



# FROM SEED TO FOREST

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Impacting 200  
Million Children

*The EkStep Origin Story*



Produced in collaboration  
with [EkStep](#) by



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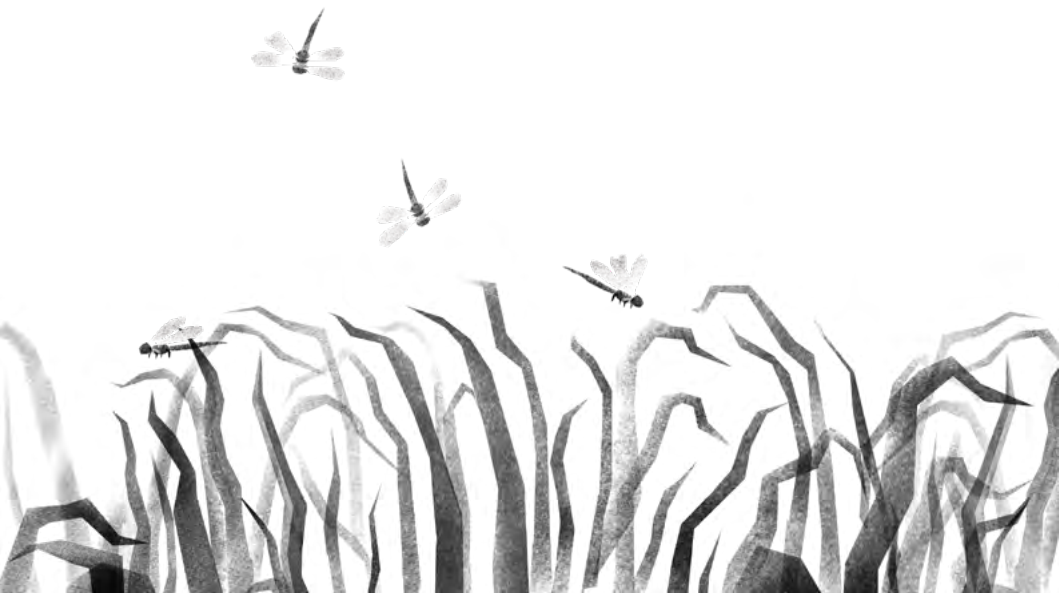
# FOREWORD

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The journey of a forest is the journey of a seed, from nothing to an ecosystem. EkStep's journey is exactly that. The idea behind chronicling this origin story is to show this is possible. But this journey is only a pointer, and the path you construct from it is your own. It all starts with a single step, your EkStep.

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Shankar Maruwada





**New beginnings  
are often disguised  
as painful endings:**  
Lao Tzu





It was 2014, and Nandan Nilekani and his wife Rohini were in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to attend the convocation ceremony of their son-in-law Shray Chandra, who graduated with an MBA from Harvard Business School.

At that point in time, the Infosys co-founder was at a particularly low ebb, having lost his first attempt to win election to Parliament, from Bangalore South, as a Congress candidate.

**What Nandan needed, perhaps, was a new challenge. And a chance visit to edX, a joint educational initiative by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard University, planted in the couple the germ of an idea that could potentially improve the literacy and numeracy of millions of children back home.**

edX, a so-called massive open online course, or MOOC, was founded in 2012 by Harvard and MIT scientists and offered a raft of online classes, some free, to a global student body. Courses range from computer and data sciences to fashion and finance, biomedical engineering to business administration, and statistics to Shakespeare.

Couldn't Nandan do something like that back home in India for primary school children, Rohini wondered.

Initially unsure, Nandan decided eventually to invest in the idea. He enlisted Shankar Maruwada as Co-Founder and CEO of what would be known as EkStep Foundation, a not-for-profit initiative intended to offer every child in India an opportunity to learn.



Now that the goal and mission were set for EkStep Foundation (at the time of inception in 2015, it targeted reaching out to 200 million children by 2020), the next task was designing the technological infrastructure.

It borrowed a leaf straight from the Bangalorean start-up playbook and created an app for personalized learning called Genie — an idea that was later pivoted because the team realized it was not getting them to their core mission. Though the app was still growing, and around 10,000 kids registered into Genie, it proved to be a dismal failure. Then, finally, the realisation dawned on Team EkStep that while Indian parents may like their children to take digital lessons, they thought it was at best a side dish or a pickle and no substitute for the main meal.

**“In hindsight, it was one of the most courageous decisions we took — pivoting from something which was growing and abandoning it for the sake of achieving the larger Mission,” says Shankar Maruwada, “if you look at our timeline, all throughout we have made decisions that were Mission first, not solution first or technology first.”**

Initially parents did not enroll their children into EkStep. So Shankar and his Team EkStep started diving deeper into the intricacies of the problem, doing extensive field studies in the process. It introduced an innovation, inserting QR Codes into textbook chapters as additional student reference material.

The idea – essentially serving the side dish with the main meal – paid off, evidenced by the response of parents who enrolled their children in EkStep.



*Tamasoma  
jyotirgamaya...  
The seed of belief*




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EkStep then created Sunbird, an open-source digital infrastructure adopted by the Central Government's Ministry of Education as Diksha, launched on Teacher's Day in 2017. Thirty-five states have since embraced the teachers' training platform. Together with the National Council of Educational Research and Training and the Central Board of Secondary Education, and many state boards of education, it has helped train over 10 million teachers in the country.

In the year of the pandemic, as the entire country went into a lockdown, the adoption of digital learning increased dramatically. Diksha recorded a spectacular rise in usage with over 60 billion minutes of learning. The government leveraged it for its iGOT Covid training programmes. Today, Diksha has been adopted by more than 35 states and UTs of India, and its QR codes are found in more than 600 million textbooks. EkStep has played a vital role as a supporting partner to the Ministry of Education and State Governments in this journey.



**CHANGE VS  
STATUS QUO:  
TWO SIDES OF THE  
SAME COIN!**





“If we want things to stay as they are, everything will have to change” — this is how Tancredi famously persuades his uncle to change strategy in the European classic *The Leopard*.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's book discusses the class struggle during Italian unification and forces threatening the status quo. The punchline has become popular ever since for its paradoxical realism.

Sometimes everything must change so that everything can stay the same.

For Shankar Maruwada, the CEO and co-founder of EkStep Foundation, life has been about change in every dynamic.

"While I am originally from Andhra, from the town of Visakhapatnam, this is one place I have never stayed! Today I live in Bangalore, and Karnataka is the seventh state I've stayed in — born in Hirakud, Orissa, and after five years, I moved to Cochin, Kerala; I stayed for 10-odd years in Kolkata, Bengal, where I also did my engineering at IIT Kharagpur, and then for my MBA at IIM Ahmedabad, I was in Gujarat. Then my initial working years were in Mumbai, Maharashtra, where my entrepreneurship journey started. After a brief while in Delhi, I am now finally in Bangalore!"

His experience in his formative years helped him learn to confront and handle sudden changes and diverse contexts. A sudden change of circumstances — people, context, language, culture, power hierarchies — makes you agile, inclusive, and empathetic!

"Each change, traumatic as it would have been at that time, gave me a lot of experiences and tools in managing



and how to survive, adapt, and thrive. To such an extent that sometimes I feel uncomfortable if there is no change. I feel uncomfortable if things are too stable for too long."

Most artists in history have said this — they are never satisfied. They don't want to be satisfied.

Stability means you are static; it doesn't work in a creative space. You need change for the creative juices to flow.

