



Telecom minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said that he is in favour of “non-discrimination and digital inclusion”. (Sushil Kumar/ HT File Photo)

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Amid massive online protests to maintain unhindered access to the internet for all, telecom minister Ravi Shankar Prasad on Monday hinted that the government was in support of [net neutrality](#).

However, a final call would be taken after a ministry committee submits its report in the second week of May, he said.

“The internet is one of the finest creations of the human mind. To become global, it must have an integral link to local. I am equally proud of the great role young people have played in the field of net expansion. There must be non-discrimination and digital inclusion,” Prasad told HT.

A citizen campaign to uphold net neutrality (see graphic) in India has taken the web by storm with over 200,000 people — including filmstars and politicians — writing to the country’s telecom regulator, which has come out with a consultation paper ahead of formulating guidelines on the matter.

Activists say net neutrality — an idea that stipulates that companies treat all data as equal so that it is accessible to everyone at the same possible speed and cost — is crucial to keeping the internet a level-playing field and encouraging innovation.

Prasad, however, refused to spell out the government’s stand and said the ministry has already formed a committee that would consult all stakeholders before submitting its report. “The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) is also considering it. We respect its advisory. We will take a call

after we receive the committee report,” he said.

Official sources said the government is conscious of the support for the issue by netizens after certain firms argued that they should be allowed to charge more for certain applications and services.

Activists say such a move would effectively tilt the balance in favour of the bigger players and potentially stifle innovation and growth of start-ups.

In the run up to the last Lok Sabha elections, the BJP successfully mobilised people through social media and the ruling party doesn't want to “let down” its supporters by compromising on net neutrality, sources said. The opposition Congress has also jumped into the debate as it sees an opportunity to wean the “internet generation” away from the BJP.

The debate follows a similar one in the US, where the federal communications commission approved internet rules that prevented broadband providers from separating online traffic into slow and fast lanes.

Prasad has called for an internal report on net neutrality by the second week of May. “I expect a comprehensive report from an internal committee (in the department of telecommunications) that I had set up in January... net neutrality is still evolving, this report will examine all issues concerned.” Trai is also scheduled to come out with its recommendations after April 24, the last date for stakeholders to send their inputs on the issue. A senior communications ministry official said, “As per the Trai Act, the government holds the final decision to accept or reject, partially or in total, the Trai report... it is not binding on the government.”

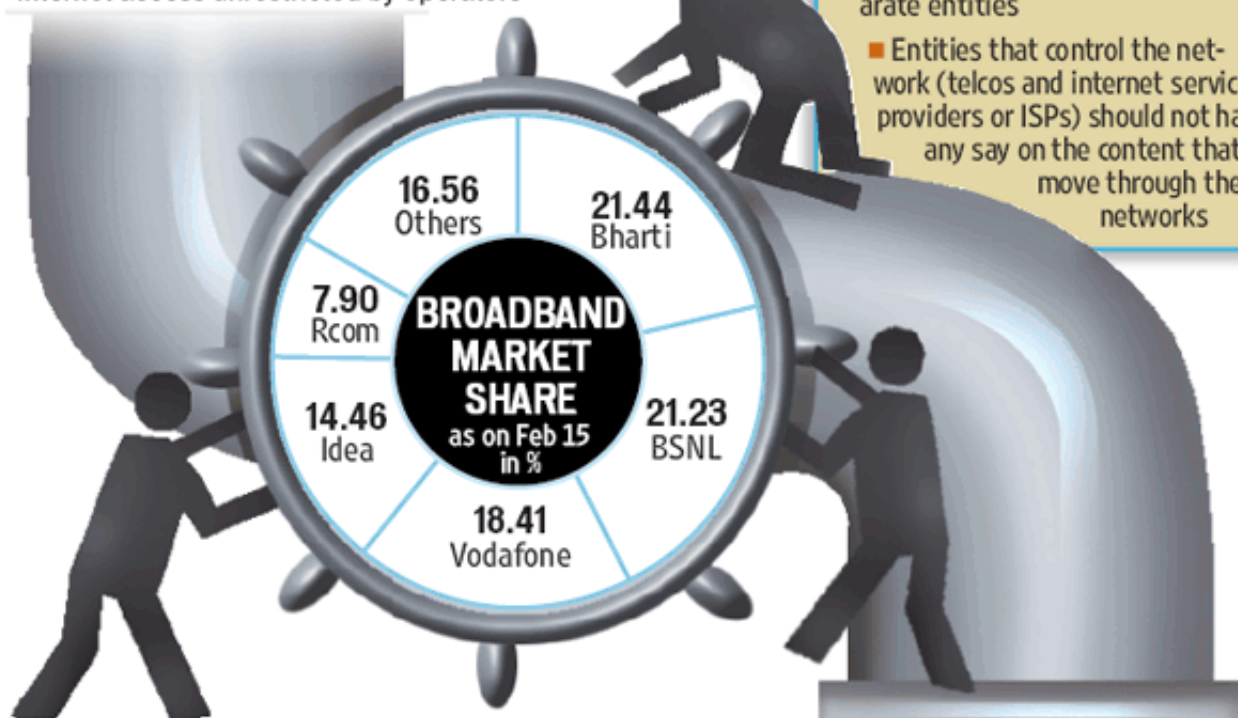
Responding to a question if the issue could reach the courts, with telecom operators differing on the definition of net neutrality, Prasad said, “I cannot stop anyone from going to court.”

