameera Groups under his able stewardship is exciting to predict. With plans to take the company to national and international markets, he is poised to position Sameera Groups as a global leader in next-generation real estate development. His focus on diversification and innovation ensures that the company remains at the forefront of industry trends, ready to tackle new challenges and seize emerging opportunities.

Mr. Jayakumar Murugesan's journey is a wonderful example of vision, determination, innovation, and of course, resilience.

to brand the ‘supermarkets-only’ gambit as bravado. The shoppers, they argued, throng to supermarkets to buy the brands of their choice at an irresistible deal. Pittie, though, had spotted something that the others couldn’t. In every city—even across Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru—some pockets are ‘Bharats’ and some are Indias. “Both coexist. But Bharat consumers are much bigger in numbers than their counterparts and they are value-for-money buyers,” he reckons.

Armed with his theory, Pittie rolled out a range of daily puja-need brands under Shubhkart. But why wellness brands? Pittie dishes out three reasons. First, targeting large commoditised segments with less brand play and negligible pull made immense sense. Wellness (puja) happened to be one such segment. Second, the rich experience of running a plethora of spiritual TV channels provided deep insights into the behaviour and needs of consumers. Third, puja ticked all the boxes a founder yearns for: Massive TAM (total addressable market), sticky buyers, repeat users, and ample upselling opportunities.

With a prayer on his lips, Pittie started with Nirmal, an incense stick and dhoop brand. Soon, he rolled out a battery of other sub-brands under Shubhkart, such as Darshana (brand for puja powders, oil and ghee), Nitya (brand for brass, steel, copper, and silver products such as bells, diya, and plates), Tejas (a wicks and candle brand), Surabhi (a camphor brand), and Gaugaurav, a brand for puja items made from cow dung, ghee and natural herbs. The pilot at five Reliance Retail stores across Mumbai was a huge success. Emboldened, the founder added more SKUs (stock-keeping units) and bloated the product count to over 350.

Then came the light bulb aka *diya* moment. The buyers were not loading their carts with all the items. This meant a quick rationalisation

First-time consumers often want value-for-money deals at supermarkets, not particular brands



of SKUs, which was trimmed to 150. There was another realisation. The supermarket game could be aced only in three ways. And it was not one of the three but ticking all the three boxes. First, Pittie needed to build scale. Supermarkets are all about volumes. Second, the products have to be the cheapest in the segment and better than the rivals in terms of quality. A tough ask but it was possible only if one had manufacturing capabilities. So far, Pittie has been sourcing from the Bhuleshwar market in Mumbai. He needed to dump the strategy.

Third, Pittie needed to reverse engineer. “One must listen to the consumers, and my consumers were supermarkets,” he underlines.

Supermarkets understood what the shoppers were looking for, knew what was missing in a product and an assortment, and were aware brands had a ‘Big Brother’ attitude in listening to the feedback from stores. Pittie partnered with modern trade, embraced their inputs, and rolled out products with high chances of flying off the shelves. He also did something interesting by planting a point-of-sale person at the stores. “I had to grab the attention of shoppers inside the store,” he says. The first-time consumers, he adds, don’t come to supermarkets with the notion that they need to buy a particular brand. They want to grab the best value-for-money deals. This buyer’s insight simplified Pittie’s life. “You just need to make them try your products,” he says. If the product, he underlines, is best among the pack in terms of price and quality, it becomes a brand. The next time, a shopper will look for Nirmal, Tejas, or ChakaaChak (see box).

The ‘commodity-to-brand’ strategy seems to be working. Look at the numbers. In FY19, Shubhkart clocked sales of ₹10 crore. Five years later, it posted ₹118 crore in revenue in FY24. The brand is now clocking a run rate of ₹200 crore. ChakaaChak, a cleaning brand for home and homecare products, has grown from ₹4 crore in FY21 to ₹18 crore in FY24, and is all set to touch the ₹40-crore mark in March 2025. Pittie started ChakaaChak with *jhaadu* (broom), and then added dust pans,



“He has been smart in selecting categories that have massive potential but are tough for modern trade guys to handle.”

DAMODAR MALL
CEO (GROCERY), RELIANCE RETAIL

ENGINEERING A LEGACY: FOSTERING INNOVATION, EMPOWERMENT, AND IMPACT

A Bold Leap: Establishing 7-Eleven GSC in India to Drive Digital Innovation



Jennifer Goschke,
Senior Vice President -
Shared Services for 7-Eleven

“What will be your legacy?” This was the question that was posed by my mentor, some 15 years ago! It ignited a spark in me and made me reflect on my own beliefs on leadership as I spent the next decade and a half finding and perfecting the answer. During my journey of self-discovery, I learned that it cannot be about individual and personal excellence; true magic, after all, happens when people feel supported, inspired, and empowered. This realization shaped my leadership style—to ‘Make Lives Better’ for the people I lead—because an exceptional customer experience is very often the result of an exceptional employee experience.

I joined 7-Eleven—the world’s largest convenience retailer, with 85,000 stores in 19 countries and a legacy spanning nearly 98 years—in 2018 as Vice President of Internal Audit. To support 7-Eleven’s digital transformation journey, the company opened a global capability centre in 2020 to access the abundant engineering talent in India. I volunteered to lead the newly formed 7-Eleven Global Solution Center (GSC), and in January 2022, I relocated to Bengaluru, India.

