

Enhanced Broadband Speed, Quality and Outreach to boost India's global positioning as an Inclusive Digital Economy: BIF

- *TRAI recommendations call for increased broadband speeds, improved QoS, consumer choice and incentives, penetration, and measures for proliferation of digital infrastructure*

1st September 2021, New Delhi: Broadband India Forum (BIF), has lauded the TRAI's recommendations on "Roadmap to Promote Broadband Connectivity and Enhanced Broadband Speed" as a long awaited acknowledgement of the crucial roles of increased Broadband penetration and Broadband speeds to fuel the next level of digital prowess, boost digital empowerment of India's citizens and lead to inclusive socio-economic growth for the nation. The recommendations provide a series of measures towards incentivising the consumers and service providers to help catalyse sustained growth and advancement in both quality and outreach of fixed broadband services, especially in the rural areas, so as to help India's progress in the global arena as a digitally prosperous and well-connected economy.

The most significant move to revise the minimum download speed of wired broadband to 2 Mbps from the legacy definition of 512 Kbps is admirable, as it would ensure a minimum common benchmark of quality for all users. Further, categorisation of fixed broadband services based on download speeds into Basic, Fast and Super-fast, are in consonance with international best practices and would help consumers have a uniform and valid comparison between offerings to make informed decisions regarding their purchase/subscriptions, based on their requirements and usage. Moreover, this would enhance transparency and consistency of delivery in the provision of broadband services, as well as provide an incentive for ISPs to offer better services.

Mr. TV Ramachandran, President, Broadband India Forum, commented on the development: *"Given that our present broadband speeds are significantly low in comparison to international good practices, revising the minimum broadband speed to 2 Mbps is an essential step, both as per the national policy mandates as well as global benchmarks. The growth and development of new technologies as well as the evolving Quality of Experience (QoE) requirements imposed by new applications/services used by consumers makes it all the more relevant. The regulator's historic suggestion to create a practical demand-side pull by incentivising the consumers through a DBT programme could help proliferate rural digital connectivity like never before."*

Major thrust has been appreciably provided on promoting Rural Broadband connectivity, including a pathbreaking pilot Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) programme suggested to create demand for uptake and usage among rural users, which could be a potential gamechanger. The requirement for licensees to meet subscriber increase targets in smaller cities, towns and rural areas will ensure that growth of fixed-line broadband services is spread across the country, thereby driving greater rural digital inclusion and plugging the connectivity gaps across the country's topography. The suggested incentive to boost broadband penetration via license fee exemption to service providers for an initial period of 5 years, is likely to provide further boost to rural broadband penetration. A detailed monitoring mechanism recommended to have periodic assessment of the efficacy of the incentive scheme would also ensure consistent check on the deliverables from the Service Provider's end.

"India's fixed broadband penetration is among the lowest in the world at only 2 per hundred inhabitants, compared to 95 in China, 55 in Brazil, and 60 in Russia. Despite the rapid growth instilled by 4G in the last

4-5 years, mobile broadband penetration per 100 inhabitants in India too remains at 53.45, compared to 110 in China, 90 in Brazil, and 100 in Russia. If we are to truly accomplish the vision of an inclusive Digital India, exceedingly higher rates of penetration have to be achieved, especially in the rural areas. The provisions for monitoring and ensuring the same as given in the TRAI recommendations, coupled with the incentives proposed for both the States and the industry to strengthen and expand infrastructure - especially addressing the crucial issue of RoW to facilitate efficient roll-out of fibre and delivery of services which is vital to our Digital India goals - would help improve the nation's broadband quality and outreach quotient, and place us in a respectable position in league with other leading global digital economies," Mr. Ramachandran added.

Giving a huge fillip to the growth of the requisite digital infrastructure, the Regulator has made fundamental and far-seeing recommendations towards addressing the critical RoW issue via multiple measures such as creation of a National RoW Policy with substantive amendments to the existing RoW Rules, creation of a National RoW Council for adoption and implementation of the RoW laws, an institutional framework for streamlining RoW permissions, creation of a National RoW Portal for seamless and transparent permissions, and incentivisation of establishment of common ducts and poles through exemption of RoW charges are extremely praiseworthy. Additionally, a Centrally Sponsored Scheme (CSS) to incentivise States/UTs for RoW reforms has been mooted by linking the quantum of incentive to the net improvement in the BRI score of that State/UT, thereby encouraging State Governments/UTs for easing and simplifying the RoW norms.

An institutional mechanism for planning and development of common ducts and posts infrastructure across the country, to be monitored and evaluated through a central entity - Common Ducts and Posts Development Agency (CDPDA) on a non-exclusive basis, will help further boost the avenues for progressively enhancing network capabilities across the country.

Detailed and prudent recommendations have also been made on Cross Sector Infrastructure development and Infrastructure sharing, including active and passive infra. Empirical evidence suggests that cross-sector infrastructure sharing lowers deployment costs, and increases market entry, making markets more competitive, while also resulting in massive savings in RoW as well as repairs and maintenance costs. Besides, the Regulator has provided a clear, transparent and robust accounting separation mechanism to segregate the incentives earned from the Fixed Broadband segment from being used to cross subsidise costs in the mobile segment.

About Broadband India Forum

Broadband India Forum (BIF) functions as an independent policy forum and knowledge-based think-tank that works for the development and enhancement of the entire broadband ecosystem in a holistic, technology-neutral and service-neutral manner. BIF has established itself as a thought leader and a credible and effective voice, to help propel the nation to achieve the country's ambitious vision of creating a Digital India. To achieve this, BIF works to promote the rapid development of policies, so as to facilitate affordable and high-speed ubiquitous broadband throughout the country.

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