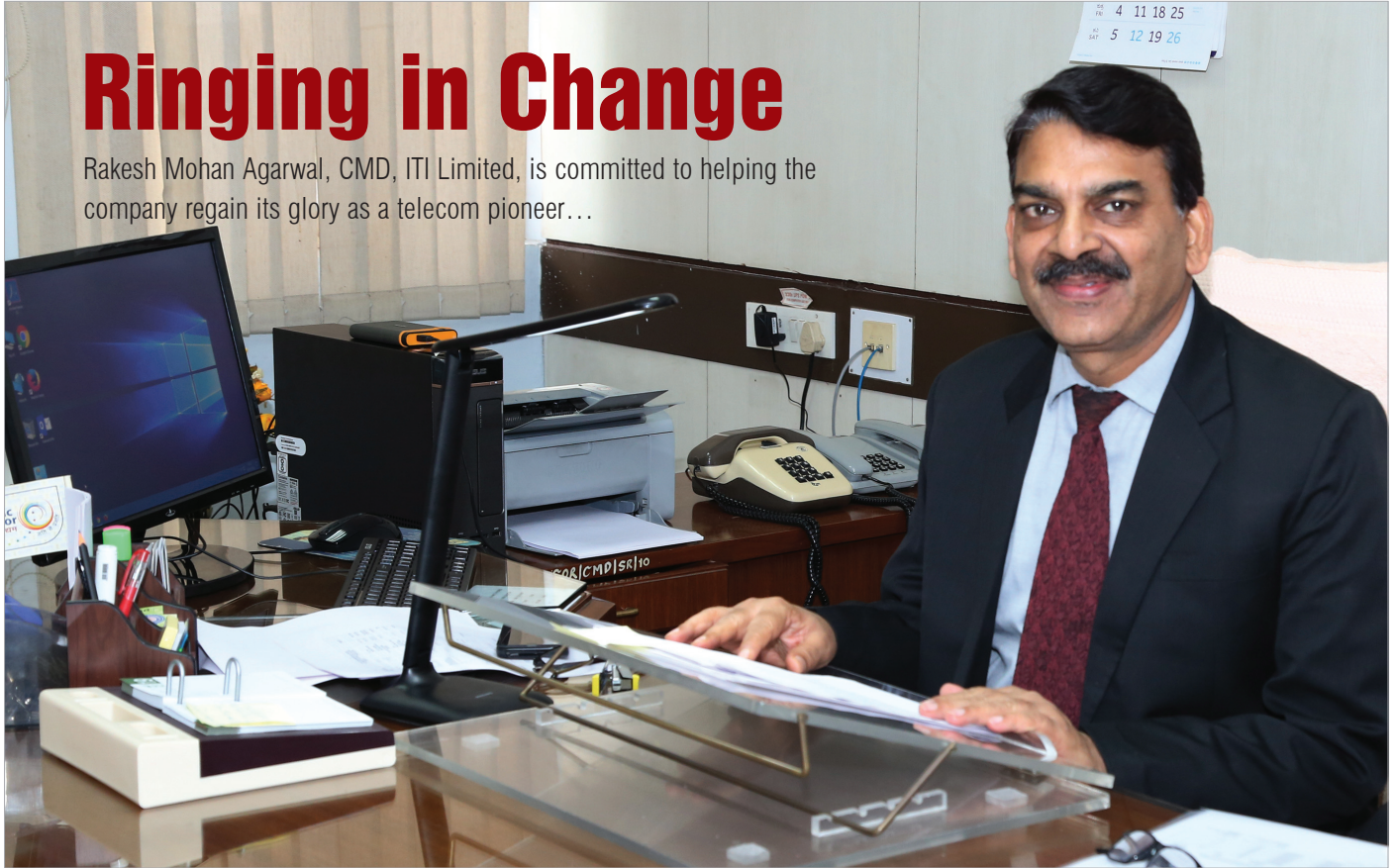


Ringing in Change

Rakesh Mohan Agarwal, CMD, ITI Limited, is committed to helping the company regain its glory as a telecom pioneer...



YouTube has a video showing a teenage boy holding one of those old rotary dial phones. He looks at it and moves it around in his hands like some Stone Age relic. His parents exhort him to figure out how to use it. He can't. The idea of inserting his fingertip into one of the numbered rings and moving it to the right simply doesn't occur to him. Phones from 20 years ago are unrecognisable to a teenager today. Imagine, then, how much change Rakesh Mohan Agarwal, chairman and managing director (CMD) of ITI, has seen during his 33 years in the telecom industry.

His career began with the unbelievably exciting job of installing telephone exchanges in remote areas to relieve people of the tedium of booking STD calls and waiting long hours. At the start of his career, he was responsible for installing the first exchanges in places such as Solan and Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh around 1988-89. "The excitement of the villagers making their first phone call is something I won't forget," he says. "We also maintained the oldest telephone exchange in

the country, in Shimla, on the Mall. There was no looking back after that."

Since then, the telecom landscape has become unrecognisable. "Now you can call whenever you want and talk to anyone in the world. It's been an incredibly dynamic industry, which has seen immense change." Of course, the change has its own implications. "These days, while we can speak to anyone anywhere in the world in a second, we don't have time to talk to those around us because we are glued to our phones," he says wryly.

Agarwal grew tired of everyone in his

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family sitting down for meals with their phones, if not talking, then looking at texts. An incoming call took priority over those present. He had work calls. His children had calls from friends. "A few years ago, we decided to put our phones away during mealtimes so that we could focus on one another rather than on WhatsApp," he says.

