

Broadband use is notoriously low across the country, but it hasn't stopped the introduction of IPTV. But does it have a future, asks **Kavitha Srinivasa**

# How real is IPTV?

For long, the good old television has been the focus of technology companies. Early efforts such as Microsoft's Web TV attempted to bring the Internet to the TV. But in recent years, the focus not only is on bringing television to the Internet, which is to say enabling telecasts via the Net, but also on marrying the two for enhanced user experience.

In many countries, the so-called Internet Protocol Television, better known by its acronym IPTV, is already popular with millions of users. But it has yet to make a mark in India even though leading telecom providers took an early leap of faith in the technology. Reliance Infocomm, Bharti Tele Ventures and the state-owned BSNL have rolled out services in the last year or so but so far none has been able to build a significant base of subscribers.

IPTV provides a number of advantages over cable or direct-to-home services, and provides a wholly new consumer experience. It bundles three services — data, video-on-demand and voice — and can be far more interactive and personalised than other forms of television. Many see IPTV as the next big step in so-called convergence.

"Bangalore is the nation's biggest potential market for IPTV because the concentration of tech-savvy corporates and an upwardly mobile and lifestyle-driven consumer class is already sold on the advantages of using IP," said Anand Parthasarathy, editor of the IndiaTechOnline portal.

Over a year ago, Bangalore became South India's first destination to enjoy the long-promised service when BSNL introduced it, in private partnership with MyWay. This service is now available in Chennai and BSNL has agreements with franchisees to market IPTV in 98 cities over the next year.

A recent user of IPTV in Bangalore, Tirtha Banerjee, says the "quality of picture and sound are better than both cable and DTH. Besides, even my children can operate it as the remote is extremely easy to navigate," she said. What is more, the service will be enhanced with the introduction of SMS and email, according to Sridhara BS, zonal manager of MyWay.

"The On Demand content showcases movies, documentaries, TV and fitness shows, which you can play, pause, rewind and forward at your convenience," he says.

Other services include karaoke, radio, games and learning.

Nevertheless, all the talk of IPTV's potential hasn't translated into large numbers of subscribers. Only a paltry 5,500 nationwide have signed up for the service, according to BSNL. Even given the difficult task of distribution, and last-mile connectivity, the number is dismal and probably the result of a number of factors including technical constraints and a failure of marketing.

"IPTV brings challenges like physical infrastructure, technology, (and) bandwidth," says Ashok Chandak, senior director for global sales and marketing at NXP Semiconductors, which supports an interac-

tive electronic device that can record television shows in a digital format for later viewing.

"Bandwidth...determines the quality of reception and the number of different services a consumer can receive at home," he says. "Bandwidth prioritisation is a technical roadblock that requires attention."

It's also necessary to have good on-demand content, in addition to on-air television channels, to drive traffic.

"India has about 300M TV sets and a PC penetration of about 0.3 per cent. To popularise IPTV, providers must offer compelling content or applications which provide incentive for end-customers to move from traditional TV to IPTV," said Kiran Pande, president, ECI Telecom India, a global provider of networking infrastructure.