The warm welcome by our team further reinforced that coming to India was the right decision for me. Our focus was to strengthen our engineering,

data, and finance capabilities, allowing us to support 7-Eleven’s strategic plan by collaboratively working with our global teams to generate value. This meant we needed to attract and hire exceptional employees. Here, I witnessed firsthand the fierce competition for talent in India’s dynamic tech landscape. We’re focused on attracting and hiring the brightest and uber-talented minds while continuing to strengthen our employer brand in India. Concurrently, we invested in building a one-of-a-kind office space for our team.

During the design phase, my brief was simple: create a branded office that brings our people together to encourage shared connections and experiences. The result is a

vibrant and spacious place outfitted with modern amenities that promote collaboration and productivity. The inviting design seamlessly blends biophilic elements with a digital touch, maximizing efficiency and creating a warm and enriching experience. For instance, inspired by current design trends, we created a new floor that features amenities such as ‘The Groove Garage’—a unique space that serves as a place for teams to unwind with music, perform karaoke, hold stage performances, watch movies, or catch a game. Additionally, our high-tech podcast room facilitates the creation of high-quality content.

But like they say, it’s the people who live in the house that make it a home!

To further provide our employees with an exceptional life experience at GSC, we’ve been focused on refining our people policies. We invested in learning and development frameworks to support career journeys. Additionally, we follow a hybrid work model, offering flexibility and autonomy. The result is a robust GSC culture built on a foundation of empathy, accountability, and passion.

As I reflect on our journey, my heart is filled with immense pride for what we’ve accomplished in four years. It’s humbling to see this sentiment resonate with our employees, who’ve made our workplace an inspiring place. In this short time, we’ve achieved significant recognition, including, “Great Place to Work” certification, ‘Impactful GCCs of India 2024’, ‘Top 24 of 2024 GCCs, including other recognitions for our learning and onboarding programs. Additionally, our office space has been recognized for its excellence by various bodies.

Every day, I’m energized to come to work at GSC; this has been the most rewarding role of my professional life. I enjoy starting the day with a great cup of 7-Eleven coffee alongside my team, where we engage in discussions focused on how to maximize our positive impact and make lives better—for each other, for our stakeholders, and the community.

Follow us on social to know how 7-Eleven GSC is redefining the convenience retail.

During the design phase, my brief was simple: create a branded office that brings our people together to encourage shared connections and experiences. The result is a vibrant and spacious place outfitted with modern amenities that promote collaboration and productivity.

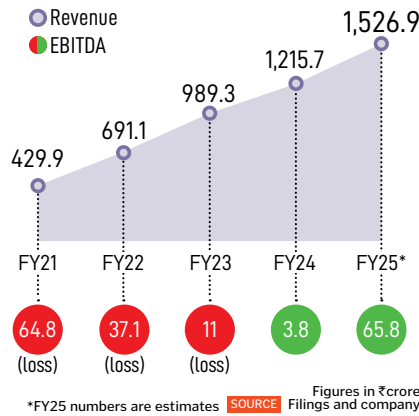
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bucket mops and wipers. “Non-dust or plastic broom has become our bestseller,” he claims. “We built a brand out of *jhaadu*,” he smiles, adding that the consumer division of Pittie Group has grown over five times from ₹24.7 crore in FY21 to ₹141.5 crore in FY24. “We are on track to touch the ₹300-crore mark by FY25,” he claims. What started with puja products under the wellness category now has three more revenue engines in homeware, personal care and food divisions (see box).

Industry experts are impressed with Pittie’s *chakaachak* (dazzling) success. “He started by identifying categories shunned by large companies and ignored by modern trade retailers due to its complicated nature,” reckons Damodar Mall, chief executive officer (grocery) at Reliance Retail. “That was a smart way to operate in a relatively safer place,” he adds. What helped him crack modern retail was his experience handling Patanjali’s products at supermarkets. “He managed the modern trade distribution for Patanjali during its startup days, heydays, and post-heydays,” contends Mall. In the process, Pittie learnt two things: How to create a supply chain backbone, and the nuances of modern trade. Usually, brands build for kiranas and then adapt for modern trade. “Pittie did the opposite. He made products that were designed for self-service stores,” he says, adding that Pittie’s brands were designed to be non-advertising brands.

Report Card
(Consumer, logistics, and media)



From modern trade, Pittie took his brands to ecommerce and now quick commerce. The beauty of his business model, Mall underlines, is that the modern trade doesn’t see him as a rival but a partner.

Interestingly, Pittie is not the first to build brands out of the crucible of supermarkets and modern trade. “The first to do so was Ajay Gupta who rolled out Ching’s Secret way back in 1995,” says Mall. Gupta didn’t have the financial clout to take the general-trade (GT) route. So, he bypassed kiranas, entered modern trade and made an impact. “He knew that success across supermarkets would make Ching’s a national brand,” says Mall, adding that most of the consumption categories in India are unbranded. So, there is a scope to churn out more brands. The biggest advantage for Pittie, he reckons, lies in going deep in the value space. “He

is not building premium brands. As long as he plays the value game well, he will grow at a fast clip,” says Mall.

