

# Technology-led Development: Reducing the Social Gap

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**IN A** country as racist and class conscious as India is, the digital world is indeed a savior. In a society that maintains a high power distance, it is ICT that has enabled a revolution. Power distance is a concept developed by Geert Hofstede that explains why in some cultures, there exists a big gap between superiors and inferior/junior group. India is understandably very high on the power distance index. As a result, those seen as junior are treated differently and poorly as compared to those seen as superior. In each face-to-face interaction this power distance exhibits itself.

There are several examples that have allowed the poor and the marginalized to access services they were denied earlier. The Mee Sewa service in Hyderabad has seen nearly 5.5 million users this year alone, and it will not be surprising if at least a third of these were small value bill payments made by people who feel far more secure working at a console than dealing with supercilious officers. The computer does not complain, does not disappear during office times and allows repeated queries being put to it which are answered with the same degree of patience.

Women using mobiles do not have to deal with lech-

erous men across the counter anymore. They do not even have to bother travelling distances and undertake journeys that are fraught with danger. The human touch that is often seen as missing and is lamented by the elite is actually what the poor and the lower castes shuddered at and stayed away from. Today, they stand empowered in front of a machine that treats all its clients with equal (dis)respect. The use of mobile applications by women in several SHGs is a great indicator of the success that ICT has had in empowering marginalized groups.

That is the reason behind the remarkable success of the ATMs. Anyone can withdraw any amount of money anytime. The machine does not distinguish between the large balance holder & holder operating at the minimum because withdrawal of Rs 100 or Rs 20,000 does not matter. There is no condescending teller behind the counter deciding whether you should be serviced or not based on your status, looks, skin colour or gender. Technology very simply cuts out the power distance.

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