

# The three Indian firms among the 50 most promising start-ups in the world

Two AI firms and a designer apparel renting firm from India figure in a *Bloomberg* listing of the world's 50 most promising start-ups. The report, titled "The 50 most promising start-ups that you've never heard of", was compiled by market researcher Quid. *Mint* profiles the three Indian start-ups.

## SOLVING THE PROBLEM FOR THE NEXT 500 MILLION

### Mihup Communications Pvt. Ltd.

Imagine you're throwing one of the over-the-top content apps. You want to figure out if certain movies are available for viewing. You can type out, but the feedback tool is just a name. And the movie pops up on the screen.

This is what exactly Mihup Communications Pvt. Ltd., a company that is building a platform for speech-to-text recognition, enables. In the process, it has dared to compete with Amazon's Alexa and Microsoft's Inc.

Mihup—a branch of Tapan Burman, Biplob Chakravorty, Sandipan Mandal and Sandipan Chattopadhyay, who was earlier chief technology officer at Just Dial—was set up in June last year. Burman, Chakravorty and Mandal had earlier founded Nectar Consultancy Services in Kolkata, a firm that provided responses to SMS queries from consumers, before devoting themselves to create a "man-machine interface" in vernacular languages.

The firm's app currently recognizes Hindi, Bengali and English, and plans are to include Kannada, Telugu and Tamil in its repertoire in the next six-to-eight months, said Burman.

The problem we are trying to solve is the problem of the next 500 million content mobile users in India. Content consumption in regional language is increasing. There has been a lot of

research and development happening in different institutes, but nobody has really made a concrete business out of it or even built a commercial product," said Burman.

Mihup raised about \$500,000 from Accel Partners and an undisclosed amount from start-up incubator Xelpmoc last year. According to Burman, Accel has committed an investment to the tune of \$6 million over the years. The company has already roped in an over-the-top content provider, an audio systems manufacturer and a caller-ID service provider as clients.

"Internet is biased towards English-speaking audience. Using a vernacular keyboard is very cumbersome. People forward messages but hardly anyone types. Essentially, wherever input-output becomes voice-based, Mihup can be used. It is on mobile and desktop. We can also

build an intelligent IVR [interactive voice response system] based on Mihup, say for banks. We may make call centres as much automated as possible or detect emotional content of a message. There are multiple use cases," said Chattopadhyay. The firm has a 20-member team, and split between Kolkata and Bangalore, and also boasts of a robust set of advisors, comprising former Microsoft Corp. executive Anubhambh, former Twitter Inc. executive Parag Gupta and SAP AG executive Saubik Banerjee.

**Sayan Chakravorty**

**Total funding**  
**\$6.7 million**  
**Investor**  
**Accel Partners**

## MAKING AI ACCESSIBLE

### MadStreet Den Systems Pvt. Ltd.

Central-based MadStreet Den is arguably one of the most recognizable artificial intelligence start-ups from India. Chief executive officer Ashwinj Asokan (who is also known for being outspoken about skewed gender representation in the Indian start-up ecosystem), however, is the first one to point out that using AI on a large scale is in a meaningful way a "massive challenge" and that we are in the "very, very, very, very early stages of building AI right now".

Asokan, who previously worked for Intel Corp. and her husband Anand Chandrasekaran (who is the firm's chief technology officer), a neuro-scientist, both worked in the US before deciding to return to start up in 2013.

"To build generalizable AI is one of the founding principles of why we started this. The second part of the founding principle is making AI accessible to millions of people across the globe. Not just to build it, but actually to build it on the scale that allows people across the world. The first one represents Anand's vision, and second one represents why I am here," said Asokan.

The firm spent more than a year building out core AI technology modules and dabbling in products around gaming and analytics before deciding on

first launching a solution, vnc.ai, meant for retailers.

"The premise was to say we'll have a platform, and we'll build one particular vertical after another, but there was a steep learning curve for us in terms of understanding how a technology like AI can actually fundamentally change the way in which a particular business can work. Retail at that point was sitting on a tonne of cash, and it was much easier to walk into retail than any other purely because they were much more ready to experiment than anyone else," said Asokan. So what does AI in retail look like? For consumers, it's personalized websites that change based on every action they do on a website; it's the ability to upload a picture and find matching products, and a better browsing experience overall. For retailers, it

improves conversion rates on the back of a better consumer experience, prevents cataloguing errors, and reduces the time and effort humans spend in doing this.

MadStreet Den currently works with firms such as furniture e-commerce site HipVan in Singapore, and fashion e-tailers such as TataCliQ, Craftsville and Voonik in India.

MadStreet Den's eventual branching out to domains other than retail is set to happen soon, though. "Sometime this year," said Asokan.

**Sadhana Chathurvedula**

**Funding**  
**Undisclosed**  
**Investors**  
**Sequoia Capital**

### Omnap Technologies Pvt. Ltd.

Omnap Technologies runs the fashion rental start-up Flyrobe—an online platform for men and women to rent designer apparel and accessories.

Since its inception in July 2015, the company has grown to register 500,000 monthly visitors, 200,000 mobile-application downloads, and claims to rent out apparel worth \$1 million per month.

Co-founder Shreya Mishra says innovating around customer experience has helped the firm scale up.

"There are three important things to fashion rental, which we stick by: one, the authenticity of product so that it looks and feels brand new every time it is rented; two, that fits well—we've launched custom fitting service, for every first-order by a user we send for at-home measurements; and third, a smooth customer experience like (making sure) the delivery and pick-up is on time."

Back in July 2015, the three founders—Mishra, Pranay Surana and Tushar Satena—engineers from the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, left their investment banking and analyst jobs to start Flyrobe. The trio pooled in Rs10-15 lakh,

## RENTING WEARABLES

bought 100 pieces of designer apparel, set up a website on WordPress and began renting out clothes in Mumbai. "While the deliveries and pick-ups are on our own, and this gave us the opportunity to meet our customers, know who they are, what they like and a direction to build forward," said Mishra.

In September that year, Flyrobe was officially launched.

The company has an asset-light model; it currently has over 5,000 products, procured from over 70 designers

such as Ritu Kumar and Masaba Gupta, and stocked in warehouses. The firm rents out the apparel for four days. While the retail price of a piece of apparel can range between Rs8,000 and Rs200,000, Flyrobe rents it out for between Rs799 and Rs30,000, sharing 50% of the rent earned with the designer.

"Flyrobe has evolved to become a destination for lesser-known designers to attract new customers, do brand building among those who can rent their outfits but hesitate to pay a high price to own the outfit," said Mishra.

Flyrobe has a team of 40 and serves customers in Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad and Mumbai. The firm's system and women between the ages of 21 and 35 are its main customers, with men's wear driving 35% of the revenue.

**Arushi Chopra**

**Total funding**  
**\$6.9 million**  
**Investors**  
**IDG Ventures, Sequoia Capital, Tokyo-based GREE Ventures.**

**Other investors include Snapdeal founders Kunal Bahl and Rohit Bhasikar, Paytm founder Vijay Shekhar Sharma, Freecharge founders Anubhambh and Sandeep Tandon, and Zishaan Hayath, founder of Toppr.**