

At the forefront of development

THE hardware is rudimentary. An ordinary mobile phone connected to a laptop with a cable. But who would have thought that this simple set up could actually be turned into a central communication hub, and in the hands of civil society, become a powerful communication tool for people's empowerment? Ken Banks' FrontlineSMS, a free and open-source software, is allowing groups at the frontline of development to do some extraordinary things. And yet, all that FrontlineSMS does, is that it "enables users to send and receive text messages with groups of people through mobile phones". Perhaps, the power of FrontlineSMS can be grasped best by the stories of its use in the hands of others.

A woman in rural India gets an SMS on her mobile Asurakshit din or "Unprotected day". She is, thus, informed that she is likely to be fertile that day. The information is specifically intended to empower her to make a reproductive choice. Similar reminder SMSs ping through days eight-19 of her reproductive cycle, fertile days as per the Standard Days Method (SDM) of family planning, based on awareness of the menstrual cycle. How does CycleTel, an SMS-based system put in place by Georgetown University's Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH), keep track of her cycle? The woman herself keeps CycleTel regularly informed of the onset of her cycle, simply by sending an SMS from her mobile to a dedicated number. FrontlineSMS provided the basic architecture upon which a more customised system is being developed through field trials.

HarassMap is a group in Egypt, started by two women who themselves faced harassment quite routinely on their

Brij Kothari



BIG POTENTIAL: India is an ideal adoption ground for solutions like FrontlineSMS. For civil society organisations working with low-income groups, this platform presents exciting communication possibilities

way to and from work, that uses FrontlineSMS to capture the location and gravity of incidents of sexual harassment. The key idea is to get women to report harassment episodes in real time by sending an SMS to a dedicated number. Place and time information is then mapped with another amazing software, Ushahidi, to draw patterns from what would otherwise have been left as isolated data points. Hot spots are then targeted with community activism, awareness campaigns and tools to empower and support women individually and collectively.

In Nigeria, voters who also registered themselves as volunteers for the Network of Mobile Election Monitors (NMEM), took it upon them-

selves to SMS instantaneously into a FrontlineSMS central hub, any untoward incident of tampering or rigging they might observe. Human Empowerment Lead Project (HELP), a Nigerian NGO helped set up this citizen monitoring system, independent of the official monitoring groups and European Union observers. Observations by two or more volunteers in an area were verified, and if necessary, shared with the official monitoring agencies. Banks termed the Nigerian case a "breakthrough deployment" of FrontlineSMS.

FrontlineSMS was made available online as recently as 2005, and made open source two years later. In 2009, Banks hired his first employee. The

spread of FrontlineSMS to more than 80 countries is, thus, nothing if not astonishing. A variety of uses by country pop up on a world map at www.frontlinesms.com/frontlinesms-in-action/user-map/. With a strong presence in Africa, the top countries of deployment are Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Banks offered three reasons, the last using a popular acronym of the Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) community: "This is likely down to: a) Me having historically focused my blog and attention on Africa; b) FrontlineSMS being closely associated with the continent (the concept came out of field work in South Africa); and finally, c) There being a growing

developer and ICT4D community on the continent (through innovation hubs, among others) keen to build on top of tools like ours."

India, it would seem, is an ideal adoption ground for solutions like FrontlineSMS. Of the 1.2 billion population, only around 100 million have access to the internet, although, this is projected to grow to 300 million over the next three years. The mobile growth story is far ahead. The total subscriber base at the beginning of 2012 was 894 million, with an active subscriber base of 647 million. Wireless teledensity, the number of subscriptions per 100 people, was 161 in urban and 37 in rural areas. Several estimates put the number of smartphones in India at no more than 30 million, and one could safely assume, mostly in urban areas. The majority of active mobile handsets are, therefore, very basic but well-suited for voice and SMS. For civil society organisations working with low-income groups, in rural and urban areas alike, a platform like FrontlineSMS presents exciting communication possibilities.

As compared with African countries, the uptake of FrontlineSMS in India is still nascent. Lack of awareness may be the key issue. What would Banks like to see happen? "We've recently had user-organised meet ups in Haiti and Uganda, with others springing up around the world. It would be great to see this happening in India — our ethos and focus is that users should drive deployment of FrontlineSMS, and user-organised meetups are a large part of this."

