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CodeYogi founder Prashant Chaudhary wins Rohini Nayyar Prize: A teacher's faith in a struggling child

Chaudhary's CodeYogi Foundation has taught technology and artificial intelligence (AI) skills to more than 3.5 lakh students across nine states and 120 districts

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Chaudhary is careful about AI's limitations. CodeYogi covers basic AI literacy and algorithmic bias, while warning students against over-reliance. (Express photo)

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In Class 4, Prashant Chaudhary was failing almost every subject except Hindi. Having moved from a Hindi-medium school to an English-medium one in his village Bhagwanpur near Meerut, he

struggled to follow lessons. The textbooks were in English, while teachers often explained them in Hindi to bridge the language gap. He expected to repeat the year.

Then his science teacher, Mita Singh, began bringing Coffee Bite candies to class and asking questions suited to each student's ability. Gradually, Chaudhary became one of the most active students in the classroom. During the final lesson on levers, she repeatedly turned to him whenever the others could not answer a question. At the end, she announced that there was only one scientist in the class.

Nearly three decades later, Chaudhary (39), on Saturday won the fifth Rohini Nayyar Prize for Outstanding Contribution to Rural Development by a person under 40. The prize honours Dr Rohini Nayyar, one of India's foremost economist-administrators responsible for designing MGNREGA. She had passed away in 2021.

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Chaudhary's CodeYogi Foundation has taught technology and artificial intelligence (AI) skills to more than 3.5 lakh students across nine states and 120 districts. The award, carrying a cash prize of Rs 10 lakh, was presented by Amitabh Kant, former CEO of NITI Aayog and India's G20 Sherpa, in New Delhi. Chaudhary plans to donate the prize money to the foundation.

"I wanted to be like Mita Singh," he says. "To help others the way she helped me."

CodeYogi's model does not depend on computers, laboratories, English proficiency or trained teachers. Its courses run on family smartphones and are available in Indian languages.

Chaudhary's own journey out of his village began when he spotted a reference to IIT in Dainik Jagran while in Class 11. He went on to become the first person from his village to enter IIT Delhi,

graduating in 2010.

At his first software job, a colleague who had dropped out of a BA course and taught himself coding changed Chaudhary's thinking. "You don't actually need to go to IIT or hold a formal degree if you build the right practical skills," he says.

In 2012, Chaudhary began training cousins and friends before taking his lessons to an engineering college in Ghaziabad, teaching iOS development.

He founded DevsLane, a software services company, in 2016. He hired his students and the company grew to $2 million in annual revenue. Initially, the foundation ran six-month training programmes for batches of around 1,000 students, many of them former mechanics, welders and plumbers. More than 80% of those completing the courses secured jobs paying Rs 6-8 lakh annually.

Chaudhary exited in 2020, handing the company to two students, and used the proceeds to build CodeYogi. Last October, he registered it as a non-profit company. But computer laboratories proved a major obstacle, with broken machines and unreliable electricity.

CodeYogi's turning point came in 2023.

A pilot with 16,500 students at Dewas in Madhya Pradesh proved students could learn on their smartphones instead. The model expanded to 3.5 lakh learners in 2024. Late last year, as generative AI began changing software development, CodeYogi retired its pure coding course for a 30-day applied AI fluency programme. Since then, more than one lakh students have registered. Among the students, 48.6% are girls, while 95% rely exclusively on smartphones.

Chaudhary is careful about AI's limitations. CodeYogi covers basic AI literacy and algorithmic bias, while warning students against over-reliance. "AI must serve as an assistant rather than a substitute for genuine cognitive learning," he says.

He cites Ankit, a Class 12 biology student from Dewas with no coding background, as an example of the talent waiting to be discovered. After learning to code through CodeYogi, Ankit identified flaws in its editor, built a better version. CodeYogi hired him and incorporated his work into its platform.

"There is extraordinary latent talent across rural India," Chaudhary says.

For him, the ambition to reach a million learners is rooted in the intervention of a teacher who once made a struggling fourth-grader believe he could be a scientist.

It is why CodeYogi now starts in Class 9 – 59% of its top-performing students who landed high-paying jobs had no Maths background. The trick is to reach them early, says Chaudhary, who aim for a

million students by March 2027.

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