Talk business on mobile

SAJJADUR RAHMAN, *back from Bangkok*

THE mobile phone has given Zayed Khan, a young shop owner in Narayanganj, the upper hand in running his business. He can now place orders for goods over the phone, without having to go personally by keeping his shop closed for the day.

A small rice trader in Bogra is also making the most of the mobile phone technology. He knows the wholesale price of rice before he takes the staple to a market nearly 10 miles away from his village.

The mobile phone is much more than a medium of communication with parents, relatives or friends. Its uses are being diversified, having outreached effects on the bottom of the pyramid (BOP). They now use their phones as a radio, torch, clock, calculator, camera, video recorder and more.

But are these enough? It maybe a difficult question to ask those who are at the bottom of the pyramid. They do not know how to get the most of the value added services available through the technology.
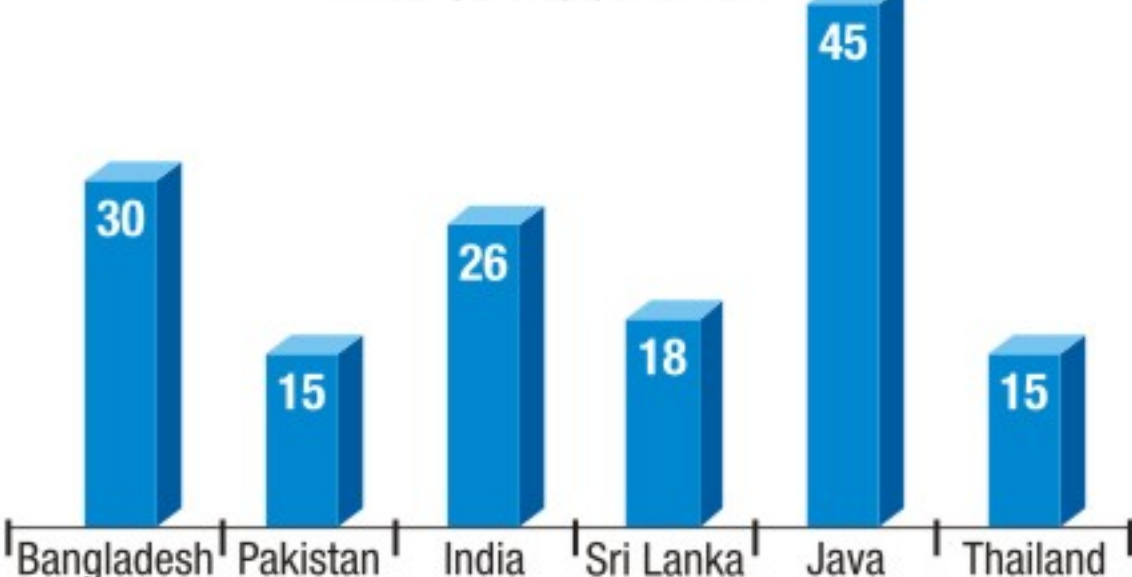
Access to medical and health services, ability to pay utility bills, money transfers, disaster forecasts, student university admission services, access to financial market, and internet browsing for information are just some of the benefits that users can derive.

Looking at matters closely, farmers can get help over their mobiles on the day-to-day problems they face on the control of pests, crop diseases, information on rearing animals and fishes, use of inputs, and the market price of their produce.

So what is the purpose of the mobile phone? LIRNEasia, a regional think-tank based in Colombo, has recently disclosed its findings from a research titled "Teleuse at the Bottom of the Pyramid" in Bangkok. It is also referred to as the Teleuse@BOP4 2011 as it is the fourth report on BOP.

The focus of this year's study was the use of mobile phones for value-generation at the BOP, against the backdrop of an emerging knowledge-based economy.

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MOBILE USERS AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PYRAMID FOR BUSINESS OR WORK COMMUNICATION
IN PERCENTAGE/EVERY DAY

Bangladesh	Pakistan	India	Sri Lanka	Java	Thailand
30	15	26	18	45	15

USERS WITH NO PERSONAL INCOME
IN PERCENTAGE

Bangladesh	Pakistan	India	Sri Lanka	Java	Thailand
56	65	54	50	27	28

THE POOR WHO OWN MOBILES
IN PERCENTAGE

- 2008
- 2011

	Bangladesh	Pakistan	India	Sri Lanka	Thailand
2008	43	38	40	36	90
2011	49	65	37	71	89

"Bangladesh is doing tremendously well in cell phone uses. It is at par with India and Pakistan in most of the indicators," said Dr Rohan Samarajiva, chair and chief executive officer of LIRNEasia, at the launch of the report.

Teleuse@BOP4 involved a detailed survey of 10,154 sample representatives of the BOP in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Java of Indonesia. These teleusers were aged between 15 and 60 years and lived on less than $2 a day. Of the total sample, 2050 were from Bangladesh.

The report found 10 percent teleusers at the BOP in Bangladesh use their mobile phones as a radio, ahead of Pakistan only. It is over 20 percent in India, 48 percent in Java, over 80 percent in Thailand and astonishingly, over 90 percent in Sri Lanka.

