Data growth has been tremendous across the Asia-Pacific market including India. Operator networks are increasingly becoming heterogeneous in nature, spanning macro sites, micro networks, hotspots, etc. Concepts such as automation, intelligence and openness are gaining ground. In an interview with tele.net, Kundan Das, head, business development and sales, Asia Pacific, Japan and China, Parallel Wireless, talks about the evolving telecom space, the challenges and growth drivers, the relevance of Open RAN, and the emerging opportunities in 5G. Excerpts…

What will be your key focus areas in 2019?

We are seeing that the Indian market is shifting towards small-sized cells. These could be extremely small, catering to a household, like a Wi-Fi access point, with base stations plugged into a lamp post offering 20-50 metres of coverage. Currently, there are limited investments in this space but they will pick up pace. Our focus will be more on this side, since macro cells are already in surplus in the industry, especially with the recent market consolidation.

What is your role in Facebook's Telecom Infra Project (TIP)?

Under the TIP, Facebook is trying to work closely with operators in areas that have not been covered through any kind of communication services such as voice and broadband so far, primarily areas in Latin America and in some parts of Europe. We have been selected to run some pilot deployments in four to five countries.

TIP will make use of Open RAN. We are expecting that, in a way, open architecture is going to get consolidated around TIP. Operators clearly know the benefits of open architecture and it is our job to meet their expectations, and that is a major focus area for us.

Starting off with Europe, Facebook has now come to India for its TIP initiative. We see that Indian operators too are realising the benefits of open architecture. They are setting up teams and focusing on innovation and engagements in open architecture. While earlier they used to buy hardware and software together from a particular supplier, they are now splitting the orders. This will result in significant realisations in terms of cost, competency and faster deployments.

What is Open RAN and why is it key for 5G?

5G is going to be modelled like a Wi-Fi-centric network, which has two components – radio and core. The core is the one which is limited and centralised but most of the value gets created around it. Functions like intelligence and automation are all part of the core. Also, in a Wi-Fi model, several companies are involved in supplying access points. In other words, operators today are not worried about which Wi-Fi networks should be bought. One can buy a TP-LINK or D-LINK and expect that the core network will accept it.

The 5G architecture is going to be similar to such a set-up. So, it is essential that the 5G architecture is open. The operators clearly want to get out of the mechanism where terms and conditions are dictated by a single vendor. They are looking for open systems and flexibility.

How big is the 5G opportunity for Parallel Wireless?

Different markets have different investment curves for 5G. If you look at Africa, 2G is still an investment area. In Asia Pacific, 4G has become the primary investment area and 3G is going down. And, if you look at Korea and Japan, it is more of 5G currently. As for India, 4G architecture has become mature and the average base station distance has come down to almost 50 metres in a dense urban network environment. This will make radio migration from 4G to 5G easier. So, India is definitely going to catch up on 5G much faster.

We have created a network that is technology-agnostic and caters to 2G, 3G, 4G and 5G. We have kept ourselves out of hardware, and the evolution is more on the software side.

What are the key market opportunities that you foresee in India?

As we move towards a data-centric network, security will become a critical component. Also, unlike in the past when operators only had retail customers, there are now a growing number of industrial customers. Clearly, an enterprise/industry such as banking will not compromise on security.

Also, there will be an increase in tailored solutions, particularly for enterprises. For instance, in the case of mines, establishing a network in tunnels is a challenge. The cost of providing coverage in such places, which are frequented by very few people, is often not justified. In such a scenario, one can look at a tailored solution, wherein people can carry coverage with them as they work in a tunnel, and later bring that coverage back with them.

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