

WHY CAN'T INDIA HAVE ITS BBC ?

Jawhar Sircar

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(English Version)

This question pops up at fairly regular intervals, especially in ‘cocktail circuits’, where the rather-provincial presentation of Doordarshan comes up. It also features in media discourses, with the obvious innuendo that PrasarBharati, along with Akashvani and Doordarshan, are not fulfilling their mandate as an autonomous body in the same spirit as the BBC. On the occasion of India’s Public Service Broadcasting Day, let us get into the facts, with some clarity.

We may begin with size and mandate. The UK has one major and five ‘minority’ languages, while India has 22 official languages and over 600 dialects. The audience base of the British public broadcaster and the Indian counterpart are also vastly different, where literacy and world-views are concerned. After Independence, AIR took up the task of ‘uniting’ a fragmented polity, which was just conscious that it was one nation, but was then spread over 14 British provinces and 565 princely states. The large number of languages, ethnic groups and multiple competing cultures did not make the task any easier. In a way, Akashvani brought India together in the 1950s and '60s through a renewed respect for its own classical traditions, with Nehru’s Information Minister, B.V. Keskar leading the campaign. This was then reinforced by spreading, intensively and extensively, the denominator that soon emerged as the nation’s common idiom: Bollywood’s *filmi* music through VividhBharati. Despite naysayers, the fact remains that it was popular film music which actually brought the much needed ‘emotional unity’ among diverse Indians, especially when several elements were up in arms, to secede from the Union. Doordarshan came in later, and further helped consolidate

the Indian nation, with its iconic serials like *Hum Log*, *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat*, *Nukkad* and *Buniyaad*.

No such task was bestowed upon the BBC except during the World Wars and it does not have to broadcast in 30 different languages every day for 30 lakh people, as in Manipur. India's broadcaster is present from the freezing heights of Kargil to the solitude of Car Nicobar, from the Rann of Kutch down to the islands of Lakshadweep, and right up the nation's lengthy borders. The BBC does not also have to operate programmes in highly disturbed areas like Dantewada.

One is not attempting to gloss over the obvious inadequacies of PrasarBharati and the fact remains that it simply does not have the sheen, élan and image that BBC possesses. To the urban Indian, the BBC is a metaphor for quality, autonomy, and fearless independence, but this autonomy is paid for by the people of Britain through a "license fee" to maintain the broadcaster, an annual license fee of Rs.13500.00 per year¹. Are Indians prepared to pay such a levy, or even half?

In 1997, Government of India handed over 47,000 of its own employees to PrasarBharati which made it the world's largest organization in terms of manpower. This number has come down to 30,000. But let us remember that more than half would go just to maintain its 2000 transmitters, even if 3 persons are deputed per shift for 3 shifts a day. Besides, AIR has 414 radio and relay stations and Doordarshan has 67 programme stations and studios. Whether such a gigantic set up is required or not is another matter, but the fact is that as long as they are there, people are required to run and maintain what the nation has created, over the decades. Put in perspective, we find that BBC employs 22,000² people to service 64 million British – that works out to one employee for every 3000 citizens. For PrasarBharati that ratio is just 1 employee for every 42,000 Indians.

¹<http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/howeare/licencefee/>

²http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/pdf/2013-14/BBC_Financial_statements_201314.pdf (p. 37)

But, why cannot Doordarshan's programmes improve in quality? The answer lies partly in the inability of PrasarBharati to infuse fresh blood and update practices, as no new blood has entered the body in the last 20 years. Most employees have not even received a single promotion in even longer periods: thus morale, motivation, imagination and skills are at the lowest ebb. But, with the new government giving considerable importance to the public broadcaster, after decades, about which there is some snickering, all one hopes is that a turnaround may now be feasible.

The Pitroda Committee made an analysis of the percentage of the total spending that is for building good 'content' and found that while Japan's broadcaster spends 75% and BBC 71%, PrasarBharati is able to spend just 13% on content³. So, quality is obviously at stake. It is interesting to note that while India's broadcaster earns about 40% of its revenues from commercial sources, BBC's equivalent figure is about half of that.⁴ But, then BBC spends a lot more on content which accounts for its world class quality, while PrasarBharati has to cut through a jungle of questions and objections from ministry officials to send just a couple of programmers abroad. UK spends \$111 per capita on its public broadcaster and Norway spends as much as \$164, but India spends just 31 cents.⁵ These are hard facts that the nation may consider, even when government extends a helping hand.

The last question is on autonomy, an issue that one had raised repeatedly as this was not part of the discourse. While autonomy is enshrined in the Act and remains a constant goal, it is futile to imagine that an orthodox organisation manned by government employees is actually pining for it. One learnt it the hard

³ Report of the Expert Committee on PrasarBharati: Vol II (Report of Expert Group on Comparative Analysis of Public Broadcasters: Annexure p. 10)

⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/annualreport/2014/executive/finances/licence_fee.html

⁵ Report of the Expert Committee on PrasarBharati: Vol II (Report of Expert Group on Comparative Analysis of Public Broadcasters: Annexure p. 4)

way and then started focusing first on building internal efficiencies and professionalism and also seeking greater operational freedom, before trying to become a BBC.