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## Broadcast blues

*Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar has launched a blistering attack on the government for keeping the nation's public service broadcaster tied to itself. **Shuma Raha** on how the lack of real autonomy is hobbling Prasar Bharati*



NOT FREE TO AIR? DD headquarters, Mandi House

Jawhar Sircar is in no mood to mince his words. After two years as CEO of Prasar Bharati (PB), India's public service broadcasting behemoth that runs Doordarshan (DD) and All India Radio (AIR), the gloves are off and Sircar has launched a full-throated public attack on the way the government continues to, as he puts it, cast a "shadow" over its functioning.

The immediate trigger for the outburst was Doordarshan's recent interview with the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. Parts of the interview — Modi's comments relating to Priyanka Gandhi and Congressman Ahmed Patel — were edited out before it was telecast, immediately drawing the charge that Doordarshan was little more than a handmaiden of the government and quite unable to maintain neutrality. Sircar denied any knowledge of the "editing", wanted to carry out a probe into the incident, and has since let loose a volley of broadsides, saying that Prasar Bharati, which is supposed to be a "statutory autonomous body" was autonomous only in name, and that its operational freedom was severely hamstrung by diktats from the government of the day.

"I'm fed up," says Sircar with evident disgust. "There is a cussed bureaucracy at work in the middle level which does not understand the subject. They complicate the simple, toxify the clean. And either the people

at the top are encouraging them or they are not in control."

Sircar got some amount of flak as his attack came in the dying moments of the present government. But few will deny that he has a point. The Prasar Bharati Act of 1990, which wasn't notified until 1997, declares Prasar Bharati to be a fully autonomous public service broadcaster (one that serves public rather than private interest), run by the Prasar Bharati board. And yet, the lawmakers also thought it fit to stipulate that the board must seek the government's approval on virtually every matter. In other words, whether it is plan projects, recruitment, creation of new posts, sale or mortgage of assets and so on, the board can do nothing until the ministry of information and broadcasting (I&B) gives it the green light.

"There is a basic schizophrenia in the PB Act," says a former member of the board who declines to be named. "It gives the power of supervision to the board, but the power to form rules and regulations rests with the government."

"The board is no more than a signboard," snaps B.G. Verghese, senior journalist and one of its early members. "It never had any autonomy!"

The problem is compounded by the fact that PB is dependent on the ministry for more than 50 per cent of its funding. The 12th Plan outlay for PB is Rs 3,500 crore. "But if they plan X amount, what they release is a quarter of it," says B.B. Pandit, who recently resigned as member, finance, of the PB board. "And for that we have to put up with no end of formalities."

Little wonder then that an expert committee headed by technocrat Sam Pitroda to review the functioning of Prasar Bharati recommended that it should have complete administrative and financial autonomy. The committee's report, published in January this year, also suggests that PB be made accountable not to the government but to Parliament via a parliamentary committee. "If the report is implemented, it will be a generational change for Prasar Bharati," says Pitroda, speaking from New York.

However, in the four months since the report was published, no effort has been made to implement it. "The timing was not right, as the elections were drawing near," admits Pitroda. But the I&B ministry, though it set up the committee, has not even begun to discuss the report yet, he says.

Meanwhile, in a situation where the board proposes and the ministry disposes, the delays and deadlocks continue. There has been no new recruitment to Prasar Bharati in the last 20 years — because the Prasar Bharati recruitment board as mandated by the Act was not constituted. No promotions have happened during this period either.



Jawhar Sircar

"We are facing a severe shortage of manpower," says Sircar who, as CEO, is also a permanent member of the Prasar Bharati board. The PB's staff strength is down to 32,000. That might seem like a staggering number, but Sircar says that to run the expanded DD and AIR effectively (with 450 TV and radio stations, PB is now the world's largest broadcasting service) and institute their much-needed technical upgradation, the current manpower requirement is in the region of 60,000. "In the last 25-30 years no new posts have been created," he says. "If I want an engineer with new skills I can't have him because the ancient recruitment rules say I can only get standard, wholesome roti-chawal!"

A plan to unlock the value of PB's vacant prime land in several parts of the country and use it to generate income is also stuck in the procedural maze of the ministry. Bimal Julka, secretary, I&B ministry, was not available to comment on the issue. What is indisputable, however, is the fact that though Prasar Bharati is not a government agency, it can't do much without its say so. "We are not government. We are not an independent company either. We are neither fish nor fowl," says the former PB member.

Operational murkiness also stems from the fact that PB's news staff — those who helm AIR and DD — are drawn from the Indian Information Service. Though they are supposed to be part of Prasar Bharati, they report to the government and hence owe their allegiance to it.

So were any of them responsible for censoring the Modi interview?

"I don't know," says Sircar tersely. "But they know that if they do not sing for their supper anything might happen."

Analysts feel that it is this systemic bipolarity that hobbles PB. And hence the Act itself needs to be revisited. "The PB Act needs to be scrapped altogether. They need to go back to the drawing board and rethink this," says Sevanti Ninan, media critic and editor of The Hoot, an online media watch portal.

Interestingly, besides keeping PB in a governmental straitjacket, the Act also words the qualifications of a CEO in such a way as to almost guarantee that only a senior bureaucrat will get the job. The idea is to always have a pliant, superannuated babu as the government's man on the spot, says Ninan — although, clearly, Sircar, a former secretary in the Government of India, has been anything but pliant so far.

However, autonomy — or the lack of it — is not the only problem that bedevils Prasar Bharati. In a sense, it faces an existential crisis since free to air terrestrial viewing of Doordarshan — as opposed to viewing satellite channels via a dish or a set top box — is sharply in decline. Ninan, who recently carried out a study commissioned by the Ford Foundation in Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh, says vast swathes of the rural hinterland are now switching to satellite channels simply because they are more attractive. "PB doesn't serve its purpose anymore. Really, the whole thing seems to exist for itself," she says.

Sircar admits that terrestrial viewing could be down to 7 to 8 per cent of the population now. Of course, PB has undertaken a move to digitise terrestrial transmission (DTT), which will release spectrum and free up fixed assets for monetisation (as DTT requires fewer transmitters). Efficiency, coupled with fresh talent and adoption of new technology, could also usher in vibrant programming and thereby stem the tide of DD's dwindling viewership.

But for all that to happen, Prasar Bharati needs to be free of the government's stranglehold and the attendant procedural bottlenecks. Few would disagree that in a country like India, the relevance of a free public service broadcaster continues to be felt. But Prasar Bharati will be relevant only if it is credible and effective and able to stand out amidst the din of the 900-odd private commercial television channels in the country.

## Tied in knots

- Prasar Bharati recruitment board not yet constituted
- No recruitment and promotions in the last 20 years
- Ownership of the fixed assets and human resources of Prasar Bharati not yet transferred to it
- No power to frame rules and regulations for its employees without seeking prior approval of the government
- Financially dependent on the I&B ministry

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