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DD mulls slot auction

Our Correspondent

New Delhi, Feb. 8: Doordarshan has decided to auction programme slots to improve the quality of its content at a time of plummeting viewership.

The move follows a prod from the information and broadcasting ministry, after it emerged that the public broadcaster's own commissioned programmes — from soap operas to other entertainment shows — have been consistently failing to garner eyeballs.

"We realise that the quality of programmes on DD is extremely poor. Any viewer who has the choice of other channels does not watch the national broadcaster anymore," a senior official attached to minister Arun Jaitley said.

The minister has reportedly asked Prasar Bharati — the parent body that runs DD as well as All India Radio — to change its revenue model to attract big producers who would otherwise turn to private general entertainment channels.

"Through the slot-auction policy, DD hopes to attract professional production houses in return for a share in the ad revenues from the programmes. This will also bring greater transparency in the programme-selection process," another official said.

Following the ministry's "advice", a Prasar Bharati board meeting approved the policy change through which it will sell air-time to bidders, hoping they will create content as attractive as that of private broadcasters and also market it to advertisers.

Sources said the same model was followed prior to 2003 but the previous NDA government changed that to the current system in which DD commissions shows and gets producers to make them for a fee.

"The falling viewership of DD is a cause for concern. Even people in rural areas who have access to free-to-air channels are shunning our channels. So we need to take corrective measures," said Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar.

The auctions are expected in a phased manner, with prime-time and Sunday slots likely to be put up for sale first, DD sources said.

Since 2012, the Centre has been paying only salary-related expenses to DD, which is expected to earn enough on its own to create content.

But the channel that used to earn around Rs 1,400 crore annually through ads — from corporate houses and the government — until a few years ago has seen the figure plunge to Rs 950 crore last year.

Viewership figures that came in around three months ago confirmed that the public broadcaster was losing out to free-to-air channels such as Zee Anmol and Star Utsav even in rural and semi-urban homes.

Recently, the Broadcast Audience Research Council, a channel-rating agency, released numbers which showed that DD did not figure even among the list of top 10 Hindi general entertainment channels. "Our revenues through advertisements have already shrunk 25 per cent this year. The future looks tougher," said a DD official of additional director-general rank.

With the dismal ratings, not only corporate houses, several ministries are also threatening to pull out ads. "Before the all-India ratings were out, DD officials used to assure us saying our rankings will improve once rural data are added. But now, they stand exposed. To reach rural audiences, why would we not prefer channels that are most watched?" asked a director in the agriculture ministry.

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CEO Sircar admitted the problem. "DD has failed to come out with a strategy to handle the stiff competition from private broadcasters. Ad hocism at the top is also hurting it real hard," Sircar said.

But Sircar saw a silver lining. "A recent market survey has shown that DD Freedish, the direct-to-home service provided by the broadcaster, is the largest DTH operator in the country with 18 million active subscribers at present," he said.

Tata Sky, with nine million viewers, is the nearest rival, Sircar added. "It's like the other channels are riding on our backs to reach rural homes, but people are preferring their content over ours."

Another senior DD official said cuts in publicity funds of various ministries this year had also hit ad revenues. "When the overall budget for ministries like health and agriculture has been reduced, their ad spending also goes down. That is reflected in our poor showing," the official said.

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