There is no right or wrong. What rules is what works. The year 2020 was the most significant disruption in modern history, but organizations such as EkStep were quick to recover (after the initial chaos that was mandatory). In post-pandemic India, EkStep made record strides in terms of user base and impact.

What took years for Shankar and his team to convince parents about the digital switch in education was now accepted by parents and children. After all, schools may shut down, but schooling cannot. They knew something like Diksha and Sunbird could not just be helpful but be a game-changer in these unprecedented times.

Sometimes you need one step to change things.

*A journey of thousand  
miles begins with one step*







# MOMENT OF EPIPHANY



**T**he Charles River is a beautiful sight. Nandan held a cup of coffee as he stood watching the dam, along which the main university campus of Harvard lies in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a few miles west of downtown Boston.

“Do you think we can do something like this in India?” Rohini asked him after the visit to edX.

“Our challenges are different” — it appeared as if Nandan was reacting, not responding.

“We are on the Harvard campus, the hub of new-age technologies. In today’s session, such an intersection, what they call learning technologies, doesn’t fit our context. You saw the condition of our schools during the election campaign?”

Rohini sensed a bit of confirmation bias in Nandan’s answer, which was almost like a reflex action.



**“Our society is different. So we do have a multi-layered problem. But the solution can come from technology. I think technology can democratise access to education across India. We could reach 200 million children with this digital education model,” she said.**

Rohini had Nandan’s attention with the last line. He loves the big picture.

Rohini and Nandan Nilekani were attending their son-in-law Shray Chandra’s convocation ceremony at the Harvard Business School in 2014. They had a chance to visit edX, a MOOC, short for a massive open online course, jointly run by MIT and Harvard. They were fascinated by the possibilities of the program, which would later go on to change the way higher education is perceived.

Rohini, who had been working in education with several non-government organisations over the past 15 years, had an idea. Could this model be replicated in primary education, too?

In India, the focus on education had been increasing, and school enrolment in schools had gone up over the years, but few spoke about the actual learning outcomes.

Fresh from his electoral defeat, Nandan was looking for something meaningful to do.

“I realised this could be achieved without being in the system,” he said in an interview with Economic Times, “Despite the government spending Rs.586,085 crore (\$94 billion) over the last decade on primary education, learning outcomes have been poor.”

The Nilekanis set apart \$10 million per annum for the ambitious project. Equally important is that this is the first time the couple worked together.



# SERENDIPITY: COMING TOGETHER OF RIGHT PEOPLE AT RIGHT TIME

The entry of future co-founder and CEO Shankar

“It was raining outside. Both of us had reached early, and we were wet.

We started talking for five minutes outside before we went in, and then Nandan asked me, so what do you do? I said nothing. I have done whatever I had to do. I've retired, and I'm enjoying life, and he immediately said: No, you're too young for all that. Take my card. There's a very exciting social project I'm thinking of starting where I might need your help. You message me after a month or two.” Shankar Maruwada gets nostalgic whenever he reminisces about that first meeting with Nandan on that rainy night.

That was one big step towards EkStep (pun intended). Shankar calls it fate.

He is known as the person who pioneered data analytics in India with his Marketics, a company he founded with some of his ex- Procter & Gamble colleagues. He had seen enough ups and downs in his personal and professional



life. During those days, he would be candid with his expectations, which were enshrined in the company's Mission Statement: "We'll have globally delighted clients who will benefit from us being the world's best professionals at what we do, we will have fun along the way, and get rich."

A lot of people speak this language. But Shankar was one step ahead. He would often tell his friends at P&G that by the age of 40, he would have retired to a cave in Rishikesh which would have a microwave oven, a nice warm carpet and lots of books!

So suddenly, at the age of 37, he had achieved far beyond what he imagined and earned more money than he had ever dreamt of, with Marketics doing so well both in India and abroad, that the Rishikesh cave was not that far from reach (coincidentally, his wife is from a place close to Rishikesh)!

Marketics was a startup ahead of its times (imagine doing analytics in 2002; what is Big Data today was sadly called KPO, or knowledge process outsourcing then, and was an object of scorn). Before the advent of Netflix, they had a Netflix-like culture where employees would love to come to the office for the work environment it offered. Many just joined Marketics for its mission statement — to be the world's best, get rich, and have fun.

In 2007, WNS offered to acquire Marketics, and Shankar and his co-founders agreed to sell the company on the advice of board members and advisors.

*We realised that people valued us much more than we value ourselves, which is a very interesting thing. That affirmed my marketing lesson that the value of anything is in the eyes of the beholder. It's a perception of value. And there is nothing called intrinsic value. It's all relative. It's all somebody's perspective.*



*Value lies in  
the eye of the  
beholder*

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Is it traumatic to let go of the company you started even if you know you're handing it over to safe hands?

*Indeed. Most entrepreneurs find it so. Very difficult to let go of your creation. But for me, it's like connecting it back to my childhood and my series of changed circumstances.*

Change had been the only constant in Shankar's life. Having lived in a variety of cities and familiarised himself with 7-8 other languages, one thing he had learned was to confront and handle change.

For him, the sale of Marketics was not traumatic. In a sense, he saw the separation and moving on as another inevitable change. The ability to see multiple points of view, envision a life beyond the current, give up everything and start afresh was a trait inbred in him.

Shankar wanted to spend time with his family now, having already done a lot of travel. So he was not keen on creating one more analytics company!

What was waiting next in life? He started reading a lot and talking to a lot of people, and in the process, he also helped a bunch of people who were volunteering for the first TED event in India in 2009.

Tickets to that event cost some Rs. 1.25 lakh per person, and it was targeted at the wealthy. Shankar was trying to help TED volunteers in as many ways he could, including sponsoring the dinner at the event.

It was here, at one of the dinners attended by the influential, that he bumped into Nandan Nilekani, who was then the vice-chairman of Infosys, on that rainy night.

In that dinner meeting, Nandan talked about his speaking experiences at TED and why he loved TED. But what amazed Shankar about him was how approachable and down-to-earth Nandan was.



*He was just one more person in the room. He was not trying to draw attention to himself, and the room was full of big wigs like him. He was not trying to stand out in a crowd. He was just part of the conversation, Shankar recalls.*

That night would be life-changing for Shankar. It means a lot when someone as big in stature as Nandan Nilekani gives you his visiting card and asks you to contact him.

And a month later, as he was watching CNBC, Shankar heard that Nandan had quit Infosys at the invitation of the Prime Minister to head the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI).

*I remember after breakfast, I was sitting down with a good cup of filter coffee. I was on permanent leave, and every day was a weekend for me, enjoying life, and it was the Bangalore monsoon, the lovely Bangalore monsoon, with a nice chill, raining. So while the rest of the country is sweltering, you're enjoying a steaming cup of coffee. So I told my wife that the opportunity Nandan was talking about where he could need my help had to be this UIDAI.*

*What was his wife's initial reaction?*

She had the same look like last time when he had first spoken about quitting his job and starting an entrepreneurial journey: "Last time, you said this dot-com thing was a cool game where you're going to make an obscene amount of money in 2-3 years, after which we would be set for life and retire rich. But then it took much longer. So hopefully, something similar does not happen here."

That was 2009. Today, 13 years later, they are still at it — Nandan, Shankar and a few dedicated others who were part of the startup team at UIDAI in different avatars.



