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A conversation with Azeez Gupta of [Rocket Learning](#)

Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you please introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about yourself and your work?

Azeez Gupta: I'm Azeez Gupta. I'm the co-founder of [Rocket Learning](#), which is an early childhood development-focused nonprofit organization working in the Global South. I have been working in education and early childhood development for the last 10 years or so. First, at [Pratham](#), a large nonprofit based out of India and for the last five years at Rocket Learning. Before that, I spent my career in the corporate sector at McKinsey & Company and did my undergraduate studies at IT Delhi and [my graduate studies] at the Harvard Business School.

My passion for the last 10 years has been how do you provide opportunities to those who don't have it, especially the youngest children who by the age of six are losing out to their higher income peers, and how can we solve that particular problem. I grew up in small towns in India to a middle-class family, so I had the privilege of seeing the disparities that exist in rural India but also having the privilege of a very strong education, and that brought me to this part of my life.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about what you think is really distinctive about your approach to education within the organization. Also, what communities do you serve with the work?

Azeez Gupta: Let me start with the communities that we serve. We work with the [poorest] 30% of India's population. These are individuals living in rural areas or in urban slums who are sending their children to government-run daycare centers. Our

core group that we want to help are 0 to 6-year-old children. We have seen that a lot of research has shown that 85% of brain development happens by the age of six. Not just brain development, but also social regulation, emotional regulation, and other factors, which are predictors of long-term success. They are all built through the millions of neuronal connections that happen during this age. Our focus is can you help children get stimulated and learn during this period and be ready for life? We do this by working with adults in their lives because children are children, and so can we work with either their parents or the daycare workers who care for them and are employed by the government.

Those are the roots that we adopt. Those are also our stakeholders, the loving parents and daycare workers who want to take care of their kids but don't have the awareness or the information or the daily habits and motivation to be able to do this on a regular basis. That's about communities. We work in 10 states of India across the north, west and south, so in a lot of different parts of the country. We work with about 20% of India's public daycare workers today.

In terms of approach, there are two or three things that we have probably done a little bit differently from others. One is we have tried to provide agency to people to be able to help themselves. I think there are a lot of models where people [for example] say my [trained] staff is going to go and teach kids. We have tried to avoid that, and [instead] we've said,these communities have the interest. They have the ability. Can you provide actionable activities for them to do with the kids on a regular basis and help them build that habit? Providing that agency is a core part of what we do.

We also wanted to leverage what's out there in terms of government partnerships and government systems. Rather than create a parallel system, we've tried to work with the government and strengthen their daycare system.

Thirdly, we are seeing the world as it is today rather than where it was, which is unlike a lot of other organizations or peers that we know. [For instance] we see that in India, 80% to 90% of families whose kids are going to government systems do have a smartphone in the house. Every government school teacher or daycare worker has a smartphone. They have a data connection. They are now getting online so we are able to provide them information digitally.

Of course, we have to figure out the right way to provide that information to people who are not digital natives. But the key thing is that we are trying to use technology and smartphones in sensible ways. A lot of people either do community work, or they think that technology is a silver bullet.We are seeing technology as an enabler to support communities in what they do. For example, we replicated the concept of the physical self-help group, which has worked so well in different sectors and created these digital

communities, digital self-help groups. That is the third part of what we are doing that makes us a little different from many others who are either in the future or in the past. We hope that we are in the present.

Ashley Hopkinson: One of the things that you said that I found really interesting was you wanted to work with the government to leverage those resources. Also the choice to bring in training opportunities instead of establishing new staff. Why did you approach it that way? What was your thinking around that?

Azeez Gupta: In our case we are fortunate that India has this network of daycare centers that are government-run, government-paid in every nook and cranny of the country. There are about 1.4 million centers serving about 80 million children at any given point of time, so the system exists. As we worked in the space, my co-founders and I, who come from various social impact and corporate backgrounds as well, we were seeing that this cadre of daycare workers, about 1.4 million of them, had daycare workers per center, who were very keen and motivated to be known as teachers, perceived as teachers, and to be able to do these joyful learning activities in the classroom.

When we saw that, we realized that the challenge is how can you support them on a regular basis, help them build these habits, help them get the right information, rather than create a parallel architecture. Part of the motivation was that most nonprofits don't have an exit strategy. What happens when you go away? For us, it was very important that anything we do should be adopted and can be adopted by the government. The best way to do that is to leverage the folks who are already there, most of whom are interested and motivated if you can just help them in the right way.

In the past, daycare workers [were supported by] a training once a year or [someone] giving them a big fat manual and saying, now just use it. Now, because of smartphones in their homes, we could actually reach them on a daily basis. We could give them content. We could give them motivation. We could engage with them. We could personalize things for them in a very real-time way. We felt that that is the best way to do it.

