



## A revival story. Coming to a TV set near you

If you think Doordarshan is dead, think again. **Prakhar Jain** reports on how the public broadcaster is gearing up to play with the big boys



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LIFE HAS come full circle for [Doordarshan](#)(DD). Gone are the days when upstarts used to poach and bribe DD employees to stay afloat. Now, DD is hiring top minds from private channels. And a major reshuffle is in the works, which could turn the public broadcaster's fortunes around.

As part of the rebranding exercise, DD National has launched an aggressive [adcampaign](#) to lure urban viewers. Its arsenal has both new and old programmes such as the classic *Byomkesh Bakshi* (a fictional detective serial), *Gora* (an adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's novel) and *Bharat ki Shaan* (a music reality television show).

DD News' primetime show *News Night* also got a new look on Republic Day. Gone were the stale backdrop, staid anchors and the regular DD logo. They were replaced by a widescreen TV, suave journalists and a brand-new logo. Debates were held with panelists via satellite link — a rarity for DD.



All this has been possible because of the new team brought in on a contract basis by Prasar Bharati, the umbrella body under which DD and All [India](#) Radio works. It's a temporary arrangement until its recruitment process takes off this month to hire more than 1,100 people directly out of the 14,000

required. This would be a first after 16 years as most of the current 34,000 employees are still those who were sent on deputation by the Centre. The old guard had often toed the government line and failed to keep pace with changing times. "Earlier, guests attending a panel discussion on DD News

had to physically visit the studios. Our OB vans were not being utilised at all,” says Prasar Bharati CEO Jawahar Sircar, an IAS officer who joined the broadcaster in February 2011 after serving as a secretary in the culture ministry.



Now, a team of 10 senior professionals have been brought in to revitalise DD News. Graphic design experts well-versed in the latest software have also been roped in to give the channel a new look. DD’s Twitter handle has become active and live streaming of DD News is also happening.

Sircar has been pushing for greater autonomy and there’s some hope on that count. A committee headed by Sam Pitroda, adviser to the PM on public information infrastructure, is all set to look into Prasar Bharati’s relationship with the government.

“There is an argument which says that full financial autonomy should be given and Prasar Bharati made answerable to Parliament through a committee,” says Information and Broadcasting Minister Manish Tewari. “There is another argument that when Prasar Bharati’s autonomy was conceived, there was only one broadcaster. Now there are more than 850 broadcasters. So, would it not be prudent of the government, which spends thousands of crores on development projects, to have a strategic communication arm, in order to disseminate information to the people?”

This dilemma is best understood in the context of Prasar Bharati surviving on government aid. Over the years, its dependence had increased to such an extent that it had accumulated liabilities close to Rs 13,000 crore. This forced the government to step in last year and rescue the broadcaster by waiving the whole sum. DD spends approximately Rs 1,000 crore to run 35 channels. In turn, it is able to earn only close to 75 percent of its expenditure.

Former DD director SY Quraishi says the losses piled up because DD was unable to tap into the advertisement market. "There was no concept of Television Rating Point (TRP) evaluation when I joined. Market share had slipped to 1.5 percent, but no one was losing a moment's sleep on that. The whole system was indifferent," he says.

Neglecting TRP ratings cost DD a fortune and forced it to depend on government dole. This was despite the fact that DD was the most watched channel in 2002 because less than 50 percent of households with a TV had a cable connection. Though the number of TV sets has now crossed the 15 crore mark, 3 crore TV sets are still outside the cable and DTH network. No one in DD complained about missing out on the ratings game. Therefore, the broadcaster's ratings have remained in the 1-1.5 percent bracket all these years.

So, when the government decided to resuscitate Prasar Bharati late last year, it did so with a rider. A clear demarcation was made saying that it will pay only for the modernisation plan and the salaries of the employees hired before 2007. The rest would have to be managed by the broadcaster. In a way, this gave Prasar Bharati a fair chance to explore ways to raise resources and also wield its autonomy.

Sircar is optimistic. In the past five years, the broadcaster's salary and operational expenses were divided equally with the government and there is no reason why DD can't make a breakthrough.

ALTHOUGH PRASAR Bharati is an autonomous body, it has never enjoyed that status. Red tapism is so entrenched that it used to take 10 months to change a studio backdrop. "When a government office takes a decision, we don't go by aesthetics. We have to remember that the CBI, the CVC, Parliament and the media are all after us," says Quraishi.

DD Director Tripurari Sharan agrees with Quraishi and explains why. On an average, DD receives 100 applications for making one serial. This leads to chaos as assessing these applications in a limited time frame becomes an uphill task. "The system must be geared to look at those stories as rigorously as possible to be able to get the best out of it. It isn't impossible, but ill-affordable for a public broadcaster," says Sharan. "The public procurement process works well only for hardware. In software procurement, it might not be the most effective process."

Meanwhile, DD's recent attention towards its Urdu channel is interesting. Earlier, DD Urdu was guilty of recycling old programmes because there were procedural defects in the proposals for new shows. However, that problem has been fixed and 170 new programmes are in the pipeline.

The concept of 'narrowcasting' is also being tried to raise money. It means city-specific content along with local ads will be beamed from the regional stations at hours that hardly bring any revenue. All that is needed is a technical tweak to play the recorded tapes from their stations, which currently beam the programmes after receiving the signal via satellite. Narrowcasting has the potential to raise more than Rs 1,000 crore from DD's 1,400 terrestrial transmitters, located in areas with little or no competition from private players.

Commercial exploitation of DD's archives is also on the anvil and 1,800 hours of material owned by DD and AIR will be digitised. This would open the possibility of monetising it through sharing content and selling DVDs of popular shows. More than 100 DVDs are already out in the market; around 10,000 more can be produced.

DD is trying hard to shrug off its sarkari image and find a fine balance between its loyalty to its paymaster and the public. "During Rajiv Gandhi's time, the telecast of news and current affairs was relatively more progressive," says media commentator Paranjy Guha Thakurta. "It was in Vinod Dua's programme Janwani that people saw politicians being grilled on TV for the first time." He sees no reason why DD cannot do it again if it is given a free rein.

Even Quraishi says that Prasar Bharati can turn things around if it is allowed to do so. He also believes that even running DD as a government channel might not do much harm. “The situation has changed so much that you have hundreds of channels spewing venom on the government; it is the government that is voiceless. The government’s point of view is also important and there should be a channel to broadcast its voice too,” he says.

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