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‘If I knew there’s been no promotion for 30 years, no equipment for 20 years, I would not have taken up this job’

In this Idea Exchange moderated by Senior Editor Archna Shukla, Sircar notes that he was brought in to clean up the body.

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Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar

Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar feels he would have failed in his duties had he not talked about the lack of autonomy following the row over DD’s [Narendra Modi](#) interview. In this Idea Exchange moderated by Senior Editor Archna Shukla, Sircar notes that he was brought in to clean up the body

Archna Shukla: Jawhar Sircar is the first Prasar Bharati CEO to take on the government. Of course, autonomy is something that everybody has been talking about for the longest time, but nobody spoke about it so openly from within the Prasar Bharati.

It’s strange and painful that I had to come out in the public, but I didn’t ask for it. It is not about taking on the government. I have worked with the government for 37 years, and there is a misunderstanding that I am taking on the minister. As civil servants, we are trained not to do so, you don’t forget 37 years in a few days. There is a clause somewhere that is preventing further autonomy and professionalisation. I am not pro X or pro Y; I am pro autonomy. This job is an Act of Parliament that says that I have a duty to perform. If I go back on that for the sake of expediency or for being a

gentleman, I would be failing in my duties. It's the first time in the last 20 years that the issue of Prasar Bharati's autonomy has been raised in the public domain. We had resolved in the PB Board that the one glaring anomaly in our functioning is that news is given to us by the Act. But the operation part, that is news control, rests with the Government of India. They appoint, disappoint, transfer, post and we learn it from the newspapers that somebody has been posted there. I have no say. I have tried desperately to have a say, to know who has news sense, who has a flair for electronic media, who would be better in a regulatory job like Registrar of Newspapers, who would be better in films. My humble submission to the government is that AIR and DD require a specialisation that is different from other regulatory jobs. It is our duty to voice the government's achievements, but a public broadcaster is expected to have a clinical, balanced approach too. All we said is that these boys are good, allow them to join us. We have 500-plus offices, we can circulate them, so there is no question of them rotting in one place or developing vested interests. Allow us the freedom to turn them around, the chance to make them first-rate professionals. I'll send them out, send them in, I'll tell them to pick up nuances rather than go into sarkari mode. You should know who is your master of transfer, posting, etc. I have never said that they have interfered. I have said that there is a shadow — the fact that you might have to go back there, the fact that ultimately someone who controls your destiny may not look upon it well is good enough to cast a shadow, that's all. I didn't ask for a debate on this.

Archna Shukla: Can you give us an inside view of how the Narendra Modi interview was 'procured'? Was the unedited part sent to someone in the government?

There are 21 major Doordarshan channels and 35 major Akashvani stations. What happened was like this. At 3.30-4 pm on a Sunday, there was an outburst on social media, which was conveyed to me by my friends. I rang up the DG, News. Frankly, that was the first time that I heard the interview was done. I asked him, 'What's the problem?' He said, 'Thoda maamla hai. Bird sounds and others have come in, we need to do editing'. He's a gentleman. I believed him. He said, 'I would like to balance it out tomorrow'.

Archna Shukla: Who is 'he'?

Mr (S M) Khan. He said, 'I would like to balance it out'. I said, 'If you have it in your hand, don't delay it. You are a newsman. Don't hold a hot property like that in your hand'. He said, 'Aaj hi karenge'. It's only the day after that the news came out saying it was edited. So we asked him again... He gave a statement saying it's a collective decision. We can order an inquiry, we may do it, but if X is found guilty or Y is found failing, I think it's just the naivete of not understanding. There are two good boys with me, suppose I find someone guilty, can I take action? That's the low point. If I can't take action, do you do something where you have to end up eating humble pie? We have sought legal opinion.

Raj Kamal Jha: When you say if somebody is guilty, guilty of what? If you look at the interview and what was not shown, somebody can turn around and say it's my judgment, so why guilty?

