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For a thorough probe

The probe ordered by the United Progressive Alliance government into whether the processes and procedures followed from 2001 by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) in the grant of licences and the allocation of spectrum were 'right, fair and reasonable' is overdue. The one-member committee of retired Supreme Court judge Shivraj Patil will have an opportunity to examine the twists and turns of high-stake telecom policy at the behest of telecom companies, the total lack of transparency, and the redrawing of rules to benefit select corporate entities. There can now be little doubt that the telecom scandal — which was enabled by the hijacking of telecom policy by special interests — began soon after the advent of mobile telephony and the formulation of the National Telecom Policy, 1994. During the first few years, marked by high tariffs and low subscriber bases, the telecom companies operating in different telecom circles struggled with high project costs and low revenues. Under pressure from these companies, the Government of India came up with the New Telecom Policy, 1999, which was a strategic shift from the licence fee regime to a revenue-sharing model. Although the new policy led to a quantum jump in telecom operations, and brought increased revenues to both the operators and the national exchequer, the murky circumstances in which the policy change was made by the National Democratic Alliance government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party gave rise to serious misgivings in the public mind.

By fixing the period beginning 2001 for the probe, Union Minister for Communications and Information Technology Kapil Sibal is seeking to bring under the purview of the one-man committee DoT's grant of the fourth telecom licence for a price of Rs.1,651 crore. Mr. Sibal's predecessor, A. Raja, had used this as a precedent for the allocation of 2G spectrum at the same price on a first-come-first-served basis in 2008. Just as the flip-flop in the policy of the NDA government is suspect (a point made sharply by Ratan Tata in his open reply to Rajeev Chandrasekhar's open letter to him: for the texts, see www.thehindu.com), so also is the UPA government's continuation of an old policy under changed circumstances. Whether, post-2001, some or several political players made fortunes by changing policy or by sticking to the old policy against sound professional advice and common sense is a matter for the Central Bureau of Investigation to investigate and prosecute. However, the apprehension is that the telecom megascandal, whose roots go deep in our political system, could escape agencies that have limited remit or are politically manipulable. It is in this context that a comprehensive enquiry by a high-powered Joint Parliamentary Committee — where the opposition has free rein and where adversariality becomes a potent way of truth-discovery — becomes an inescapable democratic necessity.