# THE POWER OF *ONE*: BUILDING THE MISSION BRICK BY BRICK



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*The invisible  
fragrance  
attracts*



**T**he story behind the vocabulary of the EkStep Foundation is interesting. On his way back from work, Shankar saw a homeless child studying under a flyover in the traffic under dim light. There was a torn poster with the word Ek written in Hindi next to him. The sight was like a flash of lightning. So he asked himself what is the one step he could take to improve that child's life.

That is where the name EkStep was born!

The idea is heart-touching, and Shankar's intention was very noble: give children like the one he saw under the flyover access to education. But the real challenge lies in how you plan to execute it.

This is where so many passionate startups fail the test. They are high on intent and purpose but either lack the resources, or the strategy, to execute the idea for making a meaningful impact.

The biggest determiner of an idea's success is the team working on it.

An idea may be great, but the team is more significant. Suppose you have a group of selfless, dedicated people who are driven by passionate causes like education and impact. In that case, you are best placed to execute a range of ideas, be it Aadhaar or EkStep.

This is why some of the original Aadhaar veterans are still part of Team EkStep. Pramod Varma, Deepika



Mogilishetty, Jagadish, Madhuchandra R and Gaurav Gupta are all part of the team and the phenomenal success story of EkStep is built on the foundation of these stalwarts, who have worked tirelessly beyond their work hours, slogging it out in the fields, brainstormed together on the complex problem of education, and stuck together for over a decade now.

In a way, the success story of Aadhaar and EkStep is their story. And it helped that they were all coming from diverse backgrounds.

Diversity is one of the important lessons Shankar took from a colleague who worked under him at Marketics.

**There was an agriculture scientist in my team, and he used to say a forest that is made of one type of plant is always very fragile and brittle. But the true resilience of a forest is what comes from its diversity. That statement of his stood me in great stead. And I always look upon diversity as a strength, as something to leverage and not as something to prune and that has always been very useful advice for me years later. That was also an important lesson that I took from there and still apply at EkStep.**





### *Diversity as a super power*

In their new team, Jagadish came from Intel, where he worked for 17 years after studying at the Indian Institute of Science. Pramod Varma had been a co-founder of a tech startup after having worked in Infosys. Deepika Mogilishetty had been a prominent name in human rights and corporate law circles. Gaurav Gupta had worked at Marketics and he has headed retail and marketing at Accenture and Flipkart.

Once you are part of a journey the team experienced in UIDAI, the realization that true change can happen and that one can play a small part in it and watch such change take place at close quarters is enough of a motivation to stick together.

Pramod Varma, Chief Technology Officer, says technology means “the choice and opportunity to help humanity at scale.”





He's in the right place. The technology-infrastructure approach carries the possibility of dramatically boosting nonlinear change.

In the education system, India has been making linear changes, but it has taken decades.

We are still behind in learning outcomes; we are still very rote-oriented, managing somehow with memorization and marks — that's just not going to cut it. By the time 2025, 2030, and 2040 arrived, the world would have changed so much!

For someone who is also the Chief Architect and Technology Advisor to the Aadhaar (UID) project, and was responsible for Aadhaar's system architecture and strategic tech decisions, what is the technological solution to this challenge?

If there is a lack of access to content — how do we open up access? The internet democratized access, like in the case of Wikipedia, but for education, are we not stuck in textbooks or to some tutors nearby? How do we dramatically increase access?

That was the challenge before Pramod when he joined the EkStep leadership.

"I come from a teaching family. My mother is a school teacher. We have a lot of people in our families who are school teachers. I come from a very middle-class family. I learned everything in Malayalam," Pramod says.

With his background, he could relate very well to the problem at hand.



But here's the conundrum: there is nothing called solving here because it is a continuum.

"We solve something, then we have to solve the next one, then you have to solve the next one, and who knows what basic education will look like in the next decade, and what it will look like in the next two decades. So there is nothing called solving," he adds. "We had to draw some lines for our organization. As an organization, we have to have a vision, what do the next five years look like? And then what do the next five years look like?"

But the fundamental remains the same.

The fundamental was dramatically reducing the cost and reducing the lack of opportunity most people confront in education.

That is where people like Pramod Varma have a role to play. Technology can definitely help democratize education.

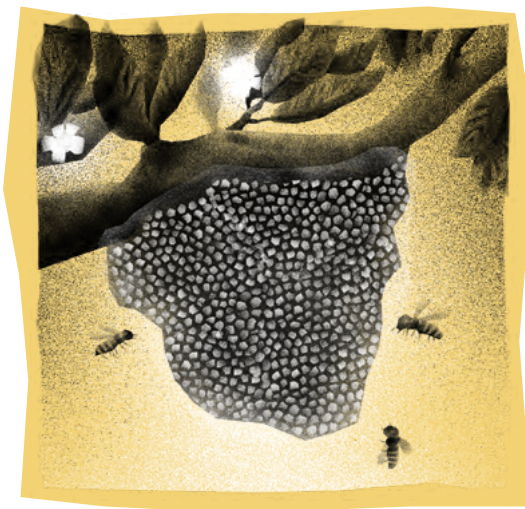
Parents invest in their children's education with aspiration. Even the poorest of the poor believe that the only way to escape out of the rut they are in is through education.

And just around the time EkStep launched, internet access on mobile smartphones had started to become widespread. It increased dramatically when Reliance Jio Infocomm entered the telecom industry two years later.

But, what was the initial thought process of the team when it started in 2014?







*Seeing possibilities in problems*

Pramod says: In 2014-2015, there were only two hypotheses we had. That the massively connected world was not going to be reversed, and we were going to be more and more connected, and secondly, parents would continue to spend on the education of their children for economic aspirations. Other than this, we literally knew nothing else — nothing about education, nothing else about how the ecosystem works, nothing about pedagogy, psychology of learning, absolutely nothing!



That means the technology could open up opportunities for children, and offering them the opportunities would narrow the gap in education if not fully close it.

But then, they would have to work on the next set of gaps, and the next set of gaps and so on, because it was a multilayered problem.

Around June-July 2014, when the Nilekanis came back from the US, the team (consisting mostly of the original Aadhaar veterans) started huddling together. Pramod Varma used to participate quite heavily. They had no organization then. It was in 2015 in the month of February when they incorporated EkStep.

So until then, they were all meeting and discussing informally, and they had started to engage with a bunch of people. The first year was all about aggressively





engaging everyone in the education sector — from technologists to child psychologists to academicians to prominent NGOs to policy makers to children book writers to neuroscientists. They met around 100 individuals during this period.

They went everywhere, and posed questions such as: What do you think is wrong with the current education model? Why is it not changing? What is your viewpoint in terms of solving the problem?

*They all had a view of how the education system worked. And we were just assimilating literally, and starting to do some random game-based tech experiments and all that. That's what we were focusing on for the first one and a half years, literally focusing on game-based development, Pramod says.*

Interestingly, while the rest of the team were absolutely focused on EkStep, Nandan and Pramod weren't. They were launching DigiLocker and eSign!

The Unified Payment Interface (UPI) discussion was underway from 2013 to 2014, so in 2014, when the EkStep discussion was going on, parallelly on the third floor of the EkStep office called Quorum, Pramod was talking about UPI.

**Was it a distraction? "Not at all," Pramod says, "With UPI, we could see a much larger tech-based disruption that was falling in place and I could apply that back here in EkStep."**





What were some of the early discussions in those huddles?