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Relief, finally

As inflation heads down, all eyes on new risks and coming budget

THERE is some cheerful news on the inflation front after two long years. People, businesses and the economy have paid a heavy price because of high inflation, mostly in double digits for at least 26 months. The inflation rate is finally down. It was 6.55 per cent for January. But inflation going down does not necessarily mean prices are falling. Nevertheless, producers and consumers alike must be relieved that the rate of rise in prices is now down to more reasonable levels. A certain amount of inflation is inevitable in a fast-growing developing country like India. Some economists even argued that a degree of inflation is indeed desirable. But the jury is still out on what a reasonable level of inflation for India is. In the 1980s, the Sukhamoy Chakravarty committee had arrived at what it called a threshold inflation level of 5 per cent. Since then, no new threshold has been officially prescribed. But the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), in recent money policy pronouncements, has spoken about 5 per cent being a level of inflation that it would be comfortable with in the medium term, with 3 per cent being the long-term goal. In the past two years, inflation has been the most serious of concerns to the government and RBI, but time and again, their projections of when inflation could be reined in have gone wrong. They must be relieved now that their prediction of the inflation rate falling to 7 per cent by the end of March seems to be have finally come true. In fact, this latest short-term target of containing inflation at 7 per cent or less has been achieved two months ahead of March. Pleased as they must be, both the government and RBI, however, are still cautious — for good reasons. After all, core inflation, as RBI defines the rate of rise in prices of those goods that are not seasonally affected, continues to be uncomfortably high at 6.8 per cent. The precipitate drop in the inflation rate in January is primarily on account of food price inflation being negative. Since there is a seasonal decline in the prices of certain farm produce, especially fruit and vegetables, the overall inflation rate has come down. This bout of inflation was triggered by the food price spiral; later on, inflation got transmitted to manufactured products too and became all-pervasive in nature. It can be expected that in the coming weeks, the fall in food prices now will have a salutary effect on core inflation. But several risks exist, including the risk of sudden and unexpected spurts in global oil and commodity prices. The biggest factor now, however, is the budget in March. RBI has done its part in checking inflationary expectations by tightening its money policy and thereby curtailing the growth of aggregate demand in the economy. Now it is for the government to produce public finance numbers that are not inflationary. Here the signs are not positive. The centre's deficit this year, budgeted at 4.6 per cent of GDP, is expected to shoot up to 5 per cent or more, thanks to higher spending on subsidies and lower revenue receipts. The revised estimates of the deficit for this financial year and the budget estimates of the deficit for 2012-13 would be the key figures to watch before hazarding any guess about which way inflation is headed.

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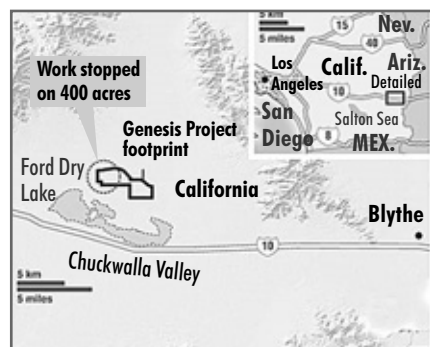
Temple wealth

THESE days, religion is being undermined. The sole aim of religion is to develop one's spirituality, thereby, bringing one closer to god. This ethos is not followed today.

Every place of religion, be it a church or temple or mosque, has modified their roles besides being a place of worship. Every religious place has now become a business proposition with proper management and distribution systems to make their income and profit viable. The religious financial empires in the whole world are limitless. One major factor contributing to amassed wealth of religious places is tax benefits. Donations to these places are exempted from tax. The recent disclosure of wealth in the secret vaults of Shree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram is one example. The temple is one of the wealthiest temples in India. The final estimate of its wealth might help it overtake the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple in Andhra Pradesh, hitherto thought to be the wealthiest temple, having some Rs 32,000 crore (\$7.04 billion) in gold, coins and other assets. Now, the question definitely arises as what to do with all the wealth. Previously, such wealth was distributed to the poor for their well-being or was utilised for other charitable work because it was not always possible for the administration/king to reach all the people.

Today, democratic governments are in place. So, why not let the government take over these assets after proper valuation? After all, the sole purpose of utilisation of the money is for the well-being of the common people. In addition, provisions should also be made at least to levy taxes partly on donations to religious places. Most of the time, high-value donations come from 'unknown devotees'. These donations help them save taxes besides turning black money into white. In order to bring in more money in the system, this will be a good measure in addition to keeping a tab on an overlooked mode of utilising black money.

Subhankar Paul



NOTE: Ford Dry Lake was once the site of prehistoric human settlements



Source: US Bureau of Land Management, California Department of Fish and Game, California Energy Commission/MCT

Trouble at Genesis

Work has stopped on 400 acres (162 hectares) of the 1,950-acre (789-hectare) Genesis Solar Energy Project as experts assess prehistoric artifacts found on-site. Biologists are also investigating the first known epidemic of canine distemper in desert kit foxes

Desert kit fox

Foxes were encouraged to leave their dens during construction by "passive hazing", which included removing food and sprinkling coyote urine at den openings



FACTOID

If you are in the UK and want to order party products for children's parties, you can get it from a company called Party Pieces. Carole Middleton, a full-time mum, founded Party Pieces in 1987 when she found it difficult to source fun, simple party products for her children's parties. She started it from a shed in her back garden. When her business grew, husband Michael, quit his job to join the company. Party Pieces and its founders would have remained little known, except for their daughter Kate's marriage. Yes, Carole and Michael's daughter married Prince William last year. The company meanwhile is very much in business.

SENJAM RAJ SEKHAH

MY SACRED BULL

Your miseries are only for you to bear

Parvez Imam

SOMEONE cheats on a partner. Someone on a little child. Someone on their own self. Someone too beguiled.

