

# ISSUES AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE SEVENTH SPECIAL SECTORAL SUMMIT OF THE NORTH EASTERN COUNCIL HELD IN KOHIMA ON 31<sup>ST</sup> JULY-1<sup>ST</sup> AUGUST 2007

## ISSUES

### **Telecommunication**

1. Owing to its geographical location and difficult terrain, there are limitations to physical connectivity in the North-East Region. With the advent of telecommunication and internet technology, physical barriers are losing their significance. This makes the development of telecommunication and information technology a *sine-qua-non* for the socio-economic development of the Region. However, the growth of these sectors has been much slower in the North-East than the rest of the country.
2. Despite achieving impressive numbers in recent years, the tele-density in the NER, and particularly in Assam, the most populous State in the Region, is much lower than All India Average. The tele-density is 10.65% in Assam and 14% in other NE States as against the national average of nearly 20% as on 30.06.07. Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited is the largest service provider in the Region with a share of 30.86% in Assam and 48.73% in other States.
3. Cellular mobile services were introduced in the Region only in 2003 after a delay of 8 years on security considerations. There are still some restrictions in border areas. Even though some relaxation has been made, no signals are allowed within 500 metres of the international border. This restriction, though applicable to the whole country, is particularly harsh to the people of the North-East States with long international borders and significant number of people residing in the no signal zone. Moreover, mobile signals from the neighbouring countries are available in those areas and are utilized by unscrupulous and anti-social elements whereas law abiding citizens have to suffer.
4. The Central Government and its implementing arm, BSNL, are alive to the communication needs of the NER. The year 2007 has been declared as the “Year of Development of Telecom Network in NE Region”. An ambitious expansion plan is on the anvil. The budgetary allocation of BSNL for the year 2007-08 is more than 1.5 time of the total expenditure made during the last three years in the Region. This is expected to add 1.30 lakh fixed line connections and 11.19 lakh cellular connections as against a total of 2.55 lakh fixed line and 11.24 cellular connections at present. Similarly, there would be an addition of 1.35 lakh broadband connections as against a total of about 19,000 connections at present. A total of 89 new towns will be brought on the broadband map as against a mere 20 towns/cities at present.
5. The Region has sparse habitations and is disaster prone. The importance of telecom, particularly of wireless mode, is, therefore, all the more. People living in rural areas, particularly remote ones, have few means of reliable communication. Attention has, therefore, to be paid to rural connectivity. BSNL has planned to provide Village

Public Telephones (VPT) in 3307 villages during 2007-08 apart from 433 Rural Community Telephones. The Region has received a total support of Rs. 193.36 crore under the Universal Support Obligation (USO) during the last three years.

6. Apart from the low tele-density, the quality of services in the Region is a matter of general concern. The telecom network is inadequate to handle the traffic resulting in frequent congestion. Roaming facility is not being allowed on pre-paid services due to security concerns. There are complaints about roaming on post-paid connections as well. Customer verification process is very stringent. GPRS services are generally not available. Billing disputes are frequent due to non-availability of online payment facility and processing centre being outside the Region.

7. An elaborate Transmission Network Plan has been conceived by the Department of Telecommunication for the Region. Under it all the district headquarters are to be connected on self-healing Optical Fibre (OF) Rings and the State capitals will be connected by High Capacity (DWDM) OF Network. In view of the peculiar problems of the Region, alternate connectivity on PGCIL line is also being considered. Remote exchanges are to be placed on 2 Mb satellite system.

8. Most of the service providers face difficulties in getting permission to lay cables and the high charges associated with it. Another problem appears to be in getting land for Base Trans-receiver Stations and other infrastructure. Electric supply and its quality is an issue in most of the States. Poor quality of roads hampers transportation of telecom equipment and machinery. Cables are frequently damaged due to natural causes like landslides and others like due to road widening and by miscreants. Frequent bandhs and blockades in the states lead to time overrun and cost escalation. Various kind of charges on transportation of equipment also cause implementation problem.

### **Information Technology**

9. The ITeS-BPO industry is growing at an overwhelming pace and is giving a major fillip to the Indian economy. India has established its leadership position globally in the offshore market and now the availability of skilled manpower is one of the key barriers to the fast growth of the industry. According to an assessment, the ITeS industry alone will need 2.7 million people by 2012.

