

A Wish list for the Union Budget 2021

The Union Budget 2021 will be presented in the Parliament by Nirmala Sitharaman, Finance Minister, Government of India, on 1 February 2021

As the Union Budget 2021 date approaches, we are keenly anticipating the priorities of the government. In this brief note we would like to present our own wish list for the IT industry and users.

The pandemic has created a digital surge, where work-from-home (WFH) and online classes have driven the demand for many services and products. Many citizens have had to purchase laptops, tablets, and smartphones, along with having to replace other devices, such as webcams and microphones. The budget could provide a subsidy to those families for whom these expenses are an additional burden.

Families have also had to spend on bandwidth to access classes, healthcare, and work. The budget may address the issue of providing subsidies for bandwidth costs when it is used for education and healthcare.

Possibly the most important issue is that of providing support to small and medium enterprises, and to independent workers and contractors, of various types and in diverse sectors, to recover from the losses they have faced owing to the lockdowns and general loss of demand. One suggestion we have is to provide incentives for setting up web and app-based marketing and outreach efforts. Further, the government should encourage the development of technology that includes those without smartphones to be able to access services, using basic supplementary service data (USSD) codes. These facilities are already being provided for the UPI payment application and may be extended for other things – such as advertising skilled labour in specific regions, seeking jobs, and seeking assistance for health and survival.

One particular area of concern for us is the incredible rise in cyber crime, scams, and fraud. A dire need is to inform ordinary citizens, in their own language, about how these Jamtara-style crimes are committed, the modus of social engineering, and the various ways in which people are cheated out of their banked savings. The government must set up bodies, or encourage existing institutions, to inform people through various media – mainstream television and radio, social media, and through local human communication.

There is also a need to set up research funds for the development of technologies such as blockchain and artificial intelligence (AI) for fighting cyber crime. Such technologies already have a strong base in India, in terms of skills and understanding, as there are now many startups and established firms working with them. An incentive to direct these efforts towards public safety would help reduce the losses from cyber crime. The loss from scams and crimes is reaching massive proportions, and the government may address this situation with strong budget provisions.

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