

Arattai – Everyone is Praying for its Survival

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Can Arattai Go One Up on WhatsApp?

Engaging users is the real test for Indian apps

India has billions online — yet homegrown messaging apps remain rare. Arattai is catching eyes, but can it move beyond the buzz to challenge WhatsApp or will it fizzle out like Koo? Indian social media apps often stumble because they fall short on the essentials: tech, business and innovation. The tech architecture of a successful social media app is not difficult to replicate. The business model is also established around targeted advertising, which is again not a barrier. The summit lies in the creative expression of users, where most Indian apps struggle with originality. Copycat versions of established media platforms can't break their network power despite having a large potential customer base. The lack of innovation has posed the biggest challenge to the development of homegrown social media, although technical support and monetisation strategies have also contributed to the overall gloom.



The holy grail for media platforms is creating a new form of content that activates the network effect. As content tech evolves, it opens a wide field of innovative social communication. The ability to pull all existing and emerging content formats onto one platform, however, does not ensure success. Community development requires special effort through discoverability, where the tech backend comes into play.

The safe course in building an SM platform is to offer a bundle of services that includes content sharing. Instead of betting on the next TikTok, tech companies are more comfortable developing a WeChat-like platform that offers a broad range of services, from shopping to playing games. In either case, Chinese app developers have shown the way to break Silicon Valley's stranglehold over social media. Indian apps, unfortunately, score poorly on both convenience and creativity, which makes every new attempt at a social media breakthrough a heart-breaking effort. Then again, all it takes is one success. Social media will remain a dynamic medium, keeping hopes alive for the eventual arrival of an Indian champion.



Arattai is like a neonate born after precious pregnancy. Everyone in

India is praying for its safety and survival. Reason is that it is pitted against mighty WhatsApp, which is the product of equally mighty business establishment, Meta. Meta is not only technically advanced but also has enough capacity to defeat a rival product. WhatsApp did this with its rival, Signal. Some years back Signal came to India but then vanished. Around that time, WhatsApp first announced that it intended to introduce paid service but this plan was abandoned when Signal arrived at the scene. And now Signal is almost forgotten in India.

For the time being, Arattai has sentimental appeal amongst conscious users in India but it is my personal observation during the last two-three days that less conscious users like aged persons, house wives, etc. are not keen to migrate to Arattai because they do not know how to settle themselves on new platform when most of their contacts are still on WhatsApp. We in TheLayerics have not been able to contact several of our clients on Arattai because they have not yet joined Arattai.

Everyone is wishing that nascent App fully takes off to face bigger challenges from international rivals.

Persons in this field know how Koo sank. Our Government in India too is to be blamed for Koo's extinction. It ought to have provided initial protection to Koo but the Government was completely indifferent. Many of us enthusiastically joined Koo. The then minister of information technology endorsed it for some time but then it became a neglected child.

Contrary to Koo, Arattai has received sufficient endorsement from Government. Let us hope that Arattai safely crosses infancy. There is no harm in providing it some financial support by way of grant-in-aid or loan on soft terms so that it is able to expand its capacity to absorb subscribers' surge it is currently facing.

Most of us have not only tried WhatsApp but also its parallel messaging services like Signal and Telegram. In Telegram, I can say on the basis of my personal experience, that I felt some data safety concerns and discontinued it. I am not fully sure whether my apprehension was

well founded or was a mere suspicion but I found myself in peace after discontinuing it.

Arattai has come with much sense of relief. Not only that it is an Indian App but its server is also said to be located in India. It is subject to Indian laws, particularly data protection, anti-monopoly and consumer protection laws. At least there is someone to catch hold if Zoho does not stick to norms of a simple intermediary only.

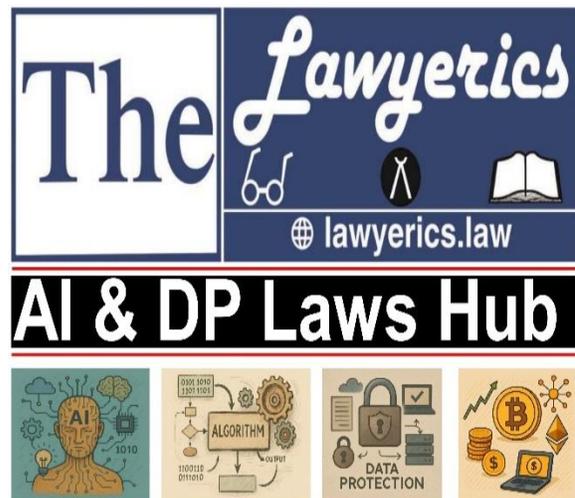
However, it is better that Arattai is gently pressurised to be a paid service. Revenue model based on shedding our data for free service has its own advantages. Paid service would ensure greater consumer protection. Still better course is that some rival Indian messaging Apps are promoted so that Arattai does not in due course become autocratic. Government by using statutory provisions of anti-competition laws, should insist on inter-operability of messaging Apps. This will ensure that no single App becomes monopolistic.

Long back, when landline telephony came into existence, the customers in USA in order to talk to each other, were obliged to get connections

from same service provider or to get telephone connections from more than one service provider. The problem was resolved by introducing regime of inter-connection and inter-operability. Similar regime ought to be introduced in messaging service. Anti-trust law of USA was pressed into service for this change.

For the time-being Arattai should be allowed to be developed as a complete rival of WhatsApp but gradually competition ought to be introduced so that consumers receive best service in terms of

quality and price. Government as well as private players like BSNL, MTNL, Airtel, Jio, Tata, Infosys, Wipro, etc. should be encouraged to compete for providing paid messaging service.



Authors' introduction: Vidya Sagar and Amolak are running the law firm, TheLawyerics, and are practising lawyers of the Supreme Court of India. They generally concentrate in their legal practice on cases relating to technology related laws. They can be reached through e-mail Id., vs.adv[at]outlook[dot]com.