PUBLIC WI-FI PLAN 'PM WANI' GETS CABINET APPROVAL

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Public Wi-Fi hotspots at a large number of restaurants, grocery stores, hotels and other places across the country could be a reality in the near future, with the Union cabinet on Wednesday clearing a project to expand wireless broadband connectivity.

The project, named Prime Minister Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM Wani), was originally recommended by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) in March 2017.

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The public Wi-Fi networks will not attract any licence or registration fee for providing broadband services, Union communications, electronics and information technology minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said.

Former Trai chairperson R.S. Sharma welcomed the announcement. "Public Wi-Fi networks will 'democratize' content distribution and broadband access to millions at affordable rates. This will be the UPI (unified payments interface) of connectivity services," tweeted Sharma, who headed Trai when the regulator made recommendations in this issue to the department of telecommunications (DoT).

Wireless data use has ballooned since March as millions logged on to work from their homes following the covid outbreak, exposing gaps and issues in connectivity.

"Covid pandemic has necessitated delivery of stable and high-speed broadband data services to an increasingly large number of subscribers, including in areas which do not have 4G mobile coverage. This can be achieved by deployment of public Wi-Fi," according to a government release.

PM Wani will be set up by public data office aggregators (PDOAs) through public data offices (PDOs), said the release. A government official said a restaurant, for example, can take bandwidth from service providers, establish and operate Wi-Fi access points, and provide broadband services. PDOs will be "facilitators" between service providers and users.

A PDOA will be an aggregator of PDOs that will oversee functions relating to authorization and accounting of Wi-Fi connections, said the official. A person, who wants to use public Wi-Fi, can do so via an app and will make payments as per usage, the official said on condition of anonymity.

The PM Wani project will also have an app developer who will build a platform to register users and discover Wani-compliant Wi-Fi hotspots in an area and display them on the app, according to the release.

A central registry, which will be maintained by the Centre for Development of Telematics, will record the details of app providers, PDOAs and PDOs.

"We have not set a target of the number of hotspots to be set up under this project as this has to be a public initiative. But we have seen the demand, and we expect this to pick up soon," the government official cited above said.

Separately, the cabinet approved an undersea optical fibre cable link between 11 islands of Lakshadweep and Kochi in mainland India at an estimated cost of 1,072 crore, including operational expenses, for five years.

The Lakshadweep-Kochi project was announced by PM Narendra Modi on Independence Day with a target of completing it in 1,000 days or by May 2023.

The cabinet also approved a universal service obligation fund to provide mobile coverage in Arunachal Pradesh and two districts of Assam—Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao—under the Comprehensive Telecom Development Plan for North Eastern Region.

The project will provide mobile coverage to 2,374 villages—1,683 in Arunachal Pradesh and 691 in Assam—at an estimated 2,029 crore, including operational expenses, for five years. The target to complete this project is December 2022.

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