

High on ideas, low on cost

India Inc is taking innovation everywhere – from booking bus tickets online to feeding poor children

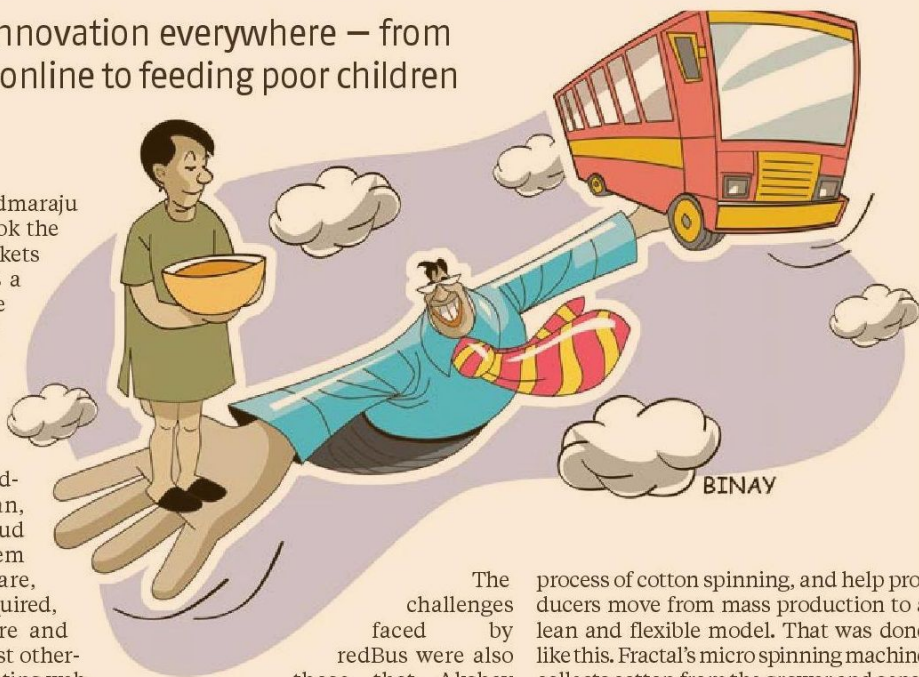
VIVEAT SUSAN PINTO

Mumbai, 31 March

Phanindra Sama, Charan Padmaraju and Sudhakar Pasupunuri took the process of booking bus tickets online. The trio knew it was a game-changing move, but the challenge was to keep costs low in a scenario where margins were thin. Also, when average ticket prices are hardly much, how do you make the business viable?

The three friends, who studied at BITS, Pilani, Rajasthan, went for open source and cloud computing. That allowed them to download and use software, even make modifications if required, and host their infrastructure and servers at a fraction of the cost otherwise needed to manage a ticketing website. "This definitely helped," says Sama, chief executive officer of the venture named redBus. "We were able to focus our attention on getting as many bus operators as we could to provide the necessary choice to those who wanted to book tickets online," he says.

In five years since its launch, redBus has aggregated almost 40-45 per cent of organised bus operators on its site. Tickets sold in the same time have been almost 6.5 million. Plans are afoot to take this number up. So, the deafening applause wasn't a surprise when Sama was on the dais at the fourth edition of the Marico Innovation Awards here yesterday.



The challenges faced by redBus were also those that Akshay Patra Foundation and Fractal Foundation, two non-profit organisations, grappled with. Akshay, also Bangalore-based like redBus, wondered how the task of feeding underprivileged children across different schools could be tackled. Akshay borrowed from management: it centralised its kitchens. That allowed it to not only scale up production, but also maintain hygiene and quality standards. In the 11 years since its launch, the foundation has moved from feeding 1,500 children in one city (Bangalore) to 1.3 million across 18 cities.

Chennai-based Fractal Foundation, on the other hand, wanted to simplify the

process of cotton spinning, and help producers move from mass production to a lean and flexible model. That was done like this. Fractal's micro spinning machine collects cotton from the grower and separates the fibre from the chaff right there. The fibre is fed into a draw frame, where it's turned into yarn. The yarn is bought by the weaver in a neighbouring village to make fabric.

The fabric produced with the help of Fractal's technology is soft and retains its shape for a long time. But the biggest achievement, says L Kannan, managing trustee of Fractal, is the removal of unnecessary mechanisation that results in wastage. The scope for the village artisan or weaver is limited in a mechanised process but that is taken care of in the said process, which improves their livelihood, he says.