New tech to empower India's poor: Information minister

New digital ID cards, online markets, bank accounts promise access

Ravi Shankar Prasad, India's electronics and information technology minister (Photo by Yuji Kuronuma)

The Digital India program is designed to empower every Indian, via technology, digital delivery of services, and the creation of opportunities in health care, education and many other things.

For example, India's population of 1.3 billion own 1.15 billion Aadhaar cards, with verifiable digital identities. We separately opened 280 million Jan Dhan accounts, for poor people who did not have bank accounts. We linked them to Aadhaar and started directly depositing

benefits for the poor into the bank accounts, including subsidies for gasoline and kerosene and payments for government-sponsored work.

Aadhaar works via encrypted iris and fingerprint data. We are linking drivers' licenses with Aadhaar, too. Suppose a reckless driver consumes liquor, causes an accident and people die. This person might try to duplicate his license to escape the law. But Aadhaar says, "No. You have a license already." It is a safe, secure system and a unique achievement of India. For Aadhaar, we spend one dollar per head -- this is cheap technology. Digital governance is good governance.

There are other benefits. Farmers often have nowhere to sell their crops, except at the local market. So we opened "e-NAM" -- a website that links markets in 285 counties. You just go and click on it, negotiate with all the individual markets, and sell to whoever offers the best price.

We also have "e-Hospital." Today there are 81 hospitals where you can book your appointment online. More than half a million people have made appointments this way.

India is home to 500 million internet users, including both landline and wireless access. In the last three years, 72 mobile-related factories have come to India, of which 42 manufacture mobile equipment and 30 make chargers, batteries, etc. As India's digital ecosystem develops, I see a great possibility of achieving up to 1 billion internet penetration. Already, the total number of mobile phone users is 1.08 billion, and Aadhaar is 1.15 billion.

India's digital economy is going to become a $1 trillion economy in the next three to four years from nearly $500 billion currently. In the coming 5-7 years, about 2.5 million to 3 million new jobs will be created in India as the digital ecosystem develops.

We are also connecting 250,000 villages by fiber-optic networks, which will be complete by 2018.

India is a country where everyone is permitted to come. For instance, Reliance Jio is here, Airtel is here, Vodafone is here, Aircel is here. We encourage fair competition.

Every operator comes with their own business architecture. They know about their margins and the sheer size of the Indian market -- 1.3 billion-plus people. And if they consolidate, or if they don't, that's their call. We don't interfere.