Main Event Report

DEF's 6th mBillionth Award 2015 honours 24 Asian innovators

New Delhi, July 23: New Delhi-based non-profit Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) announced here today 24 winners out of 320 nominations from 8 South Asian countries at their 6th mBillionth Award 2015 Gala. The award salutes mobile-based innovations for development.

The winners were selected by a Grand Jury of experts after two days of deliberations last June at the Nimrana Fort Resort in Rajasthan. The winners were picked from 53 finalists out of 320 nominations in 11 categories from India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives. This is the sixth successive year that DEF has organized this award and as in the past, this year too, the mBillionth Award has grown in terms of nominations and stature.

At the Award Gala Event at India Habitat Centre here today, more than 350 participants from four South Asian countries were present. There were 10 delegates from Bangladesh, 5 from Nepal and 15 from Sri Lanka with the rest of the participants from India. Among the winners were nominees from Afghanistan and Pakistan but they failed to attend because of various reasons.

The whole day event began with a High Powered Inaugural session with a panel of eminent speakers. This was followed by inauguration of the Mobile Asia App Bazaar 2015 and then there were 3 parallel sessions covering the 11 different award categories where finalists gave presentations on their projects and innovations. The event ended with the actual Award Gala where the winners were felicitated and given their awards.

DEF founder-director Osama Manzar began the day's proceedings by thanking the Grand Jury for their dedicated work spread over two days to identify the winners, runners-up and Special Mentions, and then welcomed the audience explaining this year's focus of the award: 'Mobile Innovations for Empowering Masses in South Asia'.

Over the last six years, the mBillionth Award has created a repository of over 2,000 innovations and given people "an opportunity to interact with innovators, entrepreneurs and government officials at a personal level", said Manzar at the Stein Auditorium of India Habitat Centre, New Delhi.

"Today, innovations in technology are being led by mobile phones, a device that is enabling last mile connectivity in India," he said before two short films were screened for the audience on the journey of the mBillionth Awards and the 2015 Jury, respectively.

There seemed to be a consensus among the Jury over the fact that the mBillionth Award has become the gateway to making people richer and more informed while at the same time encouraging people to go on to do better things.

The inaugural panel comprised NITI Aayog Member V.K. Saraswat as the chief guest of the day, Mint Editor Sukumar Ranganathan, Vodafone India Director of Regulatory and External Affairs P. Balaji, Qualcomm India Vice-President (Government Affairs) Parag Kar and mPower Social Enterprises CEO Mridul Chowdhury.

Encouraging the idea of 'neighbour first', Manzar invited Chowdhury, who hails from Bangladesh, to take the dais first.

"Bangladesh has been going through mobile revolution and this is because of the high population density in the country. What helps this revolution is Bangladesh's flat land, which ensures good connectivity at low cost, and the incumbent government that is gung-ho about 'Digital Bangla'," Chowdhury said.

Turning towards the Digital India vision, Ranganathan said that he believes in the transformative power of mobile phones. "Lack of access to information causes most problems in India but mobile phones have the power to give each individual access to information," he said.

Though official estimates say that 90 per cent of India's urban population and 60 per cent of the rural population has mobile phones, "I think there is a mobile phone penetration of only 45-50 per cent in rural India," he said. He also pointed out that though women drive change across the globe, very few women in rural India have access to a mobile phone.

"About 70 per cent of women have no access to mobile phones. This is a cultural issue. A woman is always the last to get anything in the house, be it food or a mobile phone. If a woman is given a mobile phone and Internet connection, she can drive a change in the society," Ranganathan said. For this purpose, the government's ambitious fixed-line broadband connectivity vision can be very helpful, he added.

However, it's not an easy task to take the Internet to every individual in the country.

Kar agreed that the Internet has the power to bring about a change but the cost of taking the Internet to every corner of the country is very high. Yet, Qualcomm has been trying to bridge this gap for the last 30 years.