In our case, we have one person who supports and helps about 2,000 daycare workers all with the use of technology and through judiciously going in the field and interacting with them as well. It's a hybrid offline-online model, but because of the macro changes and the fact that India has this large network, [it works.] And of course, most kids have caring parents in their lives and that's a resource that's untapped and underused. We are saying, how can we support the parents as well? That's why we came and said that rather than trying to replace the parents and daycare workers and say that these folks

can't do anything and we need to create a system or a new cadre of people, [instead] let's use what exists. Finally, we have a way of reaching them regularly.

Ashley Hopkinson: I wanted to talk more about funding models and what's working and not working in supporting organizations. Thinking about the support that you've received, what is something that was an effective catalyst in helping you to scale or operate more sustainably and effectively? Can you describe it?

Azeez Gupta: Yes, absolutely. What has been really helpful for us, and I think you'll find a similar answer across many nonprofits, is the fact that we've had access to unrestricted innovation funding early on in our journey. That's been critical. In India there is a corporate social responsibility law under which corporations are supposed to fund social impact programs. Those things are there, and there are also philanthropists who also want to fund. Unfortunately, a lot of this funding is available for working in a particular district or in a particular set of schools. Funding program support is there, which is useful. [However] in the early days, especially when you're really just trying to build the stack in terms of the content, the technology, trying to experiment, innovate, all of that, you're very limited if you only have funding for running a program in a particular area, which unfortunately is the case.

The other thing is often a lot of funders in India want outcomes in terms of improved incomes. They want things that are a little bit more the flavor of the season in terms of very immediate outputs. Things like early childhood education or primary education take time to come to fruition. The benefits are happening now, but you'll see a lot of the real-world things later. That is a challenge as well.

In our journey, we've been fortunate to have partners, both in India and the U.S., whether it's ACT grants in India, or it's Fast Forward, or Mulago Foundation, or the DRK [Draper Richards Kaplan] Foundation in the U.S., who have all been people who've taken a bet on the entrepreneur and who've said that, "We will give you unrestricted funding to develop the model and the program." In the early stages that was critical.

Similarly, Rippleworks came in during our growth stage of funding when we were at a good enough scale where we were looking to ramp our budget up to $5 million or more. Rippleworks came in with our first unrestricted six-figure gift that was spread over a period of years. That allowed us to really have visibility into funding that we could use to support particular innovation programs and other things going forward. Overall, we divided our need for capital in terms of programmatic and variable costs of funding a child's learning and also fixed costs that will go down over time, but right now, they are the critical pillars of what we need to build. So these are some of the partners who've really been valuable in terms of coming in with that sort of funding support.

In addition, all of these funders have something in common, that they've also provided a lot of non-monetary support as well. DRK, for example, in terms of organizational development and board development. Mulago Foundation in terms of strategy and impact evaluation. ACT grants in terms of connecting to a lot more people in the Indian landscape who were able to help. Rippleworks with whom we've done two projects already [with] a lot of strategic help in terms of building our people management practices, building our fundraising practices and pipelines. Fast Forward who did an accelerator with us very early on and helped us set up our U.S. companies and U.S. structures and a lot of other things. In that way, there has been a lot of [financial] support, and non-monetary as well, by these partners. The whole mindset behind all of [these funders] has been that we want to trust and support these organizations. They've funded in that way, and they've provided other support in that same way.

Ashley Hopkinson: What bold shifts do you think are needed in the funding landscape to truly center the voices of those who are closest to the problem that you're working on? What shifts would make it easier for you to be able to accomplish the work that you're setting out to?

Azeez Gupta: It would be helpful if funders and investors could support measures that enable us to move closer to the communities. For example, we have thought for a long time about whether we can get somebody from our communities on our board in a formal way. Now that requires us to make a lot of changes to the board. Right now, board meetings happen in English and then in a particular way. We would have to change that in some sense or the other, if there is a way that funders can support that, whether it's verbally or whether it's by financial commitments.

Then [there are] other things like user experience, understanding A/B testing, all of that stuff that we do, again very hard to get funding for that. Investors can actually fund that. We had some very, very good partners, including the Douglas B. Marshall Jr. Family Foundation and a few others who have been ready to support in that way. They've said, "You need to get to know your users better. You need to do quick cycle evaluations. You need to do user interviews and testing. We will fund that." The Goldsmith Family Foundation and others have done that.

Thirdly, I think new programs don't get support, and so that becomes a problem. Often when you want to tweak things to be able to help your users better and you want to get users involved in the process of designing, that support is hard to find. We've had a few partners like Pilot House Ventures for example, who helped us make sure that our curriculum and our practices are gender sensitive and gender transformative. Again, that is funding that nobody gives, and so it's very, very hard to run those sorts of initiatives.

