

‘We have complete monopoly in rural markets’

Prasar Bharati chief executive officer Jawhar Sircar talks about its revival plan and how it proposes to generate revenue

Shuchi Bansal



Sircar says around 2.5 crore viewers are completely loyal to Doordarshan. Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

New Delhi: Public service broadcaster **Prasar Bharati**'s debt —`12,071.33 crore—was written off by the government recently. Jawhar Sircar, who's spent eight months as CEO of Prasar Bharati, comprising **Doordarshan** and **All India Radio (AIR)**, that was set up as an autonomous body in 1997, said in an interview that this would help the organization turn itself around. Edited excerpts:

What does the debt write-off mean for Prasar Bharati?

As long as you have debt on your head on which interest is ticking—it does not matter whether you are able to pay it or not—it remains a burden. At any point of time if anybody wants to scuttle something, they can say 'you have unpaid debts of so many thousand crore'. You can't really come out and win public confidence when you have a lot of debt piling.

How do you plan to meet your operational expenses?

(Expenditure on salaries will be borne by the government)

Once you declared Prasar Bharati to be a separate organization (with 341 *kendras*—67 television and the rest radio stations), or when you are setting up transmitters and satellites and have people employed for public service broadcasting, then someone has to pay for it. What we are following is a mixed model. People outside think that we are completely subsidized by the government, therefore we are not cost-conscious. That is not true. For instance, in the 11th Five-Year Plan (2007-12), we earned `6,000 crore in a difficult time (at the time top Prasar Bharti executives were facing allegations of financial malpractices; CEO **B.S. Lalli** had to be removed). The government gave us another `6,000 crore during this period. So the ratio was 1:1 during the 11th Plan ending March 2012.

We got additional `1,600 crore from the government for changing transmitters that were 40 years old, cameras which did not move and lights that had got lost. If we had tried really hard, this `1,600 crore could have been split 50:50 too. We could have generated `800 crore.

Now our earnings will go into operational expenses such as spectrum and other charges, local taxes, vehicles, content and advertisement. Our own publicity budget has disappeared.

What is your revenue target?

For this Plan period, our target should be `9,000-10,000 crore or `2,000 crore a year. We have explained it to our officers. We should make `1,800 crore this year. There are welcome signs. For instance, during the Athens Olympics (2004), we made `5 crore, which went up marginally to `5.5 crore for Beijing Games (2008). For the London Olympics this year, we earned `16.9 crore.

Also, under the new strategy of simulcasting where someone else produces a programme and we also telecast, we earn a lot. For instance, *Coke Studio* (an **MTV** show simulcast on DD) makes `25 lakh per episode for us. On *Satyamev Jayate*, we made `14 crore.

How will you reach the `2,000 crore a year target?

We are talking of a complete revamp of the marketing channel. It consists of two additional directors general (DGs) and their teams in Mumbai, where the companies are located. Currently, roughly half the revenue comes from the marketing wing and the other half from government commercial wing. There are a lot of doables on these two counts.

The recent report by **Crisil** and NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) shows that the highest consumption is taking place in the rural areas. Not even our worst rivals can doubt we have complete monopoly in that market, especially in villages with scattered houses. Even in the most difficult places, we have terrestrial transmission.

Then there is DD Direct Plus, the direct-to-home (DTH) television of Prasar Bharati. With a set-top box of `900, you watch at least 55 channels free for a lifetime. You don't see DD Direct dishes because when we introduced these boxes, the only dishes available were already branded by the private DTH operators. The dish that you see in rural homes may carry the name of a private brand, but if you go

inside they will have a DD Direct box. There are roughly one crore DD Direct DTH homes. There would be another at least 1.5 crore terrestrial-only DD homes. So 2.5 crore viewers are completely loyal to us. All the private operators also carry DD.

Marketing has to relate to reports that come out periodically that rural India spending is higher than urban India. We are rural India. That nexus has to be drawn.

Today AIR and DD News are lumped together with DD main when they are sold. These have to be sold separately. For that, repositioning and freshening up of DD News is happening. On our DTH platform, we plan to begin default advertisements. All the private operators have these when you switch on their systems. So, unlike them, I cannot charge the customer, but I can charge the company.

We can also get a bigger slice of advertising from government and public sector undertakings. There is a revenue consciousness that is coming in.

Any plan to tap the archives?

There is pilfering of archives, which is being checked. They are being digitized. We should be able to charge for the use of archival material. We could market the archives online. For instance, we could put some up on **YouTube** and say, for the rest, come to us. This is 'Backwardistan'. This is because no fresh recruitment has taken place in the last 15-16 years.

But with 50,000 people, you don't need any more.

No. The 50,000 has come down to 34,000. Many people will be retiring in two to three years. For every three people, we will replace one. That is a way of downsizing.

What about voluntary retirement schemes?

That is not required. Terrestrial transmission is a labour intensive industry.

But how do you boost employee morale?

It is looking up. We went through the first-ever zonal co-ordination meetings in history of Doodarshan and AIR.

We took G9, that is the group of nine people (all the DGs, members, finance and personnel, and the CEO) who run Prasar Bharati, for these meetings. These people have never been on the same page. Or let me say that they have been working on different pages. So we got them on one team and went down to the station level for interactive sessions.

Is Prasar Bharati a public service broadcaster or a commercial venture?

For revenue, we would have to be public taste-oriented. Without crossing the *Lakshman Rekha* on decency, family values and other sensitivities on caste, language groups, community and gender. We have a much smaller playing field. We have these concerns to keep uppermost in our minds. I am not saying others don't, but they can show more glitzy shows, which may not be considered family shows.

In news, our slogan is: if you want news, watch DD News, if you want views, you can go to other channels. Our news anchors are not screaming at the top of our voices 'Why aren't you doing this?' or 'The nation wants to know... I embody the nation.' We don't have all those tensions. We give balanced news, which may be a little tepid at times.

I have to earn 50% of our keep. So, while I may not cross the *Lakshman Rekha*, we will have to have (a) little operational freedom.