

# Access for all: To the Indian dream

With a low broadband internet penetration of 0.57%, policymakers are ignoring a potent tool that can empower the man on the street and raise our per-capita gross domestic product, says **Ajai Chowdhry**

*Imagine every school-going child in the country getting information at a mouse click. Imagine all government offices, state capitals and panchayats connected with information access. Imagine everyone getting land records and ration cards, and carrying out banking and bill payments at their doorstep. Imagine farmers selling their produce with price information of buyers. Imagine students from the north-east having access to teachings of IIT professors. Imagine India moving closer to realising the full potential of its human capital.*

**Y**OU may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. By the end of this year, every one in five, or 422 million, households across the globe will be wired up to the internet, estimates Gartner. In contrast, Trai in July this year put India's broadband connections at 6.8 million, or 0.57%.

This June, France's Constitutional Council, the country's highest constitutional authority, ruled that access to internet is a basic human right. Significantly, the court ruled against the French government's attempts to stop internet piracy and observed that the world wide web is an 'essential tool for liberty of communication and expression'.

In October, Finland's ministry of transport and communications made 1-megabit (Mb) broadband web access a legal right.

Creating competition is critical to the growth of broadband access. Policies have to support broadband expansion by all telcos that have licences and create a level playing field for ISPs.

Today, why are the poor really poor? By denying information access to the poor, we are actually keeping them poor. The need of the hour is to democratise learning, as C K Prahalad says, which will only happen if we democratise access.

Access is the door to all relevant information at the click of a mouse. In the developed world, it has become as basic as, say, water or electricity connection. In 2006, in a study assigned by the US department of commerce, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Carnegie Mellon



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University concluded that broadband access 'does enhance economic growth and performance, and that the assumed economic impacts are real and measurable'.

According to the study, communities in the US enjoying broadband penetration experienced faster growth in employment and getting businesses—more so in IT and IT-related sectors—from 1998 to 2002 than those without broadband access.

Broadband access is a vital pre-requisite for many new jobs and other opportunities. A World Bank report recently said, "A 10% increase in broadband internet connections results in a 1.3% increase in real per-capita gross domestic product (GDP)."

According to the International Telecommunication Union, each new broadband connection adds twice as much to the GDP as a new telephone connection.

This has been borne out in China. Likewise, the secret of inclusive growth over the past decade or so in emerging giants such as South Korea, Singapore and Sweden lies, to a large extent, in broadband penetration. The reason isn't hard to gauge: easy availability of information lures people to participate and contribute to development, thus

becoming agents of change themselves. The possible outcome of including people—in both urban and rural areas—in development due to spread of mobile broadband are many and varied: access about government and non-government development programmes, employment opportunities, schooling and healthcare options, political and economic developments, and so forth.

**RURAL India:** Though urban India is steadily marching ahead, the telecom revolution is yet to leave its stamp in rural India, where tele-density is as low as 8%. Not surprisingly, internet and broadband access is just as low: India's rural internet usage is only 5 million, according to Juxt-Consult. Though constantly evolving, the ICT landscape has as yet failed to include the majority in rural India due to lack of internet penetration. Access to high-speed internet services could also throw open rural India to the world of BPOs, thereby opening up job opportunities for the youth there.

**Financial sector:** A study by Yes Bank on the country's financial inclusion found limited telecom or broadband access as a major roadblock. Increased broadband access will

help the government plan for financial inclusion: as connectivity of banks rises, more people in villages and smaller towns could be included into mainstream banking.

**Education:** Only one in 10 schools in the country has PCs, and broadband access is near zero. The idea is to connect all schools and colleges with broadband in the next few years and democratise learning.

In terms of internet speed, the country is way down the ladder, positioned at 115 among the nations studied recently by Akamai Technologies. This is largely due to poor internet penetration, ineffective quality and high costs. For instance, the cost is similar where it comes to a 3 Mbps broadband connection (unlimited download) in the US compared to a broadband connection of 512 Kbps (unlimited download) in India.

We should build a plan to create Access for all as a fundamental right. This is deeply connected to the government's vision of education for all as a fundamental right. So, broadband has to be available on tap—like water. This will lead to access to information, access to pay-per-use, access to cloud computing and access to dialogue.

Access for all can be a reality in India—we just need to define it as a priority.

Basic infrastructure for connectivity already exists with fibre laid by public telecom operators. A combination of broadband wireless access and fibre infrastructure should be quickly provided to extend the last-mile connectivity. Make access a fundamental right and ensure it is as easily accessible as other basic necessities.

Broadband penetration should be made part of budgetary allocation process as it will enable efficient delivery of programmes of various ministries and departments of central and state governments.

- Ensure easy financing to universalise access. Get banks to earmark loans for enabling internet-connectivity devices.
- Plan with a clear road map, cover each town and village by 2014.
- Do away with licence fee and other charges on broadband connectivity to rural areas to incentivise service providers.

*(The author is chairman and CEO of HCL Infosystems)*