



CAM man wins global recognition; blends tradition, technology- Tapan Parikh, the 2007 Humanitarian of the Year

New Delhi: *On the right side of thirty, Tapan Parikh, a doctoral student at the University of Washington and founder of Ekgaon Technologies, is already a global achiever. The winner of the TR35 2007 Young Innovator award, instituted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology published magazine Technology Review, Parikh received global recognition as the 2007 Humanitarian of the Year for his effort to help small business people by making mobile phones a more effective and result-oriented medium.*

*Microfinance groups in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are using CAM, the mobile device developed by Parikh to increase productivity and earn more money in diverse as well as traditional businesses they are involved with. In an email interview with **livemint.com**, Parikh tells more about his mobile tool and the various experiences associated with it. Edited excerpts:*

How is CAM different from other mobile phones? What are its unique selling propositions?

CAM is a mobile-phone based application toolkit that allows users to capture data from existing paper-based manual processes, that are ubiquitous in India. I would also consider CAM as one of the first attempts at an integrated mobile phone framework for delivering a variety of services in rural areas of the developing world, that seek to be accessible to all categories of users.

Any specific reason for calling it CAM?

Because the camera is used as part of the user interface.

On what kind of network does CAM function? How does CAM respond to a situation where no commercial telecommunication signals are available?

On any GSM network. Yes, CAM can respond to areas without connectivity by storing a local cache of data on the phone.

If CAM users subscribe to commercial telecom service providers, do you think it is feasible for the users as they mostly belong to rural and economically struggling background?

Initially, CAM is being deployed in partnerships with NGOs, banks and other service providers. These service providers are subsidizing the cost of the phone and the mobile service.



When are you planning to launch CAM commercially? What kind of market are you expecting globally?

CAM is an open source software. We are using it to build specific services, which are being launched commercially. Our first such service is the accounting service for SHGs. There are over two million SHGs currently existing in India.

Referring to your efforts on making CAM popular among the self-help groups (SHGs) in India, how user-friendly is your toolkit to people who are computer illiterates or perhaps completely illiterate?

It is designed entirely with semi-literate users in mind, both as users of the technology, and customers of the service offered through the technology.

SHGs across the country are engaged in different small-scale industries ranging from agro-based ones to poultry farming, fishery to handloom products among others. How will CAM tackle the communication and computing challenges arising out of these different sectors and most importantly the lack of basic infrastructure like electricity in remote areas?

I am not sure CAM can do much about the lack of electricity, other than alert someone that it is or isn't there! Regarding small-scale enterprise and agriculture, we are currently investigating potential CAM services for these sectors.

Are you in contact with the Indian government to launch CAM on a mass scale?

We are currently in discussions with government for scaling up and using CAM for improved access to government services for SHGs.

The formal financial sector is the backbone to the survival of the SHGs. What kind of feedback are you receiving from that sector?

So far the response has been positive. We are in discussions with several banks for tighter linkage of systems.

Please let us know about the affordability aspect of CAM. How much would a CAM cost in rupee terms? What are the maintenance costs?

CAM is free. It is open source software. The mobile devices, on which CAM runs, cost between Rs6,000 and Rs50,000.



How is a CAM more efficient than a PC?

Mobile phones are cheaper, more familiar and require less power and infrastructure than PCs.

In terms of data storage capacity, how does CAM take on a PC?

Using memory expansion cards, several GB of data can be stored on a mobile.

You also developed Randi, another version of CAM for the fair-trade coffee farmers in Guatemala. What is it all about?

Randi is another CAM application used for monitoring farm production and ensuring conformance with certification requirements. The response from local farmers and cooperatives has been positive. We have established partnerships in Guatemala and Mexico for taking the project forward.

Do you have any plans to launch Randi in India? Apart from helping coffee growers, can Randi help small-scale tea planters in India's northeast?

Sure! CAM can be used for coordinating procurement, monitoring production, disseminating farming and post-harvest practices, and linking to markets.