

Reinventing Education

Online education is growing fast in India as many students have access to smartphones and consume content through digital mediums. According to a joint report by Google and KPMG, India's online education industry is expected to grow almost eight times to hit US\$ 1.96 billion by 2021, with the number of paid users rising six-fold from 1.6 million now to 9.6 million.¹ While this space is expected to see an uptrend in the next few years, BYJU'S – The Learning App founded by Byju Raveendran, has carved a niche for itself. Known for his unconventional and practical methods of teaching that grew popular over the years, his app now has more than 1.5 crore users with around 10 to 11 lakh students being added each month.² India Now Business and Economy speaks to Mrinal Mohit, Chief Operating Officer, BYJU'S – The Learning App, for more insights.

What was the genesis of the idea that is BYJU'S today?

The main idea behind starting BYJU'S was to make learning accessible, effective, engaging, and personalised for everyone. We addressed the existing gap in the way students learn and how concepts could actually be learnt.

While we started as a test prep coach, we realised that if we want to make a real impact on the way students learn, if we want to make them fall in love with learning, we need to start early—when the students start feeling the subject—as those crucial years lay the strong foundation for lifelong learning. So, Think & Learn Pvt Ltd (parent company of BYJU'S), with a focus on the K-12 (school-going students in classes 4-12) segment, was launched in 2011 in Bengaluru. Consequently, we launched our flagship product (BYJU'S- The Learning App) in August 2015.

In a conventional classroom learning system, access to high-quality education and personalisation of learning have always been an issue. Students are still getting trained to solve questions and not ask questions. Learning happens because of the fear of exams, and not for the love for learning. We need to bring back the child-like curiosity by creating products in a format that they will like, and hence, making them lifelong learners.

At BYJU'S, we have developed learning programmes that address these pressing needs along with making students enjoy learning. The unique combination of media, technology, and content has helped us create a holistic learning experience. Use of real-life teachers with technology as an enabler



Mrinal Mohit, Chief Operating Officer, BYJU'S

makes the delivery of concepts effective and engaging. In fact, teachers are crucial to keep students engaged through the programme/video lesson and give them the 'someone who they can relate to', and 'someone who can explain the concepts' in a fun, simple, and engaging way. This also solves the problem of access to quality teachers in a one-on-one format.

Overall, BYJU'S learning programme creates personalised learning journeys for individual students based on their proficiency levels and capabilities, which help them learn at their own pace and style. As a brand, we are solving core problems—like access to quality teachers across geography—with technology.

Why did you choose online as your primary medium as against traditional forms?

Integrating technology in education not only increases engagement but also simplifies the way students learn. Technology today offers a combination of teachers, video lessons, and interactive games to be delivered through a personalised learning platform. Use of technology can help make complex concepts visual and contextual, which will help students understand not just the ‘what’ of learning it, but the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ as well. Children are primarily visual learners and explaining concepts with visual representations makes learning exciting and easier. For example, explaining concepts by relating it to real-life experiences improves understanding and retention of concepts for life.

What were the infrastructural challenges you faced?

As the country gets more tech-savvy, technology-enabled education will change the way learning is approached by students. Online learning is not just offline learning taken online, by simply digitising content. The advantage of integrating technology in education is that it not only enables you to take classes from the best teachers to every part of the country with the exact same high quality, but it also personalises the way students learn.

India, today, has the largest K-12 education system in the world, with over 260 million enrolments; 70% of the segment has access to a smartphone, and this percentage is fast increasing. This gives us an opportunity to use the smartphone as a learning device, and the app as a medium to reach millions of students and has the potential to solve the problem of access. A recent KPMG report suggested that by 2021, India will have over 735 million internet users. Further, India’s mobile data consumption is expected to grow five-fold in the next three years. Semi-urban and rural areas are seeing significant uptake in internet usage and therefore, we see tremendous growth for online learning and education in these regions. Such an infrastructure enables an extended reach to remote parts of India and will go a long way towards transforming education in every nook and corner of the country.

In India, a majority of the parents—who are the decision-makers—are still sceptical about the online medium. How did you overcome this mindset?

If you are addressing a need and making an impact by helping someone learn better, retention will happen on its own. For most parents, especially in India,

education is still the best way to make it big, so if we can help millions of students learn better, it will create a huge impact. Parents play a very important role in the educational journey of a student. Many working parents are unable to get a daily look into their child’s education. So, one does not get to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their child. Our ‘parent connect’ app allows parents to stay up-to-date with their child’s progress, be more involved in their child’s learning journey and appreciate them on work well done.

