Students develop hacking solutions within 48 hours to solve social problems in India

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CHENNAI: Are 48 hours enough to solve some of the pressing social problems faced by the country? Perhaps not but that's the time it takes to generate a prototype, to take a shot at these issues.

Welcome to hackathons, a concept that is becoming increasingly popular among college students, where they churn out innovative start-up ideas which can be scaled up to bring about social change, all within a span of two days.
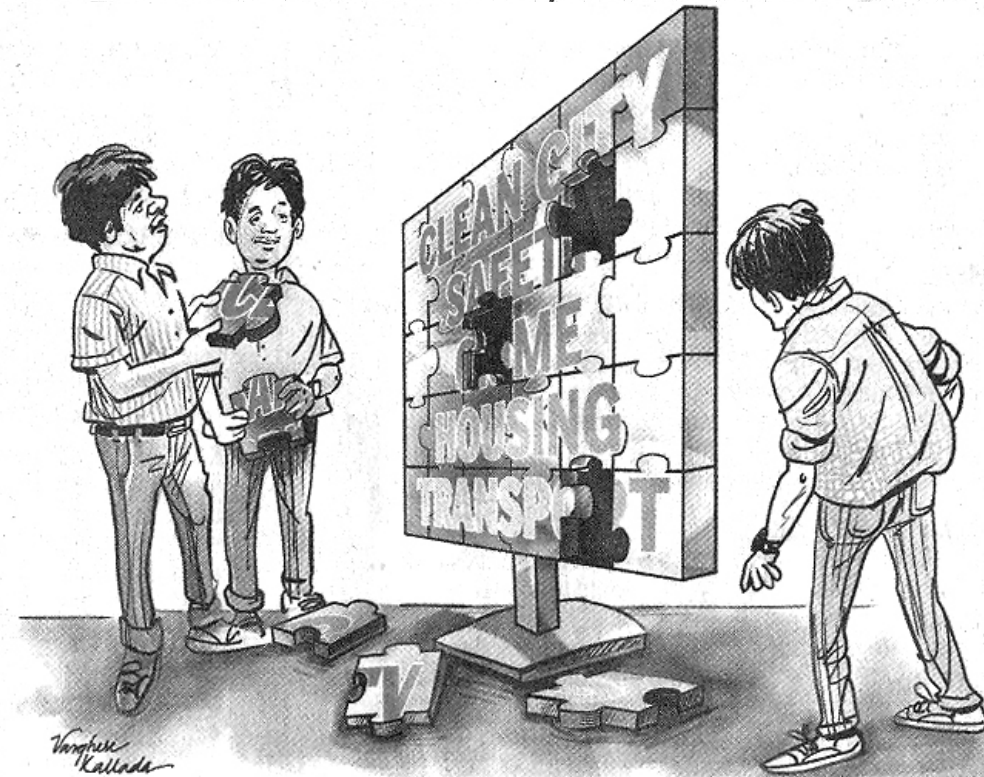
The concept is simple – the students have a time limit of 36-48 hours, where they work non-stop to use technology to solve social problems. The participants are mentored by experts from the industry, as they flesh out their ideas into prototypes. The most innovative ideas, apart from winning top laurels, also have a chance of being scaled up into production as a start-up.

The 48-hour formats are successful in churning out innovative ideas, said Nuriya Ansari, Managing Partner, Learning Links Foundation, which conducted Hack2Help, a US government funded programme. "We need innovation and technology to tackle these social problems. Hack2Help came up as a way of bringing together the brightest minds and the country's biggest challenges to create solutions that can be delivered and executed," she said.

Ariel Pollock, Public Affairs Officer at the US Consulate General in Chennai, which organised this hackathon, said that there is a strong idea of competition. "The idea of people sitting in a room and using technology to create solutions, cooperating with each other while there is a slight competitive edge, is interesting," he said.

The Chennai edition saw innovations such as a SMART hoodie to prevent visually impaired people from banging into heavy objects, using sensors on the hood and an ultrasound technology that wirelessly powers active implants, among many others. Students from Rajalakshmi Engineering College bagged the top

honours as well as the third spot while IIT Madras team came second.

Narayan Iyer, President of Science Society of India, said that hackathons can bridge the gap between academia and industry. "In a short time, hackathons give students a purpose and helps them find their potential. Hackathons can revolutionise the education system, especially when there has been talk of students not being industry skilled. Students can get hands-on experience," he added.

Hackathons are also popular for promoting entrepreneurship among students. Ravi Ranjan, Deputy Manager of NAS-SCOM's 10,000 start-ups, said that India ranks behind US and UK in terms of tech start-ups. "As of December 2016, India had 3,800 start-ups and by the end of this year, we will surpass UK to become the country with the second highest number of tech start-ups," said the industry expert.

Meet Aashish Vivekanand, a student mentor, who has devised Smart Traffic Solutions using real-time data through crowdsourcing to effectively manage the city's traffic. "I spoke to the Commissioner of Police who was really keen to know about the real-time implementation and it will soon be implemented," said the student of Rajalakshmi Engineering College.

Recently, the Government of India conducted the Smart India Hackathon 2017, where more than 10,000 technical students worked for 36 hours non-stop to build tools for the development of the country. Amit Tyagi, Assistant Director – Marketing, SSN Institutions, said, "The students are working on real life problems of the common man which need to be solved, while building companies around it. The ministries gave 598 problems and the students were mentored by ministry officials, academia and industry experts," he said, adding that the first prize in the nation-wide contest was bagged by a team from SSN College, who designed a Skill India app to aggregate all services to create a product that will be a one-stop solution to effectively disseminate information.