

Taking hi-tech solutions to poor villages

Ekgaon, a technology and management services firm for independent rural communities, is run by young Indian techies spanning the globe, some of whom are expatriates keen to help their home country.

'I have a great affection and identification with all 'underdog' elements of society. This is particularly true for the rural poor in India,' Tapan Parikh, who is part of the 2002-founded company, told IANS.

By supporting 'community-owned and managed enterprises, cooperatives and financial institutions', ekgaon hopes it can contribute to a bottom-up, locally self-sufficient and environmentally sustainable model of rural and international development.

Some of its current ventures include a CAM Mobile Services Framework, Mahakalasm MIS, a medicinal plant portal and promoting the Indic-Computing Consortium, apart from commercial projects.

CAM is a mobile information services framework for rural areas in the developing world. It's camera-based and has barcodes linking CAM to paper-based processes. It also offers offline networking, using SMS and other protocols.

In keeping with India's needs, it is 'easy to localise even if the phone doesn't support the target language', says the firm.

Ekgaon's CAM framework consists of the CAMBrowser, a single mobile phone application, CAMForm paper forms, equipped with embedded processing instructions and the CAMServer, an online service that links CAM with web-based services.

Likewise, its Mahakalasm MIS offers a management and information system for self-help groups (SHGs).

This MIS was pilot tested and later implemented with over 600 groups in rural Tamil Nadu, where it has helped SHGs to better manage their financial transactions and portfolios.

All documentation formats, manuals and training materials have been released under a Creative Commons license and they have already been downloaded by dozens of other NGOs.

CAM - its 'complete end-to-end mobile application framework' designed for 'disconnected' rural areas - was developed in collaboration with the University of Washington.

CAM, says the firm, can be used to provide a variety of user-friendly and accessible information services to rural users using mobile phones.

'Small but systemic interventions can help rural communities retain control of local resources while maintaining their livelihoods,' the firm argues.

'I think these people have really interesting perspectives in terms of their world views, and they have a really nice way of looking at things, a very deep humility that underlies everything that they do,' Parikh told IANS.

'It seems to me that if there's anything I can do to support them, give them a greater voice, give them a greater power, that can only help in terms of making the world a friendlier, more sustainable place.'

Ekgaon, or 'one village' in Hindi, links to the idea of an interdependent community of individuals, like a family. Mahatama Gandhi spoke of gram swarajya (village self-rule) as the most natural way for the holistic development of a nation and a world. Ekgaon derives its name from Gandhiji's dream, the firm says.

Parikh, of Gujarati origin but for long in the US, has been a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Washington.

Says he: 'The CAM mobile phone project is one of the main components of my dissertation. UW has also financially supported the project through fellowships for me and some additional travel and grant money.'

This has gone towards supporting the design, development and testing of the CAM platform. Several students from UW have also participated in these and other projects.

Parikh met up with Vijay Pratap Singh Aditya, after which he says he 'became convinced that through hard work, dedication, honesty and focus, one can achieve almost anything'.

They met via the Ahmedabad-based inspiring Anil K. Gupta of the Honeybee Project fame.

Recently 'Microsoft Research' highlighted how their work was attempting to make 'cellphones enhance village economies in rural India'.

It noted Parikh's ideas on how the use of an effective user interface and rich media can help encourage people to eschew their 'habitual use of paper' to exchange information.