

State-run ITI, Tech Mahindra to run 4G pilot program on BSNL's network

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NEW DELHI: State-owned ITI Limited and Tech Mahindra are planning to run a fourth-generation or 4G pilot program to demonstrate high-speed data utility on Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) network, and manufacture critical telecom equipment locally, dashing hopes for multinational vendors such as Nokia and Ericsson.

"ITI has been discussing with various leading technology companies and startups to build a Make in India framework for 4G upgradeable to 5G technology," RM Agarwal, chairman, ITI told ETTelecom, and added that the two Indian-origin giants have a plan to conduct Proof of Concept (PoC) of the 4G solution on BSNL network.

The state-backed telecom carrier offers 3G services in the 2100 MHz frequency band and demanded additional 5 units to launch commercial 4G services. The Cabinet has though approved 4G spectrum allocation in October 2019, as a part of revival package.

In June, both ITI and Tech Mahindra have entered into a pact to work together in the areas of 4G and 5G networks, as well as Smart City programs, as a part of Centre's Atmanirbhar Bharat or self-reliant India initiative.

The state-controlled enterprise, according to Agarwal would manufacture the 4G and 5G eNodeB, an LTE Radio Access Network element, and develop other related network capabilities.

The company aims to leverage its previous experience of base transceiver Station (BTS) equipment manufacturing in addition to antenna, shelters and microwave equipment production, it had undertaken for the public-sector telecom company's GSM expansion program.

Earlier, it had supplied nearly 25 million lines of 2G, 2.5G, and 3G network which, according to the official is operational and is being used by BSNL's subscribers even today.

Following the allegations of homegrown companies of restrictive conditions and India-China border standoff, state-backed BSNL had to cancel its request for proposals (RFP), floated in March for a network upgrade to 4G as well as the deployment of new sites.

Both, Finnish Nokia and Chinese ZTE being suppliers of 2G and 3G equipment, were though hopeful to bag further orders from the state-driven telco for the 'proprietary migration' to the 4G network which, however, now look bleak.

"BSNL tender will come out only after the acceptance of the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) committee, and ITI will be a key player to watch for as it leads the Atmanirbhar Bharat consortium," RK Bhatnagar, former advisor, DoT said.

The Bengaluru-based company has also inked deals with startups such as Lekha Wireless, Resonous, Signal Chip, Nivetti Systems and Sooktha, and is in discussion with other domestic firms to meet the entire end-to-end current 4G and the future 5G requirements through consortiums.

"The effort is aimed at consolidating the various components for upcoming technologies of 4G and 5G so that the Indian telecom sector relies on local companies to achieve self-reliance," Agarwal added.

BSNL, as a part of phase - IX network expansion, wanted to upgrade as many as 49,300 sites to 4G and the addition of 7,000 new sites in two metropolitans- Delhi and Mumbai for Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL).