

## BharatNet deadline pushed to March 2019

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved the second phase of the BharatNet project that forms the backbone for the government's Digital India initiative, according to an official aware of the development.

However, the deadline for the delay-marred project had been pushed to March 2019, the official said. The project seeks to bring high speed broadband to all 2.5 lakh gram panchayats (GPs) through optical fibre.

### Phase I

The Centre was still working on completing the first phase of the project for which the deadline was March 2017. It had been able to lay optical fibre in nearly one-lakh GPs, however, only about 22,000 GPs have been provided Internet connectivity due to equipment procurement issues.

The second phase aims at covering the remaining 1.50 lakh GPs. "The Cabinet has approved a modified implementation strategy of BharatNet project for providing broadband connectivity to all GPs by March 2019," the official said. The official said the approval entails a total estimated expenditure of 42,068 crore for the implementation of project bankrolled from the Universal Service Obligation Fund.

"Out of this amount, 11,148 crore is the cost of providing connectivity to 1 lakh GPs in Phase-1 and 18,792 crore is for providing connectivity to remaining 1.5 lakh GPs in Phase-II," the official said, adding that balance amount is for activities such as last mile connectivity architecture, operation and maintenance, and replacement of BSNL's poor quality fibre.

The BharatNet project, earlier National Optical Fibre Network or NOFN, seeks to bring high-speed broadband to all 2.5 lakh gram panchayats through optical fibre. It was approved by Cabinet in 2011 and deadline was fixed by end of 2013 then deferred to September 2015 by UPA Government. The Narendra Modi-led government re-examined project status and set target to complete roll out by end of 2016. This was later delayed to December 2018.

Such expenditure needs expeditious resolution of stressed loan problem: Crisil

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