Global tech giants gear up for Digital India road map

Centre has okayed blueprint for the project in August, which is expected to attract Rs 1,00,000 crore in investments over next 3-4 years

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Technology giants across India and abroad are eyeing the road map for the Digital India project. The Centre has approved the blueprint for the project in August, which is expected to attract investments upward of Rs 1,00,000 crore over the next three-four years.

According to media reports, Cisco, the networking giant, has earmarked $1.7 billion for investment this year in India. Other players such as Google, Microsoft, HP, IBM, TCS and Wipro are also gearing up with their offerings.

Companies that Business Standard spoke to are tight-lipped about their investments in these projects, but many said information and communication technology or ICT requirement in projects like smart cities, depending on the size would be anywhere between five to six per cent of the total cost of the project.

Nasscom, the software industry body, has already conducted two consultation workshops with the ministry of urban development for IT services industry members on the '100 smart cities' initiatives.

Cisco had entered the field of 'smart city' projects towards the end of 2007. It was in the middle of 2008 that a larger thrust was given to this concept in emerging regions. In India, it is a big focus area now. Even though 'smart plus connected cities' was a global initiative, the entire practice for the company is run from its Bengaluru centre. Some of the focus areas for Cisco to realise this concept are education, health care and energy.

Cisco has been working on several projects of smart cities across the globe. In India, some of the projects that it is working on are the 1,500-km Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor. In Haryana, it has worked on a project of connecting local police stations, which has allowed them to share databases on criminals much easier. Some of its other tie-ups include working with city of Bengaluru, Pimpri-Chichwad in Pune and Kochi.

Similarly, IBM too has invested in laying the foundation for a smart city in India. One of the showcase projects that IBM is working on is Palava City in Mumbai, developed by the Lodha Group. The city spanning over 4,000 acres will incorporate IBM's 'smarter cities' technology using advanced, data-driven systems to integrate information from all city operations into a single system to improve efficiency and deliver an enhanced quality of life for its residents.

"In India, we have been active with the smart city concept. But the uptake has been slow, especially over the last two to three years. I think there is a need for a change in the mindset.

However, I do see a big interest at the government level. Everybody is realising that this is a concept that is essential for India," said Rahul Sharma, partner/executive director, IBM Global Business Services, India/South Asia.

Sistema JSFC, which has been implementing smart city concepts in Russia and other countries too is considering the opportunity in India. "The smart city value depends on the city infrastructure development. For example, the Moscow smart city project's budget was around $6.5 billion (the population is approximately 12 million people according to the official data as of 2013). The project budget for other Russian cities (such as Rostov, Ufa, Novosibirsk, Kazan with a population over one million) fluctuates from $130 to $650 million," said a spokesperson from the company.

Its not just the services and networking firms that are eyeing the Digital India road map. Tech giants such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook have shown keen interest in trying to ease last-mile connectivity hurdles in the country. Indian IT players too are keen to provide services. Although TCS has not yet announced anything specific, it is already working with the Singapore Management University (SMU) for the research on 'intelligent city'. The SMU-TCS iCity Lab, an SMU and TCS joint venture, is focused on research and development of intelligent solutions.

According to sources, Google has already made its intention clear on providing the last-mile connectivity with its helium-filled balloons. On the other hand, Microsoft is planning to use its 'white space' technology. It means use of frequencies allotted to a broadcasting service but is unused. The unused frequencies are considered to have potential for providing wireless broadband internet access. A device that can be used with such technology is called 'white space device'.