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One of the major stumbling blocks DD seems to be facing is of its staff and recruitment policies

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Nirupama Sekhri

Publish Date: Feb 8 2016 2:02PM | Updated Date: Apr 26 2016 3:13PM



photo : Hrishikesh bhatt

Jawhar Sircar took over as the CEO of Prasar Bharati in 2012. Since then he has weathered many storms in office but is determined to leave his mark on the organisation before he moves on. Here he discusses with Nirupama Sekhri some of the changes – big and small - in the offing in the behemoth that is the PB. Excerpts from an exclusive interview:

There are many expectations from you as head of PB, since the organisation is not commercially driven it has great potential for real, hard-hitting public service broadcasts, and can set standards, what is your vision and plan for getting on the path for such an objective?

My plan is for PB to get healthy in the key areas of revenue, programming and recruitment. One major change that is underway is to change the model DD has been working on till now - the pay-out model – which we are replacing by a pay-in model.

In this we will sell slots to interested parties who will air their shows. Doordarshan was made legendary by excellent producers like Ramanand Sagar, BR Chopra, Ramesh Sippy and others who created their own work and DD offered them a platform to telecast iconic programmes such as the Ramayan, Mahabharat, Buniyad, Humlog, Nukkad, etc.

Somewhere in 2003 when several private broadcasters started challenging Doordarshan, it inexplicably reversed its decision and blocked out talented external producers. This successful sponsored or outsourced model was replaced by a costly Programme Commissioning one under which DD took the responsibilities of funding and selecting programmes on itself.

Till now, I haven't understood why and on what merits Prasar Bharati and DD took this decision 12 years ago. This decision would make sense only if there were sufficiently talented, qualified and creative people within DD to produce iconic programmes in-house, which could become hits, but we don't come across any such success story. The governmental system does not permit such creativity or production quality.

It is a pity that this flaw was not noticed, and as a result the Government and Prasar Bharati went on a spending spree. They spent huge sums of money to support the long queues of favour-seekers in Mandi House (where Doordarshan Bhawan is) who were commissioned programmes without proper vetting of their credentials or their ability to deliver quality work. Up until 2006 DD's TRP was higher than other channels but this patronage Raj took its toll and DD's TRP started to fall from the top position in 2006.

Was this not noticed by the people heading PB and DD?

It is a pity and I am surprised that this rot was allowed to fester for too long a time. When I pointed it out, there were shrieks of protest from several insiders because their power and patronage would go.

It has been a tough fight since then. Some vested interests are manufacturing and planting scurrilous stories in equally dubious magazines and through RTI applications. But we are determined to weed out such elements including a couple of film agents who have

held DD's movie slots in a tight grip giving us very low returns and not really permitting the genuine film right holders to come forward.

Our Board and we are determined to support the large number of honest officials in DD who will not be bullied by the vested interests of a few. I am even considering sending some matters for CBI investigation if vested interest groups do not fall in line with more transparent systems of functioning.

We are going in for the time tested sponsored outsource model under which talented external producers can pitch their concept, produce their programmes using DD's platform. They will pay us a certain amount for that slot. In addition, we will also maintain a certain time in seconds (Free Commercial Time) in that slot, which we can sell to advertisers, thereby earning in two ways.

We also want to reduce our expenses by showing more movies and re-running some of our own past popular shows.

You mentioned DD holding considerable archive resources
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Yes, another major project we are undertaking is to monetise our archive resources. We have one of the largest repositories in the world, which we are digitising to be able to monetise it for Video and Audio on demand services.

One of the major stumbling blocks DD seems to be facing is of its staff and recruitment policies

Yes, PB does not have its own recruitment and promotion rules because under the Act, the Government decides these. UPSC has been refusing for the last 16 years to recruit or promote our officers as they say we are a non-Government body. This is a major stumbling block to attract the right kind of people. Since 1997 there was no recruitment and promotion in the organisation but in the last three years, we have given some long pending promotions with Board approval. The Government also permitted us to recruit some 2500 officials last year through the Staff Selection Commission to fill up a part of the 20,000 vacancies.

