

hindustantimes**Thomas Friedman, NYT**Email Author

New Delhi, November 07, 2011

First Published: 21:59 IST(7/11/2011)

Last Updated: 22:01 IST(7/11/2011)

As techies home in, innovations sweep India

Every few miles on the road from New Delhi to Agra, there's a cellphone tower and a fresh-looking building. And the sign out front invariably says "school" — engineering school, biotechnology school, English-language school, business school, computer school...

All these schools, plus 600 million cellphones, plus 1.2 billion people, half of them under 25, are India's hope — because only by leveraging technology and brains can India deliver a truly better life for its masses. There are a million reasons why it won't happen, but there is one big reason it might: India's young techies are moving from running the back rooms of Western companies to inventing the front rooms of Indian companies. The late CK Prahalad called it "Gandhian innovation," and I encountered many examples around New Delhi.

Meet Vijay Pratap Singh Aditya, CEO of Ekgaon. His focus is Indian farmers. Ekgaon built a software programme that runs on the cheapest cellphones and offers illiterate farmers a voice or text advisory programme that tells them when is the best time to plant their crops, how to mix their fertilisers and pesticides, when to dispense them and how much water to add each day.

"India has to increase farm productivity," says Aditya, "but our farms are small, and advisers from the agriculture department can't reach many of them." He has 12,000 subscribers (\$5 for a year). The plan is to grow to 15 million in five years.

Meet K Chandrasekhar, the CEO of Forus Health, whose focus is "avoidable blindness" among rural poor. A quarter of the world's blind people are in India, and more than 80% of those are blind as a result of a lack of screening and a lack of ophthalmologists in rural areas.

Forus has invented "a single, portable, intelligent, non-invasive, eye prescreening device" that can identify five major eye ailments and also provide an automated "Normal" or "Needs to see a doctor" report. A Brazilian company is interested in taking their invention to Latin America. Outsourcees are becoming outsourcers.

Meet Alope Bajpai, who returned to India to start iXiGO.com, a travel search service that can run on the cheapest cellphones and helps Indians book the lowest-cost fares,

whether Chennai to Bangalore by bus or by plane to Paris.

Finally, there's Nandan Nilekani, the former CEO of Infosys Technologies, India's outsourcing giant, who is now leading a government effort to give every Indian citizen an ID number. In the last two years, 100 million people have signed up for an official ID. Once everyone has one, the government can deliver them services or subsidies directly through cellphones or bank accounts, without bureaucrats siphoning some off.

"The hyperconnected world is giving us a chance to change India faster, at a larger scale, than ever before," said Nilekani.

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