

The AITUC condemns the deliberate attempts to wind up BSNL

A deliberate leak seems to be doing the rounds of the media, painting a bleak picture of the financial health of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL). BSNL was 'unable to pay' recently, even the salaries of the employees for two months! It is made to look as if overstaffing is the key problem that needs to be corrected through VRS, CRS, reducing the age of retirement etc. That these are the only options to save BSNL and that they will be exercised once the elections are over and a new government is installed.

The AITUC condemns the deliberate and slow killing of various branches of public sector, BSNL being only one instance.

One recalls how a part of Department of Telecommunications (DOT) was corporatized against a stiff resistance from the employees' Unions in the late 1990s by NDA-1; the Government assured them (1) their employment will be protected; (2) their pension will be paid out of the Government Funds (even if privatization takes place); and (3) the proposed Corporation will be kept financially viable.

There were about 3.5 lac employees -1 lac executives and 2.5 lac non-executives then, catering to the telephone system throughout India. Till the year 2004, BSNL was in profit – Rs.10,500/- Cr and had a bank balance of Rs.40,000/- Cr. The total assets were Rs. 1,04,000/- Cr.

Side by side, the NDA Government started privatization of various other telecom services : Paging System, for example. Jagmohan was the Telecom Minister and tenders were called for. The private companies that won the contract, were neither paying up the license fees nor the fines imposed for flouting the norms set by the Government. It was then that the blue-eyed boy of NDA Government, Pramod Mahajan, stepped in to waive off all this amount to the benefit, mainly of the Reliance outfit – Reliance Communications (RCOM). But surprisingly, the BSNL was not allowed to bid for this tender, it was deliberately kept out of the mobile sector!

It was in 2002, that BSNL got the license to enter the mobile sector by going to Delhi High Court, which rightly asked, '**why a level playing ground was not being provided to BSNL?**'

Within the period from 2002 to 2005, though entering the field after every other private company, the BSNL came to the top, with the biggest share of the mobile market. Even the rates being charged to customers were brought down with the entry of BSNL.

But the bias against BSNL continued. TRAI looking the other way when private players flouted the conditions of license, while BSNL dutifully followed them (Coverage of unprofitable rural areas), stopping of compensation for this since 2011, stopping of compensation to BSNL for use by private players, of tower network erected by BSNL (65000 in number), debarring BSNL from bidding for 3-G spectrum, and so on. Now, the employees again went on strike to demand that BSNL be allowed in 4-G spectrum!

The Government has actually demanded that BSNL return the working capital of Rs.7500/-Cr, advanced initially at the time of formation of the Corporation on the condition that it will not be asked to be returned and that it will be interest-free. Now an interest of 14% has also been levied, thus emptying

the coffers of BSNL (Rs.40000/-Cr). The BSNL now is working from hand-to-mouth against monoliths like the Reliance Jio, promoted by Chowkidar Prime Minister Modi himself acting as the company's brand ambassador! Jio offered their services free for six months – against the TRAI guidelines, which restrict such promotional measures to three months only, with Chowkidar looking on benevolently.

The BSNL is fighting on for survival, bereft of any support from the government and sabotaged from within by high ranking officers and politicians. It is the employees who, with their backs to the wall, without any wage revision for the past 11 years, are carrying the burden of saving this vital organization in the public sector. One cannot forget their yeoman service when Kerala was reeling under devastating floods in 2018. No private player was to be seen on the scene then.

As stated above, same modus operandi is being followed for the Railways, Oil and Natural Gas, mines, airways.

The AITUC demands that the next Government keep their hands off these vital Public Sector Assets.

AITUC Secretariat
