

A CORPORATE PRASAR BHARATI ?

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If small but repetitive news items are to be believed, then Prasar Bharati may either given a fresh "corporate status", or it may head be for the chopping board. The former would actually degrade a battered body even further, as a PSU or a sarkari corporation, which is often summoned to bestow favors that financial rules hardly permit, is held way down in the pecking order of governance. But, who or what is Prasar Bharati? The opening line of Edward Lear's nonsense rhyme comes to mind: "Who, or why, or which, or what / Is the Akond of Swot?" This amusing creature has successfully be devilled any clear understanding of its role and functioning.

On the whole, it may not be a bad idea to corporatize it, except that the law as pronounced by the Supreme Court in 1995 may stand in the way. The Court had freed air waves from state control and had mandated the constitution of a "public body". It thus needs to be seen if a private company or a PSU would fit the bill. Five years before this, VP Singh had passed the Prasar Bharati Act promising to liberate and modernize orthodox AIR and DD, little realizing that the Act had been surgically injected with a polio-type virus by officials anxious to ensure state hegemony. Right from November 1997, when Prasar Bharati became operational, the ineradicable government mindset of its 48,000 employees transferred in one stroke from the ministry to the new autonomous body, did its bit by ensuring that security and subservience would always be preferred over performance and innovation. Can the proposed corporate delete-abort them?

When Indian viewers started deserting a prosaic DD for more colorful private TV channels in early 2000, Prasar Bharati actually aided this exodus by driving away many talented producers. Its control- raj pomposity and never ending 'demands' resulted in numerous, indefensible court cases that weigh it down till today. Every government has declared that it is keen to improve Prasar Bharati but many have also ensured, or winked at, losses made by patronizing sub-standard programmes. If someone is serious about DD, it has to decide once for all whether its has to maintain some 50 mini-TV stations, with hundreds of trained staff and enormous public investment in equipment, land and buildings in prime urban locations: to produce just 6 hours of programming in a whole week. It is easier to sight a rare Malabar Parakeet than come across an old-world roof-top TV antenna, but can a new corporate entity be free to shut down most of DD's 1400 analogue TV towers because of negligible viewership? Not only would it save several hundreds of cores, but what's more interesting, it would prevent expenditure on eager but entrenched suppliers of obsolete technologies. One simply cannot fathom what

mysterious force or what ALS paralysis prevented DD from jumping headlong into India's multi-billion 4G race, by offering 20 digital TV channels that it beams every day from the four metro cities, without a single paisa or any viewer. Enterprising broadcasters could reach their inexhaustible saas-bahu serials or never-ending cricket matches to 250 million smart phones, with no talk-time bills, and it would be win-win for DD, broadcasters and viewers.

If reams of sweated-out proposals containing precise steps for the improvement of DD and AIR are lost in the labyrinthine corridors of power, either by neglect or by design or even an adroit combination of both, one wonders if whether a well meaning committee decision can do the trick. "The fault, dear Brutus," rued Caesar so wisely, "is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."