Relook at the BharatNet Project

What is the issue?

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- Telecom Secretary recently asked the states to utilise the Bharat Net project's rural broadband infrastructure.
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- Notably, Bharat Net has largely failed to deliver on its objective, calling for redressal of the shortfalls.
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How has the progress been?

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- Seven years have passed since the National Optical Fibre Network (rechristened BharatNet) project was first envisaged.
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- The objective was to connect over 2.5 lakh gram panchayats through high-speed broadband.
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- Already, 1.15 lakh gram panchayats have been connected.
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- The physical execution of the project is scheduled to be completed by March 2019.
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- However, when it comes to actual connectivity and utilisation, BharatNet has achieved little.
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- This is despite thousands of crores of taxpayers’ money having already been spent.
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What are the shortfalls?

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- The onus of preventive and corrective maintenance of the optical fibre portion connecting gram panchayats is with BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd).
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- The responsibility of remaining network elements lay with other agencies.
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- Bharat Broadband Nigam Ltd was the special purpose vehicle created to execute the project.
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- The lack of ownership by BSNL and inability of BBNL in ensuring timely project implementation has cost the nation a great deal.
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- Though a clear utilisation target has already been set, the actual utilisation on the ground is well less than 10% of the target.
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- Poor planning, lack of monitoring and co-ordination between the two organisations lead to ineffective implementation.
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- It points to the lack of professionalism on the part of BBNL and BSNL.
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Why is BharatNet crucial?

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- Indian users are among the top consumers globally when it comes to adopting digitisation and online platforms.
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- At the centre of this transition to a digital world is the availability of a reliable and affordable data network.
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- Private telecom companies, including Reliance Jio, have announced plans to connect over 1,100 cities with optical fibre, which will cater to the urban consumers.
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- But BharatNet is critical to ensure that rural India also benefit from the digital dividend.
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- Besides this, BharatNet project is expected to -
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i. attract billions of dollars in investments
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ii. help train a million youth for new-age jobs
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iii. facilitate delivery of e-governance, e-health, e-education, e-banking and other such services
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What is to be done?

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- The weak performance of the project calls for a complete overhaul of the BharatNet implementation machinery.
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- Quick decisions are essential to fundamentally alter the direction of the project.
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- State governments must be brought on board to ensure the project gets adequate support at the district and panchayat levels.
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- Resources and energies would have to be mobilised for gram panchayats to be reached in the shortest possible time.
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- The industry and government need to team up on projects aimed at bolstering communications infrastructure in the country.
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- A thorough inquiry into the effectiveness and outcomes of the money already spent is also called for.
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Source: BusinessLine

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