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# Gujarat–Starlink LoI – Satellite Internet, Digital Inclusion, and India's Regulatory Challenge

15 February 2026

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# Gujarat–Starlink LoI — Satellite Internet, Digital Inclusion, and India's Regulatory Challenge

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## WHY IN NEWS

The **Gujarat government** signed a **Letter of Intent (LoI)** with **Starlink** (SpaceX) to provide satellite broadband in underserved tribal and Aspirational Districts including **Narmada and Dahod** — making Gujarat one of the first Indian states to formally partner with a LEO (Low Earth Orbit) satellite internet provider for last-mile connectivity.

## WHAT IS STARLINK?

**Starlink** is a **Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite internet constellation** operated by **SpaceX** (founded by Elon Musk, 2002). As of early 2026:

**6,000+ satellites** in orbit (target: 12,000+; eventual goal: 42,000)

Orbit altitude: **340–1,200 km** (vs. geostationary at 35,786 km)

Speeds: **50–200 Mbps** download; lower latency (~20–40ms vs. 600ms for geostationary)

Available in 100+ countries

### Why LEO matters:

Parameter	Geostationary (VSAT)	LEO (Starlink)
Altitude	35,786 km	340–1,200 km
Latency	600ms+	20–40ms
Speed	10–50 Mbps	50–200 Mbps
Coverage	Full hemisphere	Moving constellation
Cost	High (upfront)	Subscription model

## THE GUJARAT LOI — WHAT IT COVERS

**Target districts:** **Narmada** and **Dahod** — both tribal-dominated Aspirational Districts under the NITI Aayog’s **Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP)**, which covers 112 districts with poor outcomes in health, education, and infrastructure.

### Applications planned:

**E-governance:** Service delivery, Aadhaar-linked benefits, Jan Dhan portals

**Telemedicine:** Remote health consultations for tribal areas

**Online education:** Access to PM e-VIDYA channels, DIKSHA platform

**Disaster management:** Real-time communication during floods (Gujarat is flood-prone)

**Industrial connectivity:** Support for industrial corridors in remote areas

A LoI is a pre-contract statement of intent — not a binding procurement order. Gujarat will conduct pilots before full-scale rollout.

## INDIA’S SATELLITE INTERNET REGULATORY LANDSCAPE

Starlink’s entry into India has been contentious due to **spectrum allocation disputes**:

### Two schools of thought:

Approach	Advocates	Position
Administrative allocation	Starlink, OneWeb (Eutelsat), Amazon Kuiper	Spectrum for satellite should be allocated administratively (not auctioned) — global practice
Spectrum auction	Reliance Jio, Airtel	Satellite spectrum should be auctioned like terrestrial spectrum — levels the playing field

**TRAI’s position (2025):** TRAI recommended **administrative allocation** for satellite spectrum — consistent with ITU (International Telecommunication Union) norms and global practice. The **Telecommunications Act 2023** empowers DoT (Department of Telecommunications) to decide the final spectrum assignment method.

**Current status:** Starlink received its **General Mobile Radio Service (GMRS) licence** and began limited operations in India in 2025; full-scale commercial rollout was pending DoT’s spectrum assignment decision.

### Other LEO players in India:

**OneWeb (Eutelsat)** — backed by UK government and Bharti Airtel; operational in India (enterprise and government segments)

**Amazon Project Kuiper** — regulatory approval pending; 3,000+ satellite constellation

**ISRO/NSIL (NewSpace India Ltd)** — India’s own satellite broadband ambitions; GSAT-24 for DTH; VSNL/BSNL for satellite internet

## DIGITAL DIVIDE CONTEXT — INDIA

India’s broadband gap remains significant:

**Urban broadband** (fixed + mobile): ~95% coverage

**Rural broadband** (meaningful  $\geq 2$  Mbps): ~45% coverage

**Tribal/forest areas:** Often  $< 5\%$  broadband penetration

**TRAI data (2025):** ~880 million active internet subscriptions but majority on 2G/3G speeds in rural areas

**Government schemes for connectivity:**

**BharatNet:** ₹61,109 crore project to provide optical fibre to all 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats; ~2 lakh GPs connected as of 2025 but last-mile gap persists

**PM WANI (Wi-Fi Access Network Interface):** Public Wi-Fi in villages via local entrepreneurs (PDOs)

**USO Fund (Universal Service Obligation Fund):** Levied on telecom operators (5% of AGR); finances rural connectivity

**Gap Starlink fills:** BharatNet addresses GP-level connectivity; Starlink addresses the **household last-mile** in areas where terrestrial fibre is economically unviable — tribal hamlets, island communities, hilly/forest terrain.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

*Starlink (SpaceX), LEO satellite broadband (altitude, latency), TRAI, OneWeb/Eutelsat, Aspirational Districts Programme (NITI Aayog, 112 districts), BharatNet (₹61,109 crore), PM WANI, USO Fund, Telecommunications Act 2023, NSIL (NewSpace India Ltd), GSAT. **Mains GS-3:** Digital India; satellite communication policy; TRAI regulation; bridging digital divide; spectrum management (administrative vs. auction debate); Aspirational Districts Programme outcomes. **GS-2:** Government policy for marginalised communities; e-governance delivery in tribal areas.*

★ **FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA**

**STARLINK — KEY DATA:**

Operator: **SpaceX** (Elon Musk)

Satellites in orbit (2026): **6,000+** (target: 42,000)

Orbit: **LEO — 340–1,200 km altitude**

Speed: 50–200 Mbps | Latency: 20–40ms (vs. 600ms geostationary)

Countries operational: 100+

**GUJARAT LOI:**

Target: Tribal/Aspirational Districts — **Narmada and Dahod**

Applications: E-governance, telemedicine, education, disaster management

Status: LoI (pre-contract) — pilot phase before commercial rollout

**INDIA SATELLITE INTERNET REGULATION:**

Regulator: **TRAI** (recommends) + **DoT** (decides) under **Telecommunications Act 2023**

TRAI recommendation (2025): **Administrative allocation** for satellite spectrum (not auction)

Telecom Act 2023: Replaces Indian Telegraph Act 1885; empowers spectrum assignment reform

**INDIA DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY:**

BharatNet: **₹61,109 crore**; ~2 lakh GPs connected (optical fibre); target: all 2.5 lakh GPs

PM WANI: Public Wi-Fi via village-level PDOs (Public Data Offices)

USO Fund: **5% of AGR** from telecom operators; finances rural connectivity

Aspirational Districts Programme: **112 districts**; NITI Aayog monitoring; focus on health, education, infra

**OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:**

OneWeb (Eutelsat): UK-backed, Airtel-partnered; first LEO operator in India (enterprise segment)

NSIL (NewSpace India Ltd): ISRO's commercial arm; handles GSAT satellites and satellite internet

ITU (International Telecommunication Union): UN agency; coordinates global spectrum use; India is a member

LEO constellation: Starlink, OneWeb, Amazon Kuiper are the three major LEO broadband players globally

Sources: AffairsCloud, TRAI, PIB

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