10. The North-East Region is rich in English speaking and educated manpower which is available may form the backbone of the ITeS-BPO industry in the country. As the personnel costs of IT industry in the rest of the country are going up, the NER, with comparatively low wages, should be in a position to attract IT companies. The IT industry should take advantage of this highly talented resource.

11. The Ministry of DoNER is supporting the NASSCOM Assessment of Competence Test for 20,000 undergraduate youth of the Region. This will be a certification and benchmarking programme for employment in the IT industry. Apart from providing a filtering criterion for employers, it will also help in identifying the

training needs. The States may help NASSCOM towards identification and registration of the students and examination centres for timely completion of the programme during October-December 2007.

12. The number of individual internet connections in the NER is about 50 thousand at present which is woefully inadequate. Further, the bandwidth connectivity is poor in the Region. Moreover, the cost of Bandwidth is very high in comparison to the rest of the country. Under the State Wide Area Network Scheme (SWAN), 2 Mbps connectivity is to be provided at block level. This would cover all the 8 North-East States by March 2008.

13. The Region does not have adequate training facilities in IT and related skills. Even the private institutions are far from many and they cover only the major cities/towns.

14. The Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) has helped three States in setting up of IT parks in Imphal, Guwahati and Gangtok with support from the NEC. The number is clearly insufficient. The total export of IT related products from the Region is an insignificant Rs. 4 crore.

15. The cost of setting up of swish infrastructure, which has become a symbol as well as requirement of the IT industry, is high in the Region. The States and the Centre may work out a subsidy mechanism to attract IT companies. Alternatively, the States may themselves establish the infrastructure which can then be let out to the investors.

16. There is a link between hospitality industry and IT industry. The cities in the NER, however, do not have good hotels and other quality tourist and recreation facilities. Apart from the infrastructure for the IT sector itself, due emphasis has to be given to the development of tourism infrastructure.

## **E-Governance**

17. The vision of the National e-Governance Plan (NEGP) is to make all the Government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets and ensure efficiency, transparency and reliability of such services at affordable costs to realize the basic needs of the common man has only reached a nascent stage in most of the North-East states.

18. As a first step to provide internet access, basic web-based services and training to the masses in the North-East, the Department of Information Technology set up 487 Community Information Systems (CIC) at block level in the NER. The CICs are proposed to be merged into Common Service Centres (CSC) being established in rural areas across the country through Public Private Partnership under the NEGP. The CSCs will provide comprehensive Government to Citizen (G2C) and other web-based services in education, finance, agriculture and marketing. States should take steps to support the DIT for expeditious implementation of the project.

19. Important e-Governance initiatives in the Region include the Integrated Land Management and Administration Planning in one district of Manipur and Telemedicine project in Tripura, Mizoram and Sikkim with support from the NEC. Other applications include computerization of treasury operations, land record, Hospital management System, examination results, property registration, election support, e-Suvidha, etc. The North Eastern Council have established the NE Space Application Centre in collaboration with the Department of Space for digital mapping of resources and accurate forecasting.

20. State Wide Area Networks (SWAN) are being set up to provide 2 Mbps connectivity up to block level with provision for wireless connectivity from the block level to the village level. SWAN is being implemented in all the NE states except Arunachal Pradesh whose response is awaited. The Central Government is also planning to set up State Data Centres which will become the central repository of the States and provide comprehensive G2G, G2C and G2B services.

21. There is a dearth of specialized manpower to handle e-governance programmes in the NE States. An elaborate Scheme for Capacity Building to provide technical support for e-governance in the States is under the consideration of the Central Government.

## **Conclusions**

### **Telecom Sector**

i) Minister DoNER to take up the matter of restriction on mobile telephony within 0-500 metres of the international border with the Ministries of Home and Defence in the light of the peculiar situation of the Region.

ii) Regarding stringent requirements for verification of customers, the suggestion to use the electoral photo identity card as proof of identity may be examined by the Department of Telecommunication in consultation with the MHA. Other similar ideas may also be explored to enable the people of the North-East to have hassle free and quick connection.

iii) BSNL will take steps to introduce online billing facility in the Region and quick incorporation of payments made to overcome multiple billing and settlement disputes. Concepts of easy-billing centres being operated in many cities need to be introduced in the NE States as well.

