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[Startup Bharat] With the likes of Bayer as clients, Mysuru's Aasalabs is connecting agritech startups with corporates

Aasalabs' VyavaSahaaya is an open innovation challenge platform that connects corporates, universities and foundations looking for digital agricultural solutions with agritech startups.

Sindhu Kashyaap

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Pharma major **Bayer's crop science** division had a problem. The 150-year-old company was on the lookout for approaches to help farmers track, spot, and treat incidence of '**fall armyworm**' in corn fields. While Bayer could do with innovative ideas, the problem posed a clear opportunity for several **agritech startups**. However, bringing corporates and startups together was a challenge.

This is where **Mysuru-based Aasalabs' platform VyavaSahaaya** came into play.

VyavaSahaaya is an open innovation platform that connects corporate research bodies, universities, and foundations with agritech startups. Founded by Satish Bhavankar, Raghavendra KS, and Raghavendra Joshi, Aasalabs, while registered in Mysuru, has a development centre at Sandbox Startups Hubli.



Founders of Aasalabs were colleagues before they decided to start up together and build VyavaSahaaya



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What Aasalabs does

VyavaSahaaya essentially offers a platform for businesses such as Bayer to share their challenges that have no established best-practice approach. For these challenges, problem solvers design actionable, scalable solutions.

"The ultimate objective is to fundamentally 'open' and transform the agri-food innovation processes," says Satish.

For example, Bayer has a detailed list of needs and requirements on VyavaSahaaya. The platform connects with different startups or innovators who come up with different solutions.

"The organisation directly interacts with the startup, helps them and even guides their ideas, but the winner of the challenge will be one startup. What happens in the process though, is all startups get access and an understanding of prototyping, product-market fit, and other necessary elements," says Satish.

Challenges and overcoming them

Before starting Aasalabs, the co-founders were colleagues at Qwinix Technologies in Mysuru. Satish and Raghavendra KS worked on a volunteer management system at Qwinix.

"I wanted to build a volunteer management system customised to India with open innovation to address the social challenges. I first pitched the idea in NUMA (accelerator), and I was guided to narrow down and concentrate on open innovation, which is a very interesting space," says Satish. On further research, he narrowed down on **agriculture and agritech**.

To begin, VyavaSahaaya had to solve the chicken-or-egg problem of getting both sides on board, in adequate numbers, to create value. For this, **the founders persuaded companies to launch multiple pilot challenges in private beta, and on-boarded problem solvers from diversified sectors through their own networks, and through word of mouth.**



Agritech as a sector is steadily gaining prominence in India. According to YourStory Research, at least 13 agritech startups raised around \$65.6 million in 2018.



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"Initially, VyavaSahaaya had no models to follow. We had to work things out - first principles, and trial and error. Based on organisations' feedback, we decided to have multiple pricing structures based on complexity, and a range of other factors," says Satish.

Now, the platform charges a flat hosting fee of Rs 75,000 from organisations, and takes 10 percent commission from the winning startup.

To ensure seamless interaction between corporates and startups, the team designed the platform to enhance the value of direct and indirect network effects between participants.

The market and growth

Aasalabs has received a certificate of recognition from the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) for its digital innovation, and was also facilitated by the BSE Social Impact Award 2019-TOP 50.

The team currently works with **Bayer, Deshpande Foundation, and Beanstalk Agritech**. **Bootstrapped** at present, it took the co-founders 15 months to develop the platform at a cost of Rs 7 lakh. "We are on a healthy growth trajectory with about **2,000 unique hits on our platform**, and a problem solver base of about 600 from diversified fields in India," says Satish.

Agritech as a sector is steadily gaining prominence. TartanSense, a robotics driven agritech startup, announced it had raised **\$2 million in seed funding led by Omnivore, Blume Ventures, and BEENEXT**, while Pune-based agritech startup **AgroStar on Wednesday raised \$27 million in a Series C funding round led by Bertelsmann India**.

According to YourStory Research, at least 13 agritech startups raised around \$65.6 million in 2018, up over 21 percent from \$54 million across 18 deals in 2017.

Speaking on their future plans, Satish says, "We aim to have a pan-India presence, and a brand that people associate with in terms of all flavours of innovation from lab to land, idea to implementation, and also making our presence felt globally."



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