

# Govt clears phone calls, Internet on board flights

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TRAVELLERS FLYING through Indian airspace will be able to make phone calls and surf the Internet in the next three to four months. The Telecom Commission Tuesday approved the proposal of the Department of Telecommunications for Internet and mobile communication on aircraft.

The DoT had sent its proposal to the inter-ministerial panel following recommendations made by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) in January.

“The DoT will now make necessary amendments to the relevant laws to create a separate category of licences for in-flight connectivity operators, which could be telecom service providers. After making the amendments, the department will invite applications from those interested in providing these services. Once the modalities of the licences and the back-end agreements are worked out, the facility can be rolled out in about three to four months,” a senior official at the DoT said.

In February 2017, *The Indian Express* first reported that the DoT had proposed allowing in-flight connectivity to give passengers access to voice and data services on board aircraft flying through Indian airspace. The proposal, which was earlier being considered by the Ministry of Civil Aviation, was sent to DoT, which had sought Trai’s views.

Globally, while the provision of onboard Wi-Fi is a popular service with airlines, not many

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allow mobile communication. As per Trai, over 30 airlines allow the use of mobile phone on aircraft, including AirAsia, Air France, British Airways, Egypt Air, Emirates, Air New Zealand, Malaysia Airlines, Qatar Airways and Virgin Atlantic. Further, more than 40 jurisdictions, including countries in the European Union, Asia and Australia, have authorised the use of mobile communications services on aircraft.

“Exciting times ahead in the Indian skies as Telecom Commission approves data and voice services in flights over Indian airspace!” Minister of Civil Aviation Suresh Prabhu said in a tweet. “I will follow up closely to ensure earliest implementation. We remain committed in improving the services to our air passengers, making their travel delightful and hassle-free,” he added.

The DoT proposal, which was cleared Tuesday, will enable not only Indian airlines but also their foreign counterparts to offer connectivity in Indian air territory. However, during the consultation process with Trai, some of the airlines had objected to use of Indian satellites to provide their services. Accordingly, the regulator had suggested that the in-flight connectivity service provider should be permitted to use either INSAT systems (Indian Satellite System or foreign satellite capacity leased through Department of Space) or foreign satellites outside INSAT systems in the Indian airspace.

“Trai had said that foreign satellites and foreign gateways should also be permitted... but there had been an earlier Committee of

Secretaries meeting which decided that it should be an Indian satellite or Department of Space-approved satellite and the gateway should be in India. So, the proposal is cleared subject to this... all the other recommendations of Trai have been accepted,” the official said.

In line with the regulator’s recommendations, to promote the concept of in-flight connectivity, service providers that are being given the licence will be charged a nominal fee of Re 1 per annum, the official said, adding that the government will not intervene with the pricing mechanisms used by the operators for providing in-flight connectivity. Globally, given the high cost of satellite connectivity, the Internet services available on board aircraft are charged at a premium over what is available otherwise.

Furthermore, the in-flight connectivity will be available only once the aircraft has attained an altitude of 3,000 meters. This restriction is being imposed to maintain compatibility with terrestrial networks. A flight generally attains the altitude of 3,000 metres about four-five minutes after take-off.

In February, telecom operator Bharti Airtel had announced it has joined a new global collaboration along with OneWeb, Airbus, Delta and Sprint, to work towards leveraging satellite technology to offer high-speed data connectivity to mobile users while they are on board an aircraft. Apart from this, full-service carrier Jet Airways provided on-board Wi-Fi facility for its flyers but only to access its own content library and not access the Internet.