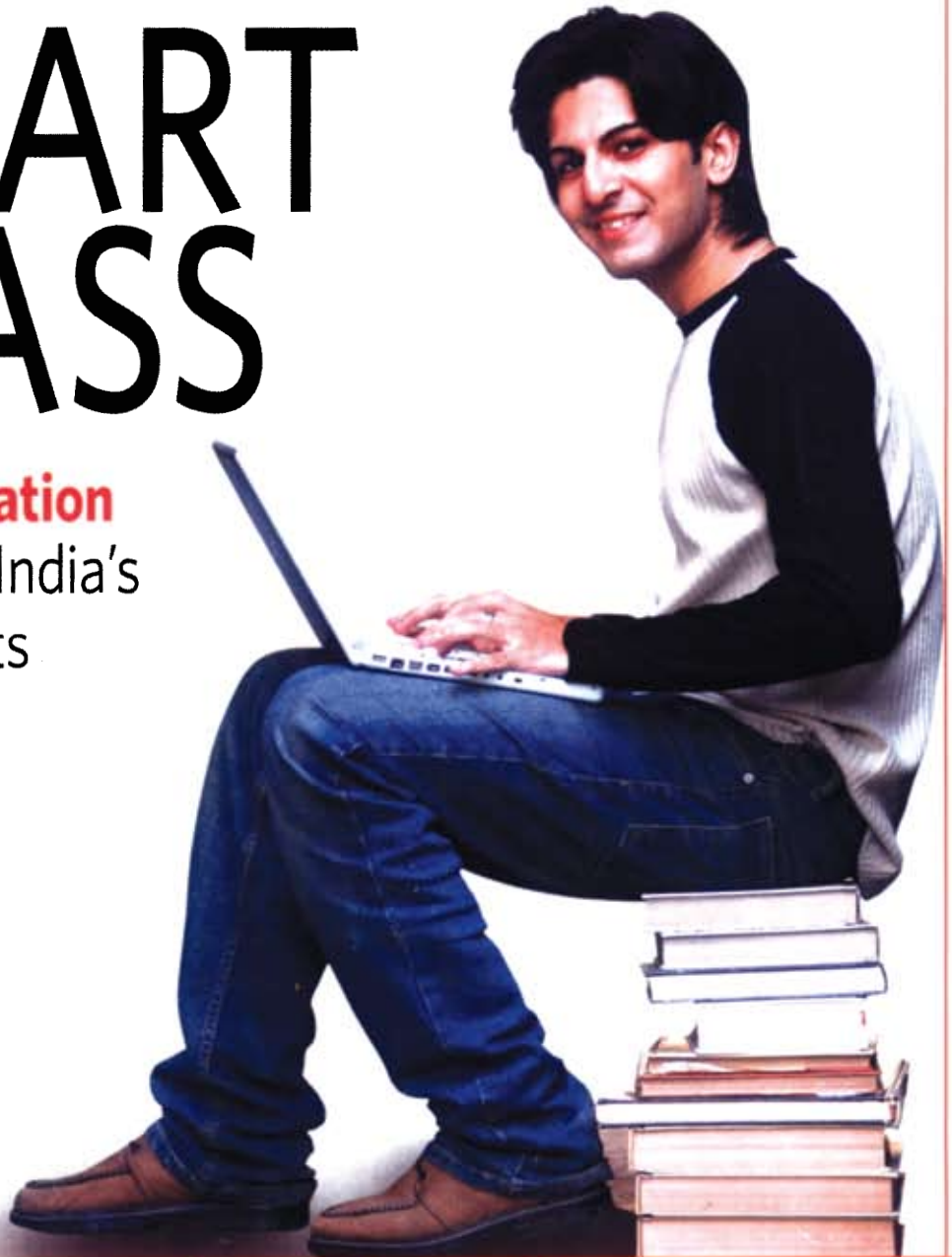


# THE SMART CLASS

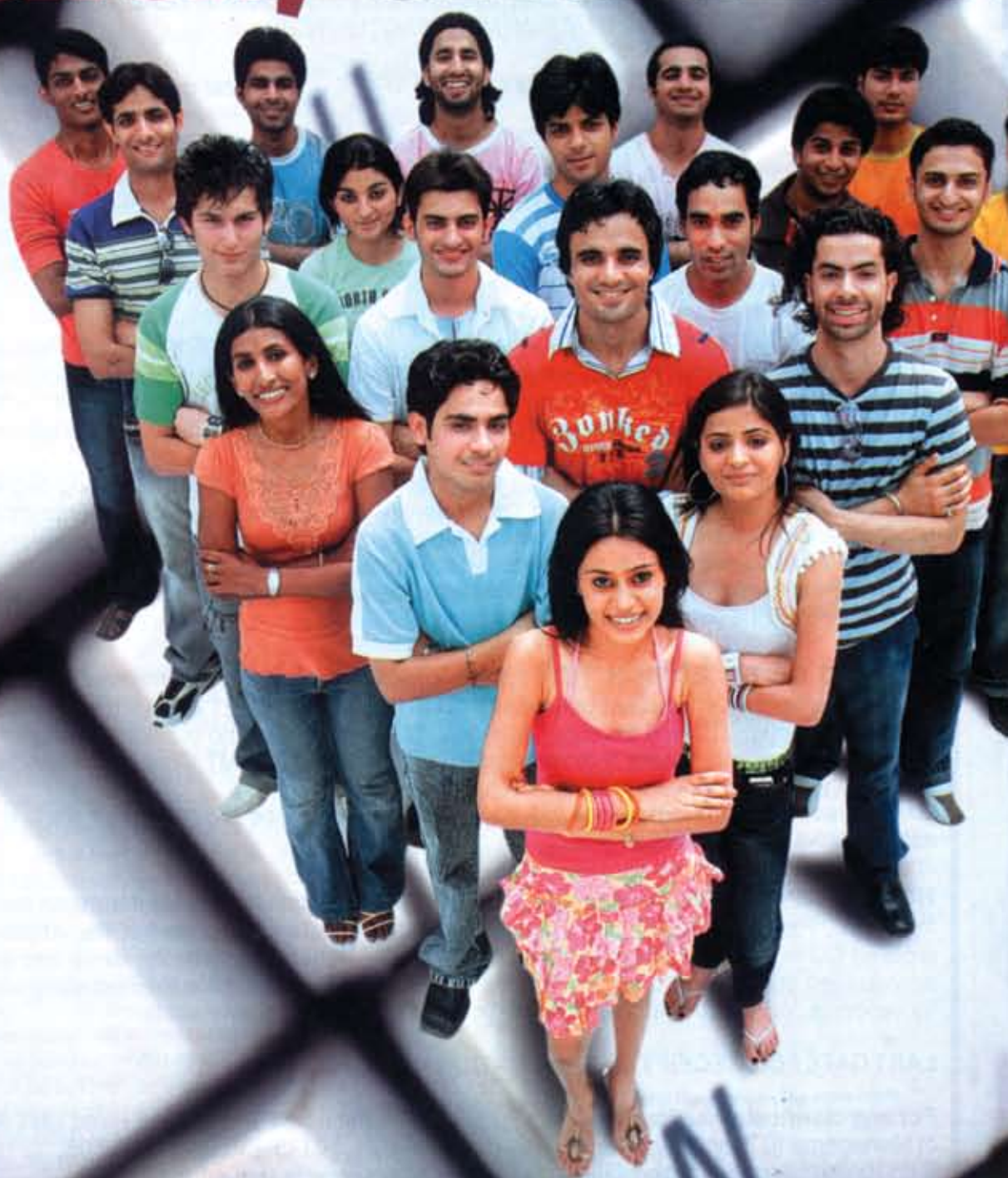
**Online education**  
is attracting India's  
young with its  
convenience



**Inside an e-learning classroom**

## COVER STORY

# Click, enter car





# Campus



## Online study is the shortest, most convenient route to higher education for many Indians

By Vijaya Pushkarna

**H**ave you been dreaming of pursuing higher education from a prestigious institute, but have never had the time or the means to go for a regular course? Perhaps, you did not look at all the options.

For you could as well have the classroom, the best teachers and all the course paraphernalia at your fingertips, virtually. No matter how old you are or what your calling is, you can still be as lively a student as any day-scholar and earn your cherished degree thanks to communication technology-enabled online higher education.

Twenty-three-year-old Bhuvaneshwari Joshi's experience shows how exciting and rewarding online education can be. While she was in Class 12, college was her dream. Finally, when she got into a Delhi college, classes bored her. A year later, she decided to complete her BA in Political Science through Delhi University's distance learning programme.