Even people, who do not have an access to motorised transport, are all used to using the mobile phone. Around 4 percent of the teleusers at the BOP have access to motorised transports, but nearly 50 percent have access to a phone.
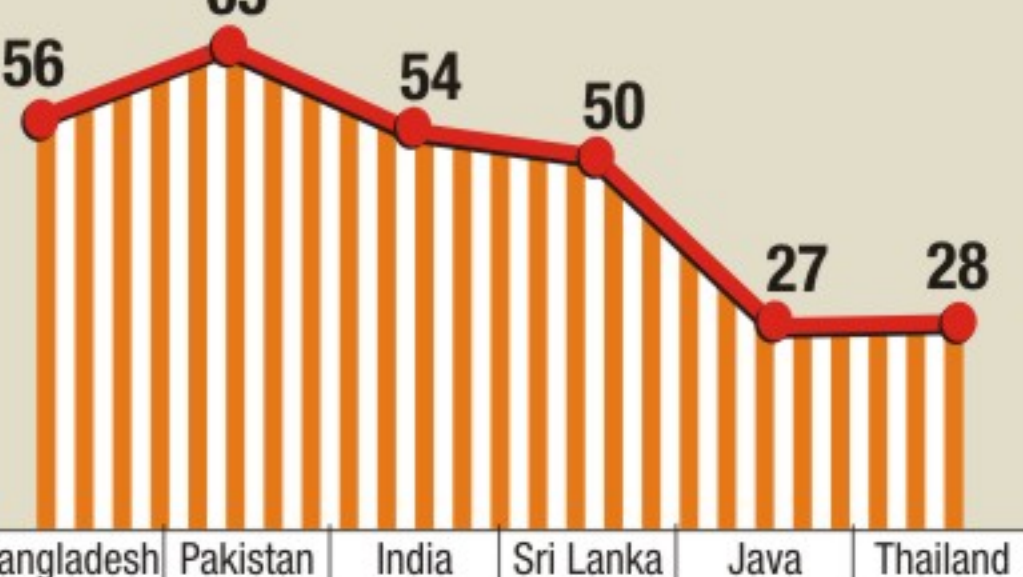
It is the reverse in Thailand -- more people have an access to motorised transport (95 percent) than phones (89 percent).

The BOP teleusers in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan hardly have any access to computers, compared to Sri Lanka, Java and Thailand.
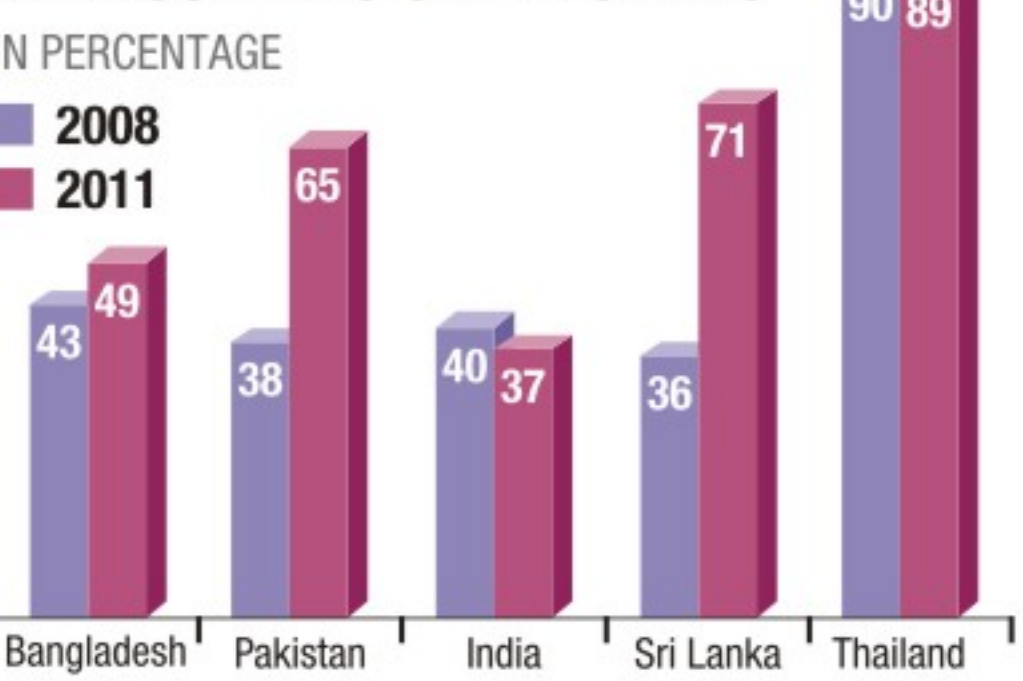
Only 5 percent BOP teleusers have used a computer in the last 12 months, which is 4 percent in Pakistan and 2 percent in India. However, it is 17 percent in Sri Lanka, 21 percent in Java and 22 percent in Thailand.

