

Street upbeat on telcos despite tariff hike delay

Rising data usage to aid ARPUs; tariff may be increased in FY22

NIKITA VASHISHT
New Delhi, 26 March

A delay in expected tariff hikes by Bharti Airtel, Vodafone Idea (Vi), and Reliance Jio has not turned analysts cautious on the sector. On the contrary, the underperformance of Airtel and Vi relative to the Sensex and BSE Telecom indices on a year-to-date (YTD) basis, can be used as an opportunity to enter these stocks from a long-term perspective, they say.

Thus far in CY21, Airtel has risen 2.6 per cent on the BSE, while Vi has declined 14.4 per cent. RIL's stock that is now seen by analysts as a play both on telecom and oil has risen 0.5 per cent. In comparison, the Sensex and BSE Telecom have risen 3 per cent and 2.9 per cent, respectively.

Calling telecom a Covid-resistant sector, Ambareesh Baliga, an independent market analyst, said: "While potential increase in average revenue per user (ARPU) remains a key trigger for Vi, correction from recent highs makes Airtel attractive. Therefore, Vi investors can stay put for now, new investors can put in money in Airtel," he says.

Tariff hike delayed

The impasse on tariff floor pricing, indirect impact of inflation, and fear of a possible subscriber churn due to any sudden tariff hike aggravating the financial stress in the sector, are among the reasons for telcos refraining from hiking tariffs, analysts say.

Yet, Vi hiked prices of two entry-level postpaid plans priced at ₹598 to ₹649, and from ₹749 to ₹799 early this week. However, the 5-7 per cent hikes in postpaid plans will help Vi's revenue by 1 per cent since the hikes are in a few select plans, notes CLSA.

Unlike the other two, its weak balance sheet is pushing Vi to hike tariffs, analysts say, and this may put it to some risk of losing subscribers.

Data released by the Telecom

GAUGING THE SIGNAL



VODAFONE IDEA Q4FY20 Q4FY21E FY20 FY21E FY22E

	Q4FY20	Q4FY21E	FY20	FY21E	FY22E
ARPU (₹)	121	109	113	117	122
Net profit (₹ Cr)	-7,345	-6,229	-48,233	-27,986	-16,793

	BHARTI AIRTEL	ARPU (₹)	149	139	134	158	172
Net profit (₹ Cr)	-334	1,880	-6,532	-6,902	5,981		

	RELIANCE JIO	ARPU (₹)	131	NA	NA	146	165
Net profit (₹ Cr)	2331	NA	5,562	12,695	21,892		

Source Bloomberg; Compiled by BS Research Bureau

Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) showed that Vi's gross subscribers additions turned positive for the first time in 14 months in January, with 1.7 million additions (to 286 million subscribers), while the monthly decline in active subscribers slowed to 0.3 million, compared with a loss of 1.5 million in December. However, the firm later flagged an "inadvertent error" in the subscriber data, which is being examined by Trai.

Airtel, on the other hand, added 6.9 million active subscribers, taking its tally to 336 million. It commands a market share of 29.6 per cent. Analysts at Emkay Global say strong data subscriber additions in Q4 should continue to improve Airtel's revenue mix and support ARPU improvement even without a tariff hike.

Jo, meanwhile, has a market share of 35.5 per cent after it added 2 million subscribers on a gross basis (active subscribers were down by 3.5 million) in January.

Jefferies thinks hefty spends in the recent 4G spectrum auction has also pushed back tariff hike.

Jo's ₹57,100-crore spend on spec-

trum and Airtel's approach of acquiring more spectrum in weaker markets do not bode well for the tariff environment, it said in a March 8 report.

Nonetheless, analysts expect the three telcos to raise tariffs in the coming quarters, which would strengthen the case for the sector. In this backdrop and amid expectations of growing revenues and usage, most analysts appear positive on the sector.

JM Financial opines that Jio would hike tariffs, likely by end FY22, once its subscriber base reaches 500 million supported by successful traction in the new JioPhone offer and the impending smartphone launch.

