

'India can be the most important country in the world for AI'

Q&A Betting on AI-powered search, **Kirthiga Reddy**, CEO and cofounder of AI-focused technology companies OptimizeGEO and Verix, is helping brands navigate how consumers build trust, relevance, and business in an AI search-led world. In a face-to-face interview with **Peerzada Abrar**, on the sidelines of the Bengaluru Tech Summit, Reddy, who was Facebook's India MD and also their first employee in the country, discusses why Indian tech companies aren't moving fast enough and why she believes India could be most important country in the world for AI. Edited excerpts:

Given the current debate in India about AI investment—with government officials warning that Indian tech firms aren't investing enough—what's your assessment? Are Indian companies moving fast enough, and what would you advise established IT services firms to do differently?

■ I think no matter how fast someone thinks, they are moving and how deep they think they are, honestly none of us are doing enough. Because the pace of this technology is well beyond what any one of us can imagine. So, each of us has to be thinking about not just 10x but 100x our pace of innovation. But that doesn't mean hiring many more people. It actually is about becoming

super-efficient. We have now two or 10 people companies that are hitting tens or hundreds of millions of revenue as very small teams. This is about how it is that you can truly leverage the AI revolution.

We're seeing hundreds of billions flowing into AI in the US and China, but far less in India. As someone who's operated in both Silicon Valley and India, what are the structural barriers holding back Indian AI investment, and can they be overcome?

■ I am actually very encouraged by what the government is doing, including the IndiaAI Mission. We are actually big partners with them. In

addition to my startup OptimizeGeo, one of the big initiatives that I lead is the AI Kiran initiative for a million women in AI, in partnership with the Principal Scientific Advisor of the Government of India. We work very closely with MeitY (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology) and I am actually very encouraged by what the government is doing. Let's take women entrepreneurs. There are dollars allocated for women entrepreneurs in the budget, but are we taking enough advantage of them? I see a lot of gaps there. It's about how much each one of us is raising our hands. Every entrepreneur and founder needs to be that much bigger and bolder, to tap into what already exists. Then, of course, we have to multiply the kind of funding that comes to the

market as well.

AI space is dominated by well-funded players like OpenAI, Google, and Anthropic. How do you compete when these giants have virtually unlimited compute resources and talent, and what's your differentiation strategy?

■ We don't compete with them. We actually are helping brands make the most of the (AI) movement. The fact is that consumers are shifting to this platform. We work across all these platforms. The more successful they are, the more the need for our solutions.

There's growing concern that AI coding tools will disrupt India's \$250 billion IT services advantage. From your vantage point, how existential is this threat, and what

should the industry be doing right now to prepare?

■ I think the industry is already talking about AI being the global superpower. That is something we need to triple down on because that really is the opportunity for us to lead in this global movement. We can be the most important country in the world for AI.

What specific gap in the market are OptimizeGEO and Verix addressing that wasn't being solved during your time at Meta (Facebook), and how has the AI landscape evolved to make these solutions viable now?

■ We are in the midst of the next mega consumer behaviour shift. When I started Facebook in India, there was this huge move to digital, mobile and social. And it was truly a privilege and an honour to be the first employee for Facebook in India, their managing director, and to be part of the country going digital and mobile. A big part of my role was helping brands, companies, products be relevant in that

age of social and mobile. Fast forward, today AI is the most disruptive force changing every industry as we know it. There is a massive consumer shift where people are not just searching for information. They are going to ChatGPT, Perplexity and asking questions, leading to enterprise business solution decisions, skincare, travel, beauty, you name it. Which company to choose? They are going to large language models (LLMs). I am very excited for the launch of my new company OptimizeGeo, where it's a proprietary platform that helps you analyse how is it that your brand company appears in user query results and helps you optimise it so that you magically appear, leading to of course traffic and to conversions and to driving brand and business results. We have a team across seven countries and across all different parts of India, and we are excited to serve the country in this new capacity.

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