

TELEVISION

Prasar Bharati's monopolistic-era mind-set has to change: CEO Jawhar Sircar

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Jawhar Sircar, the 60-something chief executive of India's public broadcaster Prasar Bharati, is bubbling with ideas and energy ---- in sharp contrast to the organisation's headquarters that gives a casual visitor a sense of life in slo-mo.

Prasar Bharati is the parent organisation of 57-year-old Doordarshan and 86-year-old All India Radio, the country's public broadcasters who claim to cover almost the whole of this vast country stretching from Kashmir to Kanyakumari --- and a little beyond to a few islands in the Indian Ocean.

Critics say age and a semi-lethargic attitude of the over 40,000-strong workforce impede both the organisations from being nimble footed in an age when technology has vastly changed the speed and mode of delivery

of video and voice. Add to these government controls (via annual funding from taxpayers' money to bridge the gap between revenues and expenditure) and Prasar Bharati continues to function as a moribund government organisation despite an autonomous status.

The chief executive of Prasar Bharati, who joined the organisation in 2012 after serving in the government for over 30 years, is not shy to admit that some fundamental problems stop it from being 'India's BBC' or 'India's NHK'. He goes a step ahead to say (with tongue firmly in cheek) that functionaries of Prasar Bharati "are living in a time warp" --- in a world of their own that could be a zillion years behind reality.

Even if you give full marks to the tech and social media-savvy Sircar for being candid, it cannot be wished away that both DD and AIR will continue to be an extension of the government's PR division unless there's a radical change in the thought process of India's ruling class and policy-makers.

Sitting in his office, in New Delhi's PTI Building, amidst files and colleagues, many of them keep trooping in and out for advise and suggestions, the multi-tasking Sircar, is completely at ease conversing with Indiantelevision.com's consulting editors B B Nagpal and Anjan Mitra on a wide range of subjects. Edited excerpts from the interview:

Q: What could be the five guiding principles that you have etched out for Prasar Bharati's possible reform?

JS: Having joined the organisation in 2012, I don't have much time left now, but I am still trying to (a) bring about transparency (b) prioritise our objectives as a public broadcaster (c) get the organisation adjusted to competition (d) get the organisation to look at non-terrestrial and satellite-based transmission and (e) strengthen the FreeDish platform.

Q: Do you think all of these could be achieved; especially as majority of Prasar Bharati workforce seems to still live in a pre-Independence era?

JS: Sadly, the majority mindset is a big hurdle in moving forward in an era where technology is changing fast and competition (from private sector) reacts faster to changing situations and ground realities. Many of my colleagues still believe they are in a monopoly era when DD and AIR were the only source of entertainment and news for Indians. Such a mentality

needs to change if we are to be in the race as a viable and relevant organisation.

Moreover, I and the board of Prasar Bharati, have been functioning with inadequate human resources at senior levels too. There had been no Member-Finance for a long time and regular Director-Generals for DD and AIR are yet to be put in place.

However, I also believe that with some change in mindset and additional revenue, which can accrue from infrastructure sharing with private sector players and better use of under-utilised existing infrastructure, Prasar Bharati can be more relevant as an organisation and to the Indian public.

Q: Can you give an example of monopolistic era mindset that, probably, tries to be immune to technological advances?

JS: (Smiles) During the first few years of my tenure nobody here understood what OTT (over the top) stood for and how it's relevant to our services. Another example is that of adoption of MPEG-4 broadcast technology. It had been cleared one and a half years back, but procedural delays hampered quick adoption.

Q: Now that we are talking about new technologies, what would your reaction be if digital terrestrial TV (DTT) is thrown open to private sector players by the government?

JS: Prasar Bharati approved DTT over a year back. We were told to come up with a plan but no base paper could be prepared as there was some resistance internally from certain quarters. And, Prasar Bharati is not afraid of private players' entry into DTT... we are quite open to the idea. Rather we'd support any such move if the government some time allows private players in DTT.

Q: What can Prasar Bharati gain by supporting private players' entry in an arena that had been a monopoly of the pubcaster?

JS: Changing with the times makes you relevant. Why should DTT be Prasar Bharati's monopoly? By allowing others, Prasar Bharati can earn additional revenue as we can lease out our infrastructure to private players who, otherwise, would have to make huge investments in setting up infrastructure. Let a private sector (content) aggregator come forward with a business plan. DD, anyway, is investing on DTT infrastructure.

Q: You earlier talked of bringing about transparency in Prasar Bharati. In what way do you feel the proposed e-auction system will be an improvement on the systems adopted until now to obtain content?

JS: The proposed e-auction would be a completely transparent method and a step towards overall transparency in the organisation to acquire content for DD. It will also put the onus on the successful bidder to ensure good content.

Q: But, before the current SFC system of self-financed commissioned programmes, DD had a system of sponsored programmes whereby good programmes were especially produced for DD. How is e-auction going to be an improvement over the sponsorship scheme?

JS: That kind of system had led to monopolization... with a few big names dominating the entire prime time of the public broadcaster. Ultimately, the same big names from Bollywood made serials for Doordarshan and left little scope for fresh talent.

In fact, I had initially faced internal resistance to the plan for e-auction of prime time slots too, and it took serious convincing on my part for the idea to sink in with others. DD has already announced that this is being done on an experimental basis and may be extended to its other channels if the scheme is accepted.

I am confident that audience loyalty, national sentiment, and the vast reach of Doordarshan would help to make the scheme a success.

