

THE SMARTEST OF THEM ALL

Shifu, the *Made in India* smartphone sidekick is set to outsmart the best of the breed apps. **BY ANSHU KUMARI**

“Shifu is your smart friend who lives in your smartphone. It observes when and how you use your phone. It knows what important things need your attention and when is the right time to show them to you...Shifu reminds you to do things which are important to you... Shifu reminds you of things which you otherwise would have missed and it does so without being intrusive. Shifu is the sidekick you always wanted.”

Sounds interesting, right? Welcome to the world of smarter *Made in India* application Shifu. Yes, this app with a Chinese name pronounced “shur-foo” in China, and “shee-foo” the Indian way, is smarter than your iPhone voice assistant Siri or your Google Now assistant for Android phones.

Prashant Singh, Co-founder, Signals, the fledgling company behind Shifu, explains how Shifu is very different from Siri and other apps in this space. “Siri provides a voice-based interface to control smartphones. In this, the user has to think what to do. Siri does not do the thinking for the user nor does it suggest what the user can possibly do

at a given point of time. But Shifu does exactly that. It makes suggestions and helps the user make smart use of not just his smartphone but also his time.”

For all of us who just can’t live without our smartphone, Singh makes a startling declaration: “One thing most people don’t realise is that in spite of all the advances we have made in smartphone technology, it is still not that smart.”

He backs his contention saying, “Beyond some surface level detail, a smartphone is not very different from a regular one as, for example, both show call logs in reverse chronological order and not in the order of importance of calls. Neither phone can sense when to go on silent mode on its own. Shifu is our attempt to solve such issues.”

What excites the creator about this app is that almost “every screen, from home screen wallpaper to phonebook, can be made more intelligent with software.” He says a phone can remind a user of what’s important based on signals like location, connectivity and context. “All this will make a smartphone truly smart. We are very excited about these possibilities,” Singh adds.

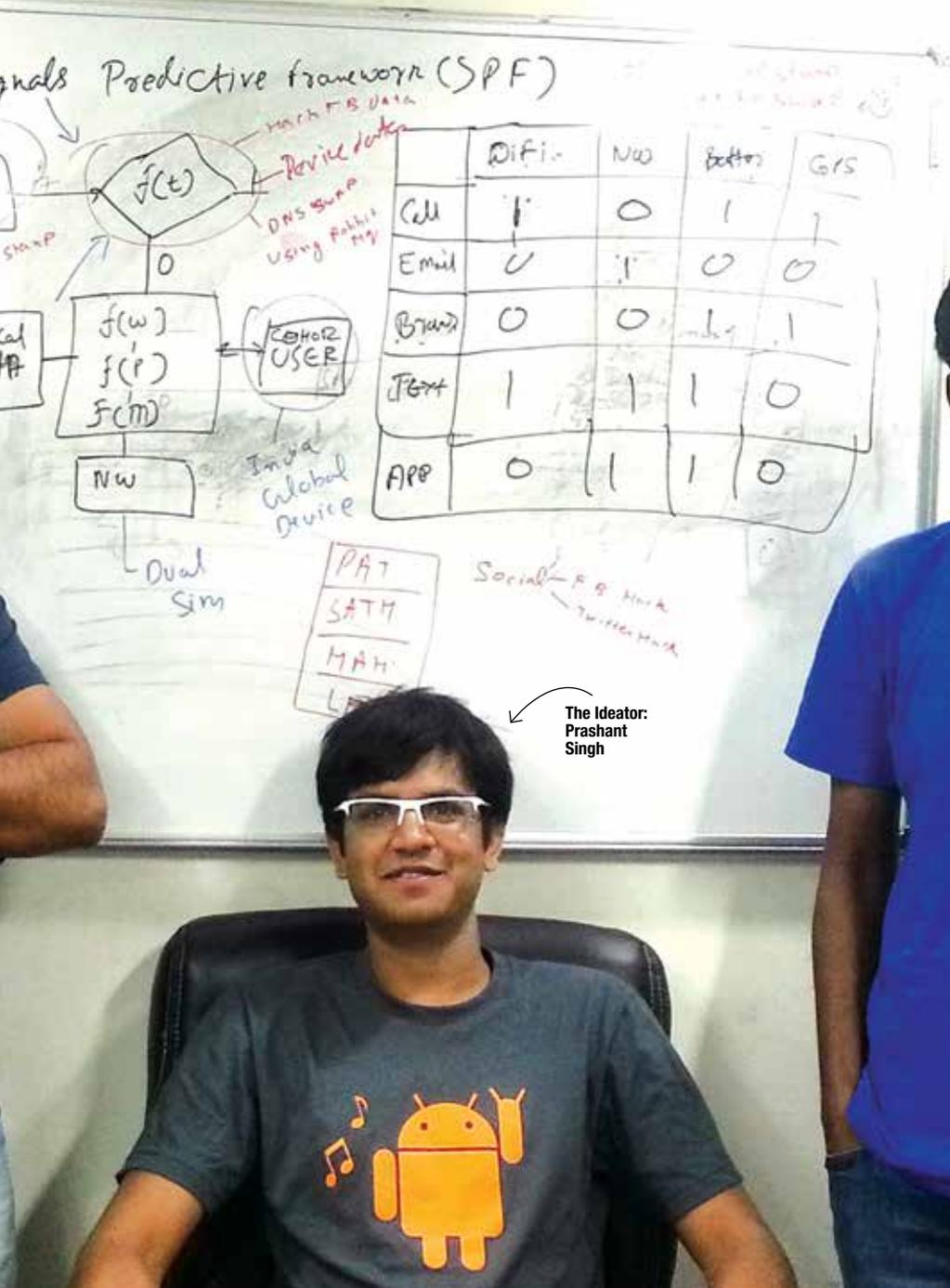
Asked about his journey into this

interesting innovation, Singh says, “I am a Co-founder and the CEO of Signals.” He calls his journey to innovating Shifu “a long story”. However cutting the story short, the dapper innovator continues, “The idea of Shifu germinated while working in my previous job.”

