

Digital infra role in e-com: India seeks views at WTO

SHREYA NANDI

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India has sought views of World Trade Organization (WTO) member nations on the constraints faced by the developing and less developed countries in the adoption and use of digital public infrastructure and its role in promoting global e-commerce.

In a paper titled “role of digital public infrastructure promoting infrastructure”, India highlighted key digital public infrastructure adopted in the country such as Unified Payment Interface (UPI), Covid-19 Vaccine Intelligence Network (CoWIN), Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC), among others, according to the WTO document. The paper, submitted on Friday, will be discussed in a meeting of the general council of WTO on February 21.

In December, India made another submission at the WTO, seeking member nations’ view on the role the trade body could play in enhancing consumer protection in the e-commerce sector and how countries can increase cooperation among enforcement agencies on this issue.

Government officials said the two papers are aimed at initiating discussion on the subject before deliberating on a final agreement. India wants WTO member countries to discuss all these issues “threadbare” before initiating



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negotiations on binding commitments or rules on the e-commerce sector.

Peeyush Kumar, additional secretary, department of commerce, told reporters that the two submissions can bring focus towards multilateral discussions on e-commerce. “It is expected that these submissions will help provide an alternative paradigm to e-commerce discussions at the WTO, which are currently dominated by discussions by a group of countries in a plurilateral mode on rule-making in e-commerce,” Kumar said, adding that it will also raise issues of interest to developing and less-developed countries.

Darpan Jain, joint secretary, department of commerce, said the e-commerce sector has been rapidly growing across

the world globe and as it has implications on developing and poor nations. As a result, it should be discussed in a multilateral setting in the WTO and not among a group of countries. Currently, a group of 87 countries, mostly developed, are negotiating to frame a pact on e-commerce rules.

“We are saying that plurilateral discussions have not discussed these issues in detail. So all members first need to discuss these issues. First let us have a threadbare discussion,” Jain said.

India believes that these two papers will form a basis for discussion on all aspects of e-commerce, pros and cons for countries at different levels of development, and on exchange of ideas, information. The focus will also be on how collaboration can help bring benefits of e-commerce to those nations that are lagging behind, and the role WTO can play in promoting inclusive and equitable development of e-commerce at the global level.

The WTO’s 12th ministerial conference in June had decided to reinvigorate the ongoing work programme on e-commerce.

E-commerce entered WTO discussions in 1998 with the establishment of the work programme on commerce. Over the years, ministerial declarations have called for continuing the work under the 1998 work programme on e-commerce according to its mandate.