**In the new era of higher education, exclusively online is OK. A regular face-to-face learning is not a necessity. Convergence is the buzzword.**

Even as she pursued her education online and through self-study, she ventured into the world of event management. By the time her former classmates began their second-year at college, she joined CRI Events as a trainee. In a year, she was designated creative executive. She could pursue her political science course at leisure.

"The degree I have from Delhi University is no different from what students of St Stephen's or Miranda have. I have two years of work experience as a bonus," says Bhuvaneshwari, who is now consultant with Brodeur India. There was no way she would have given classroom learning the go by for a call centre or BPO job. "It was for a full-fledged career," she says.

**Two years after** Sunaina Jairath, who had completed her BSc. in Zoology from Delhi University, enrolled for an LLB programme, she realised it was not what she wanted. Sunaina, who handled campaigns and managed crisis communications, was attracted to the exciting world of public relations.

Four years into the job at a public relations agency, she realised that theoretical grounding was equally important. "I did not want to give up my job. I zeroed in on the online course that the Xavier Institute of Communication, Mumbai, was offering. I'm glad I did that," she beams.

The flexibility in timings and the online programme being from a reputed institute mattered most for her. That the diploma was not from a regular course did not deter her because, as she says, "I'm in an industry where hands-on experience

## e-nrol!

### Popular e-tutors

**IGNOU:** Business management, journalism and computer applications

**NIIT:** Business management

**Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning:**

Business management, communication, besides other courses

**Annamalai University:** Online Ph.D degrees in some subjects

**BITS Virtual Campus:** Programmes offered at BITS, Pilani

**eGurus:** Online tuitions

**Gurukulonline:** Courses in java and other web-based programmes

**Tutorvisa:** Online one-to-one tuition with virtual whiteboard

**MBD Alchemie:** Online tuitions

**IITs, IISc:** E-learning repositories

- ♦ Log in to fill the online application forms.
- ♦ Pay the registration fees online using credit cards
- ♦ Appear for the online entrance/aptitude test if any, and follow the procedure mentioned in the response from the institute
- ♦ If you get admission, pay the fees online. Follow the links using the username and password provided by the institute
- ♦ Attend classes at study centres if any, and take the exams online

Business management, journalism and computer applications, java and other web-based programmes



counts most.”

Rukmani Bachal, 23, joined Synapse in Goa as an intern after her Class 12, as she did not quite fancy taking the competitive exams her father wanted her to. The internship led to a job, and one job led to another. She then enrolled for Annamalai University's distance and online dual degree in visual communication and psychology, besides a few other online courses from India and abroad. A couple of months ago, she left for a regular face-to-face classroom at the New York Film Academy.

In the new era of higher education in India, exclusively online is OK. A regular face-to-face learning is not a necessity. Convergence is the buzzword. And many young Indians, and even the not-so-young, are willing to experiment—choosing the best suited, shortest, and the most convenient path to higher education.

Driven and delivered by broadband and dedicated high bandwidth, with or without the use of the internet and the world wide web, online education has become a boon for people like Devika. A Mumbai-based merchandising manager at Fifth Avenue Sourcing, it helped her learn from the best faculty of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, without actually being on the haloed campus.

**The trend has** delighted those in the field of education. Says Prof. Rajashekhara Pillai, vice-chancellor, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), which has moved from snail mailing printed lessons to satellite television, radio and the internet to teach: “If the five IITs and the Indian Institute of Science use the online format of their classes, the expertise of its best teachers can reach a remote college somewhere.



If we create a platform and put it on the internet, anyone can avail of it.” Colleges across the country can use these repositories with the help of a pen drive, depending on their convenience. Many are using repositories of places like Harvard and MIT, too, says Prof. Pillai.

The prospect of providing quality higher education to a huge number of students is what propels people like Prof. Pillai to ride the technology-driven path. At a time when the gap between the seat capacity of premier institutions and the number of aspirants to it is widening with every passing year, communication software has proved its utility. Students in remote areas can now take lessons without really budgeting too far. In a way, they can choose their teacher, virtually.

Says Uday Singh, executive vice-president and head, NIIT Imperia: “A guru who was passionate about a certain subject and had taught it in an unforgettable way is indeed a memory everyone cherishes. But such gurus are in short supply the world over. Technology can make the great teachers available to thousands of students.”

