

The Indian telecom sector is undergoing a rapid transformation with data emerging as the focal point of the industry's future growth. The unfolding of a digital society is opening up several opportunities for all stakeholders across the telecom value chain. Towercos, which have served as the engine of growth for the telecom sector in India, are gearing up to leverage new opportunities arising from the convergence of voice and data. They are looking beyond their traditional offerings to create next generation "digital" infrastructure, and are exploring new data-led business avenues and innovative revenue streams. This will also help them to compensate for the short-term tenancy loss that they have faced on account of telco consolidation.

At a recent tele.net conference, Alka Selot Asthana, chief technology officer, Bharti Infratel, shared her views on how sharing of infrastructure is critical for the industry's future. Excerpts...

The introduction of the National Digital Communications Policy (NDCP), 2018 is a very positive development from a policy perspective and is expected to give a big fillip to the telecom infrastructure industry. It is a path-breaking policy that recognises all aspects of a changing digital environment, and has converted these into quantifiable targets. Among the various specific strategic objectives, the key ones are – ensuring broadband for all, creating 4 million additional jobs, enhancing the contribution of digital communications to the GDP, and propelling India into the top 50 nations on the information and communications technology development index of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). There are three key elements to the policy – Connect India, Propel India and Secure India. Under Connect India, several major initiatives have been identified. The key one is BharatNet, which is the world's largest project to connect 250,000 gram panchayats in the country by broadband.

### **Fibre focus**

The focus on fibre has been clearly spelt out in the NDCP 2018 by identifying it as a public utility. The policy also encourages the industry to adopt a collaborative approach for fibre roll-out. It recognises the fiberisation of towers as an effective way of backhauling traffic, and has set a target to fiberise 60 per cent of sites by 2022. The policy also talks about a national digital grid, the setting up of a national fibre authority, and the provisioning of common service ducts. The entire idea behind these initiatives is to ensure effective utilisation of existing and upcoming infrastructure by avoiding duplication. This will also ensure cost optimisation.

## **Spotlight on sharing**

Sharing has been the hallmark of the telecom tower and infrastructure industry in India. The NDCP 2018 envisages expanding and enhancing the role of IP-1s to allow the sharing of active infrastructure, fibre etc. It recognises the convergence of IT, telecom and broadcasting domains for a digital future, and proposes several regulatory reforms that will help the industry in creating digital infrastructure comprising tower, fibre, street furniture etc.

## **Leveraging existing infrastructure**

While evolving market needs call for a new, robust, digital infrastructure, it is imperative to leverage the existing assets to drive connectivity, particularly, in rural areas. The fibre network that has been rolled out under the BharatNet project must be connected to the nearby towers for ensuring backhaul as well as last mile connectivity. Similarly, the large network of common service centres (CSCs), which have been established by the government to offer e-governance and digital services in rural areas, should be utilised effectively. The towers and CSCs are national assets and must be leveraged in conjunction with BharatNet's fibre network to reach end consumers. Even for smart cities, it is imperative that service providers strategise rolling out new infrastructure only after ensuring that the existing ICT infrastructure has been strategically utilised.

## **Execution is the key**

While the NDCP 2018 covers all important aspects of how to drive a digital future, the success of any policy lies in its implementation. For instance, the Right of Way rules released in 2016 are yet to see compliance by all states. Currently, only 13 states have adopted these, while several others are at various stages of discussions.

We have a big digital opportunity unfolding in front of us. It is, thus, imperative to allay concerns around the implementation of the NDCP objectives. There is a need to have smaller committees to ensure the involvement of the industry. It is important that municipal bodies and other such local bodies as well as organisations become a part of the consultation process. The government must put monitoring and review processes in place. It must play a much stronger role to ensure that the gazetted policy becomes implementable.

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