Legal eagles foresee a judicial solution to the issue of net neutrality, followed by legislative execution. “The telecom regulator can only recommend. The IT Act does not mention anything on net neutrality, the telecom policy on it is ambiguous and there is social concern. The issue is bound to go to courts,” said Pawan Duggal, a leading Supreme Court lawyer who specialises in IT.

Telcos have their own argument against the concept. “Will net neutrality imply all devices must be standardised and offered at the same price to make the net neutral?...There are multiple mobile technologies – 2G, 3G, 4G — to access internet. Should all speed and pricing be the same in the garb of net neutrality?” asked Srinivasan Gopalan, director, consumer business, Bharti Airtel.

A TANGLED WEB

India is caught in a fierce debate on allowing internet access unrestricted by operators



'NET NEUTRALITY'

- Net neutrality treats internet as a public utility, and is based on the rule that a network and the data that flows through it are two separate entities
- Entities that control the network (telcos and internet service providers or ISPs) should not have any say on the content that move through their networks

PAID PRIORITISATION

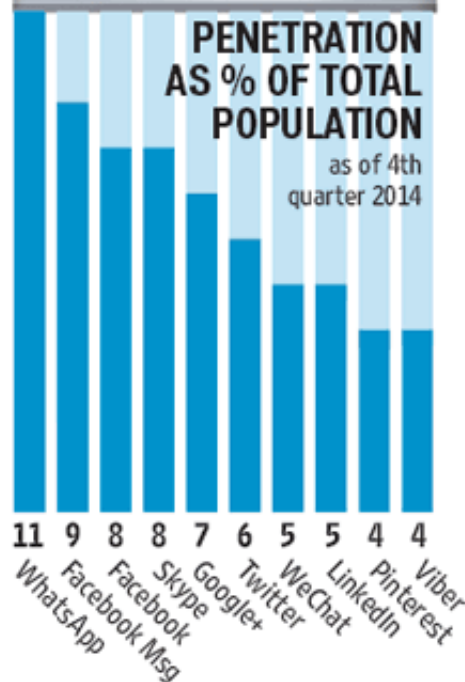
- A student's blog-post should not face slower access than a company's website just because the latter has paid the ISP or the telco through ads or any other form
- An ISP or a telco also can't block or "throttle" or slow down access to a website, so long as the contents are legal

OVER-THE-TOP SERVICES

- Services such as WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, WeChat, Hike are called over-the-top (OTT) services
- Without net neutrality you may end up paying for these

WHY TELCOS ARE OPPOSED

- Telcos, which are also the ISPs, they should earn a pie of the traffic moving through the networks that they have invested huge amounts in setting up
- Services such as WhatsApp have also significantly eroded their SMS and other revenues



TELCO TALK

- Airtel last week announced Airtel Zero, which allows consumers free access to select apps and services such as Flipkart with tie-ups
- There is concern that Airtel customers may face difficulty in accessing competing sites

REGULATORY LENS

- Telecom regulator, Trai, has released a paper inviting comments from users and companies on how Internet apps and services should be regulated
- Report expected next mth

GOVT ACTION

- The govt had set up a panel in January to recommend the position that the government needs to take on net neutrality
- The report is expected in the second week of May