

MOBILE SOCIETIES

REVOLUTIONISING COMMUNICATION

Thirty-two initiatives won hearts and the mBillionth Awards 2017 at Eros Hotel, New Delhi, on August 4, 2017, amid much celebration and powerful discussions.

Now in its eight year, mBillionth Awards South Asia was conceptualised to recognise and felicitate mobile-based initiatives that are leading the world towards development and change. Over the years, the platform has created a knowledge hub and network of more than 2,000 initiatives from eight South Asian countries — India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

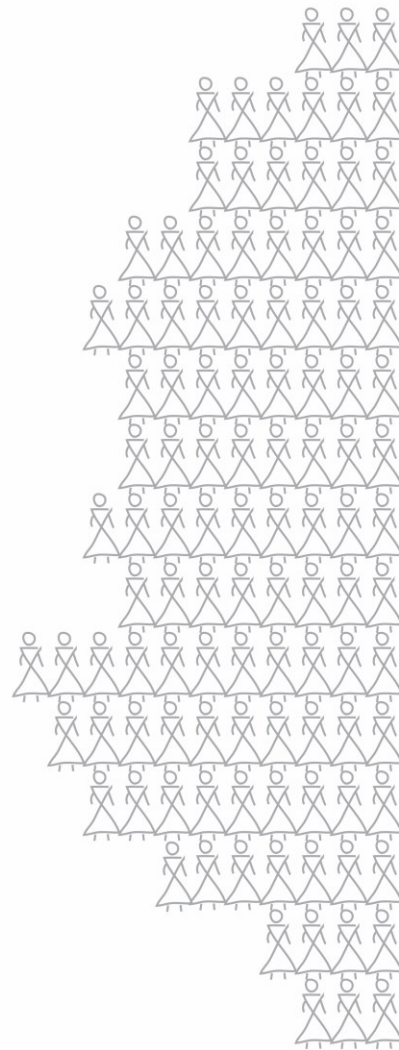
EMERGENCE OF MOBILE SOCIETIES

“In the last eight years, the mBillionth platform has moved from recognising telecom-based initiatives to purely mobile-based initiatives,” Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) Founder-Director Osama Manzar said, welcoming Finalists, speakers and guests. “When we first laid the foundation of the mBillionth Awards, mobile penetration in India stood at 600 million. Today, there are more than one billion SIM cards in India. However, gender parity is still an issue. As many as 72 per cent women in India do not own mobile phones.”

Taking forward the conversation of connectivity, access and gender, the floor was opened for a panel discussion on ‘Emergence of Mobile Societies’ moderated by GoNews Founder and Editor Pankaj Pachauri. Panellists in the discussion were Adviser for Communication & Information at UNESCO South Asia Al-Amin Yusuph, CEO of Real Time Governance in the Government of Andhra Pradesh Babu A, Vice-President of Government Affairs at Qualcomm India & South Asia Parag Kar, Chairman & Managing Director of RailTel RK Bahuguna, President of Internet and Mobile Association of India Subho Ray, and Osama Manzar.

Kar pointed out, “The cost of reaching last mile is a big barrier in India due to the high cost involved in infrastructure set up and the restrictive policies that hold back private players from expanding into rural parts of the country.”

The Qualcomm Wireless Reach initiative runs 100 projects across 40 countries of the world to showcase how mobile can be used effectively to improve livelihood. “Our fishermen project, which was launched eight years ago shortly after the devastating tsunami that hit the Indian subcontinent, alerts the fishing community about weather conditions, level of tide and availability of fishes in the sea in a particular region, thus helping fishermen to decide the best time to go fishing. Then we have the StoveTrace project that encourages women to use biomass stoves effectively and in an environment-friendly manner by incentivising their cooking process.”



Speaking of incentives, Yusuph shared how mobile money, particularly mPesa, has revolutionising the banking sector in the African region and increased mobile penetration tremendously. “When I first visited the Masai tribe in Kenya, I couldn’t even find mobile signals. But once when the community was introduced to the benefits of owning mobile devices, they began selling their produce through simple feature phones.” Access to mobile phones has also given them access to news and entertainment content, besides other mobile-based services.

