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| Sunday, March 18, 2012 |

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## 'Prasar Bharati can be turned around. But it has to be done fast and vigorously'

Jawhar Sircar is no Babu. **Shuma Raha** discovers that the new head of Prasar Bharati is full of energy — and raring to go

### Tête à tête



When you talk to Jawhar Sircar, you tend to stop believing in stereotypes. A career bureaucrat, the newly appointed CEO of Prasar Bharati — the autonomous body that comprises Doordarshan (DD) and All India Radio (AIR) — is the very antithesis of the image of the stodgy, measured Babu that you may have had in your mind. Witty and affable, Sircar is cracking good company — as inclined to talk about his positive vision for DD and AIR as he is to mimic a former colleague (complete with squeaky-nasal voice) or to surprise you with his knowledge of Baluchari and *kantha* saris.

I meet him in his large, wood-panelled office in Delhi a few days after he has taken over as CEO, Prasar Bharati. The interview almost does not happen, as his father lies critically ill in Calcutta, and he has warned me that he may have to cancel our appointment and rush off any minute. Thankfully, all goes well and Sircar, who will turn 60 this month, and would have anyway retired from his previous job as secretary, ministry of culture, appears to be full of beans about his new assignment.

Yet it's hardly likely to be a walk in the park for the new CEO. Prasar Bharati, India's public service broadcaster which came into existence by an Act of Parliament in 1997, is beset with staggering problems. It has a huge number of vacancies, demoralised staff who would rather ditch autonomy and get back into the protected government fold, lacklustre programming, and losses amounting to thousands of crores of rupees. Add to this the fact that the previous CEO, B.S. Lalli, was suspended for financial irregularities and that the post has been lying vacant for about a year, and you have an organisation that's quite a far cry from the agreeable climes of the culture ministry where Sircar served as secretary since 2008.

However, Sircar seems unfazed by the challenges he faces. And neither is this milieu too different from that of his previous work, he insists. "Culture and media are related to each other. Media is just an expression of culture. In that sense, I haven't left my domain, if I may use that word."

So how does he plan to revive Prasar Bharati, which is one of the largest broadcasting networks in the world? For in an era of high decibel, in-your-face commercial TV and radio channels, DD and AIR seem to be caught in a time warp and struck with terminal dullness.

Sircar outlines a multi-pronged approach as far as Doordarshan is concerned. "DD news is very high on content and low on presentation. It's at the other end of non-sensationalism — to the point of being bland. So I want to spice up the packaging and presentation," he says. Plus there are plans to make DD more up-to-date technologically. So direct-to-home (DTH) transmission and digitisation are both on the cards, the former having been launched in a limited way already.

"Yes, there are challenges," admits Sircar. "Employee morale is very low. How do you motivate them? How do you deliver palatable programmes for radio and television? How do you increase revenue? But it can be done," he asserts. "Sure, Prasar Bharati has gone through a lot of problems. But how old is Prasar Bharati? It's just 15 years old. You are dealing with an adolescent here!"

And he is already bubbling with ideas. "The other day I went to the Prasar Bharati website and went on to AIR. I found that there was the option of clicking on a button and listening to the news. Yet how many people know that you can catch up on the AIR news on your computer? Now I am thinking of developing an application that you can

download on your mobile phone, which will allow you to listen to the AIR news. So yes, there are lots of exciting possibilities," exclaims a visibly upbeat Sircar.

Of course, he has never been short on optimism. "If I didn't have optimism, I wouldn't have left a good job in the private sector to come into public service," says the 1975-batch IAS officer. "I decided I couldn't go on selling toothpaste and shoe polish for a living. Besides," he says, breaking into his infectious chortle, "how long can you make profits for *sethjis* and sleep well?"

Though he has put in lengthy stints in industry, commerce and finance ministries — both with the central government and the government of West Bengal — the one field that remains closest to Sircar's heart is culture. In that sense, he seems to be an almost ambidextrous, left brain-right brain person. "My mind is, was and always will be tuned to subjects like industry, finance and productivity; but my heart is totally tuned to aesthetics and culture. And *vive la contradiction!* I love the contradiction," he exclaims.

