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IFFCO, Airtel hand power to the villages

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NEW DELHI: Technology is going places. And guiding it to India's far-flung villages is a joint venture between IFFCO and Airtel. On Friday, IFFCO subsidiary IFFCO Kisan Sanchar and Bharti Airtel form a joint venture for rural telephony, which will take gadgets and services to the countryside, where power is in short supply. Transistors, community radios, mobiles and torches which don't rely on power — you name it, they got it.

The JV will use IFFCO's co-operative network for marketing telephone services while Bharti will be the service provider. The early targets could be tech-wannabes in rural Uttar Pradesh, who are already familiar with some of these products, thanks to a pilot project conducted late last year. The services are available in several districts of Tamil Nadu as well. The JV, according to sources, is targeting 20% growth every year and expects some 150 million customers by 2011.

The JV will bring several hand-cranked products of common use. These include transistors, community radios and torches. There will also be lanterns with a battery life of three years. The wind-up transistors were invented in 1996 and are now used in several African nations. The hand-powered radio on offer will be a world-first. Some of the wind-up products are marketed worldwide by UK's Freeplay.

For last year's pilot projects, the mobile phones were partly sourced from Sinocell. The wide-screen BlackBerry-lookalike, which can access e-mail to commodity prices to agricultural inputs, was priced at around Rs 4,000. The small-screen version may cost around Rs 2,000.

Phones from Alcatel, Samsung and Phillips will also be sold at lower rates, but IFFCO could launch its own brand later. The power-free, wind-up charger will be a boon for the power-strapped rural user.

Around 3-7 minutes hand-cranking a day can charge the phones. The charger will come free with the mobile phones, which will sport SIM cards branded IFFCO-Airtel Green Card. A two-year warranty for handsets, after-sales service for farmers and wide rural connectivity after Airtel sets up enough towers are also on the cards.