We have submitted a draft proposal to the Ministry for a PBRB (Prasar Bharati Recruitment Board) to be appointed that will facilitate in selecting some of the best talent in the market. We need to include more professionals from the industry. At present our average age of DD staff is 50 plus years, which we want to bring down and bring in more freshness and creativity.

How will this impact the current staff?

We have proposed for a professional manpower auditing to be done, which will evaluate the manpower strength and performance of the employees and will guide us in deciding the future course of action. The auditing will allow us to fit in the right number and right kind of people in the right places.

The Sam Pitroda Committee had been set-up in February of 2014, which made certain recommendations

Yes, it had made eight recommendations, all of which we are addressing.

A key recommendation included the need for efficient digitisation and operating active social media platforms to attract more viewers and listeners which we are working on.

Our infrastructure is huge but it's not updated we need a total FM-isation of our audio programmes, which will cost about Rs. 4500 crores. India has already a healthy mobile user base of 100 crores and they can access the service of AIR once we update to FM mode.

DD too needs to move from Standard Definition to High Definition and we are working on that seriously.

“DD Freedish” is a gift to the subscribers from Prasar Bharati, which provides complete entertainment to its viewers at a ZERO subscription fee. It entails a one-time cost of an amount between Rs. 1000-1500, that's it – there won't be any further cost to it. Currently DD Freedish has 64 channels in its bouquet which we are planning to increase to 112 in phases. The first phase of expansion would be completed by the end of February this year by auctioning the slots. This will also be a way for us to generate revenue.

In 2014 after the controversy about Ashok Srivastav's interview with Narendra Modi that was aired on April 27th, you had criticised the then I&B Minister, Manish Tewari, for compromising DD's autonomy and encouraging the perception that the Ministry and DD News worked in tandem. How have things moved since then?

Yes, we had a crisis then which everyone knows about, but after the new regime came those officers who were behind the mischief and censoring of Mr Modi's interview were not punished, but actually rewarded!

Where are some major gaps you perceive between public-funded media groups like Prasar Bharati and others around the world?

Firstly, there is a major difference in funding of such organisations around the world. For instance, ARD (Germany's regional public-service broadcasters) receives about Rs 52,000 crore; BBC Rs 50,000 crore; NHK (Japanese public broadcaster) Rs 35,000 crore; while Prasar Bharati receives about Rs. 2500 crore!

If we look at the per capita funding of different public broadcasters, one will find huge gaps between others' funding and in that of Prasar Bharati. Germany's Public Broadcaster gets per capita public funding of Rs 6599, BBC's per capita public funding is Rs 6200, NHK's per capita funding is 3200 whereas Prasar Bharati's per capita funding is only Rs 19 which is negligible in comparison to others. This should help you appreciate the gaping funding schism.

However, we are planning to scale up our funds by 50 percent through content generation and want the Ministry to also match that contribution.

Another way is to monetise our considerable land resources that number around 780 that we can rent out. Our own infrastructure can also be rented once it's been modernised.

I am also very keen to boost our global presence by joining hands with foreign channels, like CCTV China; ARD, Germany; RT, Russia, etc. We will have a programmes exchange. DD India is already available in the US and the Middle-east, we want to increase and augment that reach. We want to become the BBC of India, we will outsource 80 percent of the programmes to DD and maintain 20 percent for news content.

You mentioned 'Satyamev Jayate' as an exemplary programme, which past and current programmes would you consider some flagship PB programmes?

Yes, we had tied up with Star to air this programme, and Satyamev Jayate brought in a substantial amount of revenue. Other programmes that have done well over the past two years include the soap Saraswati Chandra produced by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the singing competition Bharat ki Shaan, the soap set in rural India Pavitra Bandhan and Fuljhadi Express. We look forward to be airing many more exciting programmes in the very near future.