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*Respected Prime Minister,*

**Subject: 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Telecom reforms in India**

I write to you to because the coming year 2018 - will mark the completion of 25 years of telecom reforms in India. The first set of cellular mobile service licenses were issued to the private sector across the four metros in 1993. As a nation, its citizens, and in particular as a digital economy, we have come a long way since then.

As you are aware, I have been a participant and witness to the progress of the Telecom sector over these last 25 years – starting as a 26 year old who had taken time off from a career in Semiconductor Industry in Silicon Valley to experience what India had to offer as the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao opened up the Economy. I spent over 14 years in the Telecom sector before I exited in 2006 as I sensed the coming of a very different set of rules in the Industry.

The last 25 years of Telecom has created a vibrant sector that has changed connectivity and the lives of the people of our country. More importantly this was all done with Private capital making the Telecom sector the biggest and most transformational reform that this country has seen – and all with private capital. The number of mobile Indians have gone from 1 Lac in 1995 to 109.95 Crores by end of 2016. So understandably I am proud of having played a role in this.

Much has been achieved during this period, especially with regards to the initial objectives set out by the government for providing affordable voice telecom services to the citizens of India. But as we reach 25 years of this Industry – there are visible signs that there is a need for a new, fresh look at this sector – both from the perspective of future growth, evolution of Technology and also importantly from the perspective of consumers of the country.



For example, there are critical areas where more needs to be done, especially with regards to internet and broadband access, which are at the core of government's ambitious "Digital India" program and "Smart Cities" mission. Similarly, there are a host of new technologies and services such as IOT, and Artificial Intelligence that need urgent policy and regulatory attention from the government. The proliferation of such services has been much slower than expected, especially when compared to competing digital economies.

During this 25 year period (1993 – 2018), India has seen three Telecom Policies – 1994, 1999 and 2012. NTP '94 laid out the vision of telecom reforms and paved the way for private sector participation in broad terms, in the mobile and fixed telephony space. However, it was the Telecom Policy of 1999 released by the NDA government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee which paved the way for structural reforms in the sector, leading to unprecedented growth of mobile subscribers, introduction of fierce competition into the mobile telephony sector, and deep rooted reforms in the regulatory regime, which was followed up by the amendment of the TRAI Act in 1999. As you are aware, the 2012 Telecom Policy achieved very little except to be mis-used by some in the UPA government to give out licenses without auctions – which plunged the sector into a crisis of confidence due to scams and other actions of bad governance. Something which I opposed as an MP during that period.

Clearly, the last effective Telecom Policy (1999) will also be 19 years old in 2018. In "internet time", this would be considered an exceptionally long period, and necessitates an urgent review of the prevailing regime.

### **Need for Re-Imagining Policy**

Given 25 year completion of telecom reforms, there is both reason to celebrate our achievements and the need to review the existing policies and regulatory regimes on a range of issues. This need to re-imagine policy is even more vital because of your vision of Digital India that is so critical to the process of transforming governance and lives of Indians.

This is necessary especially as it relates to internet and broadband penetration (Despite the recent surge in Internet Users, the total Internet penetration is roughly about 30%); proliferation of new technologies and services, ensuring universal access for rural India, and to pave the way for better International standard regulatory Capacity, capabilities and Power in TRAI.

The new policy will also necessitate a review of the 24 year old license regime that was essentially formulated in a fixed line telephone era for provision of plain voice services. These



licenses – Mobile, ISP, Unified, VNO, etc., need a serious relook, since they have the ability to constrain growth and investment on account of their legacy objectives (voice telephony), structure and terms & conditions.

The new policy needs to clearly establish the role of the ICT sector in general, but telecom in particular, as a facilitator of inclusive growth and sustainable development on one hand, and an essential for the delivery of important national programs such as "Digital India" and "Smart Cities" mission, etc on one hand and transforming Government and Governance on the other hand. Through the policy, we will also have the opportunity to align ourselves as a leading global economic super power with the United Nations' 2030 Development Agenda – in particular the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The policy needs to identify the barriers to broadband penetration and articulate the need for their removal. Similarly, it needs to support actions and regulatory framework that will aid the penetration not just of broadband but also new technologies such as IOT and Artificial Intelligence.

The policy needs to draw up a pro-investment plan with specific actions to facilitate private sector investments in collaboration with government initiatives such as BharatNet. Issues of national and cyber security, which did not exist at the time of NTP 2012, are now center stage and therefore need special attention.

The policy needs to also spell out Consumer rights and expectations from service providers. – what I have referred to as Magna Carta of Digital Consumer Rights . Consumer rights in Digital space including Service Quality and Privacy have surfaced repeatedly in recent times as Call drops and misuse of consumer data by service providers – all of which create dissatisfaction amongst consumers – the most important stakeholders of any policy action of Government. This move to legally enshrine consumer rights is consistent with this government actions in other sectors like Real estate E.g. in RERA.

The NDA in 1999 had proceeded to write one of the best national telecom policies via an open consultation process to ensure that all stakeholders have the ability to contribute to the outcome. I was privileged to have contributed to that with that as an Entrepreneur. A similar, improved, structured process may be followed for the policy that will set India on the path to growth beyond 2018. It can be one of the leading initiatives which has the potential of getting wide ranging support from all stakeholders, both domestic and foreign. It will further strengthen India's image in the global ICT sector and position India to be the world's leading ICT powerhouse over the next decade.



I firmly believe that under your leadership and that of Telecom Minister Shri Manoj Sinha, this process of a new Telecom policy for the future could be an excellent and much needed outcome for our nation. I further hope that as nation celebrates the 25<sup>th</sup> year of Telecom reforms, that recognition to Late Prime Minister Narasimha Rao will also be accorded as the man who kicked off this revolution and to our respected Atalji whose NTP 99 really launched growth and affordability and vision of connectivity for all.

I trust this note of mine is helpful. I am available for any further discussion on issues / questions that you might have on this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Rajeev Chandrasekhar

Shri Narendra Modi  
Hon'ble Prime Minister  
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Copy to:

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