Indeed, Sircar is never more animated than when he talks about his involvement in cultural projects — both as secretary, ministry of culture, as well as earlier. In 1983, he was "shunted out" to the directorate of cottage and small-scale industries in West Bengal. "It was the worst posting they could think of," he laughs. But he took it in his stride and ended up reviving the then dying art of Baluchari and *kantha* work in Bengal. "I not only revived them," Sircar says, "I was a walking model! I was probably the first man who wore *kantha*!" And ask him, and he will tell you all about the nitty gritty of the count of cotton and silk as well.

His tenure as culture secretary was, in his own words, one of the "most fruitful and satisfying" periods of his career. He galvanised the ministry into implementing a host of projects, including the modernisation of museums, archives and libraries, expanding the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi, setting up the Studio Theatre scheme to support small theatre groups, holding such iconic exhibitions as that by artist Anish Kapoor in Delhi, increasing the number of fellowships to artists and so on.

The instinct for aesthetics and culture was bred into Sircar from childhood. The grandnephew of artist Hemen Majumdar, he grew up in an artistic household where his grandfather played the *esraj* and dabbled in theatre. "There was a rub off and it gave you a huge opening balance in terms of culture," he says.

Graduating in political science from Presidency College, Calcutta, Sircar went on to pick up masters degrees in ancient history and culture and in sociology and social anthropology as well. That probably instilled in him a fondness for academics too, which he could draw on when he was principal secretary, higher education, and science and technology departments, Government of West Bengal, between 2003 and 2004.

I ask him about his former boss, then chief minister Buddhadev Bhattacharjee, who handpicked Sircar as his commerce and industries secretary in 2000. It was the heyday of the much-vaunted "Brand Buddha" and his "Brand Bengal" and Sircar became Bhattacharjee's chief lieutenant in the task of garnering investment for the state. "It was an extremely invigorating period," he says.

But before long, Sircar and the chief minister grew distant. "Buddhadev *babu* had vision, but it was patchy. There came a time when I realised that my free and frank way was not being appreciated any more. The chief minister became surrounded by yes-men," he says. Sircar eventually decided to call it quits and go back to the central government in 2006, at a time when the Left Front was voted back to power in Bengal for a record seventh term.

If he lives by a motto, it has to be "never say die", he says. And he seems to bring a lot of that same can-do spirit to his new job. "Prasar Bharati can be turned around. But it has to be done fast and vigorously," he says. "Either you turn it around in two years or not at all. There is now a huge demand for straightforward, non-sensational news, and Doordarshan can provide it. But, of course, neutrality cannot be synonymous with blandness."

Will Doordarshan continue to be a mouthpiece for the government, though? "Look, we have to strike a balance here," he replies. "I always say that much of the good work of the government gets covered under the Official Secrets Act! No one gets to hear about it, because adverse news makes for a better story. So, not sycophancy, no, but there's got to be someone to tell you about the positive things as well."

While he gears up to grapple with the problems of Prasar Bharati, Sircar is also itching to devote some time to his other passion — writing. His monograph, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal — The Role of Popular Cults* won plaudits in academic circles. And his more recent piece debunking the romanticisation of the Naxalite movement in Presidency College in the late 60s and early 70s that was published in the college alumni journal, has also been widely praised. "I have about 120 years of writing in me to do," he deadpans. "But I doubt if I have so much time."

Sircar is fond of wisecracking that in his line of work there is no *Shanibar*, *Rabibar* or *paribar* (Saturday, Sunday or family). I get a glimpse of his *paribar*, though, when, as the interview draws to a close, his 29-year-old son Shaurya Shaukat drops by to see his dad's new office. He makes a somewhat blunt observation about a meeting of publishers he has just attended. To which Sircar shakes his head ruefully, "He has obviously inherited his father's lack of discretion."

He tells me that one of his seniors in the IAS once wrote on his appraisal form: "Excess nervous energy which he inflicts on all — senior and junior. Lacks the required moderation and discretion."

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So was that a fair assessment? "Oh, yes," he says, laughing. "For me the chair has always been a hold back. But thank god for the chair! Otherwise, who knows what might have happened!"

It remains to be seen if Prasar Bharati profits from its CEO's prodigious — and infectious — energy.

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