

MeitY Warning on WhatsApp Privacy Policy

Why in news?

- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has warned WhatsApp once again to roll back its latest update in privacy policy.
- This time, the Ministry has also warned of legal action if it does not get a satisfactory reply within a specified time (May 25, 2021.)

What is the recent privacy policy of WhatsApp?

- WhatsApp, early in 2021, updated its privacy policy.
- Accordingly, WhatsApp users would no longer be able to stop the app from sharing data (such as location and number) with its parent Facebook.
- Deleting their accounts altogether is the only option to avoid this.
- WhatsApp initially proposed a February 8, 2021 deadline.
- But an intense backlash against this decision, triggered users moving to rival platforms such as Signal.
- This forced WhatsApp to push the update to May 15, 2021.
- Eventually, it decided not to enforce this as well, preferring to “follow up with reminders to people over the next several weeks”.
- WhatsApp has over 2 billion users in the world, about half a billion of whom are in India, and who use it for free.
- Its privacy updates are designed to make the business interactions that take place on its platform easier while also personalising ads on Facebook.
- That is how it will have to make its money.

What has the Ministry said now?

- The changes to privacy policy and the manner of introducing them undermine the sacrosanct values of informational privacy, data security and user choice for Indian users.
- Indians depend on WhatsApp to communicate.
- It is thus irresponsible for WhatsApp to impose unfair terms and conditions on Indian users.
- Particularly, this discriminate against Indian users vis-à-vis users in Europe.

- MeitY has said it would pursue all legal options available to it “to protect the sovereign rights” of Indian citizens.
- This marks the first time that the Ministry has warned WhatsApp of legal action.

What were the earlier exchanges?

- Communication between the IT Ministry and WhatsApp on the issue of the updated privacy policy has been going on since January 2021.
- The Ministry had sent its first letter on the issue to Will Cathcart, the global Chief Executive Officer of WhatsApp.
- In it, the Ministry had said the updated policy and the subsequent changes enabled WhatsApp and other Facebook companies “to make invasive and precise inferences about users”.
- The Ministry had then sent a set of 14 questions to WhatsApp.
- The questions were on -
 - i. the various ways in which it collected data
 - ii. the permissions and consents it obtained from domestic users
 - iii. whether they were different from what it collected from users in other parts of the world
- The Ministry had also sought to know whether the company conducted any profiling and what the nature of such profiling was.
- There are two government warnings and at least two court cases in this regard, making it hard for WhatsApp to proceed with the changes.

What is the contention now?

- It is to be noted that Europe’s citizens are protected by strong data laws - General Data Protection Regulation or GDPR.
- There is no Indian equivalent of such laws.
- India must have data protection laws in place before acting against WhatsApp.
- WhatsApp has reportedly said in its affidavit that it is being singled out.
- Its policy is not different from those of private apps such as Google, BigBasket, Koo, as well as public apps such as Aarogya Setu, Bhim, IRCTC, and others.
- Moreover, if WhatsApp is ready to take the risk of users abandoning it, the government intervening in the process is illogical.
- The Ministry’s intermittent approach to issues concerning the user may do more harm to India’s approach to data protection and freedom than

anything else.

Source: The Indian Express, The Hindu