While parents still make the decision of paying for the app, the key differentiator here is that we are targeting the end users and helping them become better learners. Parents have been seeing a real impact on their child’s learning through the app—making it a valuable investment for them. In fact, a recent survey showed that 79% of parents said using BYJU’S app improved their children’s learning dramatically, and another 17% said it improved their learning significantly.

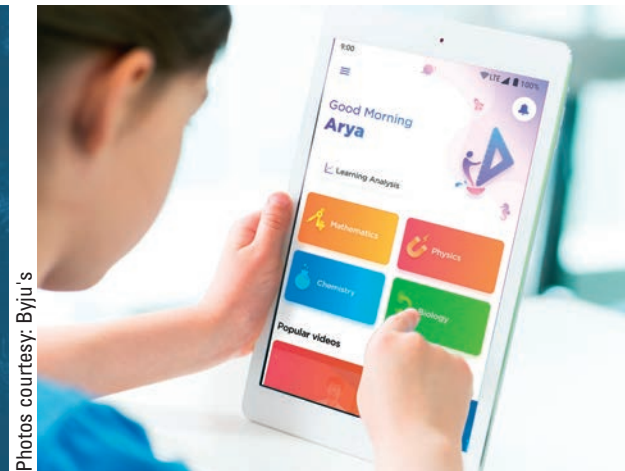
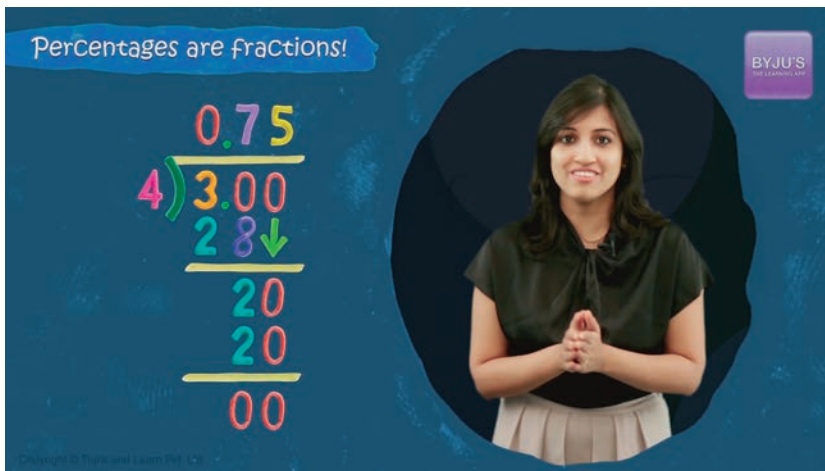
According to a recent report by Gray Matters Capital (GMC), Indians are now becoming more and more inclined towards education apps. Out of 2,000 users surveyed, a whopping 89% were in favour of paid learning apps. Today, parents are opening up to learning backed by technology. They genuinely see the value that a product like ours can bring in the lives of their children. At BYJU’S, the learning programmes are created for everyone, not just for the motivated.

The edutech sector is fast-growing and transforming the way learning is visualised and presented. This has also encouraged several startups in this area.

- a) Given this context, what has been your strategy to capture and sustain market share?**
- b) What is your differential strategy that makes you the market leader?**

One of the key differentiators is that we always speak to the end users, ie students, and help them become better learners. We are their learning companion and are there to help them fall in love with learning all over again. We believe we are our own competition and strive to run faster every day than the day before. We are constantly working on creating systems and learning experiences, which will make learning even simpler and much more fun. Here are the key points that explain how we are different from others in this space:

- Personalised learning based on the size and style of learning for every student. The app merges videos, interactives, and teachers to bring concepts to life. An average of 40 minutes is being spent by a student on the app every day.



Photos courtesy: Byju's

- Creating a new segment of self-paced learners and active learners where students are enabled to take up the initiative and learn on their own, which is made possible by the combination of content, media and technology.
- Using original content, engaging video lessons and interactives that have been designed to adapt to the unique learning style of every student.
- Creating high-quality learning modules, videos and interactives across grades.
- Accessibility for students across grades irrespective of their geographical locations and proficiency levels.

Briefly describe the business model of BYJU'S and how it complements traditional education.

We presently follow a freemium business model whereby students get access to the content for free for about 15 days, post which they can subscribe for advanced levels. We encourage students to download and try the app first and then decide if they would like to subscribe to the lessons for an annual subscription fee. Our app is a student's learning companion and not a replacement for any of their existing channels of education. Students use the app to either strengthen concepts after it has been taught in their school or as a form of preparation before exams. Learning concepts visually help them strengthen their foundation and eliminate the need for rote learning.

While there is a rise in the availability of low-cost smartphones and cheap internet access, many remote, rural areas in India still do not have an internet connection. Is there scope for BYJU'S to expand and build potential in the rural market?

