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Research Article

Launch Of Mobile Telecommunications In North East India

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Abstract: Mobile telecommunications in North East Indian states was launched only in 2003, 8 years later from the rest of the country. Ministry of Home Affairs and defence establishment strongly decided against the extension of mobile services in these regions citing internal security issues. With the advent of mobile telecommunications in the region, it is expected to bring about all round development including education, healthcare, business and economic growth.

Keywords: Mobile service operator, smartphone, e-learning, e-business, e- healthcare

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1. Introduction:

While mobile communication technology had swept all over the world since the last decade of the twentieth century, it had not been launched in north eastern states of India until the second half of 2003. The north eastern states being one of the most remote and underdeveloped regions of the country, telecommunication revolution were expected to bring about rapid socio-economic changes and development in this region. However, launch of mobile phone services in the north east were inadvertently delayed, which were also distraught with various issues and challenges.

2. Objectives of the study:

- i) To examine issues of mobile telecommunication initiative in north east India.
- ii) To examine the growth of mobile communication in north east India.

3. Methodology:

The present study is based on data from secondary sources such as publications and annual reports of the Department of Telecommunications, Government of India, articles published in national and international journals, books, newspapers, reports and other related documents published by reputed organisations. Statistical tools like averages, percentages are used in order to study various specified study objectives.

4. Discussion:

4.1 A brief history of mobile communication in India: The first ever mobile phone communication in India happened on 31 July 1995, when the then Union Telecommunication minister Mr. Sukh Ram at Sanchar Bhavan in New Delhi spoke to the then West Bengal Chief Minister Mr. Jyoti Basu at Writer's Building in Calcutta (Kolkata) using handheld devices (Das, 2015; Saran, 2005). Initially two cellular service providers were issued license to operate in the four metropolitan cities of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras (Das,

2015). Cellular services gradually extended to the entire country with the exception of J&K and the north eastern states. At present 22 telecom circles provided pan India cellular services with BSNL, Airtel, Reliance Jio, and Vodafone-Idea as the major service providers.

4.2 Delayed expansion of mobile communication services in north-east India: Until September 2003, mobile communication and internet services in the north east states were available in greater Guwahati and Shillong areas only (Singh, 2020). The major roadblock for non-extension of these facilities in other areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura was the security concern of the MHA and the Defence Ministry. Security agencies argued time and again that militant and subversive activities would escalate if mobile telecommunication services were extended in the region (Singh, 2020). However, soon after Mr. Arun Shourie took over as the Union Telecommunication Minister, who had a vastly different approach decided to roll out mobile telecommunication services in the entire north eastern states. Singh (2020) wrote in this regard, “the objections of security agencies were overruled and the government had realised that internet and mobile services would improve business, trade and working environment, and thus spur economic growth. It was also expected that improved business and trade would create tremendous employment opportunities, which would wean away the youth from militancy.” Subsequently, on the 27th of October 2003, the then Prime Minister of India Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee launched the BSNL mobile and internet services from Kohima in Nagaland for the entire north eastern region.

Mobile communication services in Manipur and perhaps in north east India was crippled with various issues. The entire north east people had to wait for 8 long years until 2003 for mobile phone service to begin. The early years of mobile communications was also besieged with problems ranging from erratic power supply, frequent and often prolonged economic blockade on the National highways in Manipur thereby hampering in construction and installation works of telecom infrastructure, non availability of diesel fuel to run generator during power failure, ransom, extortion and kidnapping of telecom officials and staffs, killing of telecom tower guards etc. On the other hand, poor network service and problem of connectivity, non availability of network in certain parts of the state, frequent internet shutdown etc are some other common problems faced by consumers in Manipur. A frequent problem mobile consumer in Manipur faced until recently is non-availability of proper network thereby making calls not possible. Another complaint often made by consumers is the shutting down of mobile towers at night from 10 pm onwards (Manipur da Network ki Problem, 2011).

4.3 Growth of mobile telecommunication: Although the north eastern states entry into the telecommunication map of India was late by eight years, yet the region caught up pretty fast and in no time most of the mobile operators began their services by 2010. The Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited started its operations in North east states of India including Manipur with its post paid

mobile wireless communication service. Later in February 2005, the BSNL introduced Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) and General Packet Radio Service (GPRS) along with prepaid facility on CellOne mobile phones in three north eastern states of Nagaland, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh (New beep, 2005).

Private operators followed suit with Airtel launching its service. Airtel became the first private telecom operator to launch its mobile service in Imphal and other regions of Manipur (“Airtel launches service in CCpur”, 2006). Airtel has been present in the north east telecom circle since October 2005. The private mobile phone companies present in the state by 2010 include Airtel, Airtel, Tata Indicom, Vodafone, Idea Mobile and Reliance (Rcom) which were operating with approximately 700 mobile towers in the state. Many of these companies later merged or gone bankrupt and by 2020 only four major players remained which include BSNL, Airtel, Vodafone-Idea and newly launched Reliance Jio.

4.4 Introduction of 3G and 4G mobile services: BSNL launched its 3G mobile services in 12 cities of India on 27th February 2009 with the then Union Telecommunication Minister A. Raja by making the first video call to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi (BSNL launches 3G Pan India, 2009). 3G mobile and data services of BSNL were made available initially to Imphal residents only from 22nd March 2010 (BSNL launches 3G mobile service in state, 2010). Airtel also plan to launch its 3G services to all its 13 telecom circles before the Cricket World Cup kicks off on 19th February 2011 (Airtel to launch 3G service in one go, 2011). In Manipur, Airtel became the first private mobile operator to launch 3G services thereby providing internet facilities to its customers in Imphal since the 1st of April 2011 (3G Service Launched, 2011).

Similarly, Airtel had spearheaded the launch of 4G services in India with its first 4G network launched in Kolkata in April 2012. In December 2016, Airtel had introduced 4G services in the north east state of Assam starting with the towns of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia (Airtel launches 4G in Assam, 2016). On the other hand, Vodafone India announced the expansion of its 4G footprint in the state of Manipur in March 2017. Reliance Jio launched its 4G mobile services all over the country from September 5, 2016. Reliance Jio service was accessible to all and what was more tempting and attractive to the consumers was that the service was available free of cost till 31st December 2016. Further, Jio mobile provides free voice calls to all its customers in addition to providing the cheapest data rate in the world with tariffs starting from Rs.50 per GB or 5 paise per MB (TechDesk, 2016 & Kurup, 2019).

5. Conclusion: Although the north eastern states came late in the telecommunication map of India, yet the region is fast catching up with the rest of the country. The expansion of mobile and internet services enabled people of this landlocked region bereft with limited opportunities to explore emerging socio-economic avenues. E-learning, e-health, e-business and e-

governance empowered the north eastern region in an unprecedented manner.

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