

**India's Ministry of Women and Child Welfare must clamour  
for rural internet connectivity**



- As per a Government of India study, “every 10% usage of Internet in India drives up GDP by 3.3%.
- Despite being the backbone of rural communities, 72% of rural women have no access to the benefits of internet connectivity
- Collaboration between ministries is a must in order to digitally empower women in rural India

The first pillar of BharatNet, the Digital India Program whose mission is to link 250,000 Gram Panchayats of India, through a broadband optical fibre network is the world's largest rural connectivity project of its kind. Upon completion, BharatNet aims to empower over 600 million citizens, living in India's rural

hinterland with Broadband connectivity. That's almost 56% of the country's total population.

Managed and operated by Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL), as on 06 March 2020, Optical-fiber cables have been laid for over 4.27 lakh kilometres, connecting more than 1.5 lakh Gram Panchayats. Only around 1.37 lakh of these have been made service ready according to the latest data, leaving about half the project unfinished, even nine years since its inception.

### **`Roadblocks responsible for the slow pace of implementation**

Challenges that are responsible for the slow pace of implementation include wide dispersal of Gram Panchayats; getting approvals for setting up new mobile towers; obtaining RoW clearances for laying optical-fibre cables; last mile connectivity issues in difficult terrain; patchy network quality; lack of electricity to charge devices; RoI issues in sparsely populated geographies; states model of implementation, which is not completely in sync with the central model etc...

While these are the obvious challenges, a more frustrating challenge we face today is the fact that the powers that be have not entirely realised what they are losing, each second, by not deploying fully-functional internet connectivity in geographies where it can make a tremendous difference.

As per a Government of India study, "every 10% usage of Internet in India drives up GDP by 3.3%. It stands to reason that each day spent without maximum rural internet connectivity poses a gargantuan loss to the nation's growth.

I wonder why then, rural connectivity is seen as a goal for the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting alone. Shouldn't it be the child that every ministry in our government must clamour for? The Ministry of Women and Child Welfare certainly should!

Take a look at the facts:

- India has a population of 1.35 billion people.
- Of this, the ratio of men to women is 924 females per 1000 males, which in absolute terms is 48.04% female population to 51.96% male population.
- Of India's 1.35 billion, 65% (approx. 877.5 mn) lives in rural areas and 35% live in urban areas
- In rural areas, there are 949 females to 1000 men – that's a ratio of 48.69% female: 51.31% male

- Only a little over 15% of rural households have access to internet services
- A 2019 survey revealed a discriminatory gap in the percentage of men in rural India who have access to the internet, vs the percentage of women connected to the internet - around 72 per cent of rural internet users were male while only 28 per cent of rural users were female

This means that despite the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals which highlights the need to bridge the digital divide between genders - a goal for which India is a signatory - 72% of rural women have no access to the internet. That's as many as 307.6mn women who do not enjoy the unparalleled benefits that internet connectivity can bring to their doorstep.

*This also means that despite being the backbone of rural communities and producing between 60 and 80 per cent of all food in India, rural women face several hurdles when it comes to gaining access to internet technology that can better their lives.*

Clearly, this is something that the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare must take up as a priority.

Here are some of ways that internet connectivity in rural areas will help the women living there:

- Strengthening community bonds by staying in touch
- Having a digital identity
- Women's safety
- eLearning / online classes for students
- Adult literacy and skills development
- Knowledge building in core sectors such as agriculture
- Access to healthcare, nutrition and hygiene related platforms
- Access to CSR services by the private sector
- Access to new income generation platforms
- Development schemes for women and children by GoI
- Market access
- Internet banking
- Entertainment

In 2013, GoI increased FDI in the telecom sector from 74% to 100%, giving foreign investors the opportunity to invest in technology and capital in India.

Closer home, Atmanirbhar companies like Saankhya Labs are ready with the technologies that can help the Government of India achieve its goal of rural connectivity. The options are low cost, readily deployable and terrain agnostic. SDR Chipset design and development company Saankhya Labs' has developed the world's first standard compliant (IEEE802.22 compliant) WiFar/ 4G TVWS equipment which is 100% developed & manufactured in India, based on indigenous IPR.

Saankhya Labs' reliable wireless broadband solutions solution, which uses TV White Space (TVWS) Spectrum, is low cost and easily installable at central Gram Panchayat HQ locations which are already connected by fibre optic cables. The technology supplements existing fibre from Railtel and Power Grid to provide Wi-Fi data access to end devices at the village level

Despite such readily available solutions, India is nowhere near the finishing line. The working of different sectors, in silos, is perhaps a reason for this delay in achieving India's mega dream.

Collaboration between ministries is a must to make India the next economic powerhouse. India is definitely on the path to big change, but interest in developmental goals must be followed by affirmative intent.