

## National Digital Communication Policy, 2018

The National Digital Communication Policy 2018 was launched by the Government of India in 2018 with a vision to fulfill the information and communication needs of citizens and enterprises through the establishment of a ubiquitous, resilient, secure, accessible, and affordable digital communications infrastructure. This has led to improvement in the telecom infrastructure and an increase in the coverage and affordability of telecommunication services across the country. In the last six years, the following improvements have taken place concerning infrastructure, affordability of broadband, coverage, etc., promoting digital empowerment and creating a vibrant digital ecosystem:

- The optical fiber cable network increased from 17.5 lakh km in March 2018 to 41.9 lakh km in October 2024.
- Base Transceiver Stations increased from 19.8 Lakh in October 2018 to 29.4 Lakh in October 2024.
- As of September 2024, out of 6,44,131 villages in the country (village data as per Registrar General of India), 6,22,840 villages are covered with mobile connectivity.
- The number of broadband subscribers increased from 48 Crore in September 2018 to 94 Crore in June 2024.
- Data usage increased from 8.32 GB per month in September 2018 to 21.30 GB per month in June 2024.
- The average tariff per GB of wireless data decreased from ₹10.91 in September 2018 to ₹8.31 in June 2024.

Further, the government is implementing various schemes through Digital Bharat Nidhi (erstwhile Universal Service Obligation Fund) to provide telecom coverage to all uncovered villages. The Union Cabinet has approved the amended BharatNet Program with funding of ₹1,39,579 crore for extending the scope of BharatNet to provide broadband connectivity to all 2.64 lakh gram panchayats and approximately 3.8 lakh villages on a demand basis across 28 States and 8 UTs.

To encourage competition in the telecom sector and ensure a level playing field, the Government established the independent regulatory authority, i.e., Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), in 1997. In pursuance of the above objective, TRAI has occasionally issued recommendations, regulations, orders, and directives to deal with issues before it and provided the required direction for the evolution of a multi-operator, multi-service, open, competitive market.

Satellite Communication Reforms-2022 by the government have simplified the regulatory procedures and reduced financial charges on the licensees. The recent space sector reforms further enabled more significant participation of non-government entities in building/leasing, owning, and operating satellite systems for satellite-based services. Many operators have applied for authorization to provide satellite communication over India, including connectivity in remote and under-served areas. A total of 5474 gram panchayats have been connected through satellite.

The various steps taken by the government to ensure a transparent and efficient spectrum management structure to address the concerns of telecom operators are as follows:

- Spectrum acquired through auction after 15.09.2021 can be surrendered after a minimum period of 10 years.
- For the spectrum acquired through auction after 15.09.2021, no Spectrum Usage Charges (SUC) shall be levied.
- The condition for a minimum 3% weighted average SUC and the SUC floor amount has been removed.
- To encourage spectrum sharing for better utilization and efficiency, spectrum sharing will not attract an increase in the SUC rate by 0.5%.
- Spectrum refarming was carried out in the 3.3-3.4 GHz band from the incumbent users to identify this band for IMT Services (5G) in the Country.
- The Telecommunications Act of 2023 defines spectrum assignment methodology for various services and applications, including satellite-based services.

*Reference: PIB*