Fibre will serve as the foundation for India's transformation to a digitally empowered economy. It will be instrumental in the success of programmes like Digital India, the Smart Cities Mission and the BharatNet project. The densification of 4G networks and the introduction of 5G will also drive fibre demand. Further, with launch of new-age technologies like internet of things (IoT), fibre will continue to get closer to the actual point of consumption. Fibre-to-the-x (FTTx) is set to emerge as a key focus area for industry stakeholders. In an interview with tele.net, Dr Anand Agarwal, group chief executive officer, Sterlite Tech, talks about the role of fibre in the networks of future, the changing customer expectations, the evolving FTTx market, and Sterlite's plans and strategies to leverage the opportunities in the Indian market…

Networks of the future will have a very different look and feel. How will the role of fibre evolve during this transition?

Earlier, we had only few towers connected by fibre, and the last mile (between towers and consumers) was dominantly wireless enabled. However, the scenario is changing now with fibre moving closer and closer to the subscriber. It is emerging as a core transport medium. Its high speed, high capacity and very low latency (very low response time) are making it a favourable technology. As the industry is embracing 4G and moving on to 5G, most of the cell sites will be connected with fibre in the future.

How have customer expectations changed over time, particularly from telcos? What kind of role do they want you to take up now?

Customers are looking for a partner that can design the entire network for them. They are facing the big challenge of how to continue creating new higher capacity networks at lower costs. In such a scenario, the design of networks becomes extremely important. One has to design a network in such a way that the cost of transportation per gigabyte keeps reducing (almost by half) every year. Sterlite Tech is playing an important role in this regard, and has become an integral part of network design, planning and roll-out for key operators in the Indian market. We have emerged as their end-to-end business partners.

What are some of the key projects/collaborations that you are working on currently?

Sterlite Tech is a leading technology player in India's digitisation journey. We specialise in

designing, building and managing programmable networks. We have integrated smart data network offerings for global telcos, cloud companies, citizen networks and the defence sector. Our broadband solutions are driving transformations from 3G to 4G and preparing the global telecom sector for the next phase, that is, 5G, IoT, fibre-to-the-home, data centres and sensing solutions, among other network innovations and disruptions.

We have been involved in creating broadband infrastructure for citizen networks like BharatNet (both in Phase I and Phase II) and MahaNet to improve everyday life experiences in smart cities. We have also undertaken digitisation projects of national importance such as the multi-year Indian Navy project to design, execute and maintain the Navy's communication network, and the Network for Spectrum project for fibre deployment for defence forces.

We are also building a cloud-based virtual network management approach for access and FTTx. With over 45 per cent of Indian data networks running on Sterlite Tech fibre, we have been a key contributor to the Digital India vision.

What are some of the challenges and how can these be addressed?

Essentially, it is all about network planning and execution. At a broader level, infrastructure planning has to be done in a holistic manner across the country. Telecom must be looked at as an important infrastructure sector. Policymakers need to look at it in the same way as they look at other core infrastructure sectors such as railways, roads and power. It is important that the government spends substantially on building infrastructure, and then allows private companies to ride on the infrastructure that has been created.

What are Sterlite Tech's future plans in terms of capacity expansion and investments?

We are the only company in the world that is forward integrated, involved in network roll-outs and programmable network design, apart from having core strength and expertise in photonics and glass science. This gives us a unique advantage to offer hyper-scale networks for applications such as 5G, FTTx, cloud, data centres and defence. These are end-to-end suites with optical products, kits and network orchestration in virtualised environments.

In terms of expansion, we have been organically and inorganically strengthening our core optical product capabilities. We acquired 100 per cent stake in Metallurgica Bresciana, a specialised optical cable manufacturer in Italy, to expand our European presence. We are doubling our cable capacity to 33 million fibre kilmotre (fkm) at a capital expenditure of Rs 3.20 billion through further brownfield expansion in Silvassa.

Our ongoing capex plan of expanding the fibre capacity to 50 million fkm from 30 million fkm is on track and will be operational by June 2019. With these expansions, Sterlite Tech will be among the top integrated fibre and cabling technology providers globally.

What are your thoughts on the NDCP, 2018, which focuses on fibre connectivity and infrastructure in a big way?

While the National Digital Communications Policy (NDCP) 2018 is great, only effective implementation will ensure its true success. In that respect, it is my appeal to the policymakers to ensure the smooth implementation of the policy.

Do you have a regulatory/policy wish list?

• Timely implementation of NDCP: While the government is working towards the Digital India vision, the industry expects a clear roadmap for the faster implementation of NDCP, with defined timelines and roles for various stakeholders.

• Efforts towards enabling government payments: The industry needs a prompt "payment policy" for all government-related payments, which will enable a healthy supply chain ecosystem for all the players in the value chain.

• Enhancing ease of doing business: The central government should also introduce an "ease of doing business" policy, specifically for the telecom infrastructure sector, which enables faster broadband deployments through a centralised process.

Going forward, what will be the key growth drivers for the FTTx market in India? What will be Sterlite Tech's strategy to leverage this opportunity?

An average end-user or enterprise generates and consumes more data than what an entire city consumed almost a decade ago. As data consumption explodes, service providers are under increasing pressure to deliver the hyper-connectivity and ultra-low latency required to meet this demand. Fibre is proving to have the capacity and agility required to support these rising needs. Operators and governments are turning to FTTx solutions to provide ultra-fast, last-mile data connectivity, which will enable a true digital revolution.

We are developing newer technologies to address this need. On the one hand, we have recently launched FTTx MANTRA, an end-to-end FTTx-as-a-service solution that enables roll-out of FTTx networks at the scale, latency and agility needed to suit all future requirements of 5G, IoT, global communication service providers, data centres and citizen networks. On the other, we believe that open source programmable networks will pave the way for FTTx to become more advanced at a high uptime and a low cost to customers.

What is the outlook for the sector?

The networks of tomorrow are already here. The network response time and latency are driving the massive consumption of data by consumer enterprises. India has a huge opportunity to harness this energy.

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