Profiling the unconnected

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Technology is as good as what it does. That is the basic principle on which we started our journey at the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and instituted the Manthan Award. The idea was to identify initiatives that use information and communication technology (ICT) tools to achieve specific goals with the long-term target of empowering the masses, especially in rural areas.

Our nominees are less about mind-boggling technology and more about the beneficent use of basic information tools such as landline or mobile phones, SMS, community radio, LCD projectors, television, local language websites and so on. In eight years, we have identified nearly 3,000 content and service-driven technology initiatives across South Asia in diverse sectors such as health, commerce, education, environment and governance. Along the way, we have learnt to profile our country in a way that allows digital intervention to be institutional, large scale and replicable across linguistic and cultural fault lines.

India is a nation of poor people, poor literacy rates, poor infrastructure, poor governance, poor agricultural and business practices and poor balance of gender participation. A characteristics-based analysis of the population can be done under the following heads:

Governance: There are about 250,000 *panchayats*, or local government councils, covering 635,000 villages through three million elected representatives, who are the face of governance, or its lack thereof. Nearly all of them are off the ICT radar.

Social sector: There are around 3.3 million voluntary organizations in India. Most of them operate in villages, sub-districts and small towns. More than 70% of them are invisible, disconnected and absent from the digital map, not taking any advantage of the information highway.

Education: India has 1.3 million schools; most are located in remote areas and more than 95% are off the information highway.

Business: There are 26.1 million micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, mostly working with communities of artisans, weavers, workers and women with traditional skills, serving the economy at the bottom of the pyramid. This sector is again digitally neglected.

Together, these sectors represent nearly 70% of the national population that has largely failed to reap the benefits of ICT. Targeting them according to this profiling can give a serious boost to the development of the country. That is what we have tried to do at DEF. Now, we can showcase 200 *panchayats* connected through digital *panchaya*t centres across 10 states, learning to use ICT tools, maintaining their websites and coming to meet national leaders at Manthan Award 2011. Similarly, with the eNGO Program, we are providing free websites and domain names with unlimited content hosting to each of those grass-roots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that never had websites. We have done about 1,000 registrations from 15 states. We have also made last-mile wireless connections using the Mesh technology exploiting the free spectrum provided by the government. Under the "Wireless for Community" project, we have connected remote communities such as weavers from Chanderi in Madhya Pradesh, tribals running rural business process outsourcing units from Tura in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Sahariya tribes being education through video conferencing at Baran in Rajasthan.

At the Manthan Award that is taking place later this week, you can meet not only the winners of 2011, but also the chiefs of digitally-enabled *panchayats*, mobile-enabled women, Web-enabled NGOs, and trained wireless networking engineers from villages.

Log in at http://manthanaward.org and register yourself if you want to see 110 selected projects and their presentations out of the 510 nominations that we've got this season.