It was a return to basics for Ramesh Kharbanda, vice-president



### SUNAINA JAIRATH

#### Public relations

The flexibility in timings was what attracted her to the online course of the Xavier Institute of Communication, Mumbai.

in the petroleum division of Reliance Industries Ltd. Ramesh, who has been into sales and marketing, knew the business world was changing. With mergers and acquisitions becoming the order of the day, mastery in risk management was essential. He needed to return to school to prepare himself for the change, more so because of his growing responsibilities.

"I did an extensive survey, evaluated the skills I needed and looked at the various online programmes in India and abroad. Apart from mergers and acquisitions, and risk management, I had to learn about finance. A cross-functional knowledge was necessary," says Ramesh, who enrolled for the Senior Management Programme, conducted by NIIT Imperia in conjunction with IIM Calcutta. The course was for those with 10 years of

work experience.

Ramesh feels no different from a regular student. "In a classroom, things get only as interactive as the teacher and students make it. Here it is built into the system," he says, on his experience of synchronous learning in a virtual classroom. Today, Prof. Ashok Banerjee, Prof. B.B. Chakrabarti and Prof. Balram Avittathur from IIM Calcutta respond to a point Ramesh makes, in real time.

**The specially-designed remote** classroom in which Ramesh sits is linked by dedicated broadband two-way-audio-video to a special studio in IIM Calcutta. Through the headphone, he can hear Prof. Banerjee discuss a case study. He can talk to his teacher at the click of the mouse.

The rest of the students from across the country can see and hear Ramesh and Prof. Banerjee, live. "I cannot see the other students' expressions when they are listening to my intervention, but the teacher and the student can see each other, and all of us can see the student with whom the teacher is interacting one-on-one," says Ramesh. Video cameras ensure that the teachers get feedback from students and sustain their interest in the class.

Ramesh's classmate Bikram Suri, a 35-year-old software engineer, who has worked in India and abroad, took to online learning when he found that he lacked the skills to handle HR and financial matters of his own venture, Venascent Info Tech. He joined an online programme in management, where he could 'attend' Prof. Banerjee's lectures.

Similarly, Vasudha Verma, 33, general manager, finance, Dalmia (Bros), is pursuing an online senior management programme with the faculty from IIM Calcutta. "My present job is comfortable, but there is potential for growth. I would need management skills. I would have loved to enrol for a regular MBA, but I have two children. So I joined the online programme over the weekends," says Vasudha, who finished



SANJAY AHLAWAT

## If the IITs and the Indian Institute of Science use the online format of their classes, the expertise of its best teachers can reach a remote college.

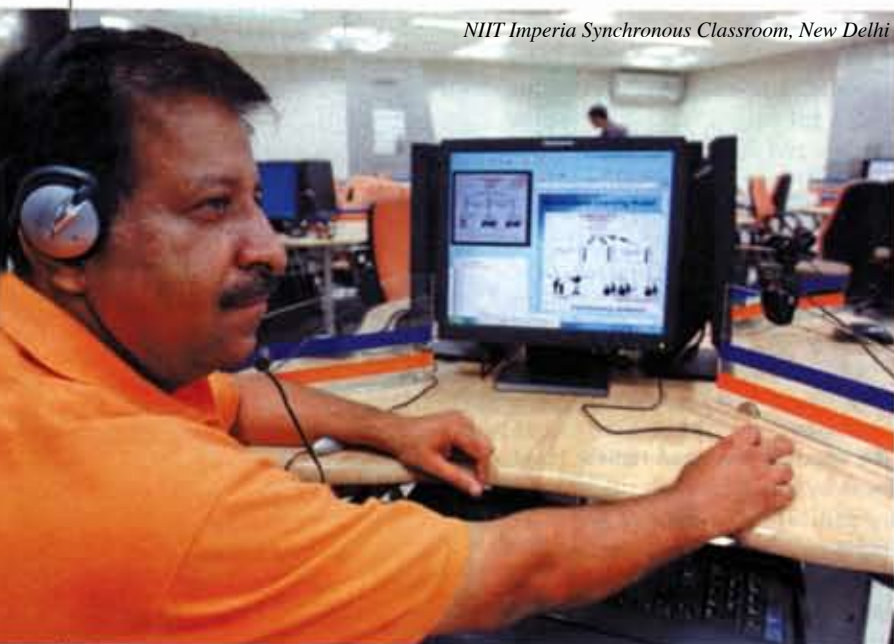
RAJASHEKHARAN PILLAI, V-C, IGNOU

her AICWA and ACS in 1994.

