Licensing and Regulation of Submarine Cable Landing in India

Why in News?

The Department of Telecom (DoT) raised concerns about **Indian International Long-Distance Operators (ILDOs)** without any stake in submarine cable systems seeking clearances for laying and maintaining submarine cables in India.

- In this context, the **Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI)** has released recommendations on the **"Licensing Framework and Regulatory Mechanism for Submarine Cable Landing in India".**

What are the Recommendations of TRAI?

- **Two Categories of CLS:**
  - Amending the ILD/ISP-A (international long distance/Internet service provider Category A) permits to include two categories of Cable Landing Station (CLS) locations — **Main CLS and CLS "point of presence".**
    - Main CLS facility be mandated to **seek all approvals for an international submarine cable (SMC) landing** in India.
    - CLS 'point of presence' needs to **allow lawful interception and meet the requisite security drill.**
- **Critical and Essential Service:**
  - The submarine cable operations should be **recognized as critical and essential services due** to their crucial role in maintaining **seamless national and international communication networks.**
  - Submarine cable operations should have the highest level of importance for obtaining necessary permissions and security clearances.
- **Proposed Legislative Amendment:**
  - Addition of a **section on "Submarine cable" and "Cable Landing Station"** in the **Indian Telecommunication Bill, 2022.**
    - It **will provide legal and regulatory support**, contributing to the growth and robustness of the digital communications sector.
- **Custom Duty and GST Exemptions:**
  - TRAI proposes **exemption from custom duty and** GST for goods and items required for CLS, submarine cable operation, and maintenance.
  - This will address critical challenges in the sector, particularly related to cable repair and maintenance.

What is the Significance of the Recommendations?

- **Strengthening Data Flow:**
  - TRAI's recommendations have the **potential to unlock the full potential of cross-border data flow**, fuel innovation, and fortify India's position as a data powerhouse.
- **Reduced Reliance on Foreign Providers:**
  - The requirement for Indian entity-owned vessels for **undersea cable maintenance will**

reduce delays and decrease reliance on foreign providers for repairing subsea cables.

What is a Submarine Communications Cable?

- **About:**
  - It is a cable **laid on the seabed between land-based stations** to transmit telecommunication signals across stretches of ocean and sea.
  - Modern submarine **cables use** fiber-optic technology. The optical fibre elements are **typically coated with plastic layers and contained in a protective tube** suitable for the environment where the cable will be deployed.
- **Significance:**
  - Compared to satellites, **using internet connection through submarine cables** is more reliable, cost efficient and of larger capacity.
- **Examples:**
  - **MIST Submarine Cable System** (connecting India with Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore)
  - **Reliance Jio Infocomm's India Asia Xpress (IAX)** (India to the Maldives, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand)
  - **India Europe Xpress (IEX)** (India to Italy via Saudi and Greece)
  - **SeaMeWe-6 project** (Singapore to France via India, Bangladesh, Maldives)
  - **Africa2 Cable** (India with the UK via several African countries

Source: PIB