Now we have a program called, Included, which is about all sorts of frontiers of inclusivity. [The premise is] can we make sure that everything we do as an organization and the ways we serve people is actually very inclusive? That [work] has been funded by a few investors, which were very hard to find.

Sometimes it's challenging to build inclusivity into the organization. Sometimes founders may feel like it's slowing them down in some way. Founders may hire [for example] people like themselves. That is easier than going out and trying to find people who are not like themselves, who are not from similar backgrounds, and so on. Then you hire the first few people and then they hire the next few people but [in the end] you don't have any network at all of people who are the sort that you should actually bring on to the team.

For a while, when we were on a big field team hiring spree— these are people who are district level, travel a lot, are locals— we took our eyes off the ball. We saw suddenly that a lot of our coordinators were men, and the gender ratio of that team was actually becoming very poor. It wasn't deliberate, but perhaps, we weren't getting our word out in the right circles. Men had motorbikes, and women often didn't. [This allowed them to be more mobile in field work] and because of all those reasons, the people applying, seen fit for the role, were all men.

Later, as we realized this, we quickly put measures in place to say that, "We will make sure that there are enough female applicants. We will reach out to particular channels where we may be able to find good candidates. We may be able to help with support in terms of getting loans for motorcycles or motorbikes if we need to. A series of things that helped us to bring the gender ratio up. For example, we have [mandatory] paternity leave as well. India has [mandatory] maternity leave, but we've also said that we shall have paternity leave as well.

We haven't had funding to support any of those measures [specifically] and I wonder if funders can even fund that. Otherwise, just be a little bit patient [would be my message]. Sometimes organizations are not moving as fast as they can because they are doing these particular steps. That will sometimes happen, then later you will move better and much faster because you were able to put the right team together and really involve core stakeholders. Sometimes that will slow you down in the short-term, and everybody then worries only about the short-term and not about the long-term.

Ashley Hopkinson: That is such a good point, thinking about the cultural landscape of different places in how things are set up. Regarding your organization, did you receive capital support or project support from Rippleworks? Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Azeez Gupta: We received both. We started engaging with Rippleworks originally through project support. We did a project with them where they helped us find an expert, and their own team also worked with us to think through how we should look at developing better relationships with our investors, our funders, and how we manage the communication with them and how we track the conversations with them. A project of that sort that really helped us maintain better relationships with our investors and be able to update and work with them in a much better way. That was the first project with them.

We also got capital support. We got a major grant from Rippleworks, which was our biggest gift at the time and really transformative in how we were able to look at the next three years of our journey through a very respectful process. Now we are doing another project with them, which is on people and culture and looking at how to develop growth paths in the organization and how to make sure that we have good career paths for different people in different roles. [They have also] been really helping us think through our strategy in terms of what we should do in terms of expansion. We've engaged with Rippleworks in many ways.

Ashley Hopkinson: For the work that you've already participated in, what do you think made the most difference for your venture? Is there anything specific that you think would have made it better based on just your experience with it?

Azeez Gupta: Honestly, I think it's hard to say what made the most difference. I think these are all things that we needed a lot at that particular time. I would find it hard to rank them in order, but all three were very impactful for us.

Ashley Hopkinson: Are there any tweaks or changes in the type of support or how you were supported that could've helped it work better?

Azeez Gupta: We had a very good experience. Typically, it's very hard to do volunteer projects and expert projects. It requires a lot of bandwidth from the organization. There's a lot of overhead, normally on the NGO's leadership, which honestly leaders find hard to manage, including us. I think with Rippleworks, they've minimized overheads and they're really focused on getting the right people in and have been very respectful, and come with a lot of expertise and knowledge.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work in early childhood?

Azeez Gupta: The examples always come from the field. When you go to the field and you see how people are engaging and responding. I won't mention a particular child, but I'll mention a classroom. We've been working within Uttar Pradesh for the last four

years. It's India's biggest state. Its population is nearly 80% of the U.S. population. It's pretty massive, and it's also extremely poor.

We've seen there that traditionally the daycare system is not as strong. Daycare workers have not been trained for a long time. There's this 45-year-old daycare worker who's been in the system for a long time, and when I first went and saw her center, it was a sad place to be in. The kids were not happy. They were fidgeting. They were not engaged. The worker was quite unsure of what she could do, and she was severely lacking confidence in what she could do. She used to say that I've been telling these rhymes for a long time. I'm bored, and the kids are bored. We started the program there to support workers offline and online and to make the classroom a joyful learning space. So we did that.