Impressed by Vasudha's determination, her company is considering reimbursing the Rs 2.1 lakh that she is spending on the programme.

The online courses are a cut above the regular classroom, says Prof. Pillai, who is chairman of the Distance Education Council. "You can have the benefit of the best of teachers and the latest technology, delivering education in a focussed and interesting manner."

According to him, there are 22 lakh students pursuing higher education through distance and online learning. Expanding rapidly and jumping on the bandwidth wagon are 13 state



NIIT Imperia Synchronous Classroom, New Delhi

## RAMESH KHARBANDA

**V-P, petroleum division, RIL**

He wanted to keep pace with the changing world of business and enrolled for an online programme to study about mergers and acquisitions, and risk management.

“At the end of the programme, students are conferred a US degree. It is as good as getting an education in the US, while being in India,” she says.

Employers, too, are getting their staff to tap the online facility to upgrade their skills. The Indian Retail Association, the Mumbai-based conglomeration of retail units, has tied up with IGNOU to facilitate higher education for its Class 12 passed employees. From day one of joining work, the employees are registered with IGNOU for a diploma in retail management. As they go up the job ladder, they can get BBA or MBA degrees.

As virtual classrooms are gaining popularity, the distinction between online and regular students seems to be fading. IIM Ahmedabad plans to give alumni status to students who

open universities and 120 distance education institutes of conventional universities, besides IGNOU. Private players, including at least 50 big names like NIIT, Symbiosis, Arena and Maya, are also on the scene.

Students are making a beeline to study online—either to acquire their main degrees, or to grab add-on qualifications. “About 10 per cent of the total higher education is through the online and distance mode. In the next three to four years, this could double as more institutes are offering cours-

es online,” says Prof. Pillai.

Apart from this, over a lakh students are in pursuit of degrees from reputed foreign universities, without moving out of India. US-based online education firm mLogica works with a university in Pune, which has a partnership with a US-based university. “The courseware is provided by the US university and classes are engaged by professors in the US. Exams are proctored by the university in Pune,” says Vazi Okhandiar, vice-president, technology, mLogica.

## Inside e-college

The top end ‘virtual classroom’ is the G5 or G6 of the early net-enabled teaching facilities that were just e-learning portals. The classrooms, in NIIT Imperia for example, are configured to optimally utilise Synchronous Learning Technology for a ‘live’ student experience.

Direct one-to-one interaction is ensured through individual ICT systems, comprising high-performance desktops, webcam, audio system and microphone at each workstation connected directly to faculty institutes for each student.

Classroom interactions are facilitated by clusters of student-stations and camera and projection systems that span the classroom. Here teachers and the college may be far, but students have to reach a centre that is designed as a virtual classroom.

Add-ons by way of lecture rooms for presentations, breakout rooms for case-discussions and collaborative assignments, and library and reading room with internet kiosks, plus a hangout area make a ‘virtual college’.

At the entry level are institutes that upload their lessons and have live chat sessions with teachers actively

involved, providing the interactive experience. Responses and assignments have to be uploaded by students who have the passwords. This helps students study from wherever they please.

Midway are institutes where the online courses are taken by students in centres, where facilitators guide them real time—this is how most of the animation and graphic design, interior decoration and architecture courses are conducted.

For those who want to spend less, and learn for the sake of learning, a book with a CD or DVD, or a website access, comprises the online class.

have done its online programme from NIIT Imperia. The IIMs at Kolkata and Indore are yet to take a decision on this, says Uday Singh.

Also, the Distance Education Council has given the green signal to IITs and IIMs to offer their programmes online. The HRD-supported National Programme for Technology Enabled Learning (NPTEL), a joint venture of the five IITs and the Indian Institute of Science, was inaugurated a few months ago.

The utility of online education in India is immense. While education for children under 14 is a millennium goal to be achieved by 2015, around 30 million children in the age group are not in schools. It will take one million more teachers to provide them education, and all the country's teacher training schools put together cannot churn out so many teachers.

"These children will face more problems when they reach the stage of higher education. Without technology, we cannot educate them all—

be it at the lower or higher level," says Prof. Pillai. "Digital literacy modules will teach them how to make use of technology to learn. Even people who are illiterate and old can use this."

