

# India business leaders pledge billions in WiFi campaign

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In this handout photograph taken and released by The Indian Press Information Bureau on July 1, 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during the launch of 'Digital India Week' in New Delhi

Some of India's biggest industrialists pledged billions of dollars Wednesday to back Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ambitious plan to provide Internet connection for all.

After storming to power at a [general election](#) in May 2014, the Internet savvy prime minister promised to connect 250,000 villages by 2019 as part of his government's bid to close India's gaping [digital divide](#).

But progress since then—including attracting investors to foot the bill—has been slow in the vast, impoverished country that is plagued with crumbling infrastructure and power cuts.

Modi, who has 13 million followers on Twitter, said business leaders have now pledged 4.5 trillion rupees (US\$70 billion) in funding and urged others to follow suit during a week-long drive of events to promote the campaign.

"One chunk of the country has digital power but a big chunk is deprived. This kind of digital divide can result in big problems," Modi told officials and [business leaders](#).

Mukesh Ambani, India's richest man, said he planned to invest 2.5 trillion rupees (\$39 billion) through his Reliance Industries, without giving details.

Kumar Mangalam Birla, chairman of the conglomerate Aditya Birla Group, announced \$7 billion to fund network rollouts and other projects.

The government has pledged to lay hundreds of thousands of kilometres (miles) of broadband cable to connect villages, develop WiFi in public places and shift more public services including health and education to electronic platforms.

"We have to develop infrastructure and prepare ourselves for the era of e-governance," Modi said.

But the government faces an uphill battle in a country where thieves steal

underground phone lines for the copper even in Delhi's upmarket embassy district, while in other cities monkeys are known to chew through fibre optic cables.

India, with a population of 1.25 billion, had about 100 million broadband subscribers in May, according to the telecoms regulator.

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