

TELEVISION

IDOS 2016: Prasar Bharati could share infra with private players: Sircar

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GOA: Prasar Bharati has thrown an invitation to all private broadcasters and it reads: come and use our under-utilised resources and infrastructure to increase your reach in digital format terrestrially. What's more, the Indian pubcaster will help in the distribution.

According to Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar, the best spectrum available for broadcasting was between 470-585 MHz, which is with the pubcaster Doordarshan lying highly underutilised. And, private TV channels can join hands as the organisation plans to make linear TV available to the public on their hand-held devices via digital terrestrial transmission (DTT).

"Twenty channels can be relayed per two antennas as such (via DTT) in four metros. All that people have to do with DVB-T2 is attach an affordable dongle on their mobile handsets and watch TV channels on the go. We can give it away free to consumers to experience it and then charge for it in the second year," Sircar said while speaking at IDOS 2016 here on Friday.

As Doordarshan has 1,400 broadcast towers and in the event of complete conversion to digital, DD may not need all those towers for the sake of broadcasting its own channels. The tower infrastructure could therefore be shared and private broadcasters could look at Prasar Bharati as an alternate delivery medium, Sircar explained. There would then be digitised cable, DTH and DTT on offer to the consumer.

In conversation with indiantelevision.com founder CEO and editor-in-chief Anil Wanvari, Sircar admitted that DD's viewership may be falling and which was getting reflected in BARC's audience measurement.

"The grand days of DD happened not at the hands of DD's personnel producing content but during Ramayan, Buniyaad, etc, all of which were made by private producers," he said. "Hence DD should not make the content on its own. The people over here don't know how to. The time slot sale to private producers is the best way to go," he said, adding Prasar Bharati will primarily work on sharing its resources and reduce (in-house) content creation.

To drive home his point on indifferent quality of present programming on DD, Sircar said the reach of the pubcaster's resources hasn't diminished and added, "We allowed private players to come on DD's FreeDish platform. Yes, they are willing to pay from Rs 1.5 crore (Rs. 15 million) a year in the beginning to Rs 5.5 crore (Rs. 55 million) today for a slot on FreeDish. That's because it's getting them viewership."

However, the former bureaucrat, now in the last lap of his present assignment, was evasive and forthcoming at the same time on FreeDish's actual reach. "Nobody knows how many set top boxes for FreeDish are there, but the industry knows about missing subscribers of (private) DTH players. Those are our FreeDish subscribers. They could number 30 million or so," he asserted, adding that DD had not initially put in CAS, but now intends to do so with Indian CAS, take the boxes up to MPEG4, and add more transponders for distribution, thereby increasing the DTH platform's capacity to 250 channels in a phased manner.

Asked about DD's role as a pubcaster and obvious comparison with the BBC, Sircar was quick to point out that the British pubcaster gets thousands of crores of rupees every year from consumers in licence fee, apart from government funding.

Still, unable to restrain himself from taking a dig at the present Indian system regarding pubcasting, Sircar quipped, "They (BBC) know for sure what is expected from a pubcaster. The problem with DD is that we don't know our real goal and mission."

Quizzed further on muddled policies and the pubcaster's objectives, Sircar, with his tongue firmly in cheek, quipped, "I am Jawhar Sircar, not Bharat Sarkar." The punning on his last name and Sarkar (Hindi for Indian government) was telling.