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Uniform Code Marches On The Air Waves

No recruitment or promotions for 20 years, Prasar Bharati brings in defence officers to do its work

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- **Empty chairs:** When Prasar Bharati was given charge of DD and AIR in 1997, it inherited 48,000 employees. Today, there are some 14,000 vacancies in DD and AIR.
- **Brakes on:** No promotion and recruitment of programming staff in the last 20 years. Redundance runs: some 15,000 employees maintaining mostly non-functional towers.
- **Control & checks?:** Five officers from the armed forces in DD and AIR. Much unease over former defence officers having a say in programming and supervising programmers.

If you are tired of barking orders at jawans and would like to command the nation's ears instead, the government has a job for you. In a 1.3 billion-strong nation, with thousands of trained, experienced

journalists looking for jobs and many more civilian government officials, the Prasar Bharati, the state-owned media corporation, has curiously opted to bring in channel heads and other bosses for Doordarshan (DD) and All India Radio (AIR) from the armed forces. The ostensibly autonomous Prasar Bharati blames the government, which has not allowed promotions in the last 20 years.

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Doordarshan currently has five officers from the armed forces, two retired and three serving but on deputation. All of them are commissioned officers from the middle ranks—group captains from the IAF and lieutenant colonels from the army. Two have been designated additional director-generals (ADGs) and three deputy director-generals (DDGs).

Unusual among them is the case of Grp Capt Ranjan Mukherjee (now an air commodore), who was considered close to the former UPA government, but found a place in DD when Prakash Javadekar was the NDA government's information & broadcasting minister. Before joining DD, he was officer on special duty (since 2007) to former Lt Gov Tejendra Khanna. When Najeeb Jung took over as the new lieutenant governor in 2013, he found himself a new OSD. In 2014, Javadekar put Mukherjee in charge of launching DD-Kisan, a full-fledged channel for farmers that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised voters during the campaign. He was given an ADG's post.

But the IAF officer—who once boasted to a journalