

India connected: the new mantra of India on the rise

by Lt. Col. H.S. Bedi, CMD, Tulip Telecom

Connectivity at every level has come to India and is transforming society and the economy. But vast rural areas are still largely unconnected from a business perspective and these represent the next phase of growth. Fundamental changes are already apparent in certain regions where wireless connectivity is bringing e-learning, telemedicine and e-commerce to some rural centres. Rollout of wireless networks in rural areas will ensure delivery of basic services to the larger part of the country in the future.



After serving in the Indian Army for 22 years, Lt. Col. Bedi took over the business of Tulip Telecom as its Chairman and Managing Director. Tulip Telecom is a data telecom service and IT solutions provider offering IP-based infrastructural solutions. Tulip is India's largest MPLS VPN player and has been prominent in provisioning and managing multi-location wide area networks for various industry verticals.

Lt. Col. H.S. Bedi was awarded the 'Vishisht Seva Medal' by the President of India for his role in the computerisation of the Indian Army and is a well-recognised business leader in the IT and telecom industry.

If there is one single phenomenon that has radically altered the way India has embraced and managed the growth of its resources, it is the telecommunications phenomenon. Connectivity is India's new mantra and it is changing the way India functions, ever seeking a wider array of connections with its global partners.

What makes the India story almost inimitable on a global scale is the ferocious speed with which connectivity has come to dominate each and every aspect of our national life in a short span of time.

With more than 500 million telephone subscribers today, India now boasts the second largest telecom network in the world

after China. The country is adding some 8.5 million to 10 million new mobile subscribers to the network every month to also emerge as one of the fastest growing telecom markets in the world.

So what does this connectivity encompass? On a micro level every Indian everywhere now seems to be glued to either a cellphone, PC, laptop, or TV at any given time! India's linguistic diversity and regional variety have one common factor – connectivity. A constantly alive, invisible thread binding the nation together as it works, educates and entertains itself.

Connectivity has completely redefined the dynamics of the Indian economy and has

been a major component in putting India in the global limelight, as it posts higher growth rates each year. More importantly, it has catapulted the much neglected and often forgotten better half of India into the limelight: the 60 per cent of India's population in rural economies.

Bridging boundaries to bring India closer

According to telecom experts, the next phase of growth will be in the country's vast rural areas. The Green Revolution in India's farm sector in the 1970s revolutionised the Indian economy and made it self-sufficient in food production. It was driven by the introduction of hybrid seed varieties and new irrigation techniques. The telecom revolution

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sweeping India currently is said to be far more important than the Green Revolution. With a teledensity of just 11 per cent in rural India, as opposed to 50 per cent in urban centres, the hinterland offers good scope for expansion and innovation.

However, the Indian rural landscape is still largely unconnected from a business perspective due to challenges faced in service delivery. Numerous banking and financial services, for example, are not yet accessible in many rural areas. Only wireless technology can open the hitherto closed doors presented by the most remote and topographically uneven terrain in India. Wireless technology can build connectivity bridges in the last mile, avoiding the need to lay underground cables, providing economically viable solutions for service providers in difficult geographies. According to a McKinsey survey conducted in 2007, rural India could become bigger than the total consumer market in countries such as South Korea or Canada in another twenty years.

Taking development to the grassroots

The rural landscape in India is witnessing some fundamental changes in the way it is moving forward. Wireless connectivity is bringing e-learning, telemedicine and e-commerce to some rural centres. States in the south have taken the lead here and many path-breaking projects providing information and access to rural areas are happening due to the synergy between private/public enterprises. Wireless connectivity and business services have reached this region in a systematic and consistent fashion.

A notable initiative in the field of telehealth has been taken by Arvind Eye Hospital. Providing total eye care facilities, the Aravind Eye Care System encompasses five hospitals, three managed eye hospitals, a manufacturing centre for ophthalmic products, and an international research foundation with a strong emphasis on rural healthcare.

Its VISION 2020 e-resource is an online collection of comprehensive resources for eye care programmes and a shared resource tool that helps assess, plan, implement and manage high quality, efficient, and

sustainable eye care programmes in those parts of the world where it is urgently needed. Offering its services to the doorstep of rural India using ICT, the hospital's effective strategies overcame barriers of distance, poverty and ignorance to create a self-sustaining system bringing services within reach of millions of the rural population.

E-learning is another major step in redefining the reach and access of education in rural areas. The Akshaya initiative in Kerala is a trailblazer in this segment. Akshaya, an innovative project implemented in the State of Kerala aimed at bridging the digital divide, addresses the issues of ICT access, basic skill sets and availability of relevant content. Quality ICT dissemination and service delivery facilities (Akshaya Centres) are set up by local entrepreneurs within a maximum of two kilometres from a cluster of villages.

Acting as an instrument in rural empowerment and economic development, Akshaya is fuelling economic growth and creating employment opportunities in the State by focusing on e-learning, e-transaction and e-governance.

E-governance and e-commerce are now recognised tools being implemented in many villages of India. They are providing agribusiness portals which can answer the specific queries and needs of local farmers, helping them access market prices, and gain access to seeds and fertilizers. Farmers are able to trade online in commodities and track the futures market in their community centres thanks to these ICT developments. Government and private enterprise backed projects which facilitate e-governance protocols offer villagers access to information on seeds, pesticides, weather data and availability of loans from Grameen banks.

A new digital India with ubiquitous broadband connectivity, both wireless and wired, teeming with an always-connected young generation that is mobile and empowered is already a reality. The power of social media in marketing and business development is opening up a huge, economic landscape of transactions and growth for many e-savvy enterprises.

Most companies have a hub where

information can be posted quickly to address customers' complaints, provide clarity and exhibit new offerings. Social media is not limited to large sites such as Facebook and MySpace; it is evolving as a platform where brands are having conversations. Social media networking sites have captured India's broadband-savvy netizens. Orkut, Twitter, Facebook are now ways of identifying with your peer group and are no longer restricted to a few computer savvy techies.

The future beckons\

India is moving towards the world of WiMAX and LTE, a future step in the deployment of next generation technology, enabling high-speed data transfer and allowing delivery of services to every part of India.

According to various sources, only about 100,000 out of 600,000 Indian villages have access to basic banking services. I believe that rollout of networks in rural parts of the country will ensure delivery of basic services to the larger part of the country.

The phenomenal rise in laptop consumption over the past year is only an indication of the shape of things to come. As multinational companies and Indian corporations continue to expand their Indian offices and as global work practices begin to be seen in India, the 24x7 connected professional is becoming increasingly visible. Flexi-hours and home-office culture are emerging – all dependent on connectivity.

Companies seek wireless solutions to gain a competitive edge in the market, and innovative applications on the manufacturing shop floor, in warehouses and at points-of-sale (POS) will drive faster and more accurate transactions. Globally, the organised retail sector is one of the largest consumers of enterprise wireless solutions. This sector is just opening up in India, as the global retail giants jostle for shelf space to lure the massive middle class. ●