The challenge, though, for Pittie emanates from his business model itself. “Can somebody replicate the model and disrupt the disruptor?” asks Ashita Aggarwal, professor of marketing at SP Jain Institute of Management and Research.

If price is the biggest differentiator that pulls a consumer for the first time, then the same trick can be played by an aggressive competitor as well. People don’t throng to Zudio, the value brand from Tatas, only for low prices. “Has Pittie built the same playbook for its consumer brands?” she asks. Another challenge for Pittie would be to take a call on advertising. “He is turning commodities into brands. So, one needs to advertise and create awareness eventually,” she says. Value-for-money consumers want to take home brands that are affordable as well as aspirational. They want to be seen with the visible brands.

Pittie, for his part, intends to stick to his game plan. “I don’t want to be on TV,” he says. But there are puja brands such as incense sticks on TV and with brand ambassadors. Moksh Agarbatti had Madhuri Dixit Nene, Hari Darshan roped in Juhi Chawla, Zed Black flaunted MS Dhoni, and Cycle Pure managed to get Sourav Ganguly. Pittie, in contrast, wants to stay away from the herd mentality. “I have to balance cost and quality,” he says, adding that the money saved on advertising is passed on to the consumers. In terms of advertising, all the brands score high digitally. “My monthly advertising budget in quick commerce is quite high,” he claims, sharing his biggest challenge. “I need to stay true to the core: Value-for-money,” he says. There were times when Pittie rolled out premium products. But they bombed. “We don’t have that DNA. For me, gold lies at the bottom of the pyramid,” he signs off. **F**



“The target group of Pittie and Zudio are the same: Value-for-money buyers. And they are in millions inside and outside the cities.”

ASHITA AGGARWAL, PROFESSOR (MARKETING), SP JAIN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT AND RESEARCH

THE TEA STORIES: AN F&B BRAND PER EXCELLENCE CO-FOUNDED BY MILLIONAIRE ENTREPRENEUR SANKHADEEP DUTTA

The Tea Stories was Co-founded in Bangalore last year by award winning entrepreneur Sankhadeep Dutta. It started its operation in Sattva Knowledge Court in Bangalore and immediately captured the attention of many food connoisseurs for its delectable offerings and new food items which it introduced through its brand outlets in Sattva. Sankhadeep started the business with his business partner Saroj Senapati and Satyaki Nandan. Sankhadeep, Saroj and Satyaki brought in different layers of expertise to the business which helped them in capturing the attention of the people of Bangalore very fast. And it grew rapidly in sales and revenue.

Making an f&b brand profitable takes time but the founders with their deep understanding of business and finance managed it quite efficiently and that culminated in the brand so fast so quickly.

The Tea Stories is expanding their operations rapidly in Bangalore as they are in talks to open in different IT parks in Bangalore such as Brigade, Sumadhura and Prestige this year.

Sankhadeep said, "The idea is to create a brand that everyone loves, we live by this principle. And that's how we are building it. You will see multiple new and unique offerings coming your way from The Tea Stories as we expand more and more in many other IT parks in Bangalore as well as in the country. The next cities that we are planning to expand into are Hyderabad, Punjab, Kolkata where we already have our F&B operation running successfully. We plan to execute all this plan by the first half of next year. I am pretty confident The Tea Stories will become a brand that everyone in India will love".

Conclusion

Sankhadeep whose business interest spans across different sectors such as Food and beverage, Edtech, Hospitality, Travel and tourism and Transportation and real-estate has very recently been conferred with prestigious Global Icon award for his inspirational journey in business and writing. His recent book "The 17 Rules of success" is making waves in the literary circles. It is very evident that his profound expertise in business and finance coupled with his ambitious nature has propelled his established brand into the orbit of great success. But many people, including his readers and fans, keep wondering what really drives this young entrepreneur so much. To which Mr Dutta says, "I don't see myself as particularly ambitious or



Sankhadeep Dutta
The Tea Stories

The idea is to create a brand that everyone loves, we live by this principle. And that's how we are building it. You will see multiple new and unique offerings coming your way from The Tea Stories as we expand more and more in many other IT parks in Bangalore as well as in the country.

driven. But what matters to me is that if I decide to do something that I get it done. Commitment matters to me the most whether it's to others or myself. And I have been particularly blessed to have great partners in Business. Mr Saroj Senapati, Mr Satyaki Nandan and I have a very good understanding of business management and finance and our style of business management sync very well. I think that has made things possible really in a big way."

Sankhadeep Dutta is also planning on expanding his successful edtech venture The Learning Curve in a new light. "We are going to be coming up with new courses and curriculums to help students learn not only academic topics but the focus would be, as I said in many of my interviews with different medias, on holistic development of someone's mind. I firmly believe it's your mind, more than anything else, which determines how much you can accomplish or what quality of life you will have. The understanding on this topic, in my experience, is very vague. And therefore we intend to change that through our platform The Learning Curve. We are also organising seminars through our platform infibrands which again deal with these personality development topics in a very detailed manner. We are not driven by profits or numbers in The Learning Curve, but we are driven by a genuine sense of responsibility that both me and my Business partner shares about teaching people how to really succeed in the real world. Traditional education doesn't teach you that. But we will. And that's what we are trying to accomplish through our skill development platform."