*We had three types of meetings: learning meetings, brainstorming meetings, and implementation meetings. Initially, the huddles were of two sorts: the first type of meeting was about purely listening to the thought leaders or experts who have been in the education sector for 20 years, and the second was our internal huddle where we would be brainstorming and sharing our readings. So in the second meeting, we internally brainstormed to bring design patterns and assimilations of what we learned either by reading or by talking in the other meetings. And this is what took us to the implementation track which is the third type of meeting which happens, Pramod says.*

There were major takeaways from these brainstorming sessions.

*The child who was born where parents don't talk much — their comprehension suffers. By the time our child is five years old and their child is five years old, they become very different already. Their learning paths are diverging and they are unable to catch up. So, we really felt that need for giving access. And hence our conclusion during those brainstorming sessions was that we have to bridge that elementary foundational literacy and numeracy.*

And the only way to bridge foundational literacy and numeracy at that time was by providing direct access to children on their smartphones.

Pramod and the team could project this. Smartphones were everywhere, and they knew the devices were bound to become an inseparable part of people's lives.

By their own admission, they always calculate a decade's journey. They did this with Aadhaar and UPI as well. Everything takes a decade. First two-three years, nothing happens and then everything starts happening. Fifth year, you start seeing the hockey stick curve. And then you need institutional sustenance, you need behavioural sustenance, you need all those things, and then it becomes part of the DNA by 10 years!



# TRANSFORMATIONAL, YET FAMILIAR: THE POWER OF PLUS ONE THINKING



Gaurav Gupta,  
Chief Growth Officer

**G**aurav Gupta had worked with Shankar at Marketics, and the mission of EkStep to help to solve the foundational literacy and numeracy problem in the country at scale inspired him.

“I hadn’t heard about anything similar elsewhere and what always appeals to me is that we are really trying to solve a big problem at scale. The mission statement of EkStep in itself appealed to me, in addition to the approach that was taken around it, which was to leverage technology to achieve the goal because whatever you do at scale, technology is a great enabler,” Gaurav says.

NGOs have noble missions, but ultimately, their funders want to make an impact. And they have a certain definition of impact — the lives of how many children have changed, how has their learning improved, and so on. The way Nandan and Rohini have backed EkStep, their vision of impact is quite different.



Unlike funders of other organizations, the Nilekanis always wanted EkStep to do things at scale in a sustainable way. From day one, they never sought immediate impact.

Figuring out sustainable narratives is important in India, given the scale and diversity of the country. This is a welcome shift from how others have looked at impact in this space.

EkStep is helping the government too because the way governments are structured, and their systems and processes are structured, their hands are tied, at least technologically. Entities such as EkStep have a very unique position in the data space and they have achieved significant success in tackling the challenge of foundational literacy.

Gaurav has an interesting take on where most startups fail in a country like India. “A lot of people know how to see the problems out there but when they approach the solution in their head, it’s a lot about solving that particular context that they’re dealing with. India is a very large and diverse country with many contexts.”

This is a remarkable observation. The moment you solve a problem for a context and you go into another context, the whole story takes a beating and the solution may no longer be applicable.

“And a lot of times when you try to scale that solution from what it is, it may have worked in a context or in certain variables or scenarios, but even scaling that without diversity would have made it be very, very different from what it should ideally be,” Gaurav says.



*Evolution works  
at its own pace*





Earlier, people at EkStep were building games for children that helped them learn in an engaging way, but they very quickly realized that the same game did not fit all. They then took a step below and focused on the digital infrastructure. Likewise, they have worked on a variety of approaches, keeping in mind the diversity and context, such as injecting QR codes in textbooks.

If you try to change this system drastically, of course, the system will revolt because change is the hardest thing to do. But now, when you realize that the textbook is an anchor, then you can supplement QR codes around that anchor which could be transformational, and yet, you have not tampered with the context at all.

Today, people are used to scanning. The digital revolution has taught many in the country to scan. So inserting a QR code on a chapter inside a textbook means that simply by scanning the chapter, a student or a teacher can get what they want.

That is the 'Plus One' thinking Shankar keeps talking about on different forums — "Mind opening, yet strangely familiar" or "Radical yet practical", as others put it. You have worked with different stakeholders without really disturbing the furniture.

How does it affect the learning outcome? It has certainly given more options to the children for learning. They can now learn hybrid.

"See we are not thinking about scale that works but thinking about what can work at scale. It may not be perfect but what can work at scale is definitely what is relatively 'Plus One' in nature and that's a different way of looking at things."



# CONTEXT AS BACKBONE, TECHNOLOGY AS ENABLER

Madhuchandra R, Head of  
Engineering and Implementation

**M**adhuchandra R comes with a hardcore corporate background and has been working since 1994. He has had pretty long stints with corporate entities such as Infosys and Fidelity. Somewhere around 2013, he left Fidelity, before Nandan contested the 2014 Lok Sabha election.

Madhuchandra thought joining Nandan's team would give him a chance to give back to the country, helping to get one good person into office. He thought he would work eight months just to make sure that somebody like Nandan could actually enter Parliament.

"I thought it was a very small thing that I could actually do. So I got into it head-on, did not take a corporate job and worked with this team. Shankar was actually the campaign manager for the entire election. So I worked with all of them for about eight months," says Madhuchandra.



Nandan lost the election, but in hindsight, probably it was the best thing that happened.

Madhuchandra is among the first 10 of the EkStep team. When the elections got over, for around six months, the team toyed with ideas of what they could do. Now that their candidate had lost, how else could they make an impact on society?

*Just after Nandan's election, the youngsters in the field team were actually trying to see how to improve the city of Bangalore. How do we improve the parks? How do we bring out data in that space? They did a lot of park-related data collection and realized that with extensive research and analysis of the available data, societal issues can either be solved or controlled to a large extent. Somewhere around the middle of 2015 when Nandan floated this idea of taking foundational literacy to every child in India, December 2014 or January 2015, this education thing came out pretty strong. And that's when Shankar said to me 'why don't you come and meet JB (Jagadish) for a possible collaboration on Nandan's proposed idea.'*

Around that time, Madhuchandra was already in startup mode. He had a few ideas of his own. He went to meet JB on Shankar's advice and was told about EkStep's mission.

That was too compelling for him to ignore.

The mission was to improve learning opportunities for 200 million children in five years. Now, this got so ingrained into me, that I said, man, no way am I going to leave a mission like this to do anything. It doesn't matter what it is, you know, this is making a direct impact on the country. It cannot get bigger than this. Nobody else can ever get anything of this nature!



That they had decided to not grow beyond 25 to 30 people was another important factor that helped each one of them focus on the mission completely.

The moment you become big, you start worrying about more administrative and operational activities. Here, it was just 25 people focused on the mission. Only the mission.



**The other thing they decided was that if 200 million children have to be reached, they could not do it all by themselves. So they decided that they would engage and work with the ecosystem to make this happen, meaning they worked with a lot of startups to help them grow in their own journey.**

The mission never changed. "Though, when we started out, on the fourth floor we had this huge poster where we spoke about improving learning opportunities for 200 million, but nobody had a clue of how we were going to get there."

That was the interesting part that Pramod and Gaurav also mentioned. Nobody had a clue how they would reach the target and what they would do, but the entire 25 team members were committed to the mission.



Each one had a different background. Some people had worked in the field, others like Madhuchandra had worked on technology implementation. People like Pramod came with an Aadhaar background, and they knew how to work with the government — there was enough diversity in the team, for good or bad.

What was interesting was that the mission was cast in stone.