Two years later I had the chance to go back, and I could see a very different environment where the teacher had actually built teaching and learning material with the parents using scrap material that they had painted so it would look much better. The kids were very engaged because learning was happening, activities were happening, games were happening, play was happening. The same kids in the same classroom looked so, so different. These kids are now life ready, and probably their IQ has improved for life, but at the same time those two-three years they've really enjoyed their lives. It's made them confident. It's made them happy. They feel that they can do anything.

Their curiosity is intact and probably even heightened as opposed to most situations where all curiosity is beaten out of you and your confidence takes a beating [as well] so that even as you enter grade one, you're not wanting to go to school. That's an example. There are many such classrooms that we had the fortune to visit and where we see these really happy places emerge.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's wonderful where you could see the transformation. You mentioned the possibility of a place like Peru, looking at this as a model. What advice would you give to someone who wants to do similar work? Do you have a teachable lesson or an insight that you think is valuable to share?

Azeez Gupta: The number one thing I would say is try to find the stakeholder who has intrinsic motivation to do this. One example I have is that we also started work with primary school children. [However in several instances] we felt that the primary school teacher was quite aloof from the community, is already very trained, and is not willing to learn. So we actually moved away from that work.

The reason that what we are doing works is because we found the parents and we found the daycare workers who really [want to work with parents] because their kids will

do better, and that will change everyone's lives and the daycare worker because she wants to be known as a teacher and she wants to have that feeling of joy in the classroom.

It's hard to change behaviors and habits. That's the hardest thing that you'll ever do. For example, convincing people to get a polio vaccination is one thing, and that's really hard in itself. Convincing people to do a learning activity with the kids every day so that by the end the kids actually have stimulated [their senses] over a continuous period of time, that is even harder.

Find the person with the intrinsic motivation, then work at it in terms of figuring out what works for them, what entertains them and what motivates them. Do that testing. Do that user understanding. This stuff has been done by big companies for rich people, but I think we need to do it for the communities we work with in that way and find the right people who want those efforts from us.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say are the top three things that would unlock your ability to scale, sustain, and expand your work?

Azeez Gupta: One thing that we have in mind is support in terms of developing really strong technology and product. That is something that's critical. We probably are one of the Global South's largest tech-enabled organizations, but now with AI and other technology coming in, there is so much more that we can do in terms of improving our effectiveness.

We are already working with, for example, Google and OpenAI where their teams are helping us develop some technology, and that's been really valuable because it is hard as a nonprofit to develop everything internally and in-house. That sort of help is really valuable and whether that's in the form of advice or people who can come on board for a short time and work with us.

The second thing that comes to mind is thinking through financing. We are at a real sort of catalytic liftoff point or inflection point where we're working currently with 4 million children across 20% of India's public daycare centers. In the next five years, we want to work with about 50 to 60 million children total. It's a big scale-up. We are fortunate that we have the partnerships in place to be able to do that.

We are running a sort of growth capital campaign where we're looking for nonprofit investors to commit funding. We need about $80 million to make this happen over the next five years. We are looking for people who will come in and support the scale-up of some of these programs and the development of newer initiatives.

Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned scale and technical support. Anything else that might help expand your work?

Azeez Gupta: In India we have a good window to expand, so I think that is definitely already there. We have good partnerships. One other thing that we have been exploring is looking at global avenues and whether some parts of our model can be replicated there. There are some conversations happening, for example, with organizations in Peru and good investors there who are keen to do that. We are wondering whether we could be a technical resource partner for locally-led organizations that may want to use elements of our model in different places.

Another unlock might be being able to engage with people who could take this to more places. Early childhood development as a whole has not achieved the level of attention that we believe it should and that a lot of research [points to that]. People talk about a lot of things, but probably if we talk about the social return on investment and other [relevant] studies, whether it's [James Heckman's research](#) [on investing in early childhood develop and how that can reduced deficits and strengthen the economy] or other research that is now happening in the Global South. There is so much impact.

It should be a top three or top five human capital priority for the world, and it's not there yet, whether you look at it in terms of multilateral retention or global funding. A big unlock would be if we could have a coalition among researchers, philanthropists, and practitioners in terms of how we elevate this topic and build a narrative to understand it at the global level and in individual countries to really drive attention and focus to this topic. [My hope is] for people to start working on early childhood development and for governments to start focusing on it and people to start funding it.

Ashley Hopkinson: Azeez, thank you so much. I had a great time speaking with you. Thank you for sharing your story about your organization and your thoughts on funding.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist and editor based in New Orleans, Louisiana. She has reported and led coverage on education, immigration, health, social justice and the arts for 15 years in U.S. newsrooms. She's worked for The Associated Press Bureau and the USA Today Network and most recently, the Solutions Journalism Network as a project manager and the Poynter Institute as a media consultant developing training materials for journalists.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.