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Indians are the second-highest app downloaders, accounting for 11.6% of all global app downloads, according to data.ai (formerly App Annie). bloomberg

NEW DELHI : Ignored by users and app-makers alike, the Indian government's Mobile Seva app store continues to languish over a decade into its existence, unable to leverage the explosive growth of shopping, gaming and mobile payment apps.

Built by the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC) and the Department of Electronics and Information Technology (DeitY) in 2011, the Mobile Seva app store initially hosted only government apps.

In March 2021, the government attempted to revive Mobile Seva by opening it for private apps too. Ravi Shankar Prasad, who was IT minister at the time, told the Lok Sabha that the app store hosted over 965 apps from various public services domains.

"While the government encourages private players to host apps, it is equally keen to develop and encourage its own mobile app store," he said.

However, as of 15 April, the store had only 1,058 apps, many of which were government ones. Among the prominent private apps on the platform are the digital payments platform Paytm and the social media app Koo.

Mobile Seva has seen only 88.5 million app downloads since inception, even as Indians downloaded over 27 billion apps from Google and Apple's app stores in 2021, according to data.ai (formerly App Annie).

Worldwide, Indians were the second-highest app downloaders, accounting for 11.6% of all global app downloads, according to the 'State of Mobile 2021' report by data.ai published this January.

Why did India's 'atmanirbhar' app store fail to catch on? Analysts point to several reasons: The lack of partnerships with phone makers, inadequate promotion, and poorly designed user interfaces.

Some analysts said that the limited adoption clearly reflects that private companies haven't found it worth investing in despite being floated as India's indigenous app store.

"The government had allowed private apps on this store last year, and Paytm and Koo had volunteered to put their apps on this platform. Since then, there have been no promotions to boost the store, and nor have there been OEM (original equipment manufacturer) tie-ups to put Mobile Seva as a default app store on phones," technology policy analyst Prasanto K. Roy said.

He added that if the Union government wants to make a serious push for Mobile Seva's adoption, it would be approaching smartphone brands on the Make in India bandwagon, such as Xiaomi, which could help push its adoption.

Social media app Koo has been on the Mobile Seva store since January 2022. Its adoption,

however, has been largely limited, according to Mayank Bidawatka, the app's co-founder.

"Adoption is still small on the platform, and we've so far seen about a thousand downloads from it," he added.

Given the limited level of adoption, Koo has not made a concerted push to offer Mobile Seva as a way to download its app. Bidawatka said Google Play Store remains the de facto choice for most of its downloads, and while the government's platform does offer benefits like no deductions from in-app payments earned, such factors make no difference for a service like Koo, which does not have in-app purchases.

He also said that maintaining the Koo app on an additional platform requires the company to focus separately on delivering all updates that it does to its Android app on the Play Store.

"We try to maintain the regularity of updates as far as we can, but it is a tedious process to follow," Bidawatka said. Since being added to Mobile Seva on 11 January, the Koo app has not received any updates. The app's latest update on the Play Store came on 8 April.

Sijo Kuruvilla George, executive director of the Alliance of Digital India Foundation (ADIF), said that the organic advantage that Google and Apple already have with their app stores would not be outdone simply by removing in-app payment commissions.

"Private apps such as e-commerce services would only want to be present (on an app store) if a sizeable user base exists. The Play Store and App Store already give developers access to massive user bases, and cheaper payment tools aren't incentive enough," he said.

Software restrictions discourage most users from trying alternate stores, he said. "Even on Android, though the ecosystem is more 'open' on paper, if the average user tries to install apps from an alternate site, Google will warn them about the app being dangerous, which could put many non-tech-savvy users off," he said.

The lack of a refined user base could also deter the adoption of Mobile Seva. Roy said government services do not always offer the best user experience, resulting in slower organic adoption.

"Such growth would only happen if the government issues a binding regulatory mandate, or private startups decide to be highly nationalist and choose to solely migrate to a government platform. That would be difficult for them since they would lose customers," he added.

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