
Text message helpline for Indian farmers

By Peter Foster in New Delhi

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Embattled Indian farmers facing the threat of drought, pestilence and cyclonic storms are turning to mobile telephones to give them advance warning of livelihood-threatening disasters which could lie ahead.

Although much of Indian agriculture still relies on the bullock and the buffalo, the use of mobile phones to warn of dangers and share market information is promising to revolutionise life for many.

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In a scheme set up by India's equivalent of Oxbridge - the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai - farmers are using SMS messages to receive alerts and ask questions of experts and colleagues.

Called "aAQUA" - short for "almost all questions answered" - the scheme enables farmers to enquire about everything from projected rainfall patterns, disease forecasts for plants and animals and to how to milk buffaloes more efficiently.

More than 100m new mobiles are sold in India every year and in India's rural areas - where 65 per cent of the population still live - the mobile is changing life far quicker than the internet which connects less than 4 per cent of the population.

"We realised that the internet is not penetrating as fast as we thought," said the Dean of IIT Mumbai, Krithi Ramamritham, "while recent mobile phone penetration is high in rural areas, so we decided to make use of this phenomenon."

It is hoped that the service will ease the plight of many distressed Indian farmers who, according to a recent Indian government report, commit suicide at a rate of one every 34 minutes because of debts, crop failures and other problems.

The service receives a wide range of questions from the "rates for cucumbers in Kolapur market" to advice on building cow barns and request for "a list of Indian exporters for stevia", a herb used as a sugar substitute.

Typical was the query from a Mr Gaju Lambhade, a small farmer in Maharashtra: "Sir. Will it be good to use milking machine for milking 10 Buffaloes? In future I will be increasing the number of buffaloes. Which make of milking machine is good and what will be the approximate cost of it?"

And back comes the reply, complete with a list of suppliers for milking machines, some advice on which machines were

the best quality and a warning that cow milking machines need to be adapted with special teats to work on buffaloes.

The schemes pioneers believe its potential is limitless and say they are already in talks with an Indian mobile handset manufacturer to construct a phone with special features just for farmers.

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