No. I have used the word 'if'. I won't take a judgmental call on a newsman. I know where my limitations are. Supposing there is an inquiry and they say it's a bad call and maybe a reprimand would do, who can do the reprimand? If the CEO can't do it, where's discipline? The Act was passed in 1990. There are two sections — 31 and 32 — that stand out like sore thumbs. I am almost convinced that if we go back to the files of 1990, we will find that these were inserted later. These say that rule-making powers, promotion powers, serving powers, equipment powers are with the government. I feel it was not a great act of magnanimity though it was the mission of I K Gujral to do it... In 20 years, there has been no recruitment, no promotions. You ask a guy to work, he looks at you, spits on the floor, and says, 'What do you want me to work for? I joined as a programme executive and I am retiring next month as a programme executive'. This is complete demoralisation. You can't function with a force of 32,000. These are the pains of non-autonomy. Do you know there's no term called radio jockey? Thirty years ago, the term didn't exist, so we call them casuals. There is no Panel Control Room (PCR), no Camera Control Room (CCR), these terms didn't exist, so they do not exist even now. I can't explain to babus at the lower level that these are required. Give me recruiting powers, I will stick my neck out.

Coomi Kapoor: What you are saying is that the Prasar Bharati CEO is a figurehead?

Prasar Bharati can operate on a day-to-day basis, but should not get overtly ambitious about things like promotions.

Coomi Kapoor: You have no control over your staff?

No, I have control over my staff, minus promotions, recruitment and service conditions.

Shailaja Bajpai: How did Modi obtain the full video of the DD interview? He was the first one to release the part with Priyanka.

Till date, I have not found out whether there was a fourth camera. I was told in the report that there were three camera operators, they were cleaning up the external sounds. It appears there may have been a fourth camera, and it's only when the full thing comes out that we will know. The point is that of judgment call — an editor takes a call, another group of senior editors makes a judgment.

D K Singh: With so many private channels, why should taxpayers pay for a public broadcaster?

It's open to the taxpayer to take a call. If the wider issue is whether we need a public broadcaster, I would love to join the debate. There is need for a public broadcaster on another count. In Manipur, everyday we telecast in Manipuri, six major dialects and 23 minor dialects. That accounts for 30 lakh people, 30 broadcasts. In Manipur, that's almost the only service available. In Kargil, there is only one person. There is just one person in Ziro, Arunachal Pradesh. We have a role in uneconomic routes. I would not go to illogical lengths to defend it, but look around the world, no one has given up public broadcasting. But it's a thing that should be open to debate.

D K Singh: You talked about a discussion on balancing things out over Modi's interview. Were you suggesting that you sought [Rahul Gandhi's](#) interview and you didn't get it?

I didn't, the news channel boys did. A public broadcaster needs to balance out to the extent possible.

Shubhajit Roy: How many times do you get a call from a minister or bureaucrat to play down news?

This kind of request comes from everyone — 'I am having a medical council meeting, I'm having an XYZ thing, would you like to have a look?' I say, sure. I have not got (requests myself), and in the past six months, I don't think I have had the chance to meet the minister.

Shailaja Bajpai: These requests don't come to you, but presumably, they come to Mr Khan. Have they, at any stage, said there's too much pressure from the government or the PMO?

Mr Khan speaks in monosyllables. I'm old enough to sense that things could be wrong. So there's a set of correspondence that has gone to the board where I have expressed my dismay that these things were going on. I have sent it to the ministry, saying would you like to keep a watch on A or B, because I'm not going to take it (this news). Nobody refuted. I used silence as a stopper.

Rohit Alok*: Would you regard the deleted portion of the Modi interview as politically insignificant?

I didn't take a call, but it may have been more appropriate to have the whole thing out, since you knew somebody else had a copy.

Coomi Kapoor: I&B Minister Manish Tewari's point was that the government does the payments, so it should have a say.

Salaries are paid from the Consolidated Fund of India and we are all custodians, in some form or the other. It is the taxpayers' money, so nobody owns it. Many countries draw their sustenance from either a licence fee or a funding that comes straight. The other model is to have a technologist committee, have an audit committee with CAG's man on top of you. This is the transparent model that we have suggested. Apart from this, put us back with UPSC, put us back with SSC for junior staff. Given a choice, I would no longer go in for permanent recruitment. The entire media has contractual appointments.

