'Digitisation will improve the quality of life'

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Digitisation is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, says Ram Sewak Sharma, Secretary, Department of Electronics and Information Technology.

His department is the nerve of the 'Digital India' programme along with partners both in the public and private sector. In a conversation with *BusinessLine*, Sharma shared his thoughts on the programme and the future of Digital India. Edited excerpts:

Considering that a majority of of the population cannot use computers and does not possess smartphones, how will digitisation work?

Digitisation is not an end, but a means to an end. Our objective is to use digitisation as a means to improve quality of life. The initiatives we have been taking are targeted at giving greater access to public services to the segment of the population that does not have access to computers.

The opening of common service centres and focus on skill development and digital literacy will go a long way in addressing the issues you have mentioned.

As far as smartphone use is concerned, trends clearly show that their prices are falling. We are focussing on developing applications that use the power of the smartphone to access pubic services. We are approaching the problem from the supply end and from the side of improving access to public services.

What will the role of local and foreign investors be in this programme?

The Digital India Programme covers a wide canvas that will help both domestic as well as global investors and entrepreneurs, as it will create demand for a range of IT products and services and IT enabled services. But the opportunities are not just limited to what the Government would do through its own funds.

Many projects under the programme will have spin-off and indirect effects that will spur the growth of the IT and electronics and manufacturing sectors in general, including start ups.

How beneficial will the programme be for citizens?

Almost all programmes and applications that the government is launching are aimed at helping citizens. However, the visibility and direct use of some applications may vary.

For instance, the Aadhaar platform has become the bedrock for establishing and validating the identity of a person. Programmes to develop IT infrastructure aim at providing digital access and services through networks, Wi-Fi, and similar means.

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> Secretary, Department of
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There are specific products, portals and applications that directly address the needs of citizens. Applications like the 'Digital locker' and 'e-sign' are aimed at eliminating difficulties faced by citizens in accessing and providing copies of their own documents and certificates. Then there are applications like e-hospital, which will help citizens access health services and help decongest hospital areas as patients can seek appointments electronically.

Would apps/ services like Aadhaar be voluntary or mandatory?

As far as Aadhaar is concerned, at this juncture it is perhaps the best available and secure means for establishing identity. Having said that, it may be emphasised that all apps and services are voluntary in nature.

How can Digital India be executed properly in terms of organisation, single point of contact and promotions? How will network and connectivity issues be dealt with?

For applications to succeed, the backend infrastructure has to be in place. We have adopted a twin-pronged approach of addressing constraints at the back end, including that of connectivity. We are also developing applications that directly address a given problem. Also, since most Digital India initiatives are implemented in the States, their involvement is also critical and fortunately the responses from State Governments have been overwhelming.

What big policy initiatives will you be unveiling over the next two-three years?

Digital India rests on nine pillars of growth: Broadband Highways, Universal Access to Mobile Connectivity, Public Internet Access Programme, e-Governance – Reforming Governance through Technology, e-Kranti – Electronic Delivery of Services, Information for All, Electronic Manufacturing, IT for Jobs and Early Harvest Programmes.