

PRASAR BHARATI VERSUS THE MINISTRY OF I&B

Jawhar Sircar

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The recent public fight between A Surya Prakash, Chairman of Prasar Bharati and Smriti Irani, the minister for Information and Broadcasting reveals that even when both swear allegiance to the same BJP and its parent, the RSS, their interests and differences can be deadly. It rudely belies the fond hope of the ruling establishment that peace and harmony would reign once a ‘dissident’ CEO was smoked out before the end of his protected tenure. From the self goals made by both sides emerges an interesting case study of how the Indian state functions after the biggest historical electoral mandate brought Modi to the Centre.

The information ministry’s increasing stranglehold over a statutory body like Prasar Bharati shows its obsessive urge to control, not improve. It is also prime example of how bureaucrats in post-Liberalisation regimes compensate the loss of powers they enjoyed under the previous Permit Control raj. As long as there are ministries, that are manned and controlled by powerful mandarins, they are genetically propelled to exercise hegemonic strength, even if the PM goes on giving assurances of ‘minimal government’. Since the license-patronage has gone, it are the public sector undertakings, banks and ‘autonomous bodies’ that have to bear the brunt of the megalomania of ministers and babus. This comes in the form of erratic government directions, unabashed interference and incessant grilling of the officials of public bodies. To be fair to ministries, their domination has been whetted by their appointees on all boards, and the Prasar Bharati board is packed with people whose loyalty to PMO is without question. After all, every little or big appointment is controlled by PMO that takes years to decide and no more can one expect a fearless crusading journalist like BG Verghese or a film maker like Muzaffar Ali to grace the Prasar Bharati board. It is well known that no minister has any say, except to function with such appointees he never wanted and this is where the roots of the present conflict lies. This same Board that is so ‘injured’ by the ministry today had, in fact, ganged up with the ministry in the past to kill positive proposals put forth by the executive, just because “the minister so desired”. A huge pile of written evidence exists that can substantiate how this.

But, since Prasar Bharati was set up by a Act of Parliament, how can Smriti Irani continue her depredations on it? To begin with, the Prasar Bharati Act itself provides for political appointees on the board, but what is important is that Act also requires a 22-member Parliamentary Committee to be set up. It should be constituted under Sec 13, to supervise Prasar Bharati on behalf of Parliament and its members are to be from both houses of parliament, through proportional representation. No

government has set up this committee as it does not want to give up powers to Parliament and allow Prasar Bharati an opportunity to explain, a bit like the BBC, its problems and projects directly to Parliament, bypassing the ministry. This militates against the prevailing narrative as every minister is coached by babus to insist that he alone is responsible to parliament. Thus, he can summon officials of Prasar Bharati, Doordarshan and Akashvani and question every act of theirs, until they succumb. It is almost certain that members of parliament are not even aware of this provision of a Parliamentary Committee which could cut bureaucratic interference substantially and avoid recurring wars with the information Ministry. Nor is anyone aware that sections 14 and 15 of the Act requires the ministry to set up a Broadcasting Council also, to ensure political impartiality. So fed up was an earlier Information minister, Manish Tiwari, that he made several public statements that his ministry should be wound up.

Budget and finance are two areas where all public-funded bodies that receive their grants from parliament through 'their respective ministries' are made to grovel before the ministries who act like *thanedars*. I have had a long stint as Secretary of the ministry of Culture and more than half my time was gone in fighting my own babus who were harassing the autonomous bodies quite periodically. It is not that Prasar Bharati or other autonomous bodies are composed of saints but the irresponsible power exercised by Assistants, Section Officers and Under Secretaries of the ministries is the most negative force that stymies any positive progress in India. They have no idea what the real India outside Delhi is, but they flourish because IAS and Central Service Officers are too busy in attending to the many desires and diktats of PMO, Niti Aayog and their own ministers to find time to control them. This applies to every Ministry and every autonomous or public body in India (except Atomic Energy and. Space) and the mechanics of hegemony have actually become more intolerable under rather present regime.

Prasar Bharati was afflicted with deliberate 'polio' at birth as 48,000 government servants who were recruited by the ministry over decades for Akashvani and Doordarshan were 'transferred' to it, without consulting either the employees or the broadcasters. As Mrinal Pande, former chairperson and journalist mentioned, the cream of broadcasters left for greener pastures in private television and radio and there is no doubt that Prasar Bharati could have done better if it did not have to inherit so many rights-conscious and rule-obsessed babus. For 25 years, no promotions were permitted to them by the ministry, sadistically quoting rules, until Prasar Bharati revolted a few years ago and gave 'ad hoc' promotions to lots of employees: mainly to pep up their morale. Under the law, the salaries of this huge army has to be paid by the appointing authority, the Ministry of I & B, but Secretaries and Ministers complain loudly that Prasar Bharati salaries eat up 80 percent of its budget, omitting to mention that their predecessors created this problem.

In the present imbroglio, it is clear that Prasar Bharati's back is to the wall. An imperious minister, who can teach babus several tricks in repressive techniques, has embarked on a rather whimsical scorched-earth policy until the chairman and the board

are on their knees. This is taking some time, though even the senior-most officials have accepted the nuisance of being at the beck and call of the ministry. It is reported that the main source of DD's revenue, namely its revenue from its Freedish satellite slot-auctions has been stopped by the minister for reasons not clear. Other revenue measures like the open transparent auction of its prime and near-prime slots have also been choked. The cumulative result will be to pauperise the gasping organisation. In 21 years, the ministry has not found time to frame rules to operationalise the transfer of assets to Prasar Bharati under section 16 of the Act and god only knows how many hundreds of crores have been lost when vacant or unused lands were encroached in this man-made confusion.

While Prasar Bharati itself is an glaring example of how a body should not be run, rife with mediocrity, intrigues and petty corruption, in the present case, it is correct to resist the minister's attempt to force it to hire high cost journalists, even if they are saffron. The ministry's order to terminate all hired hands, many of who ensure that the organisation is still alive despite all attempts to kill it, is just mindless retaliation. But then, the Ministry has to dominate as without Prasar Bharati, I&B would only be engaged in lack-lustre film festivals and boring tasks like registering newspapers or tom-tomming the limited achievements of a government that sold so many rosy dreams. As for Smriti Irani, let us watch the next episode of this tragic-comic serial.

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