Others like India Ratings maintain a 'stable outlook' for now. It believes the sector is structurally moving towards a higher-ARPU regime, even without tariff hikes, on the back of increased data usage and rise in proportion of higher ARPU data customers in the overall subscriber mix.

"Growth in ARPU offers opportunities for all three players. With tariff hikes and rising 4G data, the sector's revenue may reach \$32 billion by CY23 compared with the current \$23 billion," a CLSA report said.

All three offers for sale (OFS) were launched by promoters who intend to comply with the 25 per cent minimum public sharehold-

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Shun stocks with poor fundamentals

SANJAY KUMAR SINGH

The equity market has turned volatile in recent days after a near-unidirectional rally that lasted about a year. The resolve of a large number of retail investors, who have chosen to participate in equities directly — demat accounts have risen by 12.37 million from March 2020 to February 2021 — will be tested in the coming days.

An inevitable consolidation

The primary reason for the current bout of volatility is that markets can't keep running up forever. "The markets had moved up very rapidly," says Aashish P Sommaiyya, CEO of White Oak Capital.

Management: Some degree of consolidation is inevitable after such a run-up.

Rising bond yields in the US and Indian markets are affecting equities. "Corporates' cost of capital will rise. Also, higher interest rates in the US could cause foreign portfolio investor flows to slow or even reverse," says Ankur Kapur, managing partner, Plutus Capital, a Sebi-registered investment advisory firm.

Besides, soaring Covid cases have led to fears of localised lockdowns, which could hamper economic activity.

"With the markets turning expensive, many investors

have decided to book profits," says Vivek Bajaj, co-founder of StockEdge.

Monitor corporate earnings

Markets could remain volatile for some time. "Corporate results have surprised positively over the past two quarters. Much will depend on whether this improvement sustains over the next two quarters," says Sommaiyya. If bond yields rise sharply, they could create cost pressures for corporates. How rapidly the vaccination progresses and the second wave is contained will also determine sentiment.

Stick to quality

Retail investors need to realise they have enjoyed a hefty dose of beginner's luck.

"Investors should not mistake luck for skill. The timing of their entry into the markets after the lockdown began was very good. They bought at inordinately cheap levels and stocks moved up thereafter. But they will need real skill now," says Sommaiyya.

He suggests investors should invest part of their portfolio directly to garner experience, but should combine it with investments in mutual funds.

Those who decide to invest directly should stick to quality names. "Go with companies

HIGH VALUATIONS HAVE PROMPTED PROFIT-BOOKING

Current valuations exceed long-term averages in most market-cap segments

P/E ratio	Current	5-year avg	10-year avg
Nifty50	34.56	24.13	20.75
NIFTY MidCap 100	77.92	38.68	27.38
NIFTY SmallCap 100	39.18	91.45	61.70

P/BV

Nifty50	3.47	2.86	2.74
NIFTY MidCap 100	2.78	2.20	1.96
NIFTY SmallCap 100	2.85	1.60	1.37

Avg = average; These are 12-month trailing ratios; P/E: price to earnings; P/BV: price to book value; Compiled by BS Research Bureau

Source: Bloomberg

that have given return on capital employed (RoCE) of at least 15 per cent consistently for 10 years or more. Revenue growth should have beaten inflation each year over this period, and the company should have zero debt," says Kapur.

He says investors may pay a high valuation for consistent compounders, but should counter it with a long investment horizon. Investing in quality names will also give investors the confidence to hold on to them if the correction deepens.

Investors with a long horizon should just ride out any interim volatility. "Invest in names whose business models won't get disrupted over the next five years, and stagger

your purchases," says S G Raja Sekharan, lecturer on wealth management at Bengaluru's Christ University.

Instead of worrying about the direction of the overall market, focus on the prospects of the stocks you have picked, and on business performance rather than stock price movement. Sommaiyya suggests sticking to sectors you understand. Bajaj warns against over-leveraged bets that can magnify losses. He also favours cutting your losses in poor picks. Finally, he says, long-term investors should not look at stock prices every day.

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