‘Get ready for 5G smartphones in ₹10,000 range next year’

Global giant Qualcomm dominates the Indian chip market for mobile phones. It works with most of the key mobile device players and telcos. **RAJEN VAGADIA**, president of Qualcomm India & SAARC, describes how the 5G ecosystem and consumer case uses across brands will evolve in an interview with **Surajeet Das Gupta**.

Q&A

RAJEN VAGADIA
president of Qualcomm India & SAARC

As a dominant supplier of chips, how do you see the 5G smartphone ecosystem developing in the next few years?
Globally, the first set of 5G smartphones were launched in 2019. In India, the first commercially available smartphone came in 2020, based on Qualcomm Snapdragon 855. From then on, we have seen a series of smartphone launches. This was unprecedented. Firstly, India was considered by many as a price-conscious market. Secondly, there was no visibility on the launch of 5G networks any time soon. By the end of 2022, we expect the installed base of 5G smartphones in India to reach 80-85 million. Now, with the successful 5G auctions, we expect them to overtake 4G smartphones in 2023.

Affordability is a key factor in 5G. How is Qualcomm helping to bring 5G mobile phone prices below Rs 10,000?
Qualcomm has a healthy portfolio of 5G-enabled chipsets to address multiple price tiers. Currently there are 5G smartphones in India available in the Rs 12,000-Rs 15,000 range. This, despite the user demand for better display, camera and more memory, which affects the overall cost. We expect, going by this trend, that next year the ecosystem will be capable of bringing smartphones in the range of around Rs 10,000.

With the launch of 5G, will many consumers in India jump from, say, 2G to 5G directly as phones become affordable?
We are seeing that almost 30 per cent of smartphones shipped today are based on 5G and consumers are buying those for many reasons: they are more capable, have become more affordable and, more importantly, consumers want to future-proof their handsets. Consumers have enjoyed the benefits of 4G and now 5G has become an important aspect of their selection criteria.

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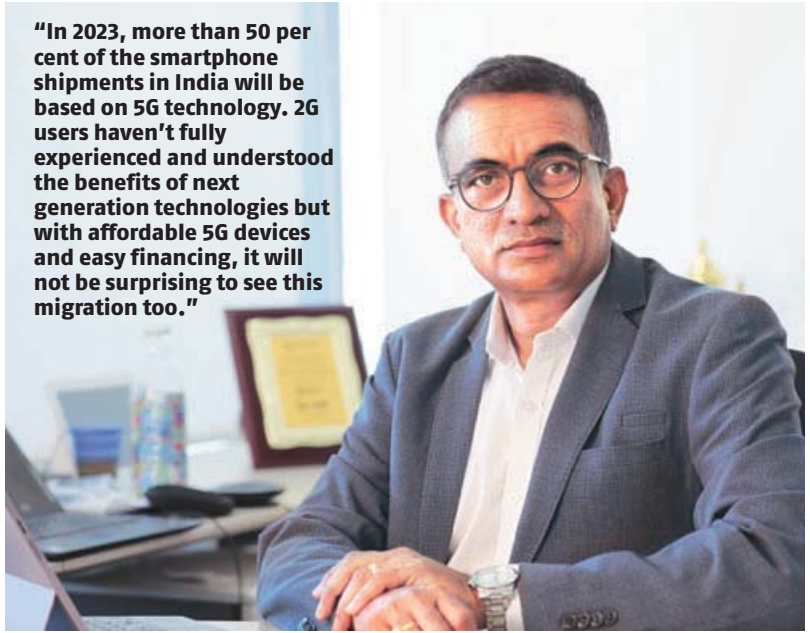

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In the recent 5G spectrum auction, operators have picked up spectrum in multiple new bands - 700, mid-band and millimetre band. What does it mean to users?
Sub-6 mid-band offers 10s to 100s of Mbps typical user data rates and network capacity for operators to support millions of 5G smartphone users and mobility

Low band 700MHz, 850MHz, 900MHz etc., could help extend 5G coverage to deep indoors and help rural 5G deployment in a cost-effective manner. The millimetre wave band offers multi-Gbps user data rates and network capacity which positions it as a wireless broadband solution (FWA) complementing fibre-based broadband. The huge bandwidth bought by operators enables them to support tens of millions of broadband homes. The millimetre wave band will also be useful to augment capacity for smartphone mobility in the case of highly dense user areas like stadiums, airports etc.

All Indian operators have the millimetre wave band. What do you see as the benefit of that band and when will it be included in smartphones?
It offers large capacity and is ideal for many use cases and applications including, but not limited to, lower latencies, better location accuracies, large capacity to decongest high demand areas, etc. In a country like India, with already very high and still growing data consumption per user and large population density, the band will become the saviour in the longer term.

Further, in congested areas where it is difficult to lay fibre, the millimetre band will act as a wireless fibre and enable home/enterprise broadband services. It will also offer a good opportunity for smartphone use cases. Consumers will be able to get premium broadband connectivity everywhere via their millimetre waveband-enabled smartphones, tablets, laptops, gaming consoles, or other devices.

How does the device ecosystem look from the NSA/SA perspective in different spectrum bands and across price tiers? How do you see it evolving?
NSA is widely supported on 5G smartphones launched in India and most notably the mid-band spectrum. Many of the newer devices have started supporting SA. Most of the remaining devices, that support only NSA today, have the hardware capabilities to support SA and the OEMs should be able to upgrade those devices through software upgrades to make the devices SA-capable.

Also, note that SA is mainstream in some of the key regions and OEMs do get to leverage the common features.