The first approach was, what can we build loosely? *Can we build a mother app, where every other education app in the world can come and connect to this?* A Super app, where everybody can actually come and connect? So that was the first real foray into the entire journey.

So 2015 was about actually trying to get a big Super app out. And Madhuchandra was in the field operations. They managed to get a couple of partners to build a learning assessment app that could tell them where the learning gaps were.

"I used to actually work with very small players, in my field, operations and would go to schools to get this done. I remember going to a school in Ejipura. Small shed, only 15-20 students, we said, 'Okay, let's try this out over here.' Then we used to talk to a lot of these low-end private schools. There was one near Lal Bagh gate, we went over there. Each school had 25 or 30 students. That's it. At one point, we celebrated when we got 1,000 kids who participated. We actually had a celebration."

At that time, they only had two apps which they rolled out: one learning screener and one math screener. And they did data entry of those because they didn't have a platform at that point in time.





*Progress means a growing  
belief in the mission*

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"I used to have a huge whiteboard in the core room, and I used to write "today we managed to reach out to 40 students and these are the apps that we actually ran them through. Let's make it to 50 students now."

But where was all this leading to? Somewhere, the team realized this way they were not going to reach 200 million even though they were investing a fair amount of money in apps, and so much time and effort. There was an early realization that *no, this is not going to take us far. Let's go to the next phase of how we should actually get scale.*

Let's go to phase two, they said. Because the first version would have never achieved scale even as you got many more partners, so many more NGOs, and you spanned the entire country. This was not practical and the mission was there staring them in the face.

In late 2015, the team thought about creating a platform that can help the community contribute to the mission and also have a front-facing app that could be put on the AppStore, which everybody should be able to use. They called the platform the Community portal and the app was Genie.



Yet again, they tried the same model, going out into the field, and this time the celebration point was 10,000. A lot of time, effort and money went into the platform.

Again, somewhere the realization came that this was not going to take them to 200 million. That was around 2016 when they had spent a lot of time doing the community portal and Genie combination at multiple places.

Around that time, Madhuchandra took over engineering. Pramod was managing the architecture. Because Madhuchandra came with a tech implementation background, he was moved to the technology view, and he worked with a lot of vendors to get the community portal out.

**One of the key principles that we put for engineering is that EkStep will not have a single engineer. I don't know whether, you know, ever since we started, EkStep has never had an engineer, the only two tech people that we have are Pramod and myself. That's it.**



But they worked with a number of partners. In fact, both of them decided to build a model where they could engage with the community and the ecosystem partners. Between 2015 and 2022, Madhuchandra alone has worked with about 12 different engineering partners for a team size of 80 people.



Managing 12 different partners itself is a huge thing. And all of them were small partners, as they were very clear about not working with big partners such as Infosys and Wipro.

*With Nandan's name, it would have been very easy for us to actually get somebody and 80 people coming from one organization, and just get it done. It will be very easy for us, but we said no, let's work with smaller partners, multiple smaller partners, and see how to do this. Believe me, even today, I still get my engineering resources from all the same set of partners. People who came at that time have all continued with us.*

They reached the 10,000 number in 2016.

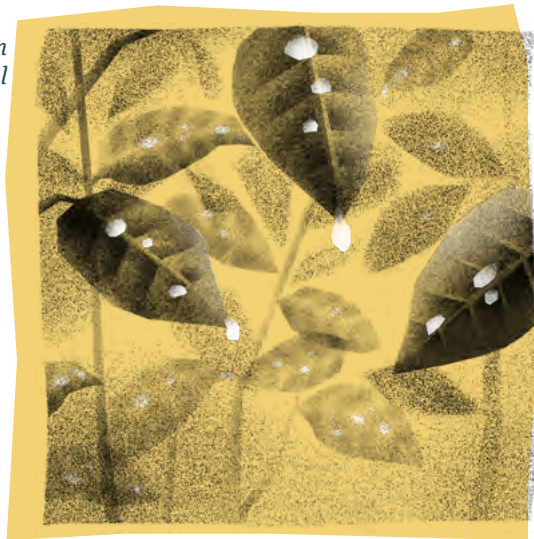
*I remember we were at 9,900 or 10,000 when Nandan was actually sitting in the room. That was a big number at that point in time. But again, late 2016, and early 2017 is when we realized that this again, is not going to take us far and we need to think about something else. And that's when the genesis or the thought of Sunbird happened. So late 2016, or early 2017, Sunbird happened. And it was a parallel effort. It was decided I should run the community portal and Pramod should run Sunbird. We're not going to kill the community portal because we saw a lot of NGOs actually coming in to use it.*

NGOs working in places like Bihar, who wanted to give some training to students on a free platform, found it very useful. So they could actually create content, and they had an app which they could take to their audience.

Interestingly, the community portal also offered them a facility where they could build their own customized landing page. So in some form, it became its own app with very minimal effort. So volunteers would create content in the portal and they would take this app to their audience.



*Early success can  
be ephemeral*



In 2018, they directed all their time and effort towards the open source software Sunbird, and partnering with the Ministry of Education, Government of India to create Diksha, built on Sunbird.

*They worked hard to make this interoperable. Tomorrow, if somebody chooses to say that I don't like this component of Sunbird and that I want to make my own component, that should be possible because of the well-thought-through architectural constructs.*

It was around this time that the team started seeing numbers in the hundreds of thousands in terms of usage. Still not in the millions, but that was good compared to the 1,000 number they saw two years back.

*On our 4th floor, TVs used to be actually showing the usage, how the infrastructure is holding up, all of those things. In some form, we had a mock control centre positioned there so people could watch the server usage, if anybody walks in, they can see what exactly is happening. I used to work on my Grafana (open-source analytics and data visualization platform). Grafana was the primary way we managed to oversee the infrastructure, but the infrastructure is itself holding up and working on that. So*



*we used to track Diksha server usage in terms of TPS (transaction per second). So the biggest measure that Shankar and team used to watch was because the data would take a few hours to actually make sense of it, just to make a sense of the load, we used to track the TPS. It's an infrastructure component. In the early days, we used to have 500-600 TPS, we came to 1,000 – 2,000. 2000 was a big moment. For perspective, Aadhaar, India's national digital identity infrastructure, has around 1000 TPS.*

At the peak of COVID, EkStep hit 25,000 TPS. That's really big by any platform standards! That's clearly a big number: 25,000 TPS.

Madhuchandra can proudly say the system has never come down and it is always up and running.

The year 2020 was amazing in terms of usage. It was there on Diksha itself — about 60 billion minutes of learning. A huge number.

What is also interesting is that Madhuchandra used to run something called a DevCon, a Developer Conference for engineers and specialists from EkStep and partner organizations, for about four years. Engineers were given a week's time to come up with some new and unique solutions to build on the platform. And it worked great for innovation. *Some of the ideas those guys came up with were absolutely amazing. A lot of things are getting implemented, and many of them have come from the ideas of these engineers. The ideas are there. Intent and passion too. If the entire education ecosystem works together, by 2030, FLN (foundational literacy and numeracy) will not be a problem for the country.*



# TECHNOLOGY CAN AMPLIFY HUMAN EFFORTS WITHOUT REPLACING HUMANS



Jagadish Babu,  
Chief Operating Officer

**F**or both Shankar and Jagadish, Nandan's election attempt meant a lot of learning. They learnt a lot of tricks of the trade, the ways of politics and elections, and the methods and modes of communication.