iv) To address the lack of adequate skilled manpower in the NER for meeting the requirement of telecom sector, the North Eastern Council in consultation with BSNL and other service providers will consider setting up of a Regional Institute for Training of Telecom Personnel, preferably at Dimapur. Dr. (Mrs.) I.K. Barthakur will coordinate.

v) The Department of Road Transport and Highways as well as the State Governments should examine and give effect to the proposal for providing service ducts

in all new roads and existing roads where widening work is undertaken to facilitate and economize the laying up and maintenance of cables and to minimize disruption.

vi) The large number of check posts and long procedures lead to avoidable delays and increase the cost of transportation. The States should streamline the system which should be made uniform for the whole Region.

vii) The states should have a single window, time bound and efficient system for according clearances for laying of cables. Restoration charges should be rationalized so as to not become deterrent.

viii) The pros and cons of underground cable network *vis-à-vis* other alternatives like PGCIL Cable, **submarine cable and a cable through Brahmaputra** should be clearly studied by the BSNL in view of the peculiar conditions in the Region. Ministry of DoNER should ask the PGCIL to include in their proposed study of the transmission needs of the Region, the utility of the network from the point of view of providing alternate connectivity on their cables.

ix) State Electricity Boards should give priority to ensure regular, uninterrupted and quality power for running the telecom and IT network.

x) DoNER should constitute a Committee under the Chairmanship of. Shri P.P.Shrivastav, Member, NEC, for better coordination and synergy among various stakeholders with a view to achieve optimum results at accelerated pace by identifying problems, integrating networks and resolution of conflicts.

xi) The States should facilitate acquisition of land for setting up of telecom infrastructure and also provide security for the officials wherever required.

### **Information Technology**

xii) The North-East States should endeavour to develop themselves into preferred IT destinations by creating an enabling environment with appropriate policy intervention and PPP models.

xiii) **The IT industry should not be misled by the false portrayal of the North-East as a Region beset with terrorism and insurgency. The fact is that large swathes of the Region have impeccable law and order situation. Ministry of DoNER and the NE States should take appropriate measures to dispel such a notion from the minds of potential investors.**

xiv) Quality infrastructure should be created to position the Region as an attractive and viable destination for the IT industry.

xv) The states should give highest importance to use IT to lift the quality of life of their people, particularly in the rural areas.

xvi) The States should take appropriate measures for promotion of local entrepreneurship in IT. A scholarship based system of identifying, nurturing and promoting IT talent should be introduced.

xvii) The North-East Region should position itself to become the back office for the Southeast Asian and Far East Asian countries.

xviii) The IT industry is likely to have much lower attrition rate in the Region as the people are generally attached to their heritage. The States and the NASSCOM may highlight this crucial aspect which is becoming a major concern of the industry.

xix) The state Governments are unable to find resources for running the CICs and are requesting for the extension of status-quo for a few more years. Further, questions were raised regarding the viability of converting the CICs into CSCs at many places. The Department of Information Technology should take into account the concerns of the states before taking a final decision.

xx) The DOEACC, an autonomous society of the Department of Information Technology, has centres at Aizawl, Imphal, Tezpur (with extension centres at Guwahati and Kohima). The centres should be established in all the States of the Region.

xxi) The Government should work towards a One India Plan for Bandwidth so that the North-East States do not suffer from this handicap.

xxii) The IT and Higher Education Departments in the NE States should extend requisite support to NASSCOM for the NASSCOM Assessment of Competence in IT Skills. They should remain fully involved with the whole process since it has long term implications for employment, training and modification of curriculum. NEC and North Eastern Regional Educational Council should sensitize the Vice-chancellors of Universities and College Principals for sensitizing the eligible students for taking NAC.

### **E-Governance**

xxiii) Many of the NE States do not provide IT enabled citizen centric services at present. National Informatics Centre has to upgrade existing technical support to the North-East States for e-Governance. The States should provide content as well as update it regularly.

xxiv) The States should undertake Capacity Building programmes for employees at all levels.

xxv) For optimum utilization of the CICs (CSCs afterwards), awareness campaigns should be organized in remote and interior areas.

xxvi) DIT should expeditiously resolve the issue of State Wide Area Network with the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and the network should be in place for all the NE states by 31.03.08.