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Govt tweaks BharatNet, clears Rs 1.39 lakh crore for last-mile broadband link

With this upgrade, the government is looking to speed up its process in connecting all 640,000 villages over the next 2.5 years.

Written by Jatin Grover

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Just like private telcos Airtel and Jio, which involve local cable operators to provide fixed home

broadband services, the government, under the revamped model, will involve village level entrepreneurs or Udyamis to take the fiber connections to the homes on a 50:50 revenue-sharing basis.

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The Union Cabinet Friday approved Rs 1.39 lakh crore for modernising the BharatNet project which involves changing its execution strategy and providing fiber connections to the last mile through Village Level Entrepreneurs, official sources said.

With this upgrade, the government is looking to speed up its process in connecting all 640,000 villages over the next 2.5 years.

Just like private telcos Airtel and Jio, which involve local cable operators to provide fixed home broadband services, the government, under the revamped model, will involve village level entrepreneurs or Udyamis to take the fiber connections to the homes on a 50:50 revenue-sharing basis.

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The cost for taking the infrastructure to the home will be borne by the government; the rural entrepreneur will only need to be involved in maintenance and operations of home connections, including addressing consumer complaints related to fiber cuts, etc, sources said.

“We laid the fiber under the BharatNet but the issue was how to give the fiber-based internet to households using the same. We ran the pilot in 60,000 villages a year back involving local partners in the villages to connect the households. That was successful,” a government official said, adding that involving the Udyamis for the project is expected to give employment to about 250,000 people.

Bharat Broadband Network (BBNL) is the implementation agency of BharatNet, which was merged into BSNL in July last year.

Until now, the government has connected about 194,000 villages, and provided internet connections to 5,67,000 households. Of these, 351,000 fiber connections have been given using the new BharatNet Udyami project, sources said.

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For BharatNet, this is the third such package approved by the Centre. In 2017, the Cabinet approved Rs 42,068 crore for the first two phases. In 2021, the Cabinet allocated another Rs 19,041 crore to implement the last-mile connectivity under a PPP model which failed to attract much interest.

Under the BharatNet project, the home broadband package will start from Rs 399 a month, giving 30 Mbps unlimited data, bundled with OTT offering, etc.

The other plans include Rs 599, Rs 799, etc. In comparison, market leader Jio's entry level fiber plan starts at Rs 198 per month, offering unlimited data and voice at 10 Mbps speed, and television channels as well at Rs 100 extra.

Airtel's cheapest bundled plan, which comes with a broadband connection and entertainment apps, is priced at Rs 699 per month with speed up to 40 Mbps and other bundled services, including TV channels and OTT apps.

"BharatNet has an edge over competitors because these private operators are not present in rural areas. Further, quality of services by BharatNet will also make people choose its services," the official said, adding that there will be an automated network operation centre for handling complaints.

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In the pilot, BharatNet registered an average speed of 175 GB per household per month. According to industry executives, the pace of BharatNet has been slow given

that the government has been able to make just 194,000 gram panchayats service ready so far. From November 2022 till March this year, about 6,000 gram panchayats have been made service ready.

The Financial Express.

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