

Regional radio channels on FM soon: Prasar Bharati CEO (Interview)

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You will soon be able to catch your favourite regional radio programmes on FM radio with maximising of the existing technology and junking of the "mindless" and "silly" plan of introducing digital radio, says Prasar Bharati chief Jawhar Sircar.

Sircar, the CEO of India's public broadcaster that runs All India Radio and Doordarshan, said plans are afoot to place FM towers parallel to MW towers to achieve "simulcast" or simultaneously broadcast programmes which are run on Medium Wave on the Frequency Modulation towers.

"Simulcast is the new technology. If I put in an FM tower parallel to an MW tower, we can have simultaneously casting," Sircar told IANS in an interview.

"With this, you will be able to hear programmes from primary channels, say Kolkata 'A' or 'B' on FM," said the top bureaucrat, known to have had run-ins with the information and broadcasting ministry over the running of the autonomous public service broadcaster.

Funds for this venture will come from leasing out the 50-odd centres where SW or Short Wave receiving transmitters stand, and also "closing down DRM" or digital radio mondiale and "putting the money in FM", he said.

SW has no takers any more and the 50 transmitters or receiving centres are standing on prime land located in 50 major towns across India, which could be leased out to government departments. It will earn "enough money to fund the entire exercise", the top official said.

On digital radio, Sircar said the government has already spent a lot of money on digital radio needlessly.

"A lot of money has been pushed into DRM, and we have around 100 DRM transmitters. But the DRM radio receivers cost Rs.5,000, so who will buy them? So, all the silly targets being made within Prasar Bharati or even in the ministry would require a re-examination before we push any target," he said.

"There are markets and there are issues in which you can't go in for long term views. The long term view was (to go in for) DRM. I think it is silly."

The decision to go in for digital radio was taken six-eight years ago.

"But nobody studied to see (the cost of receivers). Then it was Rs.10,000 and now it is Rs.5,000. No Indian can afford it," he said, adding that the move for digital radio was akin to "mindlessly" aping World Space radio, a premium satellite radio network that went defunct in 2009.

"World Space radio with less (cost of receivers) could not survive... why put mindless pressure?"

"We will close down DRM, and put that money into FM," he said.

The money, around Rs.20 crore for each DRM phase, could be used to purchase the equipment for simulcasting of FM and MW at around Rs.80 lakh per tower.

"If I can save Rs.20 crore, I can put 20 FM systems," the CEO said.

Sircar said reworking of priorities is a daily business in the broadcasting sector.

Elaborating his point, he said that in the 12th Plan (2012-17), the priority is DRM, which is on MW "at a time when MW listenership is going down".

Sircar said he sees a lot of promise in FM, which is easily caught on mobile phones, while for MW, the listener needs a transistor to catch the signals.

"It is like carrying a tiffin box around all the time."

With the mobile phone revolution in India, of the 900 million mobile sets registered, around 400 million are active sets for FM, he said.

In comparison, for MW, there are only 40 million listeners.

The only handicap with FM, which has clearer stereo quality sound, is that it needs a tower every 35 km to 75 km for transmission. So new FM towers need to be built at every 75th km, he said.

(Ranjana Narayan can be contacted at ranjana.n@ians.in)