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Direct-to-Device (D2D) Satellite Communication: Bridging India's Digital Divide

16 April 2026 · SCIENCE & TECH · ECONOMY · GS3

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Direct-to-Device (D2D) Satellite Communication: Bridging India's Digital Divide

16 April 2026 · 4 min read · 2 tags

WHY IN NEWS:

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) and Telecom Engineering Centre (TEC) organised a national workshop on **Direct-to-Device (D2D) satellite communication technology** — enabling standard smartphones to connect directly to Low-Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites without ground-based towers, bridging India's connectivity gap in remote areas.

WHAT IS DIRECT-TO-DEVICE (D2D) SATELLITE COMMUNICATION?

Direct-to-Device (D2D) is an emerging technology that allows **ordinary smartphones** (with standard chipsets) to connect directly to **Low-Earth Orbit (LEO) satellites** without any terrestrial infrastructure — no cell towers, no base stations, no cables required.

The Conventional Model vs D2D

ASPECT	CONVENTIONAL MOBILE	D2D SATELLITE
Signal path	Tower → Phone	Satellite → Phone (direct)
Infrastructure needed	Towers, backhaul, cables	Only satellites in orbit
Coverage	~75% of India's area	Near-universal (including oceans)
Technology standard	4G/5G cellular	NTN (Non-Terrestrial Network) via 3GPP standards
Phone requirement	Standard smartphone	Standard smartphone (no special hardware)
Use case	Urban/semi-urban	Remote, rural, sea, mountains, disaster zones

THE TECHNOLOGY: NTN AND 3GPP STANDARDS

D2D uses **Non-Terrestrial Networks (NTN)** — a framework standardised by the **3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP)** (the international body that defines telecom standards like 4G LTE and 5G).

Key standards: **3GPP Release 17 and 18** explicitly included NTN specifications, enabling:

- Integration of satellite links with existing LTE/5G spectrum
- Interoperability between terrestrial and satellite networks
- Seamless handoff between satellite and tower coverage

How it Works

1. LEO satellite flies overhead at ~500–2,000 km altitude
2. Smartphone communicates directly using modified LTE/5G protocols
3. Satellite acts as a "flying base station"
4. Data routed from satellite to ground gateways to the internet

WHY LEO (LOW-EARTH ORBIT)?

ORBIT	ALTITUDE	LATENCY	USE CASE
GEO (Geostationary)	~35,786 km	600–800 ms	Broadcasting, weather satellites
MEO (Medium Earth)	2,000–20,000 km	50–200 ms	GPS, navigation
LEO (Low Earth)	**500–2,000 km**	**20–40 ms**	**D2D, broadband internet (Starlink, OneWeb)**

LEO's low latency makes it suitable for **real-time communication** (voice calls, video, browsing) — unlike GEO satellites which are too slow for interactive use.

Major LEO Constellations

OPERATOR	COUNTRY	SATELLITES (APPROX.)	INDIA STATUS
Starlink (SpaceX)	USA	~6,000	In-principle approval; final clearance pending
OneWeb (Eutelsat)	UK/France	~648	Partnership with Bharti (Airtel); launched India services
Amazon Kuiper	USA	Planned ~3,236	Not yet operational
VSAT (ISRO + private)	India	Various	GSAT series (GEO) + TSAT (planned LEO)

INDIA'S CONTEXT — WHY D2D MATTERS

The Coverage Gap

Despite remarkable mobile growth, India still has significant coverage gaps:

- ~25% of India's geographic area lacks reliable 4G coverage
- North-East states, Himalayan regions, Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep have patchy connectivity
- At sea: fishermen, coastal communities, maritime logistics lack reliable communication
- During disasters: terrestrial towers are first to go down (Cyclone Amphan, Chenab floods)

D2D can provide **resilient connectivity** in all these scenarios using existing smartphones.

BharatNet + D2D Complementarity

BharatNet (government's optic fibre to gram panchayats) is terrestrial — it cannot reach remote mountains, islands, or forests. D2D complements BharatNet by covering the "last inch" where no wires can reach.

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

BODY	ROLE
DoT	Department of Telecommunications — policy, spectrum, licensing
TEC	Telecom Engineering Centre — technical standards, type approval
TRAI	Telecom Regulatory Authority of India — tariff, consumer protection
IN-SPACe	Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre — commercial space activity
WPC	Wireless Planning & Coordination — spectrum management
ISRO	Space assets; gateway support

For D2D to operate commercially in India:

1. Spectrum allocation for NTN frequencies (S-band, Ka-band, L-band)
2. Licensing framework for foreign satellite operators (Starlink, OneWeb)
3. Security clearance (D2D can bypass terrestrial monitoring — security consideration)
4. Device type approval by TEC (NTN-compatible chipsets)

NATIONAL SECURITY DIMENSION

D2D presents both an opportunity and a challenge:

Opportunity: Military/paramilitary communication in areas with no terrestrial infrastructure; disaster response coordination; coast guard maritime surveillance.

Challenge: D2D conversations can bypass India's lawful interception system (which works via terrestrial telecom nodes). The workshop on April 16 included discussions on **regulatory safeguards** to ensure national security while enabling civilian D2D use.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — S&T	LEO satellites; NTN technology; 3GPP standards; D2D technology
GS3 — Economy	Digital divide; BharatNet; India's telecom sector; rural connectivity
GS2 — Governance	DoT; TRAI; IN-SPACe; digital governance; telecom regulation
GS3 — Security	Lawful interception; satellite security; national communication resilience
Mains Keywords	Direct-to-Device (D2D), Non-Terrestrial Networks (NTN), LEO satellites, 3GPP Release 17, Starlink, OneWeb, DoT, TEC, IN-SPACe, BharatNet, digital divide, spectrum allocation

FACTS CORNER

ITEM	DETAIL
D2D workshop organiser	DoT + TEC (Telecom Engineering Centre)
Technology standard	NTN (Non-Terrestrial Networks); 3GPP Release 17/18
LEO altitude	~500–2,000 km
LEO latency	20–40 ms (suitable for real-time apps)
GEO altitude	~35,786 km (too high latency for interactive use)
Compatible with	Existing LTE/5G spectrum (no new phone hardware needed)
Major operators	Starlink (SpaceX), OneWeb (Eutelsat), Amazon Kuiper
India's space regulator	IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion & Authorisation Centre)
Spectrum manager	WPC (Wireless Planning & Coordination)
BharatNet	Optic fibre to gram panchayats (terrestrial); D2D complements for "last inch"
Key challenge	Lawful interception — D2D bypasses terrestrial nodes used for monitoring
3GPP	3rd Generation Partnership Project — defines global mobile standards (4G, 5G, NTN)

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