

## **From a digital India to a digital Bharat - PM-WANI**

### **Why in news?**

The Union Cabinet recently gave its approval for the proposal of DoT for setting up of Public Wi-Fi Networks by Public Data Office Aggregators (PDOAs).

### **What is the PM-WANI project?**

- PM-WANI - Prime Minister's Wi-Fi Access Network Interface
- It aims at setting up of Public Wi-Fi Networks by Public Data Office Aggregators (PDOAs).
- The objective is to provide public Wi-Fi service through Public Data Offices (PDOs) spread across the length and breadth of the country.
- The project will accelerate proliferation of Broadband Internet services through Public Wi-Fi network in the country.
- There shall be no license fee for providing Broadband Internet through these public Wi-Fi networks.

### **Who are the key players in the project?**

- **Public Data Office (PDO)** - The PDO can be anyone.
- So, along with Internet infrastructure, this is also a way to generate revenue for individuals and small shopkeepers.
- It is important to note that PDOs will not require registration of any kind, thus easing the regulatory burden on them.
- **Public Data Office Aggregators (PDOAs)** - The PDOA is basically the aggregator who will buy bandwidth from Internet service provider (ISPs) and telecom companies and sell it to PDOs.
- They will also account for data used by all PDOs.
- **App provider** - The app provider will create an app through which users can access and discover the Wi-Fi access points.

### **What are the key operating mechanisms?**

- The first is interoperability, where the user will be required to login only once and stay connected across access points.
  - The requirement of authentication through a one-time password for each instance of access may be cumbersome.
  - So, automatic authentication through stored e-know your customer

(KYC) is encouraged.

- This inevitably means a linking with Aadhaar.
- The second is multiple payment options, allowing the user to pay both online and offline.
- The TRAI report on the details of the project show how products should start from low denominations, starting with Rs. 2.

### **How is internet penetration in India?**

- As per the latest Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) data, about 54% of India's population has access to the Internet.
- The 75th round of the National Statistical Organisation survey shows that only 20% of the population has the ability to use the Internet.
- The India Internet 2019 report shows that rural India has half the Internet penetration as urban, and twice as many users who access the Internet less than once a week.
- So, with each move towards digitisation, the country is threatening to leave behind a large part of the population to suffer in digital poverty.
  - E.g. the Umang App (Unified Mobile Application for New-age Governance) allows access to 2,084 services, across 194 government departments
  - The ability to access and utilise the app enhances an individual's capabilities to benefit from services that they are entitled to. Those who cannot access are left behind.

### **How significant does PM-WANI become then?**

- India can create \$1 trillion of economic value using digital technology by 2025.
- With PM-WANI, anyone living in their house, a paan shop owner or a tea seller can all provide public Wi-Fi hot posts, and anyone within range can access it.
- Certainly, the project's focus is on last mile delivery.
- So, essentially, the project would mean the ability to connect to a Wi-Fi broadband connection almost anywhere.
- This can help to bridge the increasing digital divide in India.
- It will also help to reduce the pressure on mobile Internet in India.
  - The India Internet report shows that 99% of all users in India access the Internet on mobile, and about 88% are connected on the 4G network.
  - This leads to a situation where everyone is connected to a limited network, which is getting overloaded.
  - This, in turn, results in bad speed and quality of Internet access.

## How could it aid rural connectivity?

- The PM-WANI has the potential to change the fortunes of Bharat Net as well.
- Bharat Net envisions broadband connectivity in all villages in India.
  - The project has missed multiple deadlines.
  - Even where the infrastructure has been created, usage data is not enough to incentivise ISPs to use Bharat Net infra to provide services.
- One of the reasons is simply the lack of last mile availability of the Internet.
- Another key reason for the lack of demand is the deficit in digital literacy in India.
- In terms of digital literacy, it is not enough to look at digital literacy as a set of specific skills.
- This is because the skills required to navigate technology keep changing.
- A more appropriate framework is to see it as an evolving decentralised concept.
  - This depends on how people interact with technology in other aspects of their life, and is influenced by local social and cultural factors.
- The PM-WANI seems to fit within this framework.
- It seeks to make accessing the Internet as easy as having tea at a shop.
- This is not a substitute for the abysmal digital literacy efforts of the government, but will definitely help.

## What about security and privacy issues?

- A study conducted at public Wi-Fi spots in 15 airports across the U.S., Germany, Australia, and India discovered that two thirds of users leak private information whilst accessing the Internet.
- Further, the TRAI report recommends that 'community interest' data be stored locally.
- This raises questions about data protection in a scenario where the country currently does not have a data protection law in place.
- These are however, problems of regulation, state capacity and awareness.
- They do not directly affect the framework for this scheme.
- Certainly, with the PM-WANI, the state is expanding the reach of digital transformation to those who have been excluded till now.

**Source: The Hindu**



**SHANKAR**  
**IAS PARLIAMENT**  
*Information is Empowering*