

Centre sat on CBI report against Dayanidhi Maran

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CHENNAI: Indeed a shocking, daring robbery. A telecom central minister from Tamil Nadu got the BSNL to connect 323 telephone lines to his home, not in Delhi where he had work, but in Chennai where he had none. He got all the 323 home lines listed not in his name but in the name of the Chief General Manager BSNL Chennai. These lines virtually constituted a telephone exchange in the minister's home. It was exclusively used for his family business by laying 3.4 km long secret cable along public roads to connect the lines to the business premises. This had caused huge loss to BSNL. Who was that enterprising minister? The infamous A Raja? No. It is the famous Dayanidhi Maran; Raja's predecessor, now the central Textile Minister. The CBI, which probed the fraud, wrote to the Secretary Telecom on 10.9.2007 recommending action against Maran for the fraud.

Dayanidhi Maran was obviously not playing marbles with 323 telephones. He got the BSNL to lay separate and exclusive underground cable from his Boat Club home to the SUN TV office at Anna Arivalayam in Anna Salai and fraudulently linked the 323 home lines to his brother Kalanidhi's SUN TV network. The first 23 of the 323 lines bore numbers '243722 11' to '24372301' and the next 300 lines bore numbers '24371500' to '24371799'. Since the first four digits '2437' were common for all 323 lines, the lines constituted a home telephone exchange. The Dayanidhi home exchange was operational in the SUN TV establishment for at least months from January 2007 through the fraudulent cable connection from Dayanidhi's Boat Club home. They were no ordinary telephone lines, but costly ISDN lines, which could carry tons and tons of TV news and programmes faster than satellites to any part of the world. These lines, the CBI says in its report, are "normally used by medium to large commercial enterprises to meet special needs such as video conferencing, transmission of huge volume of digital data of audio and video" - precisely the facility that SUN TV would need for its telecasting operations. For this, the SUN TV would have paid huge cost. But it got it all free, at government's cost.

Full text of the CBI report:

The Maran home exchange, says the CBI, was "programmed in such a way that no one other than the authorised BSNL staff were aware of the existence of such an Exchange created for his [minister's] exclusive use". It added that by linking the minister's home and SUN TV office by the stealthy cables, "it would appear as if the lines were used in the residence of the former minister, but actually the cables laid facilitated SUN TV network to utilise the services of BSNL provided at his residence". Google map shows the distance to SUN TV as 3.4 kms along the main artery roads of the area, which were dug up to bury the illegal underground cables from Maran home to SUN TV office! It was not one of those secret White Collar frauds, but a crime committed in the open roads.

What could be the probable loss to the exchequer by this fraud? On "a sample study", the CBI says, "it is learnt that 48,72,027 units of calls have emanated from [just] one Telephone No 24371515 in the month of March 2007 alone, which is indicative of the massive multimedia transfer in the underlying connections". Just one of the 323 lines accounted for over 48 lakh call units in March 2007 alone - Yes almost 49 lakh call units in one month, through one of the 323 phones! Assume that each of the 323 connections was put to use as efficiently as Marans had operated the Number 24371515; the total number of call units SUN TV would have unlawfully robbed the BSNL during January 2007 to April 2007 [Maran resigned on May 13] could be as high as 629.5 crore call units. With the prevailing rate of 70 paise per call unit could the loss to BSNL be as high as ` 440 crore? Only a thorough investigation can reveal the true loot. But, the story does not end here. SUN TV's print cousin 'Dinakaran', too has got its share of the loot. Says the CBI: "It is also learnt that similar service connections with ISDN facilities have been provided at the office of Dinakaran, a Tamil Daily, belonging to the group of SUN TV Network at Madurai, though specific phone numbers are not available". But how did the CBI get to investigate the fraud and where is its report now? It calls for a brief flash back.

Maran, a grand nephew of Karunanidhi, was the central telecom minister from June 2004 to May 2007. Perhaps the only Hindi knowing family member, Maran was Karunanidhi's eyes and ears in Delhi and his connect to Sonia Gandhi. The 'young' and 'dynamic' minister was amongst the most powerful in the UPA government of which the DMK was the most critical partner.

Telecom Ministry sitting on CBI report for over 44 months

Need an illustration for Maran's reach then? Not only could he threaten Ratan Tata to part with a third of Tata DTH shares, but he also could threaten him not to reveal that he had threatened him! But suddenly, Maran fell from the cliff into the pit, thanks to a costly slip by Dinakaran, a Tamil daily owned by Dayanidhi's brother Kalanidhi Maran. On 9.5.2007, Dinakaran carried an opinion poll that had trashed Karunanidhi's son Alagiri as non-entity in Tamil Nadu politics. Alagiri's angry supporters burnt down the Madurai establishment of Dinakaran on the same day, snuffing out the lives of three innocent staff. Karunanidhi sided with his son Alagiri against his grand nephews, the Marans. Result, Dayanidhi was instantly out of the DMK and the central ministry. It was then that the CBI probed the daring fraud. And now back to the main story.

The CBI had recommended action against Maran as early as in September 2007.

But the CBI letter is obviously sleeping somewhere since then, and for the last 44 months. The CBI letter had specifically asked the Telecom Secretary to bring the matter "to the notice of" Raja. So the case against Maran of DMK was to be approved by Raja also of DMK.

With the 2009 elections approaching, as was expected, warring nephews and sons of Karunanidhi patched up on December 1, 2008, with Karunanidhi saying, "my eyes grew moist and heart was content." The CBI letter was perhaps used to make Marans fork out generous terms for peace. After the 2009 elections, Dayanidhi, who got elected, attempted again to make it to the Telecom Ministry, but could not.

He became the Textile Minister instead; and he is so even now. With the family feud subsiding, the CBI letter against Maran began gathering dust somewhere in Telecom Ministry.

Haunted by the 2-G scam, Raja resigned in November 2010 and Kapil Sibal took over. Sibal is sitting on the CBI report since then.

And Maran, as Textile Minister, is sitting in cabinet meetings along with Sibal. And despite the CBI advice for action against Maran sleeping for over 44 months, now Prime Minister promises to Baba Ramdev that he would tackle corruption with "seriousness" and "without delay", while he himself is still sitting with Maran in cabinet meetings. It seems as much a comedy as it is a tragedy.