The Eureka Moment

Eureka Forbes, the legacy brand of vacuum cleaners and water purifiers, has undergone a transformation that has brought along a company-wide shake-up, new-age products, and much-needed growth

By RAJIV SINGH



The place had all the trappings of a wonderland. There was love, peace, and harmony. It was a beautiful kingdom that was disconnected from the outside world. The citizens loved their benevolent ruler who had an impressive and undisputed stint for four decades.



(From left) Anurag Kumar, chief growth officer, Pratik Pota, MD and CEO, Gaurav Khandelwal, chief financial officer and Mahnaz Shaikh, CHRO at Eureka Forbes

Pratik Pota tells us more about this fascinating world. “Among the inhabitants, there was an immense sense of pride, ownership, and belonging,” says Pota, who was stunned by the naivety of the inhabitants and their unshaken belief that the sun would never set on the empire. Their unbridled optimism gave birth to an unshakeable hope: Things would never go wrong. “It seemed as if they were caught in a time warp,” says Pota, who spotted deepening fault lines in the once-impregnable fortress.

The biggest red flag was the nature of the kingdom. “They lived in silos,” says Pota. There were multiple mini-kingdoms within the kingdom: Retail, direct sales, after-sales, service, marketing, and so on. Every vertical had its full-fledged setup: A CEO supported by a marketing team, a sales team, a products team, and a channel team. So, there were multiple CEOs and countless teams.

“A storied brand needed reinvention and turnaround. I couldn’t resist the thrilling challenge and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

PRATIK POTA
MD AND CEO, EUREKA FORBES

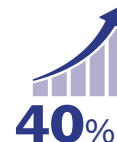
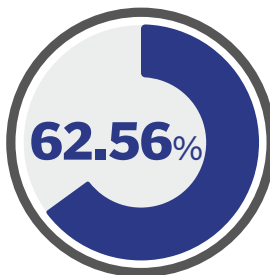
And guess what happened next? “Rather than fighting the competition, they started fighting each other,” underlines Pota, who was dismayed to see an absence of synergies and lack of collaboration among the teams. “In the meeting room, people from separate teams would start fighting,” he recalls. Data had no place in their lives, customer obsession had taken a back seat, and technology and innovation were perceived as aliens.

What, though, was alarming was a stubborn reluctance to see the writing on the wall. “*Sab theek hai* [all is well] was the overwhelming feeling,” recalls Pota. The kingdom had been progressively losing its gloss, the ruler was eventually replaced, but the inhabitants still couldn’t sense the danger. The company was in crisis, the brand looked jaded and had lost its way, but a sense of urgency was conspicuously missing.

Pota became the chosen one to deliver a rude jolt. “Folks, we haven’t grown for 10 years,” underlined the veteran, battle-scarred corporate warrior, who joined Eureka Forbes in July 2022. “In other words, Aquaguard has been posting declining sales for a decade,” the former CEO of Jubilant FoodWorks—the master franchise of Domino’s in India—reiterated in Lonavla, around 100 km from Mumbai. In September 2021, Advent International, an American firm, bought Eureka Forbes, the consumer durable flagship of Shapoorji Pallonji Group, reportedly for ₹4,400 crore.

In Numbers

Shareholding of Advent International in Eureka Forbes



Percentage growth in advertising and sales promotion, which grew 40% year-on-year in Q2 of FY25



14 mln
Largest customer database across the country

19,500
Pin codes where the products and services are delivered

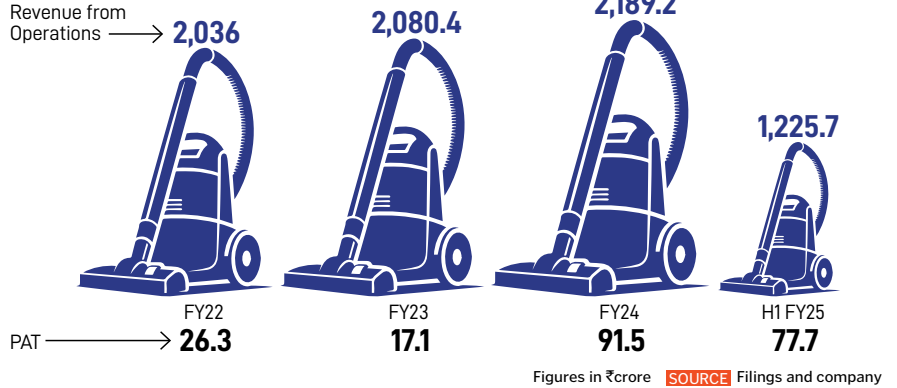


After 10 months, Pota was appointed managing director and CEO, and a few months later, he took the leadership team to an offsite at Lonavla to drag them out of their ‘wonderland’.

The CEO lived up to his reputation of not mincing words. At the offsite, he quickly unmasked the grim side of wonderland: Blunderland. “The volumes have not grown for 10 years,” he said. Eureka Forbes, he pointed out, has a large service component. “If we don’t sell, we don’t get service revenue, which means we were working on a smaller and smaller pie.” There was a stunned disbelief. There was another harsh reality that the Eureka Forbes team was happily oblivious to: A dipping market share.