Talking of WhatsApp, he says he can see how things have changed with his own father, who is in his eighties. He asked his granddaughter to explain how to use WhatsApp and is now a devoted adherent. Agarwal himself, though, doesn't use it much, nor other apps. He doesn't have the time.

A postgraduate in electronics and communications and an MBA, he joined the Indian Telecommunication Service in 1986 and has rich experience in policy formulation, standardisation planning, and operations and maintenance of telecom networks in different organisations of the Department of Telecommunications (DoT). After taking over as director,

marketing, of Bengaluru-based ITI Limited in 2018, he was appointed CMD in October this year.

ITI has been through many ups and downs. Set up in 1948, it was the country's first public sector unit to be established after Independence. Ever since, it has been a pioneering venture in the telecom manufacturing space. It started a manufacturing facility in Bengaluru in 1948 and expanded to six other locations, along with an important research and development (R&D) centre in Bengaluru. With the inauguration of its mobile equipment manufacturing facilities, it joined the league of world-class vendors of GSM technology. This ushered in a new era of indigenous mobile equipment production with ITI supplying more than 9 million GSM lines per annum to domestic as well as export markets. Today, the company offers a complete range of telecom products. It also manufactures diversified products for the defence, railway and solar power segments.

In defence, the company is all set to implement a Rs 70 billion (\$1 billion) Phase IV project, the Army Static Switched Communication Network-ASCON, for deploying and maintaining the army's strategic communication network across the country. The project includes civil works for providing the complete infrastructure required at various sites and optical fibre network, besides the supply, installation, commissioning and maintenance of telecom equipment such as IP/MPLS routers, microwave radios, satellite terminals, network management systems, mobile nodes and test equipment.

Policy has been an area to which Agarwal has contributed greatly. He worked as DDG (NT), DoT, and was involved in policy formulation for the adoption and implementation of new technologies such as IPv6, M2M and cloud computing by the telecom and IT industry.

In 2013, he brought out the National IPv6 Deployment Roadmap v2 and the Compendium on IPv6-based Solutions/Architecture/Case Studies for time-bound IPv6 implementation by stakeholders across the country. He was the member-convenor of a committee set up by the government to bring out recommendations for

the implementation of net neutrality in 2015. Agarwal also formulated the National Telecom M2M Roadmap, which was released in 2015.

Coming back to ITI, it is a company he feels proud of. "It is the pioneer in the design, manufacture and supply of encryption equipment and has been present in the field of encryption technology for more than four decades with the highest number of approvals. ITI has supplied a wide range of encryption products, which have been successfully deployed and are operational in national defence networks like Bluestar, Civicon, Project Dhruv, ASCON Phases I, II and III, Pouncing Panther, and Assam Rifles, to name only a few," he says.

In more recent years, the company has played an active role in key initiatives such as Digital India, BharatNet and Network for Spectrum. "The company went through a period when it was classified as 'sick' on account of continuous losses. But we have reinvented ourselves so that we can compete effectively in a dynamic market scenario and expand our footprint in new markets," says Agarwal.

The company has also set up a telecom testing facility in Bengaluru to ensure telecom equipment safety and security in line with the requirements of the National Digital Communications Policy, 2018. Besides telecom products, it has been focusing on products such as smart energy meters, smart cards, OFC and high density polyethylene pipes. The company recently won major orders for the supply of smart energy meters and these are currently under execution.

Things, however, have not always been so rosy. Agarwal recalls how ITI was almost shut down by the government. For 20 years, its performance had not been up to the mark. In 2004, it was declared "sick". "The staff came up to me and pleaded that the company should not be closed down. They wanted me to revive it. I had to micromanage this revival but I had made a commitment to this organisation and its people to make it one of the best," he says.

At the time he made this commitment, he was a joint secretary level officer in DoT. A revival plan was drawn up and implemented. Systematic changes were made. ITI

began executing projects in a timely manner. The tendering system was done away with. Orders began to flow in. Then bigger orders began pouring in. The company upgraded its manufacturing plants and all its infrastructure. It cut costs.

"Eventually things turned around. The staff had been so demotivated, by both the losses and their low salaries, that the morale was low. There had been no innovation for 30 years. Employees were frustrated. They were hard-working, but nothing much was happening. Today, we have improved the company's fortunes to the point where we are planning to launch an FPO in December. Moreover, the huge manufacturing hub being planned in Bengaluru will be ready in the coming days, which will greatly increase ITI's capacity," he says.

The company has already turned profitable and is aiming for good cash profits from next year onwards. Then, the next challenge would be to make this growth sustainable by keeping the order book healthy. "I have to make some changes so that in a dynamically changing environment, we can retain our leadership and ring in new technologies so that this prestigious and old company regains its earlier glory," he says.

What satisfies Agarwal about his work in the telecom industry is that he makes a contribution to the country's development. What makes the industry exciting for him is its restless quality. "It is so dynamic. You need to be alert and aware. You need to be ahead of the curve, all the time," he observes.

Agarwal's work extends far into the evening. He is rarely home before 8.30 or 9 p.m., by which time his family are impatient to have dinner. With family time being very limited, he makes it a point to go for short breaks with them every two to three months, usually to places near Bengaluru.

Agarwal will be with ITI till 2022, and is clear about how he wants to leave it. "I want it to be the best PSU in the country, one of the best performing companies in manufacturing, one of the best in exporting to the world, and one whose employees are satisfied and well rewarded. That's the only thing on my mind," he says. ▲