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.
    - S0, 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



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