The leader was bleeding from multiple cuts. And a few deep cuts came from its tardy response mechanism. For instance, take Kent RO. The rival brand rolled out its RO device in 1999, roped in Bollywood actor Hema Malini as its face, and launched a hyper-aggressive marketing and advertising campaign. Eureka Forbes, the smug market leader, reacted to the onslaught after six long years. By then, its market share had dipped from 80 percent to less than 40 percent. Another instance of delayed reaction was how it tackled the threat from LG. The Korean biggie launched a stainless-steel water purifier in 2016 and gained market share, while Eureka Forbes started sliding. The leader again took six years to respond. The

Report Card



lack of an innovation pipeline was also a drag on Eureka Forbes.

At Lonavla, Pota was clear of his vision. The brand, he said, needed reinvention and a turnaround. A transformation strategy, Operation Udaan, was rolled out with a mission to drive penetration, innovation, differentiation, awareness, affordability and relevance.

Fast forward to December 2024. Volume dip is now a thing of the past: The July to September quarter of FY25 was the fourth successive quarter of double-digit growth. The product business grew by 20 percent, advertising and sales promotion spend grew 40 percent year-on-year, the adjusted Ebitda margin increased to 11.5 percent, and profit after tax grew 83 percent year-on-year, to ₹46.7 crore.

The company has turned around on another front: From ₹200 crore debt to ₹100 crore surplus last year. Another remarkable aspect of transformation

has been the fact that the growth of water purifiers and vacuum cleaners was driven by a combination of volume and an increase in average selling price; unlike the past, it was not a pricing-led growth alone.

The seeds of a brighter future, Pota says, were sown after the Lonavla gathering. For Operation Udaan to be successful, he sensed that something drastic had to be done. A new owner and a new CEO, it was widely perceived within the Eureka Forbes establishment, would usher in disruptive changes. For a 40-year-old organisation, Eureka Forbes was founded as a joint venture between Forbes and Campbell (a Tata Group company) and Electrolux of Sweden in 1982. The Tatas sold its stake to Shapoorji Pallonji in 2001. The company had a large direct sales team that was beset with high costs and low margins. It was widely rumoured that the new management would shut down this channel.

Pota made empathy the core of his transformation blueprint. “I decided to kill apprehension, fear, and anxiety,” he recalls. “Forget shutting down, I want to double down on direct,” he announced. The reassurance was followed by a battery of quick steps to eliminate inconsistencies in marketing strategy. Usually, the direct sales team was asked to sell products at a higher price compared to retail. Pota, who was instrumental in relaunching PepsiCo’s Mountain

Mission Udaan



Advent International bought Eureka Forbes in February 2022, roped in Pratik Pota as CEO and MD in July 2022, and rolled out a transformation strategy called Udaan. The five levers of transformation are:



LORD'S MARK INDUSTRIES: PIONEERING INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY TO SHAPE INDIA'S FUTURE

Lord's Mark Industries is leading a transformative journey in India's healthcare and energy sectors, making significant strides in MedTech, diagnostics, and renewable energy, while establishing a dominant presence in both domestic and international markets.

MedTech Innovation & IVD Excellence

A prominent player in India's In-Vitro Diagnostics (IVD) space, Lord's Mark Industries is now ranked as the fifth-best IVD brand in the country. With a cutting-edge manufacturing facility in Vasai, Mumbai, Lord's Mark is meeting the growing demand for high-quality diagnostic products, including a comprehensive range of rapid tests, biochemistry products, and analyser machines. In addition to this, the company is gearing up to establish the Asia's second-largest biochemistry manufacturing unit in Maharashtra, further solidifying India's reputation in the global healthcare supply chain.

In the year 2023, Lord's Mark Industries has entered into an exclusive collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay to launch the first ever artificial intelligence-enabled point of care testing equipment to screen sickle cell anaemia, an inherited blood disease.

In the field of genomic testing, Lord's Mark's genomics arm, MYDNA, is shaping the future of personalized healthcare in India. MYDNA offers advanced genetic testing services, empowering individuals with crucial insights into their genetic predispositions. MYDNA offer personalized treatment plans, improving disease prevention and management, especially for high-burden conditions such as cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.

One of the company's standout innovations is the Oral Cancer Detection Technology—a non-invasive, real-time diagnostic device that leverages optical



Sachidanand Upadhyay
Managing Director,
Lord's Mark Industries Limited

“A prominent player in India's In-Vitro Diagnostics (IVD) space, Lord's Mark Industries is now ranked as the fifth-best IVD brand in the country. With a cutting-edge manufacturing facility in Vasai, Mumbai, Lord's Mark is meeting the growing demand for high-quality diagnostic products, including a comprehensive range of rapid tests, biochemistry products, and analyser machines.”

spectroscopy to detect pre-cancerous and cancerous lesions in the oral cavity with 95% accuracy.

Strengthening Regional Healthcare in SAARC Nations

Lord's Mark Industries is not only revolutionizing healthcare in India but also expanding its footprint across the

SAARC region. The company is focusing on providing reliable, affordable, and locally manufactured diagnostic solutions to neighboring countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. The company has set an ambitious target to export over 6.55 million diagnostic products to these countries.

Renewable Energy Leadership

In addition to healthcare, Lord's Mark is making significant contributions to the renewable energy sector. Recently, the company secured a landmark 150 MW solar rooftop project at an impressive rate of ₹4.80 per unit, following the successful completion of a 50 MW solar project. This expansion in solar energy demonstrates Lord's Mark's commitment to sustainability.