"After the elections, we all had an option to either go to Aadhaar, because there were a lot of open brackets there and there was a sense of improving convenience for billions of people, or there was an option to go back to corporates," JB says.

But the latter would have taken him back to 2008.

*I had already made quite a few moves to make the daily lives of people easy in the areas I was dealing with - enrolment and authentication – and I could still see further opportunities there.*



Even the doors of Intel, where he spent 17 years, were still open for JB. After the election, Intel asked him if he was coming back.

*Somewhere later in 2014, after recovering from the election results, I had a talk with Nandan and he advised me to look at the larger scheme of things and do the right thing. We had been travelling together quite a bit during the elections and so he suggested some of the possibilities in a personalized learning space. EkStep was not born then. Then as things developed, Nandan, Rohini, Shankar, and three or four of us started working on the education space seriously. That was my earliest memory of what we call EkStep today. It was just a serendipitous meeting.*

Volunteering and social work were not new to JB. From his Indian Institute of Science days, he had been volunteering.

*I used to teach in local schools, what you call today, the CSR (corporate social responsibility) type thing and I had seen my dad supporting me with whatever savings he had. He would focus on educating at least half-a-dozen kids who showed up every year to get their uniforms.*

*But I did not realize the magnitude of this thing about education. I would just show up in government schools and teach whatever I could teach. At Intel, I continued to engage in the CSR topics on education, but I realized that the system works with the efficiency of the least dependable component. That means if you have 10 components that work; UPS, monitor, computer, power, this and that, the least dependable one, it could be the UPS, for example, or the cartridge in the printer, when those kinds of things crash, everything shuts down.*

Interestingly, JB had tried to do his own EkStep in 2009. Pretty much along the lines of what EkStep eventually did, he recollects. He wrote up blogs and went to meet funders too. His idea was to basically help the system through collective efforts, because the best teachers were there, and technology could amplify and make things efficient in many different ways, without replacing the teachers.



So what happened?

*Aadhaar showed up and that was a bigger magnet. So I parked the idea and went to Aadhaar and six years went by. A lot of time was spent in the field making things work in Aadhaar. And this was a magnet because the election showed up without any signal. And then EkStep which was almost similar. So what I had personally thought of doing myself did not show up in my mind, but it showed up via Nandan, Rohini and Shankar.*

Today if we ask JB why he joined EkStep, he has a simple and straightforward reply: "Personally, for me, the why for EkStep is the care, that's all. I want to care. I care."

In fact, he sees the same virtue of care in all his teammates at EkStep.

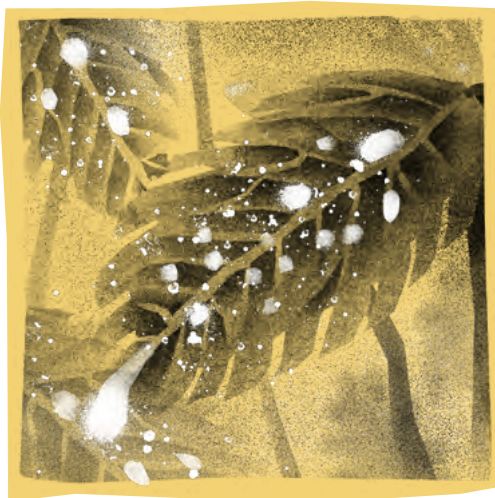
*I see that deeply in both Nandan and Rohini. In the past five, or six years that I've been privileged to interact with all the senior philanthropists and leaders in this space, the contrast that I see in the corporate world or in other domains is that there are many different motives.. But the thread that binds this area is care. Now, that care to empower people, especially in this case, with basic societal tools, educational literacy and numeracy, so that they are empowered in their life to do whatever they want to do is really what keeps me going!*

Because he has a background in farming and belongs to the countryside where he has his roots and continues to farm whenever he goes home, he knows very well that children do drop out of school in significant numbers.

Why do they drop out? I had different articulations about the why, possibly I didn't delve too deep into it, but as a fact, I knew people are dropping out, that illiteracy is not limited to old people like of my age, even current generation are all illiterate. And so you work around it.



*Wisdom of the  
ecosystem*



Because of his association with Nandan, he got to interact with a lot of people who cared in the philanthropic space. *I spoke to Rukmini Banerji, Madhav Chauhan, APF - Azim Premji and team, Ashok Kamath of Akshara, they were the anchors who kind of gave me the background to this education space challenges. I spent a lot of time with them, trying to get to the bottom and realized all these individuals are really gifted in the sense that they have spent their lives taking care of this issue.*

In fact, he learnt a lot from one of his drivers, Srinivas, who in a sense became a case study for others.

*His wife was a graduate and he was 10th pass. I realized his literacy rates are at grade one level. He doesn't understand anything. But when I drive with him long distances, I see that he does not read the board, he doesn't see the board as the billboard that we see. He just sees a glamorous lady with earrings. I thought this is the status of 50% of the children. If you can't read the caution sign saying don't go ahead, there is a dead-end or a pit ahead, is not there a deeper problem? All these are nicely written words on the billboards, but nobody can read them! That is the care that Rohini and Nandan speak about.*



*Some of them are at a letter level, some of them are at a word level, and they can read words, but they can't make them out. Some of them can read sentences but don't have the vocabulary, that's as good as not knowing what it is. And some of them can read but may misunderstand. So you see, more and more with the internet and things like that, if you see WhatsApp, they are actually making it easy by asking you to press the voice button and speak rather than type it. They're all a nice way to work around. But the funny fact is that literacy and numeracy are the roots of empowerment!*

That is some observation. And it requires deeper dives into the real problems we face with education.

The problem is bigger, deeper, micro-focused, and something we don't get to see on the surface.

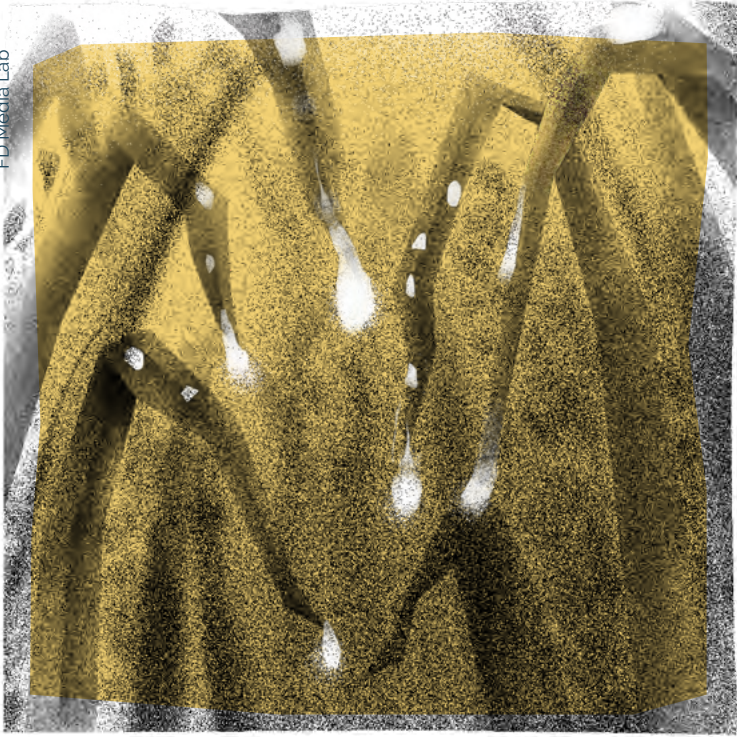
Sriniwas was with JB for three years doing so much driving, maybe he had driven him 150,000 kilometres, but he couldn't sense that while driving he never read the billboards as he can't read!