However, parents by and large still prefer the good old college and its compulsory attendance for their children. Says Rukmani's mother, Jyoti: "My husband was very apprehensive about it. He favoured a normal college education, and all the competitions that come with it. I am not a

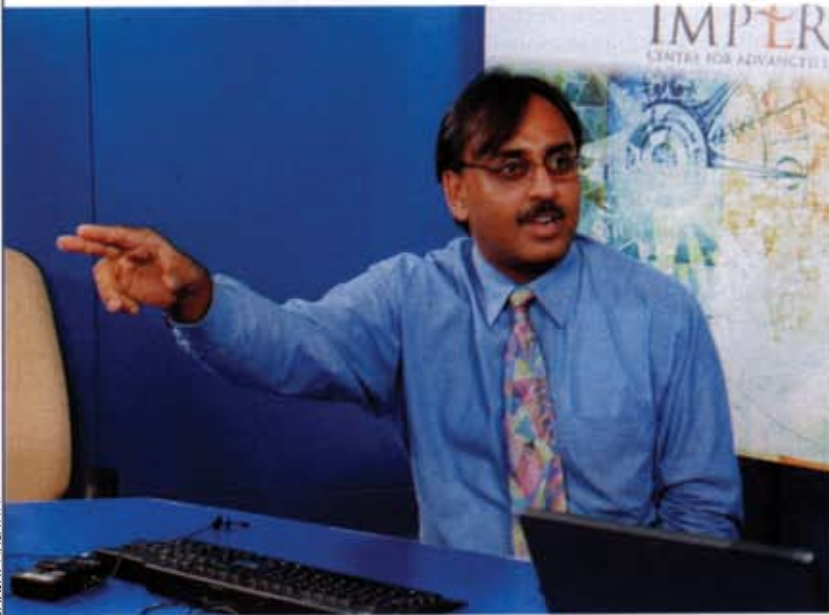
### **BHUVANESHWARI JOSHI**

**Consultant, Brodeur India**

**She did an online programme in political science, and feels the degree she has is no different from what students of St Stephen's or Miranda have.**



ARVIND JAIN



Gurus are in short supply the world over. Technology can make the great teachers available to thousands of students.

UDAI SINGH, EXECUTIVE V-P  
& HEAD, NIIT IMPERIA

conventional person, so I supported her through all her decisions.”

How do employers weigh a candidate who has an online degree? Till a few years ago, there was a lingering doubt about the ability of a person not exposed to college life. The interactive nature of online education has changed the perception. “Earlier, distance education was considered a system without any quality control, where students received notes, took exams, and got a degree. Some people were also misusing it to make money. All that has changed,” says Prof. Pillai.

Online education is also about big money. Many with the capital to pump in and bandwidth to spare are game for it. The famed coaching centres of Kota have taken the plunge with online mock tests. According to Vazi, the total market value of online education (e-learning) worldwide is expected to grow to \$21 billion by 2008. In India, the current market value of the online education industry is around \$200 million and within three years, it is expected to touch \$1 billion, she says.

Indian software companies, too, are cashing in on the online educa-

tion industry. Educomp Solutions, Core Profects and Technologies and Evernonn Systems are developing software for online tutoring, classroom management and web-based learning. Online education is a growing trend, particularly in the US, where face-to-face education is costly.

The sunrise sector has opened up opportunities for Indian teachers who want to teach without going to schools or students' houses for a one-on-one home tuition. For example, Vazi offers online tuitions in maths, English and computers, and gets queries from those who want to learn Hindi online.

Says Vazi, who teaches online for a master's programme in software engineering for a private university

## Age no bar

The son of a daily wage labourer and illiterate mother from a remote village in Uttar Pradesh, 14-year-old Shailendra Kumar Verma could only have dreamed of a career in software development. But he became the youngest computer science graduate in the country thanks to online education.

From July 2007, the young genius is a student of the online MCA programme of the Indira Gandhi National Open University at its Lucknow cen-

tre. He has been given a full fee waiver. Prior to his passing the senior secondary exam from the National Institute of Open Schooling in 2004 at the age of 11, Shailendra had no formal education. His tryst with higher learning began when a fellowship paved the way for him to join the Bachelor of Computer Application course at the Lucknow University. He passed with 74.93 per cent marks.

Earlier, he had cleared the SAT and TOEFL exams and secured admission for a face-to-face education programme at a university in the US,

but could not go because of financial constraints.

Ninety-year-old Jadhavji Jivabhai Gohil, a resident of M.P. Shah Vriddha Ashram in Jamnagar, does not think he is too old for education.

