Satellite launch to boost DTH in India

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The successful launch Thursday of India's heaviest satellite from spaceport of Kourou in French Guyana may have boosted the country's space research efforts to yet another level, but it has also lifted the spirits of at least three Direct-To-Home televisions broadcasters, one of which has been waiting for years to launch its services in India.

Onboard India's new generation spacecraft Ariane-5G rocket, the INSAT-4A was placed in geosynchronous transfer orbit in 3-axis stabilized mode shortly after launch, drawing cheers for the fact that it was the first launch of a 3,080 kg satellite by India.

It is the also the first Indian satellite to meet the requirement of the DTH television services.

"Insat-4A is the most advanced, heaviest and powerful satellite and it's a

very important milestone in the history of India's space program," said Madhavan Iyer, the chairman of the Indian Space Research Organization. "This is going to revolutionize TV broadcasting directly to the homes and improve the entertainment scenario in India."

After completing orbit-raising operations and a few tests, INSAT-4A will become fully operational in early 2006. It will be positioned in geostationary orbit 36,000 km above the equator.

For the DTH wannabes then, this is indeed good news because even as the country's TV viewership explodes, peculiar broadcasting laws and lack of transponder availability has been obstructing proliferation of DTH services in the country for years.

DTH services were first proposed in India in 1996, but due to concerns of national security and a cultural invasion -- from mainly the Western countries -- it did not pass approval of the Indian government. In 1997 the government even imposed a ban when the Rupert Murdoch-owned Indian Sky Broadcasting was about to launch its DTH services in India.

Finally in 2000 DTH was allowed. But the new policy mandated that all operators can only broadcast using Indian satellites. Moreover, companies offering DTH service were also told to appoint only a local resident as chief and foreign equity was capped at 49 percent. There was, however, no limit stipulated on the number of companies applying for the DTH license.

Clearly the first company to jump into the fray was the state-owned TV broadcasting giant Doordarshan (DD) (using C-band transponder). And even as DD penetrated 4.6 million homes in no time, triggering DTH interests of private players, not many could start operations owing to lack of availability of KU transponder capacity in Indian satellites.

DTH services can also be beamed through S band and C band transponders for which capacity is available in the existing Indian satellites, but according to industry sources DTH through KU transponders is preferred in India since a KU band dish -- set up at homes to receive the signals from satellite -- is much smaller and cheaper.

Currently besides DD, the only other DTH operator is a broadcaster known as DishTV that is owned by a local TV channel. Both use the NSS6 Satellite (C band) to air their DTH services.

And waiting in the queue are Tata Sky, a joint venture between the local Tata group and Rupert Murdoch's Star group; and, reportedly two very large local players, the Sun Network and Anil Ambani of the Reliance Group.

Clearly the first to launch DTH would be Tata Sky. It already bagged its clearances from the Telecommunications Ministry last week and from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry much earlier. Moreover, Star group has booked all the KU band transponders of INSAT 4A, say ISRO sources.

But prospective DTH players should not lose heart, because ISRO has already contracted Arianespace for launch of Insat-4B, which will also carry 12 KU-band and 12 C-band transponders, to be followed by Insat-4C, an exclusive KU-band spacecraft with 12 KU-band transponders.

Besides, ISRO says that it also plans to launch Insat-4D and Insat-4E from home soil, as Insat-4F and Insat-4G projects, which complete the Insat-4 series, is awaiting government nod.

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