

Digital revolution must be localised

India's 'smart' push must now focus on local consumers and markets to spread and maximise its benefits

There is no question that the mobile phone has become a powerful instrument of social impact and change. More than just connecting people, mobile technology has enabled an unprecedented information exchange around the world, sparking innovation across sectors — from media to healthcare and financial services, unleashing ideas, promoting businesses and growing economies.

As smartphones become more affordable, data costs decline, and 4G networks debut in emerging markets, internet penetration numbers are set to significantly accelerate, creating a new wave of change set to touch the people who need it the most.

In India, the digital revolution is well under way. With now more than 400 million active users, India is home to the second largest internet user-base in the world.

More importantly, nearly 65 per cent of these users access the internet through their mobile phones, and this number is rapidly rising as the smartphone penetration expands.

India is already the world's second largest smartphone market with approximately 220 million devices, and one of the fastest growing — bolstering between 15 per cent and 20 per cent increase annually.

Linking them all

In the initial years, broader adoption of mobile phones increased the awareness of government programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the public distribution system, and pension funds.

Through voice and short message services, farmers got access to information regarding produce prices, weather forecast, farming techniques, and market linkages and opportunities. Helplines

started being accessed by women victims of violence, providing valuable support through legal assistance, counselling, and rehabilitation.

More recently, the first effects of the smartphone footprint enlargement can be seen in rural communities, where voice and SMS services are being gradually replaced by mobile data services.

In Gujarat, rural healthcare workers are using smartphones to compile patient data and manage prenatal care to pregnant women using text messages to schedule checkups and vaccinations.

In Odisha, the State government is building a mobile-based system to fast-track land titles to villagers by enabling information exchange with remote locations.

And across India, the delivery of social benefits to the poor has notably improved because of the transparency and transaction traceability mobile channels offer.

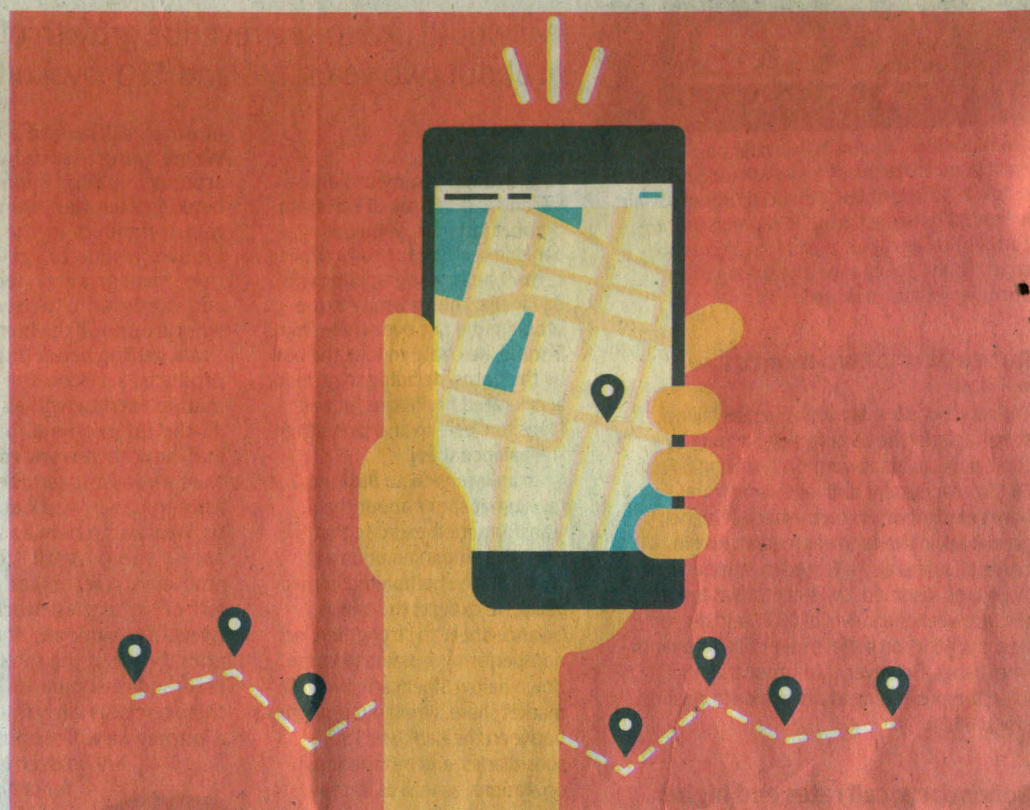
New models

The next frontier of innovation for smartphone-based applications in India is in new business models that provide access to basic services such as employment, education and financial services to the underserved, at an affordable price.

In the last couple of years, entrepreneurs have married complex algorithms with mobile technology to create innovative applications that match blue-collar workers in urban areas with employers looking for staff.

Although these business models are still evolving, the segment is attracting considerable early-stage capital investments.

Education for low-income communities is poised to leverage the smartphone revolution. High quality, low-cost private school models that use mobile devices to deliver lesson plans to teachers in far-flung locations have already started operations in some parts



Mapping out Going vernacular and local is the way ahead for digital India BLOOMUA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

of the country. Providers are also looking into new learning programs that make education fun through mobile apps — for example, spoken English language skills is a high priority for low-income families, and mobile devices can significantly advance efforts in this area.

The digitisation of retail payments front-end through mobile money and the dramatic increase in bank accounts through the Jan Dhan Yojana have expanded access to financial services to the underserved.

A clutch of new entrepreneurs is applying big data analytics to consumers' digital footprints created by mobile phones to generate alternative credit scores and assess consumer credit risk.

All of these innovations are transformational and can drive

immense growth for India. As we embrace smartphones, the key to realising their full potential will require greater localisation of content, especially when it comes to language.

With 21 official languages and high English illiteracy rates, it is crucial that innovators embed language considerations in their plans for expanded reach and impact.

Today, more than 150 million internet users already access content in their language and this number is growing 50 per cent annually.

They want more

Championing this approach, new business models such as apps that aggregate news and provide e-books primarily in local languages have already reached a critical

mass in India. Similarly, technologies that automatically translate Android phones' operational systems into regional languages, helping users to fully leverage all the features of their smartphones are securing good traction among consumers.

Localisation efforts can unlock new consumer segments for businesses and greatly increase India's internet user-base, maximising all the innovation and benefits associated with it.

It can also enable our government to better serve India's diverse population, level-setting knowledge and opportunities for all across the far corners of our country.

The writer is a partner at the philanthropic investment firm Omidyar Network