Digital South Asia: a brief history of telecom policies in the region

*The telecom sector in South Asian countries have followed different trajectories with similar characteristics. **Preeti Raghunath** takes stock of policy developments in each of the South Asian countries.*

Late last year, India put out a call for recommendations to the New Telecom Policy 2018 from its various stakeholders. In response, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in February laid out a set of recommendations which have taken cognisance of, among other things, 5G and the Internet of Things (IoT) as technological advancements that the country should focus on. This New Telecom Policy, when implemented, would be an upgrade from the earlier Policy of 2012. This is the latest such iteration that recognises advancements in the digital domain in the larger South Asian region, prior to which initiatives like Digital Bangladesh and Digital India have been at the forefront.

The opening up of the economies has been closely linked to the mega story of telecom upsurge in South Asia. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the lifting of barriers in trade, revolutionising telecommunication infrastructure and services in the region.

Sri Lanka: The island-nation was the first country in the region to allow a private player to obtain a mobile license in 1989. Two years later, the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission was set up in Colombo. In 1996, direct competition was allowed in the sector, also increasing the independence of the Commission.

India: The Indian telecom sector opened up to private players in the early 1980s, further opening up in a big way after the liberalisation of the economy in 1991. The TRAI was set up in 1997, as an autonomous regulatory body. The country's telecommunications policy has seen many iterations, the most recent ones being the 2012 Policy preceding the latest policy exercise this year.

Nepal: Nepal's telecommunications policy goes back to 1997, when the Nepal Telecommunications Act and Regulation were both passed. The following year, the Nepal Telecommunications Authority was set up, to oversee the sector and its services. The Himalayan country was a pioneer in introducing 3G and WiMax in the region, but since then the sector has lagged behind. In 2004, the Nepal Telecommunication Corporation (NTA) was brought into being as a public company. In 2017, 4G LTE service was launched in the country.

Bhutan: Another mountainous country, Bhutan's telecommunications policy can be seen in effect with the promulgation of the Telecommunications Act of 1999, which also institutionalised the Bhutan Telecommunications Corporation. The sector has since seen policies that pertain to the ICT and Broadband domains, under the ambit of telecommunications.

Bangladesh: After opened up its economy to private investment in the 1990s, the Bangladesh Telecommunications Act was passed in 2001. The Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) was set up the next year, to administer and regulating telecommunications in the country. The country's telecom policy has seen many revisions, and shifts in focus with changing times.

Pakistan: The telecom sector in Pakistan goes back to the Telecom Ordinance of 1994, which led to the formation of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. It was in 2003 that the sector was deregulated, to allow for private and foreign investment. Pakistan instituted its latest telecom policy in 2015, and includes a focus on Universal Service Fund (USF) to allow for mobile and internet usage.

Afghanistan: Afghanistan's telecom sector has been marred by political and economic instability owing to the country's war-ravaged recent past. The success story of the mobile phone in the country resonates with the rest of the region. The laying of the optic-fibre network through the country has been done with the help of China.

The Maldives: In Maldives, the country's Communications Authority runs a regulatory board, which oversees policies and laws pertinent to the sector. The Maldives Telecommunications Act came into effect in 2003, and the National Broadband Policy that is currently underway is for the period starting 2014 to this year.

Another characteristic feature of telecommunications in South Asia has been the perceived need to 'catch-up' with the rest of the world, and not miss out of technological developments. Image: Mobile phone evolution, respectively, from left to right: Motorola 8900X-2, Nokia 2146 orange 5.1, Nokia 3210, Nokia 3510, Nokia 6210, Ericsson T39, HTC Typhoon. Credit: Anders/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

Mobility and connectedness

The above outline provides a capsule of the regulatory landscape of telecommunications in South Asia. However, any critical study of policy often goes beyond policy documents, to shift the lens to practice. This would involve the study of institutions, key actors, the sites they operate in, and the discursive elements of policy. In South Asia's telecommunications landscape, the recent years have seen the discourse being dominated by the following conceptual apparatuses and overall trends, presented as analytic pointers:

Veracity of technological determinates: The telecommunication sector in India is hailed as the second largest in the world, contributing significantly to the GDP, over the last two decades. Telecom, in South Asia, holds the passkey to immense amounts of data, the new currency. While this focus on the technological manifests of telecommunication recognizes advancements, it does little to underscore the social construction of such technology. In other words, the sector is often approached with an instrumental rationality and a more essentialised understanding of technology as a disrupter in itself, rather than as embodiment of such technology.

Market mandates: Connected to the social construction of technology is the manner in which the telecommunications sector in South Asia had been intricately connected to an open market and competition. This is evident in the manner in which the telecom boom occurred almost in tandem with the liberalisation of the markets in the region. Market mandates are often the selling point, with baseline sales numbers of mobiles driving the larger telecom sector blueprints.

Imperative to 'Catch-Up': Another characteristic feature of the telecommunications sector in the region has been the perceived need to 'catch-up' with the rest of the world, and not miss out of technological developments. The many iterations of policy documents and related exercises are made with the driving belief that the country should not miss out of the "tech miracle". This trend is seen in the manner in which the digital divide is perceived, both within and between countries.

Autonomy versus interference: Institutional mechanisms that have come to govern the telecom space in South Asia have more or less been marked by the tussle between institutional autonomy as regulators and the instinct for interference by government. While the mandate seems that of autonomy, institutions are seldom fully independent and are often rendered toothless by the trappings of governmental power. There are numerous examples from the region, of the regulatory authority being reigned in, by lack of authority. For instance, the TRAI often makes recommendations and holds public consultations, none of which are binding.

Conclusion

The road that the telecom sectors in the countries of South Asia take will be largely determined by the global move towards greater connectedness and integration. This manifests in the form of 5G services and a surge of products and services that come under the rubric of the Internet of Things (IoT). This, in turn, is only making the world an increasingly datafying space, where data holds immense value. The third wave of the development of artificial intelligence and the increased research in deep learning and deep neural networks is set to pave way for a greater penetration for telecommunication services. It will be incumbent on South Asia to recognize these developments, without succumbing to a deterministic logic. The key for South Asia will be to focus on human security as the goal for such transformative technology.

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