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Digitalise terrestrial TV Release Spectrum For 3G

THE government behaves as if third-generation (3G) telecom services are an indulgence for the public and a revenue source for itself. Why else would it dawdle on 3G licences the way it has been? At the pre-bid conference held this Monday, it had no clarity to offer on any substantive issue and, not surprisingly, foreign players, who hope to see 3G as their entry point in India, skipped the meet altogether. True, it does not mean that the latter would finally stay away from 3G licence auctions. But the main constraint is that the government is offering just 5 Mhz of spectrum with each 3G licence, citing shortage of spectrum. This is just not enough for viable services, leave alone efficient network planning. Spectrum shortage is entirely a result of faulty planning and, worse, implementation. Our terrestrial broadcasting monopoly, Doordarshan (DD), hogs valuable spectrum in the 700 Mhz band, ideally suited for 3G services. Apparently, it is possible to release 108 Mhz of spectrum in this band by digitalising all terrestrial broadcast. Nations around the world are on the verge of completing their transition to digital TV. In India, DD has a desultory plan to go digital by 2017, and in India, deadlines have a life of their own: 2017 could well yawn, stretch and walk over to 2027. Such an attitude amounts to criminal negligence, given the potential that wireless broadband has for transforming the economic potential of rural India. Let us not make the mistake of thinking fun and games when we think 3G. In India, 3G is likely to carry vital services, rather than entertainment: data ranging from educational material for schools and diagnostic information on patients hundreds of miles away from a qualified doctor to precise instructions on growing orchids and crafting embroidery for export.

Give DD a one-year mandate to go completely digital. Part of the cost can be met from the fund meant for achieving universal telecom access. Consumers will need set-top boxes (STBs) to make their analogue TVs receive digital signals. STB makers can get fiscal incentives on top of huge volumes to make STBs cheap. The spectrum released, when put to wireless broadband access, will generate more than enough incomes to justify any fiscal outlays on digitalising all of Indian TV.