

Ideas that can change India

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India is a country of extremes and always figures among the top few in all kinds of statistics, and yet falls behind on all developmental indices. It is the world's second biggest country but one with high levels of poverty. It is the third-largest in terms of Internet connectivity, yet these constitute less than 10% of the population. India has more than 900 million mobile phone connections, yet we suffer from information poverty and have not been able to exploit this massive reach into converting ourselves into a knowledge-based society. I will highlight some mobile ideas that have the potential to transform the country:

Panchayats: There are 245,500 *panchayats* (village councils) in India, each covering 2-4 villages. The country's three million *panchayat* members embody governance at the grass roots. Almost all of them have mobile phones. By developing all-round content and service-driven mobile applications, one can empower these three million and ensure better governance and revenue-oriented services.



Figure 1 : Bloomberg

NGOs: There are four million non-government organizations in India, staffed by people who mostly own cellphones. Considering the huge target audience across the social sector, they could be reached using mobile-based applications and services.

Small enterprises: India has more than 26 million micro, small and medium enterprises employing 60 million people. More than 70% of these do not have Internet connectivity and websites, but they all have mobiles, work in clusters, and are located in small cities, towns

and villages. There is a huge opportunity in this business sector to reach out through innovative mobile applications, including services such as mobile money, financial inclusion and livelihood-oriented services. Specialized applications could be developed to target the 60 million employees.

Schools: India has 1.5 million schools and 7-10 million teachers. Fewer than 8% use information and communication technologies. But most teachers have mobile phones. Smart mobile phones in the hands of teachers could truly become the third eye to record, report and monitor their presence and performance as well as that of the students.

Health: India has more than 85,000 public and community health centres, mostly located in remote areas. Most are dysfunctional and non-operative. In most of the cases, doctors are unwilling to go to remote areas. Yet, all the appointed doctors and other health officials have mobiles. It requires no great imagination to see how India's extensive mobile networks can be

used to make sure the doctors are present in the health centres and equip district and regional hospitals with video-conferencing to leverage diverse and advanced health services for poor communities.

Poor: People in villages and small towns depend largely on government programmes, jobs, schemes and provisions. Yet, there is no single-window information feed on hundreds and thousands of government schemes. As rural mobile penetration touches more than 40% of them, there is clearly an opportunity to offer them with necessary information on government services through mobile phones.

Women: There are 300 million women mobile subscribers in India—a potent, exclusive and potential group for special needs, desires and profiles. There is undoubtedly a great need to innovate specific mobile applications and services to reach out to women.

Connectivity: Last mile Internet connectivity is still a major challenge in India. Yet, mobile networks have significantly reached out till the village level and offer a great opportunity to provide mobile broadband for the last mile and connect millions in remote areas. Another area of opportunity is to explore how mobiles could be the vehicles to reach the last mile with targeted content and services.

Citizens: Finally, we need one mobile toll-free, number-based citizen service from the government for all citizens to offer “answers to all questions.”

I am sure there are several more ideas. Please share your ideas that can empower the masses through mobile phones.

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