

*“What is it, which we look at first when we wake up daily?*

*or*

*If we lose our mobile and wallet simultaneously, whose absence will we notice first?”*

: Suresh Sethi, Business Head & CEO, m-Pesa, Vodafone

These words, spoken at the Indian Habitat Centre, New Delhi at the 5th annual mBillionth awards, presented by Digital Empowerment Foundation exquisitely embody the thump that mobile phones have in our lives. Mobile phones are no longer limited to conversations and messages but have a plethora of apps floating on mobile screens. The mBillionth awards since the last five years has been serving as a dedicated platform to explore the latent potential of mobile & telecom sector across 8 countries in South Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This year the award continued its legacy by recognizing the efforts of sundry mobile applications that aim to spread knowledge as well as help sustain and save lives.

This year's award, held on 18<sup>th</sup> of July, 2014, was graced by the presence of dignitaries from various countries and fields, who all were in praise of the thought process implied, the services being offered and the thus bridged gaps of our everyday lives. The award, which was hotly competed for, by almost 300 entries from eight invited countries in eleven categories ranging from entertainment to health and governance, was kick-started by Mr. Osama Manzar, Founder and Director, DEF who talked about the history of mBillionth and what it had come to signify.

Mr. Marten Pieters, MD & CEO of Vodafone India, opened the session, which was conducted in the form of a panel discussion. He pointed out 'when an event reaches 5 years, it would usually go a long way and hence mBillionth is here to stay'. He described in glowing terms how mobile technology had

become the driver of change in society and impacted lives in Asia. He also predicted that mobile data and broadband usage would increase by 6 times in coming years, which would usher in the era of equitable growth. Mr. Sanjeev Gupta (IAS), Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture stressed on the importance of keeping the user in mind while designing the services by quoting that the smart phone penetration is still only 16.8% and the mantra to reach farmers and the marginalized is still through SMS/USSD/IVRS/voice broadcast/text-to-speech portals. While Ms. Shawn Covell, Vice President of the Wireless Reach Initiative of Qualcomm narrated a success story in which they had created a strategic programme called Wireless which put together projects that use wireless technologies for social benefits. Mr. R Sukumar, Editor of The Mint called for some introspection as most of the entries that were received for mBillionth focused on one-way information delivery even though the mobile offers the potential for two-way communication. Mr. Mridul Chowdhury, CEO of mPower Social Enterprises answered succinctly by citing the lack of emphasis on intermediary service providers as the chief reason for this. He remarked that activity of specialists could be decentralized up to the last mile solution providers.

The discussion then took another vibrant direction with Mr. Sukumar again posing an interesting question as to why no start-up that had been bestowed with the mBillionth Award has gone on to become truly national. The economist in Dr. Amir Ullah Khan, President, Glocal University was insistent that economist theories dictate that rational people would change their behaviour with a delta reduction in price, hence the adaptation to new technologies should not be an issue. He concluded that the problem hence must lie with the regulatory system. Moreover, use of mobile will increase significantly if more and more public services are offered through the medium. Mr. Sanjeev Gupta attributed the success of his solutions to content in vernacular language, which he stressed would be crucial in bridging the information gap.

Mr. Mridul Chowdhury concluded the very engaging discussion by reflecting that the whole process of inclusion is a cycle. He remarked that telecom companies would not be interested in setting up infrastructure if the usage

was primarily for accessing Facebook. Only by pushing more services onto mobile which would help the community in generating income would demand for mobile usage surge, thus attracting telecoms in setting infrastructure.

After the enthralling initiation of the day; the crowd, eager to know more about the impacts and the stories behind the applications, dispersed into 4 parallel summits of 12 sessions, comprised of almost 65 presentations spread throughout the day. These presentations, which were given by the competing entities like apps, SMS and call services, illustrated the basic working mechanism and the intricacies involved in the ground implementation of their products. The presentations also were focused on shedding light on the elemental results and impacts; and the realizable and potential future prospects. The presentations were chaired by the eminent jury members who, with the present audience, while forwarding their queries and clarifying their doubts, were providing elemental suggestions and recommendations to the presenters.

The panel recommendations included enhanced focus on financial services delivery to the bottom of the pyramid, technology acting as direct link of education with livelihood, realize role of entertainment in today's world of service-driven differentiation and the fact that more apps must be developed for promoting culture and heritage, and Agriculture and Rural Development, further work on security of data on such applications, more focus on G2G apps etc.

The event also sported 85 expos in form of arrayed stalls; each allotted to nominees along with assorted partners and ventures of Digital Empowerment Foundation for instance Mobile For Good, e-Heritage, Soochna Seva, W4C, Chanderiyaan etc. These stalls provided an opportunity to the audience to interact one to one with the various apps and enterprises, both, to know more about them and inspire, and to interact formally to effect chances of involvement, provide funding and for propositioning for business. This opportunity for direct interaction was appreciated by both, the audience and the hosts at the various expos.

The evening of the day had in store a starry mBillionth award gala night adorned by our ensemble of esteemed Guest of Honors representing government ministries, leading organizations from around the world, national and international agencies and dignitaries , each of who are renowned leaders in their walks of lives and area of expertise. The glittering congress was anchored and moderated by renowned author and consultant in knowledge management and ICT4D, world music editor and DJ, Mr. Madanmohan Rao in his own distinguishing and classy demeanor.

The award gala commenced with Mr. Osama Manzar welcoming and greeting the guest of honors and the distinguished gathering. He also remembered the start of mBillionth award and the path that it has travelled till now, hoping that it will continue touching lives in the future and, while providing people a better world to live in and inspire them to work for the same. He then invited the celebrated singer and musician Shri Umar Farooq along with his Bhapang samiti, to enrapture everyone with their delightful folk music. On Mr. Osama's earnest request, the samiti also produced a song, which highlighted the importance of mobiles in our lives.

Enthralled, the function then moved towards the much awaited award felicitation ceremony. The distinguished jury, after days of grueling sessions had, out of almost 300 entries, had assayed and chosen 91 finalists from six countries after accessing each of their performance over various assorted parameters. Out of these 91, 24 emerged as winners from their respective categories, while 11 were declared as runners up. Six of the nominations earned special mentions. Also, Mr. Osama, being the chairman of the jury committee, adjudged two other entries eligible to earn chairman's distinction. All the triumphant entries manifested their joy with exuberant vigor and were applauded for their efforts and endeavors. The felicitation was done by the guest of honors who expressed their admiration for the resplendent and impressive toil and performance of the winners, and hoped that the awards will not only motivate the competing and winning entities to labor harder but will inspire many more minds to work for the common good of humanity as a whole.

A very fulfilling day was aptly summed up by a photo session and then an equally fulfilling and succulent food which was enjoyed by everybody present.