Lighting & Energy Solutions

Lord's Mark Industries is also a dominant force in India's lighting sector, being the largest player in the RMS-based lighting domain. The company has partnered with Philips to distribute energy-efficient lighting solutions, establishing itself as a key channel partner in India. This collaboration further strengthens Lord's Mark's position as a leader in the lighting industry.

Lord's Mark Industries is not merely a business entity but a beacon of innovation, sustainability, and social impact. Through groundbreaking advancements in MedTech, personalized healthcare, and renewable energy, the company is redefining industry benchmarks while addressing some of the most pressing challenges faced by India and its neighbouring regions. Its commitment to excellence, sustainability, and community empowerment reflects a forward-thinking vision that aligns with India's aspirations for a healthier, greener, and more inclusive future. As Lord's Mark Industries continues to expand its horizons and innovate across diverse sectors, it is poised to play a pivotal role in shaping a resilient and sustainable India on the global stage.

www.lordsmark.com

Revamped Team

Makeover of the top deck—around 80% of senior management was infused from outside—was in sync with a new vision, purpose, and a sense of urgency



“The most fundamental shift has been the willingness to try new things, even if a few fail.”

Gaurav Khandelwal, chief financial officer

- Joined in August 2022; has had stints at Oyo, Airtel and Hindustan Lever
- Khandelwal digitised collections; moved 85% of collections to digital within 18 months
- Guided Eureka Forbes from a debt-heavy (₹200 crore+) to a cash-surplus company
- Moved nearly 50% of service AMC (annual maintenance cost) sales to app



Dew with an inspiring tagline, *Darr ke aage jeet hai* [beyond fear is triumph], killed the price differential. In one go, he brought customers back into the reckoning. “One price for one product was a big unlock. This convinced us that we were walking the talk,” he recounts. “One reason why we had not been doing well was because we had not been investing. So we said we would invest in capability, brand, and drive innovations.”

Another integral strand made the transformation possible: A new-look team. In the following nine months after becoming CEO, it became apparent to Pota that the existing core team was reluctant to bite the bullet. The criteria for picking up new team members was simple: Leaders with stints at strong foundation-building companies like HUL, P&G, and Asian Paints, with some years at a digital or new-age company. Pota wanted a team that was agile, experimentative, and fearless. Around 80 percent of senior management was infused with external hires. The squad was equipped with new-age R&D, category marketing, digital, engineering, product management, and data science capabilities. (See box.) “A captain is nothing without a winning team. I am fortunate to have built that at Eureka,” says Pota.

The team had its task cut out. As chief human resource officer (CHRO),

Mahnaz Shaikh knew what it would take to rally the employees behind a cause. In a sharp disconnect from the past, she rolled out a company-wide ESOP programme. The move transmitted a powerful message: All managers across grades, functions, and locations were now owners of the company, working together and towards a common goal. “This was an industry-first approach,” says Shaikh. “We wanted to signal that everybody plays a critical role.”

The new chief financial officer, Gaurav Khandelwal, inculcated a new language and mindset. “The most fundamental shift has been the mindset to challenge the status quo and willingness to try new things, even if a few fail,” he says. However, a business with over ₹200-crore debt needed much more than a mindset reboot; it needed rewiring of internal and external business practices. “We

bought in digitised collections,” he says, adding that, within 18 months, Eureka Forbes saw nearly 85 percent of collections becoming digital. Annual maintenance charges (AMC) were revamped. In 18 months, he claims, nearly 50 percent of AMC sales moved to the digital platform.

The chief growth officer too had a clear vision: To drive growth and penetration. The water purifier segment has a paltry 6 percent penetration in India. The big question was how to make further inroads. The answer lay in a slew of things: Driving relevance, access, and innovation; focusing on replacements; nudging consumers to buy genuine filters; rapidly scaling vacuum cleaning on the back of convenient solutions like robotic and cordless cleaners; and growing the air purifiers and water softeners. “This framing has enabled resource deployment and big initiatives towards growth areas where we have a right to win,” contends Anurag Kumar.

Lastly, the chief digital and product officer was tasked with stirring up a new culture. Nithyanand Shankar worked with one of India’s top UI/UX design firms to redesign the consumer app and website. He built an in-house product and technology team, incubated a data-science team to leverage millions of data points to build predictive models, and built and scaled ecommerce business across Amazon and Flipkart. “We built a best-in-class digital team that operates like a startup within a

“Our digital team operates like a startup within a 40-year-old company.”

Nithyanand Shankar, chief digital & product officer

- Joined in Feb 2023; has had stints at Amazon and P&G
- Shankar built in-house product, technology, and digital business teams
- Redesigned and launched a new app and D2C Website with new UI UX
- Active app downloads zoomed from 150,000 to 1.5 million in a year
- 80%+ of customer interactions moved to app (vs 35% a year ago)
- Incubated an in-house data science team to build predictive customer models



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40-year-old company,” he reckons.

With a handpicked team in place, the captain added more fizz and topping. “We took a hard look at Ebitda [earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation] margin,” says Pota, who had a reputation at PepsiCo and Jubilant for looking at everything through the Ebitda lens. “We were at 3.5 and 4.5 percent Ebitda margin. This was unacceptable,” he says. Ebitda margins in consumer durables businesses hover between 9 and 12 percent. But Eureka Forbes was not just a consumer durable company because of a large service business. So, the new benchmark was 16 to 17 percent. “We began to cut costs,” he says.

