Optic fibre network reaches 83,000 gram panchayats; BharatNet to give fillip to
e-commerce, e-governance, education and television services: DoT Secretary

'i-Bharat 2017' focuses on ICT elucidations for Unserved and Unsolved

NEW DELHI, 26 October 2017: The BharatNet project, which aims to deploy high-speed optical fibre cables across rural areas of the country, has now reached 83,000 gram panchayats, **Ms Aruna Sundararajan**, **Secretary, Department of Telecommunications, Government of India,** said here today while speaking at **'i-Bharat 2017'** on the theme *ICT Elucidations for Unserved and Unsolved*, organised by **FICCI in association with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India.**

Ms Sundararajan said that by December this year the first phase of BharatNet will be complete. This would provide 100,000 gram panchayats with broadband connectivity by laying underground optic fibre cable lines. The DoT is aggressively monitoring the prestigious BharatNet initiative that aims to provide Internet connectivity to 2.5 lakh gram panchayats or village blocks by March 2019.

The entire project, when complete, is expected to give a fillip to reaching out e-commerce services, including e governance, education and television services to far flung areas of the country.

The DoT Secretary said that fibreisation was a national imperative and the government, industry and chambers of commerce needed to work in coalition to achieve the objective of doubling the telecom footprint in the country by 2020.

Quoting from internet guru Mary Meeker's 2017 report released in May this year, she said that there are over 355 million monthly active internet users in India, where nearly 109 million smartphones were shipped in 2016. Nearly 46% of internet users in India consume content in local languages. In the first quarter of 2017, 27 million smartphones were shipped. Most Indians used the internet on their mobile phones (80% usage was on mobile as compared to the global average of 50%). The most used browser in India was UC Browser, followed by Chrome and Opera. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Shareit, Truecaller and Facebook are the most used apps in India.

These figures, she said threw up challenges in the policy domain, particularly in terms of security; data privacy and protection; data regulation and data monetisation.

Mr. Som Satsangi, Managing Director, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, who shared the industry perspective, said that with the impending large-scale migration of people from the rural areas to the proposed smart cities, the challenge before industry would be to meet their rising expectations and services on demand. Industry, he said, should be ready to bring low-cost, affordable solutions to the aspirational people at the bottom of the pyramid.

Mr. Anant Goenka, Executive Director, Indian Express Group, in his remarks, said that India would soon overtake China as the consumer base for telecom and IT and therefore, if the objective was to shape digital India, there was a need to look beyond the current trends as also figure out how the country would leverage the database of 'Aadhaar' and at the same time tackle the privacy debate.

Mr. Virat Bhatia, Chairman, ICT & Digital Economy Committee of FICCI, said that following the government initiatives, the internet landscape of India is about to experience a tectonic-shift. The next millions of users that will come on the internet by 2020, will utilise ICT as socio-economic tool of development. To fulfil the dream of 'New India', we all have to work towards good governance and streamlining the marginalized section of the society and transforming India into an empowered and inclusive knowledge-based society, he said.

He said that with the focus on the sustainable growth and development of the digital economy of India, FICCI ICT and Digital Economy Committee continues to work with the industry, government and other stakeholder to come together for policy change and participate in mutual interaction and benefit of the sector.

The day-long conference deliberated on Digital India- Empowering Unserved and Answering Unsolved; Technology driven future of marketplace in India; Information Privacy, Security, and Data Ownership and Network Ecosystem - Bringing the Smart India to Life. It also featured a Start-up Studio Session: Idea to sustainability & raising funds, organized jointly with Start-up India and Invest India.

Dr. Sanjaya Baru, **Secretary General, FICCI,** emphasized the need to have pre-policy consultations between the government and industry rather than resort to post-policy alterations which leads to needless confusion. FICCI, he said, would initiate closed-door consultations for industry so that its representatives can have a free and frank discussion with policy makers in the government.

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