

Trai head moots portability in DTH

Currently, set-top box supplied by one DTH provider cannot be used to access services of another as players are using different technology platforms

Dhirendra Tripathi & Itika Sharma. New Delhi

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) may look at introducing portability in the direct-to-home services sector, on the lines of mobile portability, to stimulate the sector's growth, chairman J S Sharma said.

"Entry price in DTH is coming down on its own. Growth will now be a function of quality and pricing. Portability in DTH may reduce entry barriers for users," Sharma said in an interview.

Subscribers in the country currently have to pay for installation each time they switch their DTH service provider.

DTH service providers could be accused on two counts. One is that they have 'blocked' their set top boxes, preventing the set top box supplied by one service provider from being used to access the services of the other.

Currently, service providers are using two technology platforms — MPEG2 and MPEG4 — for offering their services, allowing them to extend the argument that equipment of one will thus not be compatible with the service of the other.

"All these are issues that will be looked into. DTH will do well if service providers can offer more than cable operators," Sharma said.

Sharma took charge as the chairman of the regulatory authority on May 14.

Sharma, also former telecom secretary, was a member of the Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tri-

bunal prior to his current assignment.

The regulator is also currently in the process of formulating new tariff regulations for the sector.

Another area of regulation that Trai could look at is tariffs for calls and SMS. "We will have to examine if there is further scope for cut in SMS rates. We need to take a look," Sharma said.

Earlier this year, after much prodding from Sharma's predecessor Nripendra Misra, mobile service providers had cut tariffs for SMS.

Sharma acknowledged that SMS rates continue to be high even as the service uses less resource compared with a call.

Another area of consumer interest that the regulator is currently grappling with is value-added services, a key concern as all service providers look to increase their revenues from such services in a highly competitive market.

The regulator had recently directed all service providers to take a written request from all subscribers before activating their value-added services.

However, after much howling from industry associations, Trai relented. "We have formed a committee to look into this. Value-added services must grow and only in a systematic manner and only if consumers need them," he said.

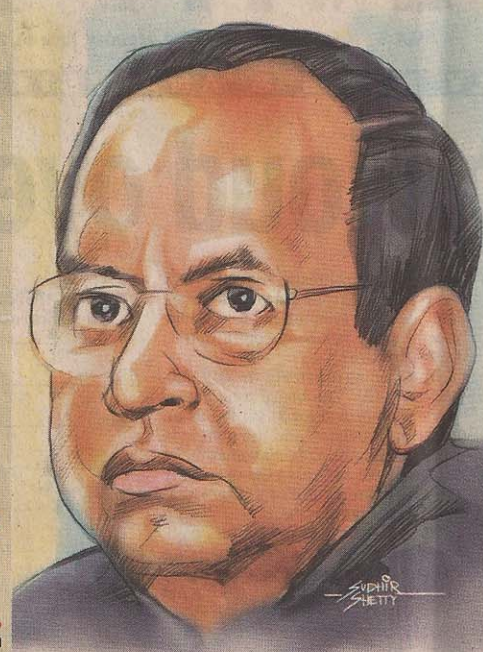
Sharma listed redressal of consumer grievances as among the key challenges facing the telecom sector. Convergence, bridging the digital divide and growth of broadband services are the other ones, he said.

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gy ready, that there's no lag between the world and us. There are various constraints. We need to do a lot more on broadband, convergence... how telecom and media can come together. Consumer satisfaction is obviously a challenge," Sharma said.

Even as the industry awaits auction of spectrum for 3G services, Sharma adds a word of caution: "All consumers

are not going to take up 3G immediately. It is a play of availability and pricing. 3G in India will start but we should not expect a substantial switch from 2G to 3G," he said.

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Sharma accepted there's a long way to

go before the same can be said about the satisfaction levels of an average mobile user. "It is true that consumers' expectations are currently not fully met. We are looking at ways so that the consumer is not harassed. While he obviously knows about his experiences, he doesn't know about the experiences of others. We want all this to be in public domain so that the consumer can make informed choices," Sharma said.

The regulator plans to audit performance reports of various service providers and put them under greater scrutiny to ensure better quality.

"We are looking at how the reports that the service providers submit can be cross checked," Sharma said.

The regulator plans to introduce a "Do Communicate" registration, under which service providers will be able to call or SMS willing users. "We are looking at a way in which people can choose what information they want and how they want it — through call or short message service. The service will allow consumers to have access to information but only if it is desired," Sharma said.

This is to reduce unauthorised marketing, Sharma said.

The government had introduced the 'National Do Not Call' registry, which enables users to block unwanted, marketing calls. However, this registration does not include marketing through SMS. "The effectiveness of the facility has been found to be only 60-65%," Sharma said.

The regulator is yet to make up its mind on whether the proposed "Do Communicate" registry will replace the existing 'NDNC'.

Trai is exploring the possibility of holding 'telephone adalats', on the lines of 'traffic or *bijli adalats*'. nw18