But what's EkStep as an idea according to JB? How is it going to be part of the solution?

In a traditional sense, an organization makes certain commitments and it delivers on those commitments, for example, Samsung delivers phones.

In that sense, EkStep and the set of individuals working on it, including Rohini and Nandan, is basically a societal promise that we care, and we will do what it takes to help you. This is how JB defines the motive of the organization.





*Rain blesses the entire forest*

**When the motive is aligned for everyone in the team, change happens as a natural upshot. Because overall improvement is not an isolated story!**



# EKSTEP MEANS THE EMERGING OF POSSIBILITIES

Deepika Mogilishetty,  
Chief of Policy and Partnerships

**P**rior to joining Nandan's election campaign, Deepika Mogilishetty was a well-known name in corporate law and human rights circles. She worked tirelessly during the campaign, so much so that in those months she saw very little of her two kids.

The day after the polling was completed, she was driving her children to her parent's house and this is when an incident caught her attention.

*As I stopped at the traffic signal at CMH Road, 12th Main Junction, a bunch of children came to sell stickers. One of them came running and my daughter turned around and said, "mamma, mamma quickly just buy. She's trying to sell a sticker." I said, "do you want the stickers?" She said, "no, I don't want the stickers. She's trying to sell something, it will be useful for her, just buy it." I put the window down, called this child that came running back, gave the money and bought two packets of those stickers. As the light*



*was turning green, my daughter was screaming saying do it before the light turns green, she's gonna get hurt. My seven-year-old. While this drama is going on, I give them money, the light turns green, we have got the stickers in our hands and we are moving past. She puts the stickers into the glove compartment, the stickers are not relevant to her at this point. Then she says she should be in school, no? And I am like, yes, she should."*



*Explore a forest to find yourself*

Sounds like a casual observation, but what her daughter said next was to have a profound impact on her future goals in life. She said, "You know what, when you win the election, what you should do is to build a lot of schools and make sure every child goes to school."

Interestingly, the remark meant that even a seven-year child was aware of what it means to go to school and what it meant for someone else who missed going to school.

*I wrote this as an email to the team saying, you know, I think whatever else the result is of this whole*



*thing, in my head, it's the possibility of what can happen when you win, you can do much, you can change things, you will have the power to do anything!*

The campaign was gruelling and difficult, but incidents like these came as a reminder as to why it was such an important thing to do. *Somehow in the middle of the fight, you don't forget the reason why you do things.*

As it turned out, Nandan lost the election. One day, as the team was sitting in the office, Shankar asked Deepika if she knew about elementary education and the challenges surrounding it. She asked him why he asked this question. He did not reply at the time.

A few days later, he told her Nandan and Rohini wanted to start thinking about doing something in the education space. "Will you have a conversation with Jagadish about it? We'll think about how we can get this going," Shankar asked Deepika.

*When I met Jagadish, he talked about his deep passion for this space. For me, it was just another space where access to something would change the world.*

Deepika was aware that none of the people involved in the election campaign was coming with skills in the education space.

They were literally starting from scratch. They did not know what to do and who to talk to!

*Early on it was all just about observation. We visited schools, sat around, and saw what they looked like. The team came together. We were doing these field visits, we were making our notes, making observations about what was going on with the children, and taking videos. Then we got into this gaming, there was the space of the games, the idea of the games. The first year we spent so much time looking at games and had so much fun*





*with the idea of learning in the context of games and that big idea. We were ridiculously shameless as we went and told other people that this is the new way to see the world.*

As they went on exploring this idea, it instilled in them a new belief in the form of the possibilities.

Some of the incidents during those field visits boosted those possibilities. Such as the one Deepika faced in one of the schools, where there was this boy, Madhu, who was considered the dumbest boy in the class. But when Madhu was given a tab, he was doing so much with it, he was able to engage with the game in ways the brightest kid in class couldn't.

So is EkStep the solution to look to in the future education space? Because every day organizations are born, every day people arrive with the intent to change education and every day initiatives of goodwill happen. Why are EkStep's intent and heart different?

Where does that confidence come from in the EkStep team?

*The confidence comes from having access to patient risk capital. That confidence comes from innately not being afraid to lose anything. It came from there in the beginning, to be honest.*

Maybe so. The field they are playing in is still risky. But they have a massive safety net. So they are not afraid. What is that safety net? The freedom that Nandan and Rohini give them. The safety net is the money that they provide. The safety net is their involvement. And because of it, EkStep exists to show them the possibilities.

Because they had access to the capital, and the safety net, they tried to look at the simple things and tried to make the simple things work. This was their approach to making an impact.



## Why does EkStep exist?

EkStep exists because it created a mission and decided to go after the mission. It's a simple answer. And people cared about the mission. It brought a bunch of people together who wanted to go after this mission, and that meant something to them. Why does it exist? Because it just wants to change — change the nature of the game. Why do I do what I do at EkStep? If you ask me I will say because it gives me space to raise the level of conversation on a few things and if it leads to the emerging of possibilities, we could think of solving the larger problem, that is the societal problem.

*The chaos of a forest is its beauty*

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What has the journey been like for her? Is EkStep going in the right direction? Has the team ever gotten complacent, inadvertently at times, or is there still something they can guard against?

*Such a journey doesn't come without frustration. At various points in time, the voice that you have in space changes. For example, our mission is on foundational literacy and numeracy. But if you actually look at what we're doing right now, it sometimes feels so far removed from that mission. Because that core thing has not been solved yet after five years! So bringing the attention back to that is critical. We keep coming to it but keep drifting to other things. It feels like that sometimes. Also, we have to continue learning to work with a diverse team as new people who get added don't have the shared past. This new shared view, with a new present and a new future, comes with its own trickiness.*





*Denizens come and go,  
the forest goes on*

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## THE FUTURE OF EKSTEP





**T**he pandemic and consequent lockdowns may have been a blessing in disguise for EkStep, triggering an extraordinary increase in the adoption of the Diksha platform, which recorded its arithmetically best performance in the past two years.

But today, ask Shankar about Chapter Two of the EkStep story and he is not thinking of the next five years. He wants to go up a notch and think of Chapter Three, to see what can be achieved by 2030, and then work his way back to 2025.


*Let us crystal-gaze into 2030. Let us imagine that by 2030 people have stopped talking about learning outcomes as a problem at the primary school level because, as a country, we have solved it. So for example, these days, we don't hear too many policymakers worrying about financial inclusion or worrying about payments because we, as a country, have largely solved it. What if in the passionate conversations about the learning crisis that we have, which the National Education Policy 2020 also talks about, what if by 2030 those conversations have ceased to exist because largely, as a country, we have solved it!*

So what is the role EkStep can play if we crystal-gaze through this coming decade?

As a country, we spend close to \$200 billion on education — government and private. What if there is a way to improve the productivity, effectiveness and efficiency of the \$200 billion we spend? Wouldn't that be brilliant?

Working backwards from a 2030 mission, when we don't even know how big the market would be, what would you want five years from now? How can we create a product for it?





**We should create building blocks which people can use to create their own products and their own solutions, which fit the market they operate in, says Shankar.**

This is another departure in terms of the thought process. Change the paradigm from a product-market fit to more of a product-mission fit. This is what EkStep would invest in — the infrastructure, a set of building blocks — that can be created and offered free to the whole world to use the way it wants to.