"Several years ago, Qualcomm started its wireless reach initiative. It wasn't a 'CSR project' but a step towards reaching rural India," Kar said, adding that they have helped fishermen in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu improve their livelihood by getting access to information on prices, market and even international boundary alerts on their mobile phones.

Also contributing towards ensuring maximum wireless reach in India is Vodafone, India's leading service provider and DEF's partner in 150 locations.

"Vodafone doesn't only reach the smartphone users but also those who use feature phones — through an SMS approach.Vodafone has reached 600-650 million unique users in India but we've faced a lot of obstacles in this journey. Policies have been one of the major obstacles," said Balaji. However, that has not stopped Vodafone from mobilising a change and making a difference in the society. Mobile for Good and the Red Rickshaw Revolution are evidence of that.

The evidence of the government's efforts towards reaching each individual is in its MyGov initiative, explained Dwivedi.

"It is a medium of large-scale connectivity between individuals and their government though radio, print, electronic and social media," he said.

Earlier, people could only blame the government while discussing the issue in their living room. Today, each citizen has the option to raise its issues directly with the government. Earlier, the government invited suggestions and grievances through its Facebook and response forms on websites. However, how many of those feedbacks actually got a reply from the government? MyGov is looking to change that," Dwivedi added.

MyGov has connected 36 ministries and hopes to connect each and every individual now. "Each one of us forms the government. MyGov, like the government of India, cannot function if each one of us is not a part of it," he stated.

Taking forward the government's Digital India vision, Saraswat emphasised on the need for better Internet penetration and connectivity. "We've not been able to provide the last mile connectivity but mobile phones can change that," he said.

"Technology demands are growing by 40 per cent each year. Data demand is high today and it will only grow in the years to come. At the same time, data storage space will also need to be increased. Thus, cloud computing is very important," Saraswat said, adding that earlier innovation in technology were computer and Internet centric but today, they're human centric, thanks to mobile phones.

However, though there is a high dependence on mobile phones today, the Indian mobile industry is largely based on the international market and imported components. "The government's Make in India campaign can change the scenario. We need to establish design houses and component-manufacturing factories in India," he said.

Saraswat also took the opportunity to appreciate the role played by service providers in India. He said, "Integration through CSR schemes is important, and I'm happy service providers are taking their job seriously in India."

On this note, the session was opened for a Q&A round during which several interesting questions and views were raised. One key point raised during this session was that though the government promotes use of mobile phones, there is no electricity in villages to charge phones. Saraswat agreed to this shortcoming and said "The government cannot only develop an app but also needs to develop infrastructure to ensure its sustenance and increase its penetration."

Meanwhile, National Skill Development Corporation COO Atul Bhatnagar, who joined the panel on stage during the Q&A round, explained the power of mobile phones with a simple fact: "There are 300 million Internet users but 900 million mobile users". Bhatnagar is heading the government's mission of creating jobs for 15 crore individuals.

After about a dozen questions and their replies, time constraint brought Q&A to an end to allow the panel to inaugurate this year's mBillionth Award book, 'You, Me & Mobile'.

"It's just like '*Pati, PatniaurWoh*'," quipped Manzar.

'You, Me & Mobile" is a compilation of profiles of the 53 finalists and provides a snapshot of the various projects and innovations.

The inaugural session was followed by a tea-break and then Vodafone Director Balaji inaugurated the Mobile Asia App Bazaar 2015. The day-long exhibition had stalls from all the 53 finalists who showcased their innovations and ideas at their stalls.

Before the lunch-break, there was one parallel session which covered three categories where finalists presented their innovations to an interested audience.

After the hour-long lunch break another parallel session was held till the tea break for various finalists to make their presentations. The third and final parallel session for presentations was held after the tea break.

At the end of all the parallel sessions, the main Award Gala began where all the 24 winners were felicitated and handed over their awards by the various Guests of Honour present.

The event ended with a sumptuous dinner that all attendees enjoyed thoroughly.