

## WHERE PRASAR BHARATI FAILED

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Exactly twenty years ago, when Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral set free the two arms of the State-controlled media, All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan (DD), he had sincerely hoped to insulate them from government control. He knew radio and TV as he had been India's information minister 22 years earlier till he was evicted by Indira Gandhi. In this long interval, every political party had sworn to liberate the two state media but they reneged once they captured power. They realised or were made to realise that these were just too powerful as tools to be sacrificed for some past ideological commitment. It was finally Chandrasekhar who managed to pass the Prasar Bharati (PB) Act in 1990, to take these two organs out of the State's reach. The bureaucracy had however inserted two sections into the law to ensure that its control was perpetuated. The next PM, Narasimha Rao, sent this Act into cold storage until the Supreme Court intervened in 1995 and directed that broadcasting be delinked from the government. Even after the court ordered that radio and television be placed under an autonomous body, the information ministry filibustered for two more years. Gujral, however, put his foot down and implemented the Prasar Bharati Act in 1997, but what followed thereafter is a classic case study of what the bureaucracy can do and can undo.

As soon as Gujral's short regime ended, the ministry's bureaucrats threw out his handpicked CEO of Prasar Bharati. He was their own former boss and secretary, but such sentiments hardly mattered because he had committed the cardinal offence of taking his 'autonomy' too seriously. And, what was worse: he had defied the information ministry. It was a do or die situation because if Prasar Bharati really became free, the ministry would hardly have any job left other than organising second rate film award ceremonies and stamping registration numbers on applications for new newspapers and magazines. Powers were thus withdrawn from Prasar Bharati; its finances were tightly controlled and the CEO's keys were given to the ministry's own additional secretaries. The latter were not inefficient but they could never dare to talk of autonomy or even dream of the BBC model. The time-tested model under which DD's serials like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Buniyad or Hum Log had become iconic and had also contributed to DD's revenues was peremptorily replaced by the babus. They

decided that their cohorts in DD and not producers like Ramanand Sagar or Yash Chopra would decide which serials would be best. Profits were, therefore, replaced with losses as DD's serials that were selected under the new 'patronage raj' could not stand up to private television. Corruption and sleaze increased but the ever increasing budgetary deficits ensured that Prasar Bharati remained crippled and had to cringe before the ministry for funds.

Overnight, some 48 thousand employees of AIR and DD who were recruited by the ministry in the good, old socialist era were transferred to Prasar Bharati, tying thereby a millstone around its neck. The salaries of this huge army was (and is) the responsibility of the government, but it was passed on to Prasar Bharati. This was obviously repaid by the ministry but every minister was told that Prasar Bharati was his white elephant and CEOs and DGs of AIR and DD were thus pulled up by irate ministers. The ministry controlled every recruitment rule and hounded every professional who was taken on contract by PB to inject contemporary techniques. It choked the promotion of senior officials and thousands retired demoralised without a single elevation in 25 years. Morale and professionalism suffered but such 'forest fires' ensured that senior officers in PB could do nothing productive. As revealed by Sam Pitroda's Committee, while Japan's broadcaster spends 75 percent of its budget on creating good programmes and BBC spends 71 percent, India's Prasar Bharati can barely afford just 13% on content. Public broadcasters do not garner revenue and their programmes are usually free of advertising, but Prasar Bharati has to earn half its operational cost from 'ads'. There is no professional for this task from the open market, as insiders have stymied all attempts to get any. But then, the conservative 'government servants' of AIR and DD can hardly compete in this cut throat world of media marketing.

Hegemony has ensured that the party in power always dominated AIR and DD, maybe not as brazenly as now, but quality and credibility have suffered. Many of India's finest radio and TV professionals had enriched Prasar Bharati but constant control by IAS officers who hardly understood media has ensured debilitating obsolescence. It may really be more appropriate now to discard this hypocritical charade and declare AIR and DD to be wings of the government, once again. Everyone would surely be happier.