

“Department of Telecom- Serving the nation during the Covid Storm”

- During lockdown and restricted mobility periods, both communication and economy relied primarily on Telecom infrastructure and services. Despite sudden increased demand, Telecom Department, with cooperation of all stakeholders, coped well. As an illustrative example, the mobile network uptime of BSNL improved by 10% during the lockdown period, thanks to the dedicated efforts of all officials and stakeholders and focused managerial oversight. The Department continues to do its best in these challenging times of the second wave of the pandemic.
- Proactive approach of the Department in coordinating with states and local administration ensured telecom services were maintained and problems addressed quickly. Senior Officers (Joint Secretary level) were appointed Nodal Officers in each of the Local Service Areas (LSAs) of the country to ensure that network integrity and connectivity were monitored closely. Regular interactions with industry players and associations including TEMA, TEPC, TAIPA and COAI ensured that field issues were addressed as and when they arose and that Telecom service providers, manufacturers and their personnel worked productively and safely throughout the lockdown and restricted mobility period.
- Even before lockdown, ‘Work from Home’ and ‘Work from Anywhere’ facilitated through dispensations to Other Service Providers as regards security deposit, prior permission and VPN configuration- notified on 13.03.2020. These dispensations have been extended, liberalised further and notified on 05.11.2020 to the satisfaction of industry and individual employees. These have also facilitated ‘ease of doing business’.
- SMS support to Covid messaging for spreading of awareness among general public with the support of Telecom Service Providers (TSPs). Several crore public service messages sent regarding Covid appropriate behaviour, use of Arogya Setu app etc.
- Developing and implementing the Covid Quarantine Alert System (CQAS) during the first phase of the pandemic to track movement of Covid positive persons who were meant to be in isolation/quarantine to prevent further spread of the disease. An alert in real time is sent to relevant authorities where the affected person breaches quarantine restrictions. Over 27 lakh mobile numbers of Covid positive persons in 18 States/UTs have been monitored through this system in the public interest.
- Designing and rolling out the Covid- Savdhaan platform : This is a geo-intelligent alert dissemination system for enabling States to disseminate location-based alerts on Containment Zones, supply distribution points, availability of treatment centres etc. Targeted information based on Pin-code/polygon details is provided which is of immense help to beneficiaries as well as government authorities. More than 310 crore SMS message alerts have been sent on this platform free of cost in 26 States/UTs in 10 vernacular languages since April 2020.

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- A helping hand to migrants facing hardships through the in-house developed “Shram Setu” system. This Bulk Migrants Tracking & Reporting System (BMTS) is a powerful information and analytical tool that helps States in tracking migrant influx and devising appropriate action plans.
- Relief to retail consumers during the lockdown period: Not only BSNL, but private TSPs also gave a free recharge of Rs.10 to mobile phone subscribers on their reaching zero balance during the lockdown. BSNL and MTNL also permitted free incoming calls even after validity of prepaid plan was exhausted. Other dispensations including doubling of free data in broadband plans and augmentation of international internet bandwidth were also implemented by MTNL/BSNL during the lockdown period.
- Decentralisation of licensing activities for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) from DoT HQ in New Delhi to field units effected in July 2020 has reduced delays in the process, avoided unnecessary travel of applicants to Delhi on this account and has improved ‘ease of doing business’ in this area.
- Covid 19 helplines and additional lines required by several Departments/ States/ agencies during the period were supplied on war-footing by BSNL and MTNL. BSNL provided 18500 new fixed line broadband and 8000 new land line numbers during this lockdown period. In addition, a National WhatsApp number and short codes for managing Covid-19 calls by frontline bodies such as Ministry of Health were provided speedily.
- In addition, Video Conferences were greatly facilitated by the Department as a substitute to physical meetings. Even Courts were enabled through the Department’s efforts to hold virtual proceedings, thus ensuring that the pandemic restrictions on physical interaction did not stop the wheels of justice and of the consultative machinery in the Government and in industry from coming to a stop.
- Ensuring that flagship/significant connectivity projects not derailed due to the lockdown: The inauguration of the undersea optical fibre cable connectivity between Port Blair and Chennai on 10.08.2020 by the Hon’ble PM underscored the Department’s determination in ensuring that nationally significant projects were not disrupted entirely by the pandemic and consequent lockdown. This determination is reiterated in the Department’s commitment now during the ‘second wave’ of the pandemic to provide broadband connectivity to the remaining ‘uncovered’ inhabited villages in the country (of the around 6 lakh inhabited villages as per the 2011 census) within 1000 days of the Prime Minister’s Independence Day announcement in this regard on 15.08.2020.
- To ensure that telecom manufacturers are incentivised to manufacture in India to promote AtmaNirbhar Bharat as well as create jobs in the Telecom Sector, a PLI Scheme with Cabinet approval has been notified by the Department to take effect from 01.04.2021. With a financial outlay of Rs. 12,195 crores over 5 years, this Scheme is particularly relevant as a beacon of hope for the Sector during the ongoing ‘second wave’ of the pandemic.