The world just carries on Even when it is torn To shreds as petty properties That someone else will own. Someone else out their dies In some patriotic fight And valour is rewarded By those, who sit on bribes And drink from crystal glasses That shine of blood and sweat Of all those godforsaken souls Who tread the beaten tracks.

The horses must be tamed. For, blinded they can gain A fortune for their masters And their sacred, holy claims. Question not what it gives you? You give yourself to us "Work is worship" get that chant Do not create a fuss. This life, it is but just a test The real one lies ahead Way beyond the seven seas And seven mountain crests. Where you shall meet the king of kings And live in luxury But for that dream to be, you must Burn in penury. And lose yourself in turns and twists That this story has About the nether world of god And all that snazzy jazz. But, till you question, doubt and search We cannot take you in But once you submit soullessly, You are accepted in.

So be prepared to sacrifice Even if we play dice Give up your wealth, do not look back Just hail the lord and hit the sack Those blisters aren't anything An illusion for the lord to sing

A happy tune as he rests upon A feather bed where diamonds shone And muses dance to bring him sleep After a hard, long day.

And you my friend, this is your test Burnt, hard bread and a heavy head The scorns, your needs and miseries, Vanishing wealth and buckling knees But hail the lord, just hail the lord. Inhale the love. Sing the happy chord He's watching you. He's testing you. And after death you shall attain That coveted place in heaven.

And we shall take upon your wealth And let our coffers overflow With sweat and blood that you must drip Magic for our modest growth.

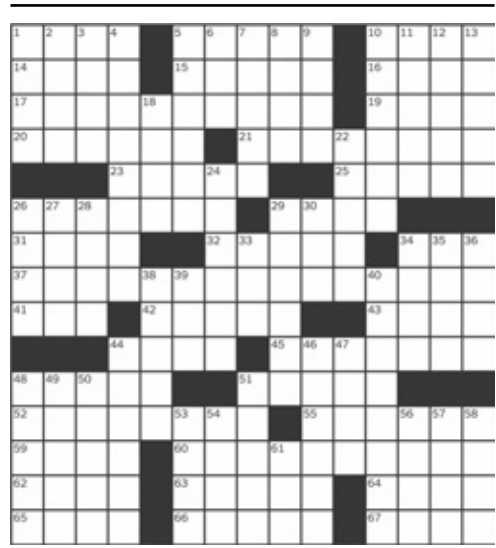
And oh, those angels love you so On either shoulders perched so low Featherlight yet heavyweight With morals, pulling you below. The fairies too dance over you They love you but won't interfere Your miseries are for you to bear If heaven you must dare.

So in the end what do you learn? Morality or religious fun? Someone once said somewhere, somehow, "Morality makes you do what's right No matter what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told No matter what is right."

But right and wrong are relative Like scales of two dissimilar songs. Which one you choose is yours to sing And hold the tune along. But think about those pictures grey That keep you tied, always at bay The pride, that you have buried deep Somewhere beneath some little creep.

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(The writer is a filmmaker, traveller and doctor)

NYT CROSSWORD



- Across**
1 Course in the biology dept
5 Prize won by Obama and Carter
10 Pickle containers
14 Rogen of "Knocked Up"
15 Strong adhesive
16 Black cloud or black cat, to some
17 Do-it-yourselfer's activity
19 Spanish sparkling wine
20 Come next
21 Compares (to)
23 With 51-Across, nitpick... or a hint to 17-, 37- and 60-Across
25 Affirmatives
26 Turns down
29 Last word of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow"
31 Altogether it's worth the most bonus troops in Risk
32 Giraffe's cousin
34 Snowmobile part
37 New York singing group that last performed in 2007
41 It's "the word"
42 Ability
43 Digital camera mode

- 44 Reminder of an old wound
45 To's enclosure
48 Suffix with Kafka or Zola
51 See 23-Across
52 Come together
55 Preparing to drive, with "up"
59 Half-pint
60 Forum cheer
62 Govt. meatstamping org.
63 What "O" stands for in the magazine business
64 Knock for a loop
65 Son of John and Yoko
66 "GoodFellas" Oscar winner Joe
67 Gulp from a flask
- Down**
1 Stadium (Big Apple tennis locale)
2 Vegas gas
3 Dinero dispensers
4 Bar habitué's order, maybe
5 Replaceable part of a phonograph
6 Antonym: Abbr.
7 Blowhard's claim
8 Interstate sign
9 Vega's constellation

- 10 Big name in underwear
11 Pile up
12 Show with skits
13 Alternatives to buttons
18 Contract negotiators, for short
22 Critic of the selfless
24 Weathercaster's pressure line
26 Chicago mayor Emanuel
27 Jacob's twin
28 Unwilling to budge
29 Place for a facial
30 Short albums, for short
33 "Tik"
34 With 57-Down, memorable "Seinfeld" character, with "the"
35 Charlie Brown toy that's often "eaten" by a tree
36 Steel component
38 Show host
39 Culpa
40 TV's Clampetts, e.g.
44 Mideast bigwig
46 Nutlike Chinese fruit
47 Two-dimensional measure
48 Hosiery shades

Answer to yesterday's Crossword