*And this is where I also realize that where Chapter One was all about a mission mode where we had gone to great depths to help the government build Diksha and achieve our own goal of reaching 200 million, in Chapter Two, we will have to jump to a higher orbit. And when you jump to a higher or a different orbit, what worked in the previous orbit may not work, and, therefore, we are taking the best of what has worked and adding new stuff into it with Plus One thinking.*

We can continue on our growth, taking a leaf out of EkStep's Plus One approach. What if we can unleash the kind of energy and exuberance around education that we have done around digital identity, digital payments and so many other things over the last few decades!

The biggest success of an organization is when the mission outlives its team. Can EkStep do that?

EkStep has certainly created a playbook for future startups, especially in the impact investing sector.

Be it the diversity of its team, with people from varying backgrounds and experiences coming together to wage a common crusade, the ability to decode and



understand the enormity of a problem that has been a multi-decade challenge, to learn from past failures and take risks with a much more organized thought process — there are certain core building blocks that EkStep has put in place.

The team has never compromised with these core building blocks. EkStep may have reached its goal of providing access to 200 million children and some 10 million teachers, but it is Diksha and others who used Sunbird who achieved this. In fact, EkStep has no product it can call as its own, even Sunbird is now a community-based open source project, which does not belong to EkStep, but is a community digital public good. EkStep is only a mission.

“Why should we differentiate who is learning? A learner is a learner, it could be a non-literate person who is also a learner. So I have been very clear since then that we will not collect any personal information about anybody,” says Pramod Varma.

Its foundational principles are so strong that they will ensure EkStep never becomes a monopoly platform.

“We can’t be the one platform in the country, that the whole country has to depend on the EkStep platform run by 30 people,” says Jagadish. “No one company can take over our education. We live in a time when Elon Musk can give the internet or take away the internet overnight. We were very clear that’s not how we want to do it.”

Education is everyone’s right. And any attempt to hegemonize education will not work.

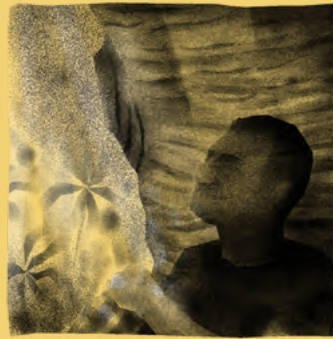
Secondly, the system is so slow and siloed that unless you work with the ecosystem, something the EkStep team had decided to do from inception, it is not going to help society in the long run.

And Team EkStep has worked bottom-up to enable hundreds of entities in education to achieve success through the infrastructure it catalyzed.

Gaurav Gupta puts it aptly.



“At EkStep, we are not trying to solve but resolve a problem. Because when I solve for it, then there is an I in it, but when you say resolve, you’ve taken away the I and you’re saying it is participative in nature, where others also come along. So it becomes societal in nature. And the moment you make it societal in nature, then it is not one versus the other. It is many coming together to bring change.”



*Mrityoma amritam gamaya...*  
*From I to all*



EkStep never had an obsession with being in the middle of things.

“One thing that all of us are pretty clear about at EkStep is, we don’t have to be in the middle of everything and it doesn’t matter. If somebody else comes and takes credit for it, it’s perfectly fine. For us, our mission is our only aim, it’s the only goal that we are looking for. It’s about how to improve education for the country. And the newly crafted mission that we are actually going towards saying that FLN will not be a problem for the country by 2030,” Madhuchandra says.

The idea of EkStep should continue because it’s the idea that is helping the system get better, and not me vs you.

“It will continue because the motto and sentiment are one of care and service. I see that across the domain, especially in the foundational literacy and numeracy space, people are very deeply committed. And it is big organizations like this. So coalitions can help. Eventually, it is about empowering children and essentially empowering others, and increasing the nation’s productivity in a very big way, eventually, individual livelihood as well as national productivity,” JB says.

And this is another lesson others can learn from EkStep. How do you go about resolving a situation? First, see the situation, and then locate areas where efficiency can be improved. With Plus one thinking!

“We have a deep sense of being a collective; there is no ‘my work’ here, it’s ‘our work’. You can see that there’s no marker to say EkStep did anything. We didn’t do anything because it was a collective effort. Also, there is a





commitment to not get attached to what works because what works at scale is different from scale what works,” Jagadish concludes.

Think of it as a home kitchen versus a community kitchen. Do the same food and techniques work in both? No. A community kitchen is about what works at scale, and a home kitchen is scaling what works.

Another building block at EkStep is the learning that no idea is great until it starts affecting and helping people in a sustained manner over multiple years.

If EkStep didn’t exist, what would happen? Absolutely nothing. The world would carry on. It wouldn’t matter. Because the world is too big a place for it to miss something it hasn’t engaged with. It’s not like saying you develop a combustible vehicle and there’s no petrol, then what will happen to the vehicle? It won’t work.

But what a mission like EkStep does is to create more space for voices. That creates possibilities.

“So here’s the deal. Let’s start with if EkStep was to outlive me. If I were to disappear tomorrow, and if EkStep is meant to continue, is there somebody at EkStep caring about the things that I cared about and doing something about it? If Jagadish was not around, how would EkStep look? If Shankar was not around, How would EkStep look? If Nandan and Rohini were not funding EkStep, how would EkStep look?” Deepika’s questions have all the answers impact startups need in today’s times.

EkStep will still leave behind its open-source technology if it were to get disbanded tomorrow. That would continue to help hundreds of entities in education in the future. The team has always believed that you can’t solve



a problem alone. Especially in India, where diversity is the key, and like Gaurav points out, often you end up mistaking your solution for a certain context as the solution to a larger problem.

EkStep's job is done when it removes the frictions that make it difficult for any human being in this country to access learning at the very basic level. And that is how a larger mission outlives the people working for it!

**This is what Shankar tells the writer of this story when we ask him about the one-line mission of EkStep:**  
**"EkStep is like a tree in the forest, and no tree can claim the ownership of the forest."**

As the forest grows, EkStep will become smaller and smaller. It will be there in the background, but what is happening around it will not be its business.

When it is raining, let anyone come and take shelter!





# TEAM EKSTEP: CHANGEMAKERS WHO CAME TOGETHER



NavaDhiti Clay Consulting CGS-Univ of Washington  
Fiona VNR Rijul Degue Software NIIT Brand Value  
SuperSike Games Madhuchandra Tenon Facility Management  
Ruchi Tekdi The Random Lines TurtleBowl Abhineet  
Rainmaker Robert Vikara Tarento Siriti Creative Mangalam  
Terralogic Qualitrix Himshi Eval Design Nita Natasha  
Riflexions NM Studios Taarini Infotech Netcore Enlearn  
Edreams Edusoft Vivek Mukesh Sahaj Software Deepika  
Karleen Hemalatha NanoBi Data and Analytics Pritha  
Artha-India Research Advisors Heena Shashi Raghavendra  
Michael Monica BeyondSquare Raja Preenos Crowd  
Pratik Shetty Foundation Sushma Autumn Advertising  
Pramod Callystro Infotech Srujuna Sharan Chethan  
Radhika CecureUs HR Services Sridhar Christopher  
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PRATHAM Promise Foundation Monsoon Fish Priya Gaurav  
Education Initiatives EY Sensibol Rashmi Prasad S Sanjay  
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Tasveerien Media ThoughtWorks Socion Sanketika Consulting  
Tech4Good Samagra Transforming Governance Mahesh Vinod  
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