Working with a portfolio of 20 apps which had 53 million downloads Singh used to look at the usage statistics of the apps and wonder, “How can I make use of this information to help people get more out of our app? Can I find out when the user is free and bored and remind him to use our app?”

The Creator: Deepansh Jain





Singh was sure that this kind of gentle nudging at the right time could help the user get more value from the apps. "I thought if I could do this for our apps, why can't I do it for the entire phone experience, i.e., can I make the phone suggest what is the best use of it at a given point of time?" says Singh, reminiscing about his inspiration.

His thoughts were leading him in the direction where the phone would nudge the user to make/return a phone call to a friend, check Facebook, visit a nearby coffee shop, or watch a video, or upload a picture, etc. There were so many ways

in which a mobile phone could be used, and Singh wanted to figure out the best way of doing so.

"The idea and its impact were so huge that I had to take a chance at making it a reality," Singh gives a glimpse into his determination. The budding innovator decided to quit his job. He partnered with two of his friends, Michael Massey and Deepansh Jain, in November 2012, to launch Signals, the startup that was to launch the breakthrough app Shifu eight months later in June 2013.

Massey is not just the Co-founder but the Custodian of Server and Analytics.

"He is the man behind all the server side magic you see in Shifu," says Singh. With a Masters in Computer Science from IIT Kharagpur, Massey's love for analysing data has his partners' respect. "He is obsessed with optimising algorithms," reveals Singh.

Deepansh Jain, the third partner in the trio, leads all of the client side initiatives at Signals. He holds a B. Tech degree in Computer Science from Delhi College of Engineering. "Deepansh is a very active member of Android forums and was the first moderator of StackOverflow from India," says Singh proudly. Jain

manages an online community of ebook enthusiasts. This serial innovator built a couple of apps in his college days which got half a million downloads in aggregate. He built an Android app for India Against Corruption (IAC) which proved to be very popular.

Singh himself has an illustrious list of achievements for one so young. He has eight years of experience in mobile app development; he is the founder of the Delhi chapter of Mobile Monday (MoMo), an industry association for mobile developers; and he was on the program management team at Monsoon Multimedia, a mobile TV startup based in San Mateo, part of the core team at Spice Labs, which developed a portfolio of apps that got 53 million downloads and reached a daily revenue of ₹123,780–495,120 (US\$ 2000–8000). “We were the top publisher of apps on Blackberry, Nokia and Android,” says Singh about his last stint.

A resident of Rajasthan, Singh credits his innovative streak to his environment. “All of us are born with this tendency to be creative. Some are more fortunate to be born in an environment, which (1) provides us enough resources to take care of survival needs like food and shelter and (2) encourages enquiry and helps us with resource and guidance to get ourselves educated to find answers.”

Coming back to Shifu, Singh says it means “teacher or enlightened friend who helps you.” Shifu was a deliberate choice for the team after much rumination. “We considered many names, some 15 of them, and followed a systematic approach to choose the best one,” says Singh. “Other names considered, some inspired by books, mythologies and films had some issue or the other so we finally opted for Shifu.” Users certainly have no issues for the name has found instant appeal.

Explaining the working of Shifu Singh says, “It mines your cellphone usage data and algorithmically estimates how much of free time you have and recommends what you can do in that time.” These recommendations are



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— Prashant Singh, Co-founder & Innovator, Signals & Shifu

served via Tiles. Shifu serves the alerts superimposing them over your existing live wallpaper and the user can act on them by tapping and bringing in the option menu. “It’s like having a smart friend in your smartphone,” says Singh. The app is free and is available via Android app stores. “We are very happy with the response we have received from the market. In little more than a month we have got 8,000 users hooked to Shifu,” declared Singh.

No wonder the company has big plans in the offing. But first they are filing a US patent for it. “We are in the process of drafting a patent application for a few algorithms and design techniques we have used in Shifu,” informs Singh.

Meanwhile, the team is exploring all possibilities to make Shifu the ultimate best friend indeed. “We want it to help you in everything, from showing an intelligent alert for the battery to helping you stay in touch with your friend. The possibility of what can be done with Shifu is immense and I believe that we are just scratching the surface of our smartphones,” says a confident Singh.

The latest Merry Meeker 2013 Internet Trends Report says that a typical smartphone user looks at his device 150 times a day. “They don’t have a fixed

thing to do with their device for each of the 150 times. Most of the time people switch on their phone and do the first thing that comes to their mind. We don’t consider all options because it requires a lot of time and work. With Shifu we want to change that. It can do the thinking for you and suggest the most suitable use of your phone at that time,” Singh shares Signal’s future vision for Shifu.

“We are witnessing some interesting ways in which people are using Shifu,” he says adding cautiously, “But it’s a little too soon to talk about the future roadmap.” Talking about the challenges of running a global startup in India Singh says, “We are one of the very few product startups in the country. This is my fourth startup and the first one as a founder. Running a global startup is a hard task everywhere in the world.” In India he finds “on the positive side you have access to a significant chunk of the market. We can develop our product at a fraction of their cost.” However, as Singh says, “No one has built a global product like Shifu in India before, hence finding someone who knows how to do it is tough.” Notwithstanding the challenges, the smart innovator of the smartest smartphone sidekick is sure to find a way to make more smart moves. ■