

The Annals Of 'Backward-Istan'



Prasar Bharati is the world's largest public broadcaster in terms of size, but it is also bloated, inefficient and loss making. A look at how bad the situation at Prasar Bharati is and how to fix the organisation.

JAWHAR SIRCAR'S OFFICE on Delhi's Sansad Marg is tastefully decorated with thoughtful pictures of Hindu motifs on the Islamic pillars that surround the twelfth-century Qutub Minar in the capital. The shadow play in the pictures and their pregnant symbolism is fitting enough for a man whose last job was as Secretary to the Government of India for Culture. Another picture shows a younger Sircar in dark sunglasses, presenting a tennis trophy to an even younger Sania Mirza, a memento from his other life as a vice-president of the All India Tennis Federation. There is, of course, the customary portrait of Tagore in the background, a must-have for any self-respecting Bengali intellectual.

In a city where government servants measure their importance, and that of their bosses, literally by the size of their offices, this is one of the biggest personal cabins in town. It had only been a few months since he had taken over as CEO of Prasar Bharati in 2012, and I had heard of Sircar's interest in anthropology and history, his reputation for honesty and his cut-through-the-bullshit approach, but nothing prepared me for his blunt response when I asked him what he thought of the job. "It's a useless job," he thundered back, using a wonderfully colourful but unprintable adjective.



"The problem is the bureaucracy. Even though I am from the IAS, I tell you, the IAS is the problem. It must be abolished." This was going to be a promising afternoon, I thought to myself.

Full of nervous energy and infectious enthusiasm, he spoke for the next hour on everything from how Mikhail Gorbachev must have been a

closet reformer long before he got the top job in the Soviet Union (“Do you think he suddenly realized the system was broken?”) to the lack of sporting DNA in Indians, to the importance of iron as a crucial factor in the expansion of the Mauryan Empire, stopping only to give a nervous personal assistant, who had walked in with some papers, a tutorial on how to use Gmail to write official messages. The assistant’s horror was palpable as he looked down at his files. Not only was he getting attention from the boss, he now had to learn a new way of writing letters. “This is the problem with this place,” declared Sircar later. “It exists in Backward-istan.”

It was as fitting a description as any of the problem with Prasar Bharati, from the man who had been specially brought in to clean it up.

First, why does all this matter? Should anyone in India care about Doordarshan, or Prasar Bharati, when they have so many other TV channels to watch? The simple answer is that in a country as young as India and dealing with a crisis in its media as big as it has, Prasar Bharati is a vital missing cog in the wheel. It is the world’s largest public broadcaster in terms of size, the services it provides and the number of people it employs.

It oversees Doordarshan, which operates 35 national and regional TV channels, 67 production centres and 1,415 TV transmitters; and All India Radio, which operates 366 radio stations (including 119 regional channels), 21 DTH channels and 406 transmitters, operating in as many as 23 languages and 146 dialects. With such size, reach and potential, Prasar Bharati’s gradual fading away into irrelevance over the past decade and its complete absence from debates about the information revolution in India has been nothing short of tragic.

In 1999, the global consultancy firm McKinsey studied 20 important public broadcasters around the world. It found that despite losses after the rise of commercial television, most of the good public broadcasters—such as the BBC, SVT in Sweden, NHK in Japan, ARD and ZDF in Germany—remained market leaders. More importantly, the

assurance of stable public funding allowed them to focus on good quality “distinctive programming” which in turn set higher benchmarks for commercial channels. The existence of a strong and popular public broadcaster forced commercial channels to up their game and invest in better programming, rather than trying to outdo each other to the bottom in a nihilistic race for the cheapest ratings. As a former head of Britain’s Channel 4 once put it, “The BBC keeps us all honest.”

A healthy and popular public broadcaster can lift an entire industry and be a healthy setter of norms. This is precisely why the sordid state of Prasar Bharati should be a matter of concern for all right-thinking Indians.

So, how bad really is Prasar Bharati? The first indicator of its dysfunction is its gargantuan size. In 2013, it had over 33,000 employees (as against a sanctioned strength of over 48,000). This made it the single largest employer in the world among public service broadcasters. In comparison, the BBC, despite its global operations, had a headcount of less than 17,000 employees and the state broadcasting companies in Australia, Japan, Canada and South Africa all employed under 10,000 employees.

Even China’s CCTV, which operates 46 TV channels and provides far more services than Prasar Bharati, including running global news channels in five different languages, had a headcount of around 10,000. Prasar Bharati is unquestionably overstaffed and full of dead wood. Yet, it was projecting a shortage of over 15,000 employees in 2013—more than the entire officer shortage in the Indian Army. Something had gone horribly wrong.