Then came the move of rationalising stock-keeping units (SKUs). In 2022, Eureka Forbes had around 200 SKUs of almost similar products across sales channels. “You can’t replicate every single SKU for every channel. So we trimmed it to 45,” says Pota. The next big ask was to make people buy new products. It was a tough task because of classic category barriers. Consumers, says Pota, perceive branded purifiers to be expensive. Why pay ₹15,000 when you can get a cheaper local version? With the added cost of five-year AMCs, the total cost comes to around ₹30,000. “We had to address the cost of ownership issue,” says Pota. This was done by making purifiers affordable. Pota rolled out a purifier with a price tag of under ₹7,000 in



“We pushed penetration of water purifiers, drove premium innovation, and nudged people to buy genuine filters.”

Anurag Kumar, chief growth officer

- Joined in May 2023; has had stints at Tata Play and HUL
- Drove the product business to double-digit growth
- Unlocked penetration for water purifiers with campaigns and affordable products
- Rolled out premium innovations in vacuum cleaners with robotics and water purifiers such as hot and ambient, Slimtech, and 'Under the Counter'



March 2023, and launched a TV ad campaign that targeted a traditional method of using cloth to filter tap water: *Sar se kapda hatana hai toh nal se kapda hatane padega* [if you have to remove the cloth from your head, you have to remove the cloth from the tap].

The gambit paid off. “Our sales from April skyrocketed,” says Pota, who aggressively invested in the R&D team to roll out a bunch of innovative products, such as Aquaguard Slimtech, which blended functionality with aesthetics, and Aquaguard Blaze Insta, which was loaded with instant hot water technology, and Aquaguard UTC (under-the-counter) that could be installed beneath the kitchen counter. A company starved of innovation for years now had a rich product pipeline.

The new owners are elated. “We are proud to champion Eureka Forbes on its transformative

journey into a premier health tech company,” says Sahil Dalal, managing director at Advent India, which owns a 62.56 percent stake in Eureka Forbes. Under Pota and his team of CXOs, the company has reinforced its market position, pioneering innovation and elevating customer satisfaction, he reckons.

Despite the turnaround, Eureka Forbes will have to contend with a series of potential challenges. The biggest is wooing a new set of users who migrated to other brands. “Rekindling an old romance is not easy,” says Ashita Aggarwal, professor of marketing at SP Jain Institute of Management and Research. One needs a compelling reason to go back. There are strong multinational rivals as well as a bunch of home-grown challengers who have grown aggressively. “The brand needs to stay aggressive in marketing, advertising, and product innovation for a few more quarters,” she says. Another challenge for Eureka Forbes is to drive the penetration of water purifier and vacuum cleaning categories. “A leader has to do it. And when one does it, there would be hits and misses,” she says, adding that sustaining the turnaround tempo would be another formidable issue.

Pota reckons there is no U-turn. “In a way, we were India’s first D2C company some 40 years ago. Now we need to become a healthtech D2C company,” he says. **F**



“Company-wide Esop signalled that everybody had a critical role in the transformation journey.”

Mahnaz Shaikh, CHRO

- Joined in April 2023; has had stints at Udaan, Godrej Consumer Products & P&G
- Ushered in senior management with new-age capabilities of digital, R&D, and P&L management
- Moved away from ESOPs only for top leadership to ESOPs for all
- Streamlined organisation structure, brought execution closer to market
- Created incentive framework for frontline teams, enshrined new culture codes



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‘PICKLEBALL IS CONTRIBUTING TO POP CULTURE’

Filmmaker Karan Johar on becoming the brand ambassador of the Indian Open and Global Sports Pro and Challenger League, why the game is a revolution for people across age groups, and Bollywood interest in the sport

By **KUNAL PURANDARE & KATHAKALI CHANDA**

Thirty-four years after he last played a racquet sport—badminton—Karan Johar started playing pickleball in his 50s. A mash-up of tennis, table tennis and badminton, the non-contact sport is growing in popularity in India. And the filmmaker is among the many who have taken a fancy to it.

Johar, 52, is the brand ambassador of the Indian Open and Global Sports Pro and Challenger League 2025. Ten teams will participate in the tournament, scheduled to be held from February 3 to 9 in Mumbai. Global Sports is a leading sports management firm that has been promoting pickleball across the country under the leadership of Hemal Jain, and co-founders Niraj Jain, Divyesh Jain and Suresh Bhansali. Filmmaker Shashank Khaitan and Yuvraj Ruia, Pro Pickleball player and scion of Essar Industries, are partners.

In an interview with *Forbes India*, Johar speaks about being a part of the pickleball revolution, taking the sport global, the commercial aspect of the game, and how the association of Bollywood celebrities gives it an additional fillip. Edited excerpts:

Q How did you’ll decide to start the league and what is the idea behind it?

Global Sports was brought to me by Shashank Khaitan, a prolific filmmaker and a dear friend, and I could see way back then that his passion was so immense. And then when I did my research, I realised that pickleball is going to be an eventual revolution. It’s going to really pick up. Because it’s

a sport and no matter how old you are, you can get into it for the first time. I am in my 50s and I am playing pickleball. I hadn’t played a racket sport in 34 years. Playing pickleball was game-changing for me. Which is why I think that it is not just a revolution for the youth, but across decades, across generations. You could be in your 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, even 80s, and you could be playing pickleball, which means that it’s a pop culture revolution. And collectively we saw that coming. And I felt that if it’s a revolution, why not be a part of it.

