

Privatisation of MTNL-BSNL - too costly to remain quiet.

For most of the service providers, telecom sector in India is running through bad patches of time. The situation resembles to a scenario when one wild, and pampered bull having been allowed to enter into the garden and wreck havoc with everything around. Each and every service provider in the field except one, is facing almost existential crisis. It is more so for MTNL and BSNL.

Why we say so ? Because apart from the market crisis precipitated by JiO and various cascading effects thereafter, MTNL-BSNL is being targeted by a syndrome of crony capitalism and a deep rooted conspiracy seems to have been hatched against these two Govt. owned PSUs.

Let us explain and analyze the situation. Down the years and across the tenure of various political dispensations, the financial positions and edge of competitiveness of MTNL-BSNL have been systematically eroded. The financial crisis has been created by pumping out huge amount from their coffers and withholding the payments legitimately due to them. The situation has been created in a calculated manner such that that they can not modernize / upgrade / rehabilitate their network due to lack of necessary and timely permissions from DOT. The desperate efforts of MTNL-BSNL to survive through the onslaught of uneven competitions, have been sabotaged by preventing them from acquiring 4G spectrum and cancelling one after another tenders for procuring essential gadgets in time to expand the customer

base. Thanks to JiO pampered by the upper echelons of Government, unholy and unethical slash of tariffs result into huge revenue loss.

By all these actions, the ground is set where MTNL-BSNL are now in a hand to mouth situation. They can not pay the salaries and other dues of employees in time, they can not pay the bills of the vendors – employed, and even the electric and other utility bills remain unpaid. Private Operators survive the situation by taking loans from the banks. They know, they can escape conveniently by converting loan to a NPA on latter date. But MTNL-BSNL don't have that liberty. They are prevented. Sparingly, MTNL is allowed some times for taking loans but only to the extent barely needed to pay the salaries only and not for investing for upgrading/improving the service. How long will they survive in such suffocating conditions.

An inescapable question that comes in any body's mind is : What is Government, the owner of the PSUs, thinking or doing in this context ? To be precisely correct, Government is apparently plagued with its visibly dwindling mind . It is on record and it seems on some visible accounts, DOT works to start the process to revive MTNL-BSNL to bring them back on to the track of its viable operation with earning of reasonable profits. Even Hon'ble Minister in-charge asserted such stand in the Parliament. But this alone is not sufficient. The proposal whatever is there on the anvil needs to be approved by the cabinet to start with.

Side by side psychological warfare seems to have started. The Information's leaking systematically from various sources give rise to confusions and doubts. It is as if, Government is speaking in different voices giving contradictory news. This essentially precipitates uncertainty which shaken the confidence of both customers and the employees. There appears to be a canard of malicious propaganda against MTNL-BSNL and their employees who are working hard with their backs on the wall to save the situation even at this stage. But propaganda is let lose trying to say that the number of the employees, their efficiency and their ageing are the root causes of deteriorating conditions of MTNL-BSNL. The solution lies in driving out them out of MTNL-BSNL. What can there be more damaging than this ? "Blow hot blow cold" sort of posture is being perpetrated perhaps to break the morale of the employees gradually and to soften the probable resistances against move of privatization.

Recently I heard one spokes person of BMS in a television program. He tried to explain with pains that the Government in its political entity does not want to privatize MTNL-BSNL. But Government in its bureaucratic entity is not traditionally in favor of continuing MTNL-BSNL as PSUs. To what extent such statement may hold water ? Certainly not to the fullest extent. Beyond certain limit, it is too preposterous to comprehend.

If the political dispensation has a genuine political will to retain MTNL-BSNL as PSUs and for that matter, their survival is something that Government genuinely wants, the minimum thing is expected of them is that the Government

should promptly and iron handedly plugs the sources of contradictory news being leaked from time to time purportedly in the name of PMO or Min. of Finance. Mind that these leaked news are getting wide publicity even through the so called main stream media including those presumably close to the Government and even those owned by the prominent person of the ruling party. This cuts the MTNL-BSNL at their roots. Why is DOT not issuing press note clarifying that theses news are fake and ill-motivated. That will help MTNL-BSNL to retain confidence of both customers and employees.

In absence of such denunciation, is it not naïve on our part simply to be carried away with the belief that news emanated are fake and sit tight ?

May it that be, what is left for us – the employees and the pensioners, to do now to face this. We must mobilize all across the board, without having any consideration of affiliations and banners, put forth resistances against any move directly or indirectly to privatize. Please mind that when the house is set on fire, it is immaterial whether one is good or bad, black or fair, staying in the upper floor or in ground floor, all will be burnt together to the ashes.

It is nobody's business to disbelieve Govt. stand as such. Let Govt take its own time to derive its own final decision. But stake is too high for all of us to be quiet till that last moment. Let us be on our timely guard.

(M. K. Bagchi)

10/10/2019