Moving the conversation back home, Babu A shared, “Real-Time Governance was the need of the hour and a demand by the citizens. In a span of just seven months, we were able to survey 4.3 crore people in Andhra Pradesh and link them to 29 government schemes. Today, we have direct communication channels between the state chief minister and the citizens who can submit their feedback and grievances in real-time and expect almost immediate responses and solutions.”

“Each citizen who receives the ration through the public distribution system also receives an automated call with the chief minister’s pre-recorded voice, asking them whether or not they are satisfied with the ration received. Further, a real-time communication channel, based on the idea of crowdsourcing information, helped the state identify — and shut down — 3,000 illegal liquor retail units within 72 hours,” he added.

Access to the Internet at railway stations, too, is revolutionising connectivity. “Not just passengers who are waiting for their trains but even other citizens come to railway stations to connect to the free Wi-Fi to listen to music, work on projects or download information that they need.” Though there is no denying that some misuse the access, this connectivity has opened hundreds of opportunities for those who could not afford data packs for their phones.

Among those not connected to the Internet in India are women. “Only 25 per cent Indian women have access to the Internet. No other gender difference is as pronounced as Internet access,” highlighted Ray. “We are proud that over 300 million Indians are connected but what about the more than 650 million who aren’t? Ninety per cent of the Internet is still English dominated. We can’t just be passive consumers of online content but we need to become active producers of information online as well,” Ray insisted.

Stressing on the need for becoming producers of information, Manzar asked why aren’t our government digital literacy projects taking a more institutional approach towards ensuring all our panchayat members and school teachers are digitally literate. “Further, telcos will not enter rural India anytime soon, so why are we not creating community networks or allowing Rural Internet Service Providers to set up shops? Our policies are not adequate for last mile connectivity, and it’s time the innovators pressurise the government,” he said.

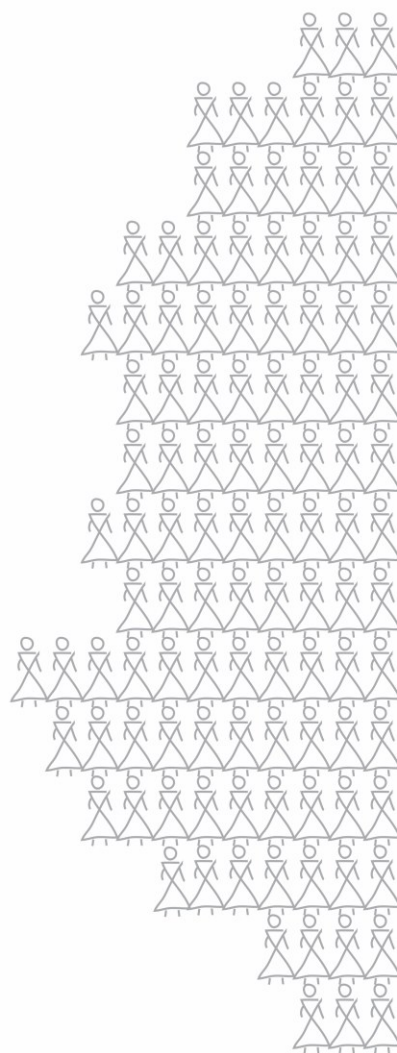
Seconding Manzar, Yusuph pointed out, “Innovation is always ahead of regulation and policy design. So how can we ensure that both work simultaneously?”

For long we have been talking about redistribution of wealth. “It’s time we talk about redistribution of connectivity too,” said Pachauri, sharing the example of Finland where access to Internet is a Fundamental Right.

CELEBRATING INNOVATIONS

While we are still a long, long way from making access to the Internet a Fundamental Rights, mobile innovators in South Asia are doing some amazing work.