Q When you did your research, what stood out and convinced you to get involved with the game?

I realised pickleball is more than a sport. It’s contributing to pop culture. Sport is associated with competitiveness and physical fitness, and communities that are rallying behind a particular sport. But very rarely is a sport contributing to pop culture. For me, pop culture is music, books, entertainment... even the internet is contributing so strongly to it. But there’s never been a sport that’s actually contributing to pop culture. Pop culture also equals relevance. To be relevant, you have to engage with pop culture. And pickleball is the only sport that is heavily contributing to pop culture.

Q What are the short-term and long-term goals of the league?

There is only a long-term goal. How can there be a short-term goal for something that is a revolution? A long-term goal is, of course, making



it to the Olympics. It's going beyond that, going global with it. Global Sports has already made inroads into Dubai. Then it's going to be across the world. I think Shashank and the team are engaging in absolute intensity to make sure that Global Sports lives up to its name and goes beyond global... which it already has, the process has begun. I think some of the most prolific names in the world of industry and entertainment are now affiliating with pickleball and Global Sports, and I think that is only going to exponentially expand. So, as I said, it's the beginning of a revolution.

Q There are a lot of pickleball leagues in India suddenly. It's a crowded space. Do you think

▲ Karan Johar believes pickleball is more than just a sport

the Indian sports ecosystem will be able to handle the sudden and explosive growth?

Global Sports is a pioneer, a market leader, and actually began the pickleball rolling much before anybody else did. Imitation is a form of flattery, so if there are other leagues, and they started after Global Sports, we are saying, 'Welcome to the party, but remember we started it first'.

Q How is this league different from the others?

Because I am a part of it (smiles).

Q Tell us about the sponsorships and partnerships. Is this a commercial venture as well?

Yes, absolutely. Every sport is commercialised. Like every entertainment or art is commercialised, it is too. And, of course, we have huge interest in sponsors across our industrial base, corporate base that are engaging because, as you know, sport and industry have always held hands, they have come together. So I think that's what's happening even at our end. You can see the interest from all the branding. There's a huge amount of interest in our pickleball league.

Q A lot of Bollywood celebrities are team owners now. Do you feel that helps promote the sport and start a conversation around it?

The movie industry has always contributed to the face value of sports. As you see with the Indian Premier League (IPL) in cricket, the biggest movie star in the country has a team. And you know that the team has so much love because of its brilliant performance, but also the fact that Shah Rukh Khan adds so much. So Bollywood always adds to the brand value and gives a sport or an entity a face.

Q Why didn't you get into cricket, for instance?

Because that time, I didn't see the vision that I see for pickleball now.

Q This is the first edition of the league. Is there a plan to scale it up?

Yes. We come from the world of scaled entertainment, so why not operate that in sport as well. I believe in bigness in cinema... why not in sport?

Q Five years down the line, when you look at this league, are there certain milestones or numbers that you have in mind that you want to achieve?

I've never played the five-year game. I live in the moment. You never know 'kal ho na ho' (there may or may not be tomorrow). You live today. **F**

Sports Stars

From Oliver Bearman to Vaibhav Suryavanshi, five talented players to watch out for in 2025

There may not be an Olympics but there is still plenty of sport to look forward to in 2025 and while some will be looking at it as a final swansong,

others will see the year as the springboard to sporting greatness.

AFP Sport looks at five young pretenders to keep an eye on over the next 12 months **F**

CRICKET

VAIBHAV SURYAVANSHI

Eyebrows were raised in November when Rajasthan Royals bid \$130,500 for 13-year-old schoolboy Vaibhav Suryavanshi, who could become the youngest-ever to play in the IPL. He made his domestic debut aged 12 in the Ranji Trophy, then was selected for India's Under 19 squad against a touring Australia team, promptly hitting a 58-ball century



FORMULA 1

OLIVER BEARMAN

A graduate of the Ferrari driver academy, Bearman, 19, made his F1 debut as a late replacement for Ferrari's Carlos Sainz in Saudi Arabia in 2024. Driving a mature race, he finished seventh, provoking excitement over another young talent joining the grid.



TENNIS

MIRRA ANDREEVA

The 17-year-old Russian served warning of her precocious talent when she reached the last 16 of Wimbledon in 2023 and at the 2024 Australian Open, only to eclipse that by reaching the semi-finals at the French Open. Her first WTA title arrived in Iasi, Romania, before she added an Olympic silver medal in doubles in Paris.



ATHLETICS

SEMBO ALMAYEW

At the Paris Olympics, the 19-year-old finished fifth in the 3000 m steeplechase. She then went on to win gold in the U20 World Athletics Championships in Lima in a new championship record. That resulted in her winning the World Athletics Rising Star for 2024 awards.



BASEBALL

ROKI SASAKI

The 23-year-old from Iwate, who exceeds 100 mph on pitches, has been described as a "generational talent". In 2022, he threw a perfect game with 19 strikeouts, nearly repeating the feat a week later with eight more perfect innings.

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