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Lord of the rings: Why aam aadmi is sitting pretty

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Nasir belongs to a village in Bihar but has moved some distance from his physical and mental origins — he works in an office canteen and recently, had to contact a mobile phone helpline. He says he was gobsmacked when a polite female voice answered the phone and all his queries. “I never thought they would bother to talk to me,” says Nasir.

Clearly, the canteen boy had underestimated his importance as a mobile phone subscriber. Across India, there are many like him and they are part of a radical change in mindset, expectations, worldview and aspiration. But the revolution underway is not the result of a political doctrine — it is the product of new technology.

It would be no overstatement to say nothing like this has happened before. Never before in its history has India experienced such widespread technological change, which is affecting the lives of millions. A record 128 million people became new cellphone subscribers in the year beginning April 2008. The corresponding figure for China was 89 million. Although China still boasts the largest mobile phone subscriber base, India’s growth rate is the fastest. About 70% of India’s one-billion people use cellphones.

More change is expected soon. Very soon, the handset is going to double as a platform for informal banking. A migrant worker will be able to transfer money to his family just by sending a text message. The Reserve Bank of India has already given permission to 40 banks to enter the mobile money market. “Mobile banking is a way of empowerment for the underprivileged,” says minister of state for telecommunications Sachin Pilot. Pointing to the social significance of the technology, he says, “Mobile banking could be a great leveler in our kind of society.”

He is right. India’s technology-driven transformation is already apparent to the naked eye. It extends from physical participation in a change-making act to virtual attendance. The importance of this last should not be underestimated. The violence perpetrated by West Bengal’s ruling Marxists on the villagers in Nandigram would not have made international headlines but for mobile phones and 24X7 television.

A decade earlier, such brutalities would not have stirred the nation, simply because the news would not have reached the outside world along with their moving freight of troubling television pictures.

Once it was thought that the biggest agent of change in the world was the automobile. But mobile telephony, satellite television and the internet have arguably had deeper impact than automobiles. They have affected social mores profoundly because they are more invasive than the automobile. “It’s a fact that social silos are breaking down because of the new freedom coming along with informal economy of power that mobile telephony has given,” says social scientist Shiv Visvanathan. “The little instrument eliminates social structures and obliterates the role of intermediaries,” he adds.

For Indian society particularly, technology is a way of leapfrogging over entrenched biases. Psychologist Asis Nandy says that new avenues of communication can create an impersonal reality that does away with biases. Social commentator Santosh Desai concurs. “The mobile-phone and DTH technologies provide non-linear avenues of change and create a sequential kind of distancing, which removes many forms of inequality, institutionalized in society over the centuries.”

For India, the harvest of technological change has not come a moment too soon. But there is still some distance to go. Countries like Kenya are already reaping the benefits of technology. For instance, one-fifth of Kenya’s population uses the M-PESA mobile-money scheme to transfer cash and pay bills. Surveys show that incomes of those using M-PESA have gone up. “Cheaper, faster and essentially plebeian in character, such technology breaks social stagnation injecting a new mobility into the life of the masses,” says an analyst.

Clearly, the mobile money market’s potential in India is enormous — and exciting. Listen out for the change.