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The travails of being a Prasar Bharati CEO

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MUMBAI: It is not easy being the Prasar Bharati chief executive. Amid competition from private satellite television, there is always the issue of funding and running a tight ship. On top of that there is interference from the government.

Although Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar feels helpless due to the nosy-parker attitude of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (MIB), he insists that he is a fighter and will not let go so easily.



"I am not a robot. I can walk off today, if needed. I have people working for a pittance but they are the ones keeping Prasar Bharati alive," he said when asked about the MIB's meddling in the functioning of Prasar Bharati.

Running Prasar Bharati on thin budgets and still expecting it to compete against private satellite channels is a challenge. Sircar says that content is a factor of creativity and funding. While Prasar Bharati can indulge in creativity in terms of concepts, the challenge is funding which is almost negligible.

In early 2014, the Sam Pitroda committee suggested scaling up allocation of funds for content to 50 per cent of the total expenditure within a period of five to seven years. It also suggested reforms in terms of HR.

However, Sircar said, "We had 48,000 employees, which has now come down to 30,000, and I would like to gift-wrap and send many of them."

To explain that nothing has changed for the pubcaster, Sircar stated that while the BBC can spend about 75 per cent of its funding on content, India can spend only as little as 10 per cent. India gets to spend 40 cents per person on public broadcasting, much lower than some of the North European countries where it is \$100, UK where it is \$50 and Japan where it is \$42. "Thus, you get content that is worth the price. If you spend 40 cents, you get content worth 40 cents too," the CEO said.

Unlike its peers, Doordarshan does not get support in terms of a licence fee, which is a premium source of funding for almost all public service broadcasters across the world. The BBC earns around 70 per cent of its revenue from licence fees!

BBC Global News CEO Jim Egan revealed that the BBC is funded with \$20 subscription per month, per household. "The BBC is overwhelmingly paid by people, so it exists and is regarded as one of the few things that haven't screwed up in the UK," he quipped.

Sircar said that minus the salaries of employees, Prasar Bharati earns annual revenues of Rs 1,600-1,800 crore, accounting for 95 per cent of the expenses.



On top of these financial challenges, the question remains if Prasar Bharati is really an autonomous body.

In Australia, ABC is 100 per cent funded by the government and is still an independent body as per the regulatory framework. In Japan, NHK is 45 per cent paid for by households and still guarantees independence.



Being relevant in the digital age is also an important value proposition for the public broadcaster. Citing the example of public service broadcasting in Russia, VGTRK Digital Television Russia deputy CEO Ayuna Badmaeva said, "We are driven by profit and reach. We follow our audiences where they are going in terms of content consumption. We have a lot of digital assets and we attract the best talent."

Egan and Badmaeva said that all broadcasters should create engaging content. Some of the finest content comes from public service broadcasters across the world.

While Egan stated that the number of events on their list is dwindling due to more pay TV channels, Sircar argued that he couldn't make shows like 'Satyamev Jayate' because his maximum cost is 1 per cent of what the show's is.



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Despite these challenges, Sircar has a passion for public broadcasting. Stating that the role of the public service broadcaster has always been to unite India as one cultural stream, Sircar went on to mention that Prasar Bharati is the only broadcaster in Manipur today and runs 30 broadcasts per day for 30 lakh people.

Highlighting the pubcaster's role, he said, "Is there a broadcaster that operates from the snow peaks of Kargil? After the Uttarakhand tragedy, we were the first to restore broadcast services. Doordarshan played a big role in introducing the 'Mahabharat' and 'Ramayan' to the world."

Echoing similar sentiments on the role of a public service broadcaster were Egan and ABU secretary general Javad Mottaghi.

Egan stated that the role of a public service broadcaster today is to make the good popular and the popular good. Mottaghi opined, "The public service broadcasting system has to be the voice of the public, covering the entire population, and has to service them with public-oriented rather than business-oriented content. Moreover, it should be controlled and managed by the public."

Sircar's focus now is to increase the number of channels on Free Dish, the pubcaster's DTH platform, to 112. He also hints at Prasar Bharati's willingness to take private-public partnership and allow for revenue sharing.

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