



**VISUAL: STAR**

# THE DIGITAL EVOLUTION

## Challenges and opportunities



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According to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), the number of internet users in the country is 132.8 million, of which 119.06 million are mobile internet users and 13.74 million are internet service provider (ISP) and public switched telephone network (PSTN) users. In early 2024, there were 52.90 million Facebook, 33.60 million YouTube, and 37.36 million TikTok users nationwide, according to the advertising resources of the relevant organisations.

According to the "Digital 2024: Bangladesh" report by DataReportal, 7.6 percent of adults over 15 have sent money online or using mobile devices, and 3.1 percent have made a purchase. Credit cards are held by 0.6 percent, and debit cards by 4.9 percent. According to a Bangladesh Bank report, the number of digital transactions rose from 366.7 million to 478.7 million between December 2023 and June

- » Bangladesh's digital landscape is rapidly evolving, but challenges like declining internet users and infrastructure limitations hinder progress.
- » Despite impressive internet user numbers, the country faces slow adoption of 4G and 5G services, compounded by regulatory and financial obstacles.
- » The telecommunications sector in Bangladesh requires robust policy support, improved infrastructure, and quality assurance at all levels to meet future demands.
- » While mobile internet is widespread, rural areas still struggle with smartphone penetration, limiting access to advanced digital services.
- » Despite steady growth in digital transactions, Bangladesh's ICT service exports remain far behind global competitors, signalling a need for more strategic development.

2024, increasing their percentage of all transactions from 51 to 56 percent.

From all the statistics shown thus far, the nation is moving towards digitalisation—we will require more bandwidth and utilise more data in the

smartphones and the internet.

GSMA, the global organisation of mobile operators, said in a report last October that only 26 percent of mobile phone users in rural Bangladesh use smartphones. The rest use feature phones, which are known as button phones. Both smartphone users and declining internet users are causes for concern for us. Public-private partnerships, appropriate policy support, and the creation of a business-friendly environment can overcome these weaknesses and achieve the desired goals.

In 2006, Bangladesh started operating a 7.5 Gbps primary capacity submarine cable as a member of SEA-ME-WE 4 (SMW4) and joined the SEA-ME-WE 5 (SMW5) submarine cable consortium in 2014. Both SMW4 and SMW5 are owned by Bangladesh Submarine Cables PLC (BSCPLC), a state-owned public limited company with about 77 percent of the shares held by the government.

The bandwidth used in the country from BSCPLC's submarine cable system as of June 2024 was about 2,696 Gbps, which is about 45 percent of the country's international bandwidth market. According to the Bangladesh Broadband Connectivity Report, the total fibre optic deployment has reached 173,845 km, and the total network bandwidth has reached 6,600 Gbps. Except for the bandwidth provided by BSCPLC, the remaining bandwidth is mainly provided by International Terrestrial Cable (ITC). In 2012, BTRC granted ITC licenses to six private operators, four of which are now in active commercial operation. ITC licensees provide services through international terrestrial cables connecting Indian landing stations to Bangladesh from neighbouring India.

Internet connectivity in Bangladesh begins with the International Submarine Cable and the ITC, which provide bandwidth to the International Internet Gateways (IIG). From the IIG, the internet reaches the last-end ISPs through

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29

**According to the 'Digital Bangladesh 2024' report by DataReportal, 17.6 percent of adults over 15 have sent money online or using mobile devices, and 3.1 percent have made a purchase. Credit cards are held by 0.6 percent, and debit cards by 4.9 percent. According to a Bangladesh Bank report, the number of digital transactions rose from 366.7 million to 478.7 million between December 2023 and June 2024, increasing their percentage of all transactions from 51 to 56 percent.**

near future. How ready we are in this regard is the question. Between 2021 and 2023, India's exports totalled \$119 billion, \$142 billion, and \$162 billion, respectively. In contrast, our ICT service exports for the same years totalled \$618 million, \$721 million, and \$636 million (Source: WDI, World Bank). Unfortunately, we were unable to export even \$1 billion worth of services despite all the noise.

Since June 2024, the nation's mobile subscriber count has been declining monthly, from 196.08 million in June 2024 to 188.7 million in November 2024. In a similar vein, since June 2024, the overall number of internet users has been steadily decreasing, falling from 142.17 million to 132.8 million in November 2024. This decrease is definitely not encouraging,

It should be noted that the government has discussed digitising numerous government services at different points in time. Additionally, efforts are being made to bring a number of domestic facilities online. Now, the return on investment will be bigger the more individuals this investment can help. One way to get a return is to bring the maximum number of citizens under the umbrella of



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