

The BL interview

India is at the tipping point of a digital revolution: Ravi Shankar Prasad

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RAVI SHANKAR PRASAD Communications and Information Technology Minister

Rural growth in telephony is more than the urban, says Communications and IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad

Over the past two years since he became the Communications and Information Technology Minister, Ravi Shankar Prasad has cleared a lot of pending work in his Ministry, even though people termed him a 'call drop Minister'. Prasad, who will be completing two years in office on May 26, shares with *BusinessLine* how the telecom, postal, IT (digital) policies and projects have progressed since he took over. Excerpts:

What are the key points that you think have changed in the telecom and IT space in the past two years?

As Minister, my first priority was to change the profile of the Communications & IT Ministry, as it was known for all the wrong reasons (2G scam). The second priority was to ensure positive growth. The third was to turn around loss-making public sector units. The fourth was leveraging the wide postal network, the fifth was to push electronic manufacturing, and the sixth was to settle all long-pending policy issues. I would like my two years to be known for these benchmarks.

Today, Sanchar Bhawan is free from middlemen, there is no scam or scandal, and decisions are taken in a free and fair manner. We had the highest spectrum auction ever of ₹1.10 lakh crore (last year).

All the policy initiatives pending for the past 7-10 years — defence band identification, spectrum trading-sharing, harmonisation, liberalisation, cloud policies, open source in IT and creating an ecosystem of sound investment — are in place. As a result, IT and IT-enabled exports today are worth \$108 billion, the highest ever in the history of India.

India has received \$4,091 million (over ₹26,000 crore) foreign direct investment in telecom. Mobile telephony has shown growth. The postal sector had tremendous growth of ₹122.66 million between April 2014 and February 2016. India crossed one-billion mobile phones under our government, one-billion-plus Aadhaar cards and 400 million plus Internet users. On a lighter note, I can say that net addition in total telephony (mobile plus landline) from April 2014 to February 2016 is equivalent to the population of France and Italy put together. The growth rate of total telephony, which was 3.90 per cent in 2013-14, posted 6.76 per cent in 2014-15, and 5.65 per cent till February this year, and I am sure the rate must have crossed 6.50 per cent in March. This is the position — a clear growth — and what is important is the rural growth is more than the urban. Rural tele-density has increased 6.62 per cent between February 2014 and February 2016. Therefore, the telecom sector is rising and with 'Digital India', it is going to rise further.

My biggest personal satisfaction is the recovery of the postal department. Postal services have become the biggest deliverer of e-commerce items — there are more than 57 centres in the country, fully automated and computerised. The e-commerce parcel revenue, which was down 2 per cent in 2013-14, rose 45 per cent in 2014-15 and 80 per cent in 2015-16, and by February, it has reached 100 per cent.

Apart from computerisation, core banking was an important area. When I became Minister, 240 branches had been linked...now there are over 21,000, surpassing the State Bank of India in core banking network (which is 16,600). There were only four ATMs (postal), which have now grown to 900.

What is the status of Digital India projects?

Digital delivery has started. Around 19-lakh people of the country are interacting on MyGov.in; 15-lakh pensioners are on Jeevan Pramaan (a biometric-enabled digital service), 37-lakh are using e-Hospital@NIC for their bookings, around 74-lakh are on National Scholarship Portal. **The biggest is the rise in e-Taal, which records any movement for digital delivery of services anywhere in the country. It has gone up to 58 crore compared to 25 crore last year.** Under the digital literacy programme, 55 lakh people have been trained and around ₹6 crore have been sanctioned in this Budget.

I am creating some digital platforms for the country. First is BharatNet. This scheme, as National Optical Fibre Network, started in 2011 and had optical fibre of 358 km and OFC pipes of 2,292 km. As of May 2, 2016, the OFC pipe laid is 1,39,582 km, optical fibre laid is 1,11,726 km. OFC is laid in around 61,000 gram panchayats (GPs) and optical fibre in 50,500 GPs.

Second, the guidelines for Mobile Virtual Mobile Network are in the process of being finalised. It will revolutionise India in terms of services in the hinterland, small villages and semi-urban areas.

Third, the common service centres (CSCs) are being improved. There were 83,000 CSCs before we came to power, now there are 1.70 lakh. I propose to add one lakh more, for banking, insurance, making reservations of railways (e-ticketing), Aadhaar cards and passports. We have given them the licence of internet service providers so that they can go from GPs to villages through Wi-Fi. Finally, there is the rural BPO programme which will give an extra push to 'Digital India'. India is at the tipping point of a digital revolution, and I am confident that change will come.

There has been a lot of improvement in BSNL, but what about MTNL?

There was a profit of ₹10,000 crore when Atal Bihari Vajpayee government left office...loss of ₹8,000 crore when Manmohan Singh government left office. In 1.8 years, BSNL has to come to operating profit and, most importantly, their monthly customer base, which used to be 7-8 lakh, has become 20-22 lakh. I am now concentrating on the turnaround process for MTNL.

What about policies such as cyber security and net neutrality?

On cyber security, we are firming up our entire architecture from Internet security. We are working in close co-operation with the security agencies to reinforce our entire system, including training of human resource, for which we will come out with new programmes.

On net neutrality, the telecom regulator is taking public consultation. We are awaiting that.

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