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2,500 cities, towns to get free Wi-Fi

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New Delhi: The government will roll out free high-speed Wi-Fi in 2,500 cities and towns across the country over three years and the programme, involving an investment of up to Rs 7,000 crore. The plan will be implemented by state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam (BSNL).

However, the free ride will be only for a limited time, after which users will have to pay for further access, a model similar to what is being offered at airports and other places by private operators. For those having a BSNL or an MTNL connection, the switch-over to Wi-Fi will be similar to roaming "at very nominal costs" once the free usage is over.

"The services will begin in the next financial year (2015-



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16) and we plan to offer these to subscribers of all mobile operators," BSNL chairman and managing director Anupam Shrivastava told TOI here.

The measure seems to be in line with the Modi government's ambitious 'Digital India' programme aimed at boosting internet connectivity across the country. Also, it is being seen as a measure that will give a boost to struggling BSNL, which has been in the red for nearly four financial years and suffered a loss of

about Rs 7,000 crore in 2013-14. Telecom minister Ravi Shankar Prasad has already listed revival of BSNL and MTNL among his top priorities.

Shrivastava, who recently took over as the CMD of the ailing PSU, said most of the top cities around the country will be getting the Wi-Fi facility that aims to provide fast internet speeds. "The cities where it will be rolled out include Kolkata, Chennai, Lucknow, Dehradun, Hyderabad, Varanasi, Bhopal, Jaipur, Patna, Indore,

Chandigarh and Ludhiana."

The BSNL CMD said the Wi-Fi speed will be "of 4G levels" as the company will develop it around its vast optic fibre and cable network. "Around 50,000-60,000 Wi-Fi hotspots will be set up as part of the programme."

BSNL is hoping that a favourable tariff plan offered for Wi-Fi services will help it gain mobile subscribers. Stiff competition from private operators and slow pace of infrastructure upgrades have seen flight of mobile customers from BSNL at a time when its landline base is also shrinking. "We are sitting on the verge of a data revolution and BSNL has a huge potential here on the back of our landline base and capability," Shrivastava said.