

Business Standard

Doordarshan made anew

Detach from the government for real, public service TV

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The new minister for information and broadcasting (I&B), Manish Tewari, has set up a high-level committee under prime ministerial advisor Sam Pitroda to examine the future of Prasar Bharati, the giant state-owned organisation that takes up almost two-thirds of the I&B ministry's budget, and which controls Doordarshan television and All India Radio (AIR). The committee is supposed to make yet another effort to figure out why nobody watches Doordarshan unless they're forced to, and whether that state of affairs can be changed. The Pitroda Committee follows in the footsteps of the Sengupta Committee, the Bakshi Committee and the Narayanamurthy Committee, all of which made, no doubt, eminently sensible recommendations that nevertheless were ignored or failed to stem Doordarshan's and AIR's decline.

The reason why people turn to private channels for their television news is not as easily fixed as by hiring a few more journalists and updating graphics and production values a bit. It comes from the continuing deep distrust of news that is tied too closely to the agenda of the government in power, or of a few close insiders with ties to the bipartisan New Delhi establishment. What is needed is not the sort of tinkering with which ministers or the bureaucrats of the I&B ministry would be comfortable, but more far-reaching and structural reform. In essence, Doordarshan and AIR must reform themselves and tear away any direct connection with the ministry. Most crucially, their budgets, their personnel decisions and their leadership should not be decided by the government, but by Prasar Bharati itself, which should be independent. Its finances, as with many other state-owned broadcasters such as the BBC, can come from a licence fee that is levied on all TV owners. As with the road tax on vehicles, this can be added on to the purchase of new televisions.

The reasons why a viable and independent public service broadcaster is important are on air daily. In the absence of any corrective, the electronic media competes only on eyeballs, descending to the lowest common denominator. This distorts and warps India's national conversation, and sometimes even affects national security decisions, such as following the recent tension with Pakistan at the Line of Control. What is needed is to encourage competition along an additional axis, that of quality. In the United Kingdom, the presence of a public service broadcaster means that even for-profit news channels maintain a high level of quality. India has talked about the future of Prasar Bharati for far too long. It is time to make it genuinely independent of the government as well as of excessive commercial pressures.