Internet use by the BOP teleusers is also very low in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan with 1-2 percent, which is 9 percent in Sri Lanka and 21 percent in Thailand. Some 17 percent and 24 percent teleusers haven't heard about the internet in Bangladesh and India respectively.

Interestingly, the report found that 56 percent of the surveyed teleusers in Bangladesh have no personal income, which is 54 percent in India, 50 percent in Sri Lanka, 27 percent in Java and 28 percent in Thailand. Only Pakistan has more teleusers at the BOP with 65 percent having no personal income.

Despite the costs of owning a mobile, ownership at the BOP has grown in Bangladesh in 2011 compared to the BOP3 report launched in 2008; BOP mobile ownership has increased to 49 percent in 2011.

It reached 65 percent in Pakistan in 2011 from 38 percent in 2008 and it has doubled in Sri Lanka to 71 percent.

But the gender gap continues in BOP mobile ownership in the sub-continent. Around 65 percent of men own a phone in Bangladesh, which is 30 percent for women. The gap is bigger in India and almost the same in Pakistan, according to the report.

In terms of ownership, the urban-rural gap is not as wide as in Pakistan, shows the BOP4 report.

Multiple SIM ownership has risen in every country in the report except Pakistan. Bangladeshi BOP users reasoned it out on the low charges within each network.

The report also found a limited use of text messaging (SMS) in the six countries surveyed. Over half (54 percent) of the respondents in Bangladesh actually do not know what the SMS is; another 41 percent found it 'too confusing'. The condition is worse in India with 61 percent not knowing what it is and 42 percent confused about it.

A majority of people at the BOP do not use mobiles for financial, business or work, except in Java, Indonesia. Nearly half of the BOP users in Bangladesh do not use mobiles for these purposes. It is 74 percent in Pakistan, 64 percent in India and 62 percent in Sri Lanka.

"Entrepreneurs and petty traders are the main business users," said the LIRNEasia CEO.

The use of mobiles to conduct polls and for entertainment is the highest in Sri Lanka followed by Thailand and Bangladesh, according to the report.

On the economic benefits of owning a phone by BOP users at all these six countries, the report found it has reduced their travel needs significantly, followed by a rise in efficiency in day-to-day tasks and an ability to contact people for business or job purposes.

There are complaints too against the operators. Nearly half of the time, BOP users in Bangladesh cannot get through on their mobiles because the network is shown busy, found the report. All other users in the sub-continent also face the same problem.

Though access is improving at both personal and household levels and phones are overtaking the television and radio, its use is still limited to voice only.

"The mobile is hardly being used for productive purposes," said Dr Samarajiva. "Awareness and use of more-than-voice services among BOP has not progressed much since 2008."

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Political vision a must for policy implementation

Abhisit Vejjajiva, former prime minister of Thailand, (sixth from right on the front row), poses for a photo at the inaugural session of a two-day conference on Communication Policy Research south 6 (CPRsouth6) in Bangkok on Friday. He was the keynote speaker at the conference.

SAJJADUR RAHMAN

THE regulator should adopt a role supporting the private sector that leads technological innovations across the globe, said Abhisit Vejjajiva, former prime minister of Thailand, early this week.

"Creativity takes place very much in the private sector, so regulations must be friendly for them," said Vejjajiva, in his keynote speech at the inaugural session of a two-day conference on Communication Policy Research south 6 (CPRsouth6) in Bangkok on Friday.

Vejjajiva, now the leader of the opposition in the House of Representatives of Thailand, also emphasised independence of the regulatory body, but not without accountability.

LIRNEasia, a Colombo-based think-tank that works to improve the lives of the emerging Asia-Pacific people by facilitating ICT, organised the conference hosted by Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Academicians from the US, Canada, Australia, Africa and Asia attended the programme that talked on how to benefit from research and make it practical.

Though communications are shaping our lives, the former Thai prime minister said it has a lot of challenges too.

He said the use of public resource efficiently for the management of technology is a big challenge. To cope with the pace of technological advancements and political vision to implement policies are the two other major challenges.

"Regulatory people need to adapt with the changes in technology," said Vejjajiva, an Oxford graduate who became the prime minister of Thailand at 44 years of age.

The roles of professionals and intellectuals are also vital, he said.

"They (professionals and intellectuals) are to guide us with the best practices," said the young politician.

In response to queries on internet regulations, Vejjajiva said there is no easy solution. But he said countries should have global standard guidelines and service providers should be accountable as well.

Dr Rohan Samarajiva, chief executive officer of LIRNEasia, said he started the concept six to seven years ago, in a bid to build policy intellectuals in the information and communications technology to develop and implement policies effectively.

"We encourage the long-term production of professionals," he said in his opening speech.

Laurent Elder of Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), that funded LIRNEasia to carry out research, said they fund research for development.

UK's Department for International Development (DFID) was the other fund provider.

Nearly 20 young scholars from different countries, including three from Bangladesh, presented their papers at the conference.

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