

## An effort to connect villages

BBNL should function like an Internet service provider so that everyone at the village level would be able to avail of the connectivity for a payment and demand quality service

There is a lot of excitement around how we will be able to reach out to each and every *panchayat* (village council) through broadband in the next two to three years. The universal service obligation fund has allocated money and created a special purpose vehicle called **Bharat Broadband Network Ltd** (BBNL) for the deployment of a national optic fibre network with the help of RailTel Corp. of India Ltd, Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd and Power Grid Corp. of India Ltd.

Last week, the Prime Minister's Office announced a Rs. 20,000 crore fund and the formation of a multi-ministerial panel of secretaries to see how diverse applications and services could be delivered once the 100 mbps (megabytes per second) lines reach the 245,545 *panchayats* of the country.



How effective will the project be—in connecting and information-empowering these pillars of governance that are mostly dominated by an older generation of powerful people—in rural areas where much of the population tends to be uneducated? Let me share some facts from my experience of working across more than 500 *panchayats* in about 15 states in enabling a digital culture.

The nearly quarter-of-a-million *panchayats*, each representing an average of two-three villages, have some three million elected members including about one million women. The grassroots bodies are responsible for overseeing all 29 subjects listed in the XI schedule of the Constitution such as land, water, sanitation, agriculture, education and healthcare. How is the broadband network going to be managed and sustained while promoting accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, information sharing and the cause of development?

I will try to make some suggestions here. For one, BBNL should make sure that each hub of government activity around the *panchayat* is connected to the network unconditionally and without capacity restriction. For example, all government schools should be enabled with high bandwidth broadband and given the freedom to use connectivity for both teachers and students. Currently, out of 1.4 million schools, fewer than 100,000 have an information and communications technology lab and/or Internet connectivity. All public and community health centres should be enabled with connectivity and more specifically with tele-medicine

equipments, further linked to major district hospitals. Additionally, the *panchayats* should be linked to the more than 600 Krishi Vigyan Kendras.

BBNL should function like an Internet service provider so that everyone at the village level would be able to avail of the connectivity for a payment and demand quality service. BBNL should enable itself to provide Internet through Wi-Fi in the rural areas, especially in tribal and hilly terrain, where the population typically has to trek several kilometres to reach any office or institution. Providing wireless Internet at the last mile won't be difficult as BBNL can use open spectrums which provides data flow up to 54 mbps.

The ministry of *panchayati raj* faces the task of building 245,545 websites—one for each of the village councils, with their own unique names. It is necessary to make sure that we create content and make it available on the Internet to promote transparency at the *panchayat* level, showcase localized work, assets and knowledge. It would serve as an archive of all progress that is made; it would reinforce India-specific content in cyber space which is now extremely low.

Another learning is that almost none of the *panchayats* today possess working computers. According to an internal report of the *panchayat raj* ministry, close to 50,000 *panchayats* have computers in their premises. Spot checks have found that virtually none of the computers are functional, the reason being a lack of capacity to run, maintain and manage any tool of information and communications technology. It would be interesting to see how the government will use the digital infrastructure to deliver services, especially in the backdrop of its learning from the 100,000 common service centres that have been rolled out; the ground reality is that not more than one-fifth of them are successful, and almost none of them are fully integrated with e-governance services, contrary to what had been planned and promised.

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