Secondly, of all the world’s major public sector broadcasters, only India’s is a loss-making entity. Despite being the largest in terms of services and staff strength, it is also among the smallest in terms of its finances. The BBC’s annual profit in 2011-12 amounted to over \$592 million. Canada’s CBC made an annual profit of over \$40 million, Germany’s ARD over \$90 million and Australia’s ABC over \$10

million. Even South Africa's SABC made over \$47 million. In contrast, Prasar Bharati in 2012-13 had an annual operating deficit of Rs 2,062 crore or \$375.6 million, if government funds did not cover salaries, pensions and other costs (as they did).



In terms of producing good content, which should be the sole purpose of the organization's existence, Prasar Bharati slipped badly into mediocrity. It spends only about 13-14 per cent of its budget on content. This is by far the lowest percentage among its global peers. Content and distribution expenditure accounts for over 70 per cent of the total expenditure in Japan's NHK, the BBC and Australia's ABC. If a private sector company spent so little on its core business, it would go out of business.

This has meant a severe mismatch between the programming that Prasar Bharati needs and the output it actually produces. By its own estimates in 2013, Doordarshan's various TV channels needed approximately 171,915 hours of content per annum but faced a severe shortage of good programming. Similarly, All India Radio's 366 stations needed approximately 1,603,080 hours of content per annum. But it ended up producing only about 946,080 hours.

Far too less content was produced and half of its local radio stations were in minimal use or forced to simply transmit programming from other places. Similarly, about 60 per cent of programming facilities nationwide were either in a state of total disuse or minimal usage.

Combined with the fact that there were over as many as 80 per cent vacant positions in the Indian Broadcasting (Programme) Service—this in otherwise the most overstaffed broadcasting service in the world—it is hard to avoid wondering whether Prasar Bharati's real purpose is to continue existing as some kind of a giant publicly funded employment service.

The result is that despite access to assured funding, superior reach and a law mandating that its flagship channels must remain on prime bands in TV households, Doordarshan has been virtually eclipsed from the popular sweepstakes in comparison to private networks. Its earnings have not risen anywhere near enough to justify the money being pumped into it and the national broadcaster has virtually become an also-ran when compared with its commercial peers.

Far from setting norms, it lost serious market share and revenues in most markets. Between 2010 and 2011, the viewership share of its flagship DD National (or DD I) declined by nearly 50 per cent for cable and satellite households. By 2012, the share had shrunk to under 1 per cent of the total national market. This was abysmally poor when compared to private channels: Star Plus retained 6.5 per cent, Sony 4.83 per cent, Zee 4.9 per cent, Colors 4.8 per cent and Sun TV 3.5 per cent. What is the point of television, even if it is good, if no one watches it?

The fact that even DD Sports, which has a legal monopoly over hugely expensive cricket rights in India, displayed low and declining earnings, is unforgivable. Here is a channel with greater reach than anyone else, one that is legally mandated to get expensive cricket rights free of cost from others who pay millions of dollars for it. Yet, it has been unable to capitalize on the windfall to sell adequate advertising. This was partly due to the ineptitude and in some cases the corruption of senior officials

who connived to favour private players, but the mess in the system is clear.

How To Destroy A National Institution

Prasar Bharati came into being on 28 November 1997, seven years after the Prasar Bharati Act of 1990 was passed. On paper, its creation separated Doordarshan and All India Radio from the control of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and put them under the new entity, which was envisaged by the legislation to be a “genuinely autonomous body, innovative, dynamic and flexible with a degree of credibility”. In practice, its autonomy is a joke and for all practical purposes, it has remained a government department in all but name. It is run by a toothless board, managed by a redundant bureaucracy and remote-controlled by a disinterested (as long as its interests are served) government. The board is so powerless that its members cannot even hire taxis to attend meetings without the government’s prior permission and has no authority to hire, discipline or sack anyone. It has often talked of autonomy but, in practice, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting kept up a life-giving drip feed of funds, remained the fountainhead of all real power and generally was happy as long as Prasar Bharati remained a quiet poodle.

Why has Prasar Bharati remained a dysfunctional arm of government? Why has it remained trapped in a Kafkaesque frame of mind, always holding itself up to promises that it has never kept?

Two answers are clear. The first is any government’s inability to give up even basic control and live with independent state media. This is straightforward enough. The second, which is tied to the first, is a culture of unaccountability, shoddy—even criminal—mismanagement of taxpayer’s money and the inability to invest in setting up an institution that could work by itself. This is why the only institutions that have worked effectively in India are those mandated by the Constitution, the Election Commission of India and the Comptroller General of India.

