

WHY PRASAR BHARATI CAN NOT BE AUTONOMOUS

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(English Version)

While episodic outbursts when the public broadcaster of India commits some sin of omission or commission are quite natural, they usually peter away after some self righteous indignation. Such transient interest can hardly achieve anything beyond a few column centimetres, as we need to look at what heavy chains bind Prasar Bharati before calling it a poodle. In 1990, VP Singh's government passed a landmark Act to delink the two state monopolies, All India Radio and Doordarshan, from the government that earlier Congress regimes had used to the hilt. A new autonomous corporate holding, namely Prasar Bharati, was desired, but the bureaucrats of the Information & Broadcasting Ministry ensured, through two sections, no 32 and 33, that effective control remained with them. In any case, the Act was put into cold storage throughout Narasimha Rao's tenure and it was only on the Supreme Court's order that it was taken out in 1997, dusted and operationalised. After bundling off the first CEO who took 'autonomy' too seriously within a few months, the Ministry ensured for several years, that its own Additional Secretaries doubled up as CEOs of Prasar Bharati. Though some were outstanding, they were vulnerable and the ministry clamped 'dominion' status through total funding control.

Some 48,000 employees recruited by the ministry in the good old soviet days, were unceremoniously passed on to Prasar Bharati to weigh it down for ever with unmanageable numbers and hard-wired sarkari mindsets. Under law, their pay has necessarily to be borne by government but it invariably makes such a hue and cry about Prasar Bharati bleeding it. As every employee's promotion in this vast army was dependent on the ministry's assistants, section officers and upwards, this breed revelled in its negative powers, but unprecedented stagnation followed. Tens of thousands of employees retired without a single promotion as the ministry was 'overburdened' yet when the Prasar Bharati board (one must compliment the present one and the previous one) demanded justice and autonomy, they were literally laughed away. There were, and still are, several excellent professionals in DD and AIR, but governmental systems demoralise and punish initiative. Almost every minister has chuckled and enjoyed these hegemonic powers as secretaries could never exercise these without acquiescence or encouragement.

Some 10-12 years ago, a couple of ministers pumped money into DD for making its own serials, replacing the earlier successful model of Ramayan, Mahabharata and Buniyad, and the result was pathetic. All they did was to enrich the private producers and damage DD's TRP beyond repair but, despite best efforts, that model has not been replaced even now. Over the decades, countless radio and TV stations were set up and even when it was known that less than 2% of India watches terrestrial transmission through rooftop rod-antennas, not a single of the 1400 plus towers could be shut down. These, and short wave radio transmitters, guzzle power, money and bind down a lot of manpower. So do the 45 tv studios whose hundred odd staff produced just half an hour's programme per day. But then, who bells the cat that appoints everyone, including the Board members? Section 17 transferred all assets and properties from the ministry to Prasar Bharati, but in 20 years, the rules of transfer could not be made.

Every time the organisation hires 'updated professionals' from the open market to try to make old elephants run a bit like race horses, 'insiders' are egged on to complain and enquiries instituted. Parliamentary committee recommendations enjoining autonomy and the Pitroda Committee report are all stuffed into lockers, while control is exercised daily through adroit divide and rule at the top. Frankly, until the organisation is forcefully e-coupled from the mighty sloth, and totally detoxified, there is no option but to keep singing the HMV anthem.