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

