

Satellite communication to bridge India's digital divide

India needs active collaboration between the space and telecom sectors to become a truly digital economy

BY JOSUN JN



“The satellite-based communication networks have a huge potential that can transform India into a truly digital and developed economy,” said Lt Gen AK Bhatt, Director General of Indian Space Association (ISPA), adding that the space and the telecom sectors need to collaborate to tap the opportunity. He was speaking at the recently held Voice&Data Telecom Leadership Forum in New Delhi.

Delivering the Industry Keynote, Lt Gen Bhatt highlighted the current state of the space industry in India, drawing parallels to the mobile communication sector 25 years ago. He stressed the importance of catching up with the advancements in space technology and expressed his belief in the power of satellite communication to bridge India's digital divide.

Established on the Prime Minister's directive in 2021, the ISPA serves as the unified voice of the Indian space

industry and Lt Gen Bhatt outlined the association's focus areas, including fostering international partnerships, building capacity and knowledge, and facilitating industry collaboration with the strategic sector. He also highlighted the close collaboration between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), the recently established Indian Space Regulatory Agency, and Newspace India Limited, a public sector company responsible for commercial space activities under ISRO.

One of the key challenges addressed by Lt Gen Bhatt was the lack of connectivity in remote areas, with 63% of India still remaining unconnected or experiencing poor connectivity. He underscored the role of satellite communication in providing connectivity to these underserved regions, thereby enabling the digital transformation of the entire country. Citing a World Bank study, he emphasised that a 10% increase in broadband penetration could result in a substantial boost to India's

By retaining the 28 gigahertz spectrum for satellite communication, India could align itself with international standards and promote global cooperation.



GDP. According to the study, for every 10% increase in broadband penetration, the GDP would grow by 0.8 to 1.5%.

To make satellite communication a viable enabler for India's digital growth, Lt Gen Bhatt proposed several essential measures. Firstly, he suggested the extension of Universal Service Obligation funds, currently allocated for the telecom sector, to also support satellite companies. Secondly, he emphasised the significance of globally harmonised policies, particularly in terms of spectrum allocation. By retaining the 28 gigahertz spectrum for satellite communication, India could align itself with international standards and promote global cooperation in this burgeoning sector.

He also shed light on the forthcoming Indian Space Policy 2023, which aims to foster the promotion and development of the space industry in India. The policy will create opportunities for non-government entities, including industry and startups, to engage in space activities. It will establish clear roles and responsibilities for various stakeholders, including the Indian Space Association and the Indian Space Regulatory Agency. The policy will encompass satellite-based communication,

remote sensing, navigation services, space situational awareness, and more.

Addressing the ongoing discussions surrounding spectrum allocation, Lt Gen Bhatt emphasised the necessity of administrative authorisation rather than auctioning, considering the unique characteristics of satellite communication. With multiple users sharing the same spectrum, an auction-based approach would be challenging to implement effectively. Administrative authorisation, on the other hand, would provide the necessary support for the space industry to thrive and ensure long-term benefits for the nation.

Concluding his Keynote, Lt Gen Bhatt called for the telecom industry's support in nurturing the space domain as a co-traveller. He emphasised that India's robust space programme positions the country as a global leader, offering commercial opportunities for satellite communication. "By leveraging this advantage and increasing its share of the global space economy, India can achieve greater digital inclusivity and reinforce its position as a global player in the space sector," he summed up. 🌟

josunj@cybermedia.co.in