A decade and a half after it was declared an autonomous corporation, Prasar Bharati in 2012-13 remained dependent on government for over 60 per cent of its annual spending of about Rs 3,312 crore. The government still paid for its entire salary and pension bill and its entire infrastructural costs. This funding does not come through a licence fee like it does for the BBC in the UK, ARD in Germany or NHK in Japan. Instead, it comes through ministerial discretion.

This is important. Australia, for example, also does not have a licence fee to fund its Australian Broadcasting Corporation but has managed to keep its independence by ensuring that its annual grants from government are approved directly by Parliament. Australia's equivalent of the information minister has no power whatsoever to decide on government funding for public broadcasting. Furthermore, like in India, Australian communications ministers are empowered to give the ABC directions in the national interest in rare cases, but unlike India, the Australians are required to do so in writing and to publicly inform Parliament immediately whenever they do so.

This system has kept the ABC independent and sustained it as the most important force in Australian broadcasting. The absence of such checks and balances has enfeebled Prasar Bharati to the point of irrelevance.

Financially, Prasar Bharati's size is so huge and its expenses so badly managed that its revenues are unable to even account for annual operations, leave alone costs for staff salaries and infrastructure. It has remained a loss-making organization, forever dependent on government largesse. This is why former information and broadcasting secretary Asha Swaroop likens the relationship between government and Prasar Bharati to that of an "overpowering father" to a child.

The core of the problem is the well-meaning but terribly designed Prasar Bharati Act. On one hand, it created a board to oversee the new corporation, and on the other, it also mandated (through its infamous Section 32) that "all rules" would be made by the Central government.

The Act talked autonomy but simultaneously ensured that virtually nothing could be done without prior government approval.

This meant, for example, that though the board, under law, was supposed to set up a new recruitment system, put in place new salary structures and announce new rules, it never could do so. Under the same law, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting wielded all effective power. Someone needed to sort out this bureaucratic nightmare, but no one ever did.

The result has been a special Indian bureaucratic creation—the old system was explicitly broken down, the new one never got set up and even what worked, stopped functioning properly. In the first two decades of Prasar Bharati, hardly anyone—except some very junior technical hands—was hired. This only began to change in 2013 when Prasar Bharati finally began advertising for hundreds of vacant positions. For an organization that grew from 236 radio and TV stations in 1997 to 455 in 2013, this was nothing short of suicidal.

This was even more so for an organization whose job description included reflecting the diversity of India. In a small state like Manipur for example, Akashvani broadcasts in six major dialects and 23 minor dialects every day! Somehow, the efforts of a few dedicated staff kept the wheels turning, despite all the institutional bottlenecks loaded against them.

But not getting new blood wasn't the only problem. Because there were no serious human resource management systems within it, no one in its existing staff had been promoted either. In 15 years!

Prasar Bharati fell into a strange halfway twilight zone between being an erstwhile government department to whom normal government rules did not apply any more and a new institution which was supposed to set up its rules but didn't have the legal remit to do so. From a government

department, it was turned into a de facto government department without even the checks and balances of government.

This is why Jawhar Sircar, brought in as CEO in 2012, has often wondered publicly “if it is a public sector undertaking or not”. “It is neither fish, nor fowl,” he says. “Let us make it a platypus.” A truly independent platypus. And, rare for a career bureaucrat, he has often publicly mused about the wide chasm between the reality and the rhetoric of autonomy.

Writing, for example, in the Planning Commission’s journal in July 2013 on whether Prasar Bharati had any real independence or not, he tellingly observes, “it is difficult to give a straight ‘Yes or a No’ answer to this question, though many would be tempted to jump to a firm ‘No’. There is no doubt that both Akashvani and Doordarshan have been pushed to a corner...”

The uniquely Indian servility that is so characteristic of officialdom in this country is seeped into the very DNA of Prasar Bharati. Every chief executive chosen by government in the past 15 years has been a former bureaucrat and virtually every minister has failed to rise above partisan considerations in packing the board with their own nominees. In effect, the grand facade of autonomy for the public broadcaster has been a shambolic Potemkin village which even those who have perpetuated it are not bothering to pretend anymore.

This article was published in the [August 2015 issue](#) of Swarajya. Indian television has metamorphosed over the past three decades to overwhelm many of us, and, in equal measure, lead and debase public discourse. Edited excerpts from a major book on the industry that touches all our lives and influences our worldview, [Behind A Billion Screens](#), Nalin Mehta, HarperCollins India, 2015.