

With rollout of 4G delayed, BSNL union urges govt. to use VI network

S.R. Praveen

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Faced with a constantly eroding user base, the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited Employees Union (BSNLEU) has urged Union Minister for Communications Ashwini Vaishnaw to temporarily utilise the network of Vodafone Idea (VI), in which the government is the biggest shareholder, to provide 4G service for the BSNL.

The attempts to launch 4G services through the BSNL has still not taken off, even as private players have all started providing 5G services.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India's (TRAI) monthly telecom subscription reports paint a grim picture of BSNL's future. In the month of March alone, the BSNL has lost 23.54 lakh customers across the country. During the same period, Reliance Jio gained



21.43 lakh customers, while Airtel gained 17.5 lakh customers. In the 2023-24 financial year, the BSNL lost 1.8 crore customers. For the past several months, the BSNLEU has been trying to attract the attention of the government over the massive exodus of customers from the BSNL, due to the non-availability of high speed data services.

According to the letter from John Verghese, acting general secretary, BSNLEU, the telecom major's 4G services, the plans for which began at least four years ago, are nowhere close to being rolled out.

"The Tata Consultancy Services, to whom the

BSNL has placed the purchase order for the supply and commissioning of 4G equipment, is taking an abnormally long time for commissioning BSNL's 4G network. It is understood that the TCS has not even completed the field trial of its 4G equipment. It clearly seems that the TCS is faced with serious technical problems in the commissioning and operationalising of BSNL's 4G networks," says the letter.

Cancelled

The Department of Telecom had in 2020 cancelled the BSNL's tender for 4G upgrade and asked it to depend on indigenously developed equipment, even though no such restrictions were placed on private players. The new network has been developed by the Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DoT), but there have been issues in its roll out related

to the integration of legacy 2G and 3G networks.

The letter notes that Reliance Jio and Airtel, which have already rolled out their 5G service throughout the country, are getting benefited through the massive customer exodus taking place in the BSNL. Even Kerala, which till some years ago used to have a growth in customer base, has lost close to 10 lakh customers, according to M. Vijayakumar, Circle Secretary, BSNLEU.

After the Union government converted the Vodafone Idea's adjusted gross revenue (AGR) dues into equities of over ₹16,000 crore, the government became the largest shareholder with 33% share. The BSNLEU has urged the government to utilise Vodafone Idea's network temporarily to rollout 4G services to contain the massive exodus of customers from BSNL.