Q: You referred to giving a push to FreeDish, which is the country's only free-to-air KU-band service. What are the plans and what would be the present subscriber base of FreeDish?

JS: As the antennas are available in the market (at a nominal one-time price ranging between Rs 3,000-4,000) and no monthly subscription is paid, it is difficult to know how many television households have FreeDish. This audit will become easier when we complete the process of encryption of FreeDish while keeping it free to air.

Exact figures may be difficult in our case as even the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India admits there is a gap between the number of active and registered subscribers of private DTH operators. But it is understood (from

feedback from market and sale of antennas) that there are around 15 million households hooked to FreeDish.

In recent times, FreeDish has got some very good response from private TV channels...many of them, including the big names, want to hop onto FreeDish's platform for wider reach of their products. We have plans to increase the number of FTA television channels on the platform so a consumer gets more choice.

Q: There were plans to upgrade FreeDish to MPEG 4 to increase its capacity to carry more signals. But there has been no report on the progress in this regard.

JS: It is not possible to implement MPEG 4 and the new Indian Conditional Access System (iCAS) together at the same time. But the commitment of FreeDish is to reach the rural areas and also cover all the areas not reached so far by television.

Q: After initial protests by Prasar Bharati, Broadcast Audience Research Council had begun to give rural data separately. Are you satisfied with the audience measurement system?

JS: We at Prasar Bharati have had some issues with BARC, which we would prefer to raise directly with the organisation. But our understanding is that DD covers a large part of India via its terrestrial and satellite services.

Q: Why is it that Prasar Bharati cannot function like BBC or other public service broadcasters in the world?

JS: The move to greater professionalism is eventually bound to happen, but some hurdles have to be crossed including those relating to budgets.

Public funding on the public broadcaster in India is just Rs 2,400 crore as compared to Rs 51,653 crore in Germany, Rs 39,800 crore in the United Kingdom, Rs 34,097 crore in Japan. The amount spent on Prasar Bharati was even lower than those spent on pubcasters in Canada, Australia, and Korea.

The per capita funding in India on the pubcaster is only Rs 19 as compared to UK and Germany where it is approximately Rs 6,000 to Rs 7,000. Even Malaysia has a per capita funding of Rs 350.

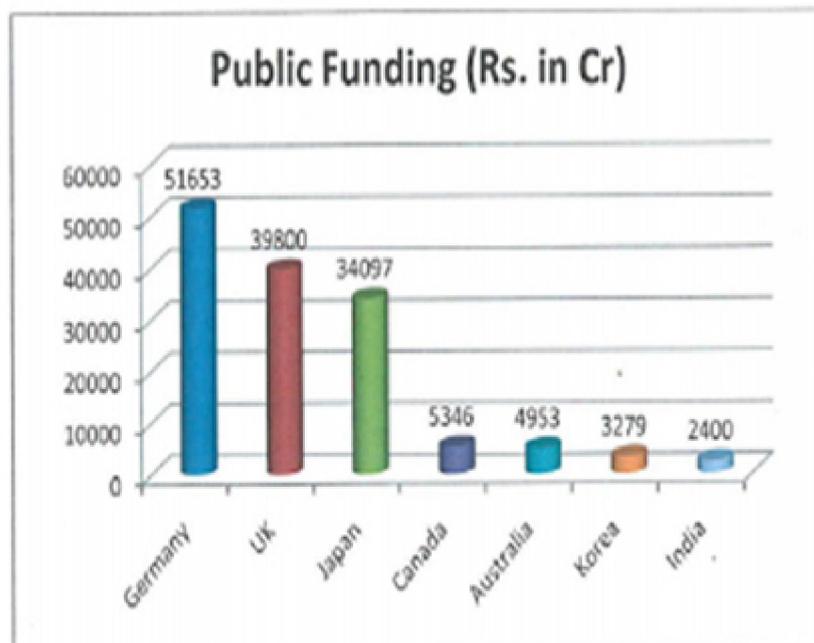
PUBLIC BROADCASTERS & TYPE OF FUNDING

(Rs in Cr)

Country	Broadcaster	Year	Total Earnings	Total Expenses	Public Funding	% of Public Funding	Per Capita Public Funding (Rs/Yr)
Germany	ARD/ZDF	2014	53186	51862	51653	97	6599
UK	BBC	2014	48050	49140	39800	83	6175
Japan	NHK	2014	35248	34928	34097	97	3510
Canada	CBC	2014	9108	9181	5346	59	1755
Korea	KBS	2014	8244	6754	3279	40	1920
Australia	ABC	2014	5698	5772	4953	87	2800
India	PB	2014	3963	4019	2426	63	19
United States	PBS	2014	4237	3363	1695	40	211
Russia	RTTV	2014	0	1211	1211	100	104
Malaysia	RTM	2013	1040	932	1021.5	98.2	350

Per Capita Public Funding:

- UK & Germany: Rs.6000 to Rs.7000.
- Japan, Canada & Australia : Rs.1700 to Rs.2800
- Even Malaysia spends Rs.350
- But India spends Rs.19 only



Q: What are the constraints on acquiring good content for Doordarshan?

JS: The expenditure on content in India is a mere six per cent as compared to 75 per cent by NHK in Japan and 71 per cent by the BBC.

The Indian Government gives 62 per cent as compared to 100 per cent in Russia, 98.2 per cent in Malaysia, 97 per cent in Germany, and 83 per cent in the UK. So, this should answer your question.