Y P Rajesh: What is the way out of this logjam on autonomy?

Discourse. The Pitroda committee says the government and the people of India have invested in such huge infrastructure. Hindustan Lever set up FM channels in Bihar and went gaga over it. FM channels have been inaugurated by us over the last two years. Let X or Y run it, provided there's nothing contrary to the accepted principles. There are around 1,400 terrestrial towers, you have something called white spaces from which you can access broadband. There is digital terrestrial light mode, one of the superior streaming instruments. To my horror, I found that we have only 39 terrestrial antenna and it would take us 30 years to have complete digital terrestrial. The government has limitation of funds. Don't sell the family silver, but put it on an escrow account so that you can keep drawing.

Y P Rajesh: Do you think things can change after the new government takes over?

The interesting spin-off of this painful debate has been that many people have talked of a Prasar Bharati revamp. With due deference to the democratic process, whatever comes up, there's a discourse and that's all.

Raj Kamal Jha: Have you ever had a conversation like this one with your minister?

Twice, I had the good fortune of meeting him. Then I met him in the public fora.

Raj Kamal Jha: What was his feedback?

He appeared to be open. He is ill, and unavailable.

D K Singh: What happened to DD's international project?

DD International is a limping channel. We get Rs 3-4 crore against a minimum of Rs 2,000 crore. I wanted a honeycomb model. Which means if Zee has penetrated some countries, let's piggyback on Zee instead of trying to do it ourselves. If NDTV has made a pitch somewhere, let's piggyback. After all, NDTV and others came piggybacking on us.

Kaunain Sheriff*: What's happened to the modern equipment procured during the CWG?

It's very rarely used.

Shubhajit Roy: You worked with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as the culture secretary when he held the portfolio. What was your impression of his decisiveness in the ministry? As Prasar Bharati CEO battling autonomy issues, have you ever written to the PM, with whom you share an equation, or the President?

I don't know whether I share equations. I worked with them at a junior level. Culture accounts for little bits of chicken feed, small amounts. I'd like to think that he is tolerant. I have not reported to him on these, because I don't blame the minister for everything. Micro management is not the function of a government.

D K SINGH: There's an impression that your stint as cultural secretary got you close to the Gandhi family and was instrumental in your appointment as the Prasar Bharati CEO.

Prasar Bharti CEO is selected through a process. I was told by the only person I interacted with — Ms Ambika Soni — in one interview that they wanted somebody to clean up the place.

Raj Kamal Jha: Much of what you are facing now, did you know about it when you took up the job?

If I knew half of it, I wouldn't have taken up the job. If I knew that there's been no promotion for 25-30 years, no equipment for 20 years, I would not have taken up this job.

Archna Shukla: Do you think the government is callous? Didn't your predecessors care at all? Is it a systemic failure or is it about individuals?

For 17-18 years, this has been remote-controlled by the I&B Ministry in the form of additional secretaries. I have two predecessors, one I have never met and the other, whom I have met, is Mr B S Lalli. I will not make any public judgment about them. I have two years and a few months left. You

require quite some time to make a breakthrough, provided the questions that you raised are answered — Do you need a public broadcaster in this form? Do you need a public broadcaster only for remote areas? Do you need a broadcaster to contend with external broadcasts? Do you need a broadcaster who becomes a carriage provider rather than a content provider? Do you need a broadcaster who sells content off to the last mile?

D K Singh: Do you get bothered by paid news?

No. I wish we could have got some (laughs).

Shailaja Bajpai: Do you believe there will ever be a political will to give autonomy?

I have seen the swing turn around. If there's a will, everything is possible.

Shobhana Subramanian: Have you at any point seen any iota of will?

I saw some amount of it in Ms Soni. Mr Jaipal Reddy was also like that.

Shobhana Subramanian: You have never found it in Mr Tewari?

He's been ill. I found him one of the sharpest ministers. If only we had a one-to-one, without these fellows coming up, maybe we could have carried on. It was our collective misfortune.