This year, mBillionth Awards received 294 nominations across 10 categories —



Health & Well-Being, Government & Citizen Engagement, Learning & Education, Early Stage, Business & Commerce, Agriculture & Environment, Smart Settlements & Urbanisation, Media & Entertainment, Culture & Tourism, Inclusion & Empowerment — from eight South Asian countries. A rigorous Jury process shortlisted 65 Finalists from these nominations. These Finalists got together on the day to share with each other what they are doing.

Ahead of the keynote address, four generations of a folk musicians' family from Mungaska in Rajasthan performed in memory of Umar Farooq, a renowned bhangar player, who the world lost last month. Leading the performance was his son and bhangar player Yusuf.

The father-son duo have been closely associated with DEF for the last few years, digitally documenting their songs and music so that younger generations are not unaware of their rich traditional craft and history.

Another man who has done some exemplary work using digital technology in his village is Dilip Tripathi. The Sarpanch of Hasuri Ausanpur in Siddharthnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, Tripathi joined Manzar in the keynote address to talk about his Digital Village, which he built using his personal saving of Rs. 16 lakh.

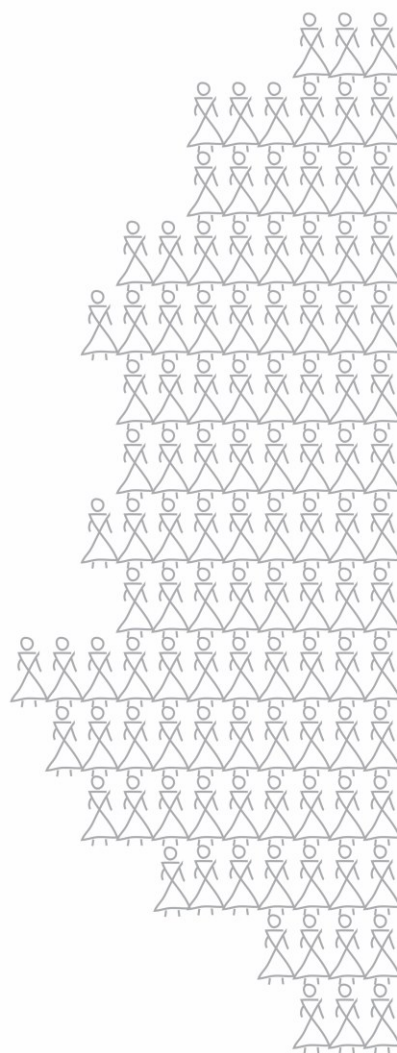
Hasuri Ausanpur village has 23 Wi-Fi hotspots and 25 CCTV cameras for its population of just over 1,000. It even has a website that features the GIS map of the entire village — agricultural land, grazing land, networks of roads and canals. All its health centres and schools are mapped online, and equipped with digital tools and technology. Further, socio-economic details of all families are available online. These not include the number of family members, their age, caste and income but also catalogues whether or not they have life and health insurance; if any member smokes or chews tobacco; if they are into the habit of washing hands before eating; of the household have a toilet, kitchen garden and compost pit; what is the source of water; does the family have a bank account and ATM card, do they own a smartphone; can they operate computers or carry out cashless transactions.

"People are beginning to learn to use WhatsApp in the village now. Women are watching videos online to learn to play the dholak and do embroidery!" Tripathi shared, adding that the state government now wants him to replicate this model in 30 villages.

WINNERS TAKE CENTRE-STAGE AT GALA

The Awards Gala began with the felicitation of winners of World Summit Awards (WSA) Mobile Content 2016 from South Asia. The Health Informatics Society of Sri Lanka won in the Health & Well-Being category; the Government of Andhra Pradesh won in the Government & Citizen Engagement category; Sankalpstar Foundation won in the Environment & Green Energy category; and Bangladesh's PreneurLab won in the Smart Settlements & Urbanisation category.

The WSA Awards felicitation was followed by the announcement and felicitation of those who were recognised with the mBillionth Award 2017. At the Awards Gala, 25 initiatives were announced Winners, 04 received Special Mentions and 03 were recognised for the Chairman's Distinction. A complete list of Winners can be accessed [here](#) and the annual awards book 'Mobile Societies', released on the occasion, can be [read here](#).



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