

The Times of India Online

Printed from timesofindia.indiatimes.com

Cell phones: Poor man's gadget

[30 Apr, 2006 1632hrs IST IANS]

DHAKA: It's a billion dollar question: how do the poor of the planet use their mobile phones? A South Asian study conducted in India and Sri Lanka that looks at telecom users with monthly incomes of less than \$100 says that over half the respondents do not even own the phone they use.

Conducted by the Learning Initiatives on Reforms for Network Economies LIRNEasia, the survey covered 3,199 people -- and seven diverse districts of India and four in Sri Lanka.

It found that 31 percent of fixed owners and seven percent of mobile owners allow non-family members to use their phones. "Keeping in touch" with friends and family locally was the biggest use of telephones.

Women spend equally as long on the phone as men, and use the phone for the same purposes.

More than two-thirds of those studied do not take advantage of 'off-peak' rates. Less than 10 percent of mobile users that switch off phones do so to avoid incoming calls. Some 33 percent of Indian mobile users bought second-hand handsets.

LIRNEasia's Sri Lanka-based researcher Ayesha Zainudeen said that, "This survey did cover very diverse areas." Locations studied were a rural-urban and geographically spread list.

In India these included Mumbai, Kasaragod (Kerala), Sivaganga (Tamil Nadu), Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh), Cuttack (Orissa), Dehradun (Uttaranchal) and Neemuch (Madhya Pradesh).

"There are lots of stories you hear, like the one about people using missed-calls to lower phone bills. But we found that people were not very strategic in their use. They were making peak call hours," she added.

...Zainudeen said this was probably because many users of telecom services don't own their phone, so they don't have the luxury of deciding when to make or receive a call.

"In India we found a large number of people - 50 percent of our sample - still using the mobile phone as a fashion statement, probably because it's a younger mobile market.

"It was a pilot. We hope to replicate it this year in six countries," added Zainudeen.

"Out of all the people in financially constrained communities we approached, the number of people who had not used a phone at all in the last three months was less than one percent in Sri Lanka and 12 percent in India," Zainudeen noted.

People were using phones for what the survey broadly classified as "relationship maintenance purposes".

This seemed to fly in the face of widely accepted views and anecdotes about people using phones for business transactions. "That use was very low," she said.

LIRNEasia said "several sub-studies" were currently being developed from the "vast dataset".

Some would look at gender patterns in the use of telecom, a case study of telecommunication use in the post-conflict society of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, emerging (SMS) and dying (telegram) services, price sensitivity, pre-paid mobiles and 'strategies' in the use of telecom services.

LIRNEasia's programmes have been primarily funded by Canada's International Development Research Center and by infoDev, a World Bank unit.

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