

A cosmetic corporatisation will do nothing to improve Doordarshan or AIR

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According to recent news items, Prasar Bharati may either be given a fresh “corporate status”, or it may be headed for the chopping board.



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The former would actually degrade a battered body even further, since a PSU or a sarkari corporation, which is often summoned to bestow favours 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 Swat?” This amusing creature has successfully bedevilled any clear understanding of its role and functioning.

Read: [We have a long way to go to revive Doordarshan](#)

On the whole, it may not be a bad idea to corporatise 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, former prime minister VP Singh had passed the Prasar Bharati Act promising to liberate and modernise orthodox AIR and DD, little realising that the Act had been surgically injected with a 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 makeover delete-abort them?

When Indian viewers began deserting a prosaic DD for more colourful 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 patronising sub-standard programmes. If someone is serious about DD, it has to decide once for all whether it 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 1,400 analogue TV towers because of negligible viewership?

Read: [Govt panel wants public broadcasters DD, AIR be made corporate](#)

Not only would it save several hundreds of crores, 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 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 smartphones, 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 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.”

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Views expressed are personal