

A Microsoft Alumnus Shares His Good Fortune

Jason Pontin

TARUN ANAND, the co-founder and chief executive of the Perfect Future, a start-up near Delhi, made his fortune in the United States, but returned to India to become an entrepreneur. He wants to use Web and mobile telephone technology to reform, or at least begin to improve, the uneven condition of education in his homeland.

I met Mr. Anand on a recent trip to India, where he introduced me to his company. Wearing a chartreuse cotton kurta, the traditional knee-length shirt of northern India, he arrived at my hotel and drove me through the squawking chaos of Delhi's industrial suburbs.

Mr. Anand, who is 34, grew up in Delhi, where his father taught political science at the University of Delhi (his mother was a chemistry teacher at a local school). He was always a tinkerer and engineer. "At the age of 10, I built a film projector and watched strips of Indian cinema projected against a white wall," he said. "Around the age of 14 I got hooked on computers and started programming."

He learned computer science at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur and at the University of Texas, Austin. In 1995, he joined Microsoft, where he helped design a number of successful systems, including Windows NT and 2000, as well as Microsoft's most important software development tools.

In 2001, Mr. Anand returned to India to work for Microsoft as a "technical evangelist," with the unenviable job of persuading other software developers to embrace Microsoft's technical standards, products and services. Even then, he said, he knew that he would eventually leave Microsoft to start his own business in India.

"I was honest with my boss, but I was building contacts and a network," he told me.

He achieved limited institutional fame when he was named Microsoft's Worldwide Software Architect of the Year in 2003. But the next year, when his stock options vested, he quit the company to start the Perfect Future.

Mr. Anand financed his company (which is named for a favorite book, "A Future Perfect: The Challenge and Promise of Globalization," by two Economist editors, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge) with \$25,000 of his Microsoft money. He describes the venture as "dedicated to bringing innovative solutions to emerging markets."

"That's where the most demanding customers exist today," he said. "Emerging markets also offer you the opportunity to experiment on both the mobile and Web platforms since the largest number of Web and mobile users exist in those markets."

After a number of false starts, and, like so many Indian software firms, some service work (in this case, developing the Web site of The Hindustan Times), the start-up decided to focus on education.

"We realized that in Indian schools, children find education boring and static, and teachers and administrators are overburdened," he said. "Parents are also out of touch with what's happening. But most importantly, children are unprepared for real life."

India's international reputation for educating so many to high standards is deserved, and is the more remarkable in a nation whose per-capita income was \$3,700 in 2006.

But that reputation disguises significant disparities.

According to India's Department of School Education and Literacy, 90 percent of the country's children enroll in school, but after five years in class around 50 percent of the students fail

basic reading tests and are unable to perform single-digit subtraction. Ninety percent of Indian children drop out before they reach high school.

When I visited with Mr. Anand, his company had just moved out of a garage into its new offices (an undistinguished low-rise office block in a dry, sun-blasted field in an industrial park) and was weeks away from shipping its first branded product, called "School in a Box." In the 115-degree heat of a Delhi afternoon (the air-conditioning in his company's new offices had failed), Mr. Anand's small team of programmers and educational advisers proudly showed me their answer to the problems of Indian education.

School in a Box offers Indian primary and upper primary schools (that is, for children from 5 to 14) an array of services which the Perfect Future hosts and manages. Teachers and others can use the services either on the Web, on mobile phones or even, in many cases, print them out at an Internet cafe and take them to school.

Among the tools that School in a Box users can deploy are simple text messages to notify school administrators, teachers, parents and children of important events; online student assessment tools; interactive question-and-answer examinations; and something called "activity-based learning," or 25 games (most of them traditional and Indian) that teach children chemistry, physics and vocabulary.

By far the most interesting and radical element of School in a Box is how it attempts to promote Vedic mathematics, a system that Bharati Krsna Tirthaji Maharaja, a Hindu mathematician and scholar of the last century, claimed to have rediscovered in the Vedas, or Hindu sacred literature.

Vedic mathematics is controversial. It is associated with Hindu nationalism. The section of the Vedas where Mr. Tirthaji unearthed them is notoriously obscure, and some mathematicians believe that Mr. Tirthaji was a fabulist whose inventions distracted from the genuine achievements of ancient Indian mathematics.

While I am no great mathematician, Mr. Anand's short tutorial revealed to me a system of remarkable power and elegance, ideally suited to calculations that must be performed without pen or paper.

Mr. Anand believes that traditional Indian learning, of which he thinks Vedic mathematics is an example, was suppressed by the British during their administration. "Most Indian children are unaware of the rich traditional knowledge and educational system of a great civilization," he said.

The Perfect Future will earn money from School in a Box by charging schools about 15 Indian rupees, or around 40 cents, a month for each child, according to Mr. Anand. But he says the company will give away the service to the poorest schools or schools in rural areas.

Still, School in a Box, for all its high-minded promise, faces real challenges. To flourish, it would have to be purchased by Indian school administrators, who are typically conservative, and who have limited resources.

For his part, Mr. Anand believes that his service will succeed because it doesn't threaten administrators, but will help them to do their jobs better. In the meantime, he is seeking the patronage of the minister of education for Delhi State, Arvinder Singh Lovely, whom he hopes will recommend School in the Box to administrators, and he is pursuing partnerships with other companies with interests in Indian education.

More tellingly, it's not clear how much the new service can help Indian education. But for Mr. Anand, at least, it's a start. "It's not an easy task to uproot an existing system, no matter how bad, with a new one," he argued. School in a Box, he said, won't foment any revolution. "It was designed to bring an effective, affordable and user-friendly interface between technology and education."

Tarun Anand is one member of an intriguing and growing group: Indians who have done well in the United States, and who, in preference to becoming even richer in their adopted country, have come home to see what commercial technology can do to improve the intractable problems of the subcontinent.

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