The retired aeronautic engineer from the Indian Air Force is pursuing his passion, English literature, through IGNOU's online and television-driven programmes. He is the oldest student the open university has ever had. Today, he is a favourite with the Ashram office-bearers, and the envy of his fellow oldies.





SANJAY AHLAWAT

### VASUDHA VERMA

#### GM, finance, Dalmia (Bros)

Pursuing a senior management programme online with the faculty from IIM Calcutta, she catches up with her lessons on weekends.

in the US: "A few years back, they tried starting a programme in India. But they had to go through a lot of bureaucracy, and dropped the idea. There is a lot of potential for Indian universities to partner with US universities, where they can offer programmes to US students."

The cost of books and classroom training is high in the US and many students cannot afford tuition, she said. "The US universities can provide a cheaper solution through the partnership programme, and Indian and US professors can interact with each other. This will open a job market for teachers and professors in India."

At the top end of the spectrum are institutes like NIIT, which invest hugely in technology to keep pace with the emerging trends. On its part, the government is concerned about the quality that the huge bandwidths are offering. An Assessment and Accreditation Board for Distance and Online Educational Programmes may just be on the cards. And virtual classrooms are here to stay. ■

## Class sans rooms

By Rajesh Parishwad

A few years ago, a US daily published a cartoon where a parent tells the kid: "No, you may not outsource your homework to India." That made Krishnan Ganesh of Bangalore think. He made outsourcing homework to India a serious business with his venture TutorVista.com.

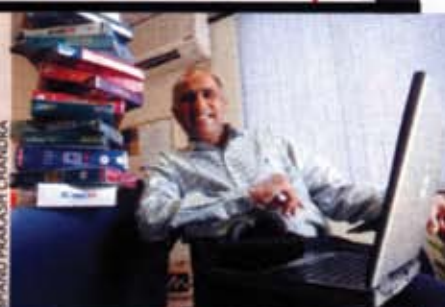
Private tutoring in the US is very expensive at \$50 an hour. Leveraging the power of the internet and inexpensive services of teachers in India, Ganesh offers "unlimited, anytime, anywhere education on any subject" at \$99 a month.

"I am targeting the bottom of the pyramid," he says, drawing a phrase from management guru C.K. Prahalad. "My firm cannot be categorised into a BPO or a KPO. It is an internet company and B2C type as it sells services to customers directly in the US or the UK."

Launched in 2005, TutorVista.com offers tuitions for school children, and for standardised entrance tests. Students just need a computer and internet connectivity, and an online tutor helps them with their homework and exam studies. Students can choose their tutor.

Maths and English are in great demand at the school level, followed by science. Says Ganesh, "The US has produced the maximum number of Nobel laureates and is home to some of the best universities like Harvard, Yale and Berkeley. But its school students rank among the lowest in science education." The company has so far tutored more than 10,000 students from over 15 countries.

A mechanical engineer, Ganesh started his career at Tata Motor's Jamshedpur plant. He joined HCL after his MBA from the IIM. After five years at the HCL, Ganesh and a



BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

Net entrepreneur: Krishnan Ganesh

group of friends started IT&T, a company that provided IT maintenance services to companies in Delhi. Eight years later, IT&T had a revenue of Rs 30 crore.

He moved to Bangalore where he got an offer to join Bharti-British Telecom to run their joint venture that had been piling up losses. "The management gave me total freedom," says Ganesh, who changed the fortunes of the company within 24 months. He bid goodbye to this job, as his entrepreneurial spirit took over.

With the dotcom boom at its peak, Ganesh and his wife, Meena, hit upon an idea to offer cost-effective email-based support services to emerging internet firms in the US. He wrote to some investors, who offered financial support and helped them in generating business. CustomerAsset.com was set up. But the internet bloodbath happened, and he "had to change the business strategy from email-based support to voice-based services". The transition was successful.

In 2002, he sold the call-centre firm to ICICI for over \$22 million. He took up the role of investor and adviser at Marketics.com, a data analytics BPO firm that did marketing analysis work for Fortune 100 firms in the US.

Now, his focus is on popularising TutorVista.com in India. He is working on a different business model for India where internet penetration is low. "In India, it will be click and brick," he says. "We will use services of a teacher and the internet. We may hold face-to-face classes in schools and other places."





*Excerpts from*  
*The Week Magazine*  
*with reference to NIIT Imperia*

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