

FROM CONNECTIVITY TO PRIVACY, IT TAKES CENTRE STAGE

BharatNet to offer big bang broadband

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Calcutta, Dec. 3: The Narendra Modi-government has drawn up plans for an ambitious \$70-billion optical fibre network that will crisscross across the country and underpin Digital India's objective to provide broadband connectivity to all by 2020.

Telecom regulator R.S. Sharma admitted today that the original plan for a national optical fibre network (NOFN) — conceptualised in 2011 at a modest initial cost of Rs 20,000 crore — had been a miserable failure and the government was hoping to learn from those mistakes and avoid them when implementing BharatNet.

"Bharat Net will not be an NOFN-2," Sharma said at the inaugural session of Infocom 2015 here today.

India suffers from very poor broadband speeds and BharatNet is the Modi government's initiative to provide blazing fast download speeds that will bring India up to speed with the rest of the world. The definition of broadband itself needs to be tweaked from a low-ball 512 kilobits per second (kbps) that was framed in 2012.

The national telecom policy of 2012 had targeted 175 million broadband connections by 2017 and 600 million by 2020 at a minimum 2 megabits per second (Mbps) download speed. Eventually, it hoped to provide higher speeds of at least 100 Mbps on demand.

"But the NOFN did not deliver on its goal to provide connectivity to 250,000 gram panchayats because of structural issues," Sharma said at the 14th edition of Infocom, an ABP group initiative. A consultation paper on BharatNet floated by Trai two weeks ago said only 3,384 panchayats had been connected till date.

BharatNet was conceived after a review of the NOFN project carried out earlier this year. "Yesterday, we debated at Trai how BharatNet can be im-



(From left) Chitra Ramkrishna, managing director and CEO of NSE, SBI chairperson Arundhati Bhattacharya, STPI director-general Omkar Rai, Trai chairman R.S. Sharma and D.D. Purkayastha, managing director and CEO of ABP Pvt Ltd, in Calcutta on Thursday. Picture by Pradip Sanyal

plemented so that it doesn't suffer the structural constraints of the earlier programme."

The aim is to offer 1 gigabit per second of connectivity to the panchayats. It is still not known how BharatNet will be funded and operated.

The original report on the NOFN had considered three options: the first was to get central PSUs such as BSNL and RailTel to handle the project with the asset ownership vesting with the Centre.

The second was to get the state governments to head the project by designing and customising its requirements with some equity investment from the Centre.

The third was to hand it over to a private consortium, which would build and maintain the network but the asset would continue to vest with the Centre. It would involve some revenue sharing if bandwidth utilisation crossed a threshold. The latest consultation paper has floated a fourth option that provides for a build-own-operate-transfer model.

Call drop

Trai will conduct a drive test in some cities by the end of this month to assess the progress made by operators in addressing the call drop issue.

"The operators have shared with us the kind of work they have done and are expecting some improvement, but it is only after the drive that we'll be able to validate those assumptions," Sharma said.

Bid to explore tech potential

OUR BUREAU

Calcutta, Dec. 3: The 14th edition of Infocom, an ABP group initiative, kicked off today with the idea of technology playing a crucial role in transforming individual habits in a connected world. It also touched upon the need to put in place a stronger framework on privacy and individual data protection.

"Information and communication technology has played a crucial role in transforming individual habits and through the Digital India initiative the country will continue with the drive towards building a knowledge-based economy," Trai chief R.S. Sharma said.

He said the creation of a large database of individual IDs through the Aadhaar initiative would facilitate the exploration of different frontiers in banking and financial services.

According to the SBI chairperson Arundhati Bhattacharya, IT upgradation is one of the priorities for the bank. "IT has played a key role in solving many issues in banking. In fact, we are recruiting more IT people," Omkar Rai, director-general

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of the Software Technology Parks of India (STPI), said the share of IT sector in the gross domestic product had grown to 9.5 per cent and the trend would continue.

Manish Prakash, director and president of Airtel Business, said mobile devices had played a key role to build a connected world and the next expansion areas for government and corporate houses were the development of smart cities, Internet of things, healthcare and financial services.

Arnab Basu, leader, technology consulting, PricewaterhouseCoopers, said there was a need to focus on privacy and data protection and storage.

"Every two years, the amount of digital data produced from different sources almost doubles. But the growth rate of data storage lags behind that of data generated. But at the moment we are turning a blind eye to issues like privacy and data protection," he said.