As stated previously, India is home to the largest K-12 education system in the world and 70% of this

segment has access to a smartphone. This gives us an opportunity to use the smartphone as a learning device and app as a medium to reach millions of students. The Government of India has launched several initiatives like SWAYAM, eBasta, and Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) that have been driving the adoption of online education across the country. The internet is quickly penetrating every nook and corner of the country. Semi-urban and rural areas are seeing significant uptake in internet usage and therefore we see tremendous growth for online learning and education in these regions.

We have been at the forefront of addressing issues like access to quality education and teachers for students in smaller cities and towns in India. Students from remote locations like Keshod (Gujarat) to Berhampur (Odisha) are increasingly adopting learning from the app. Today, almost 75% of our users come from outside the top 10 cities. It is encouraging to see increased adoption and high engagement from 1,700+ towns and cities in the country. But, there is still a long way to go before we call this a learning revolution. Presently, we have reached out to less than 2% of the total student population in India alone. By launching our programme in Hindi, we want to accelerate our growth and reach and create awareness about tech-driven learning in remote parts of India. We are also working on creating learning programmes in other regional languages like Marathi, Gujarati, and Malayalam among others, and we plan to roll them out within 2019. The availability of BYJU'S learning programmes in multiple vernacular languages will make quality learning accessible for children in every nook and corner of the country and fulfil their aspirations of building better lives.

How should the new Indian workforce embrace global standards and innovation—

something only achievable through quality education?

With India being demographically one of the youngest countries in the world, there is a huge population of students who need to be made future ready. Children today are essentially in the AI economy. Jobs are transforming at a pace never seen before. Research by the World Economic Forum shows that 65% of the children entering primary school will find themselves in jobs that do not exist today. Early conceptual understanding is essential for students to be in a position to re-skill and up-skill themselves at any given point in the future. Only when a person has great mathematical and scientific foundation will they be open to embracing new tech developments in their sectors. After all, a 21st century illiterate is not someone who cannot read and write, it is someone who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn. Strong conceptual learning during formative years has never been more important.

Could you share a few numbers—y-o-y growth, funding, investments made, revenue, etc?

To date BYJU'S has raised funds from Naspers, CPPIB, General Atlantic, Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, Tencent, Sequoia Capital, Sofina, Verlinvest, IFC, Aarin Capital, Times Internet, and Lightspeed Venture Partners. The company has been growing at 100% year on year for the last three years. Its revenue in the last financial year was ₹520 crore (US\$ 72,996,500), and is on target to triple its revenue to ₹1400 (US\$ 196,529,000) crore this year.

What are your expansion plans?

We are in the process of building a product for international markets. At present, our core focus is on getting the K-3 (1st, 2nd and 3rd grades) product ready for launch in 2019. Our recent acquisition of Osmo, the US-based award-winning playful learning system, is also aimed at bolstering our international plans to innovate, explore, and set new benchmarks for tech-enabled personalised learning solutions. With the integration of Osmo, we are looking to offer a unique, customised, engaging, and fun learning solution for younger kids.

For the international product, we are working with some of the most popular YouTube teachers who are experts in their respective domains. We are getting them to India to record and help us with product development too. To start with, our target markets are English-speaking.

What trends do you foresee in the future of online education?

- **Greater acceptance of the idea of blended learning**
We are already experiencing a shift in the way parents and students traditionally viewed education and learning. While there is a long way to go, we expect this transformation to touch deeper parts of the world and become a movement in the coming year. Increasing smartphone penetration and high aspirations for quality education are the key triggers influencing this trend. Products and solutions that demonstrate quality and results will be able to quickly gain consumer trust.
- **Gamification will play a key role in transforming learning**
For truly effective learning outcomes, the child needs to be motivated to want to learn. Technology makes that engagement possible, by delivering content in various formats (videos, interactives, games, etc) and styles, which are delightful and make students want to learn more. Using game design principles for motivation, providing actionable insights, and being a friendly learning companion—all of these get a lot easier with technology coming into play. Gamification has been steadily gaining acceptance and will continue to be an essential part of the learning ecosystem of the future.
- **Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) will further disrupt and personalise learning:** Personalisation ensures that students initiate learning on their own. This increased inclination to study results in better overall results. Ed-tech companies can take this one step further and leverage analytics to trace the learning footprint of students individually to create personalised learning journeys, accurately based on their proficiency levels and capabilities. The right blend of AI and ML into systems will help organisations create personalised learning paths for students, offer highly relevant recommendations, and predict and solve their 'real' learning challenges based on their strengths and weaknesses, and their specific learning gaps, pace, and needs. ■

(As told to Melissa Fernandes)

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