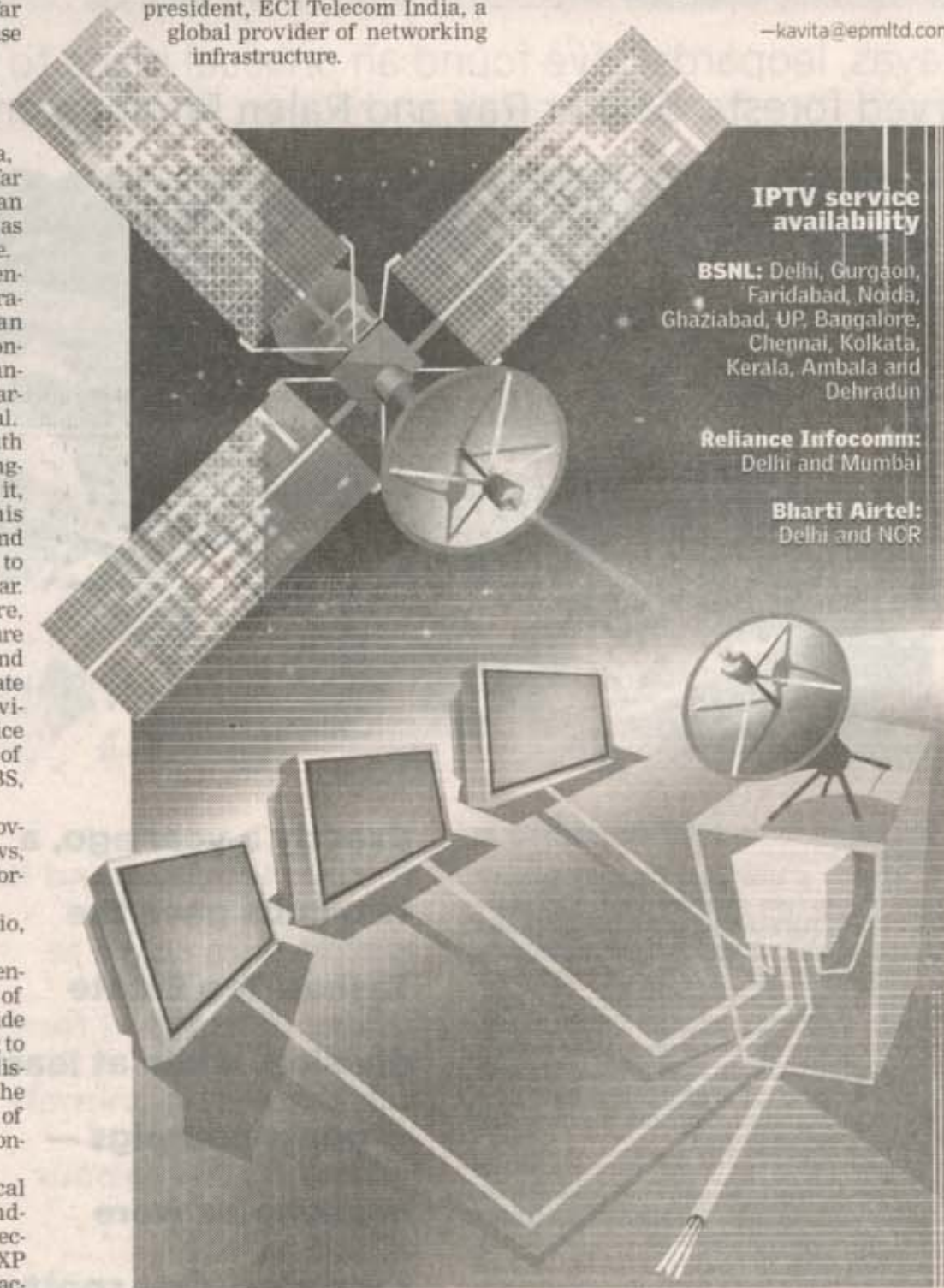
Some others believe the key challenge lies in adapting IPTV for the home user:

"Where you do the network and how you power the device becomes crucial," said M Sunder Raju, managing director of ACT Television. The company brings cable TV, digital TV, IPTV, data and broadband services through cable to homes.

Raju says his company is ready to work with cable operators in order to enable wider distribution but not before "regulatory issues are worked out."

In the final analysis, as Cisco's Chandan Mendiratta says, "broadband penetration is important for the future of IPTV in India," and unless that makes rapid advances, success is far from guaranteed.

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## IPTV service availability

**BSNL:** Delhi, Gurgaon, Faridabad, Noida, Ghaziabad, UP, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Kerala, Ambala and Dehradun

**Reliance Infocomm:** Delhi and Mumbai

**Bharti Airtel:** Delhi and NCR