An Indian Telecommunication Service officer of the 1977 batch and an engineering graduate from IIT Roorkee, Pradeep Kumar Agarwal has more than 33 years of industry experience. He has expertise in project planning and execution in the fields of optical fibre, and radio systems and IT.

As director (planning) at Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL), Agarwal is spearheading the National Optical Fibre Network project, which was recently renamed BharatNet. He also holds additional charge of the operations function at BBNL, which is the implementing agency for BharatNet. The project aims to connect 250,000 gram panchayats across the country through optical fibre cables and provide internet connectivity at speeds of 100 Mbps as per the government's Digital India vision.

According to Agarwal, "BharatNet is a landmark initiative in taking forward the Digital India vision, which aims to transform the country into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. It is the world's largest rural broadband connectivity project on optical fibre and one that envisages providing non-discriminatory access to bridge the digital divide across rural India. The project aims to link 600 million rural citizens across 250,000 gram panchayats, spread over 6,600 blocks and 640 districts."

Over the years, Agarwal has worked on a number of challenging projects but identifies BharatNet as the most engaging among them. Being a large-scale project, it involves major logistical and execution challenges, which have affected its timelines. The BharatNet project had been approved in 2013, with all gram panchayats expected to be connected through broadband by the end of that year. The deadline was subsequently revised to September 2015. It has now been moved to December 2017, and Agarwal is confident of the project's readiness for commissioning a pan-Indian roll-out by then.

Despite the challenges, he is confident that BharatNet will change the service delivery landscape in rural India once it is fully implemented. It will facilitate the delivery of a host of services such as e-governance, e-health, e-education, e-banking, public internet access, government to customer, business to business, business to consumer, and weather and agriculture-related services to rural India. The project also seeks to provide many opportunities for employment generation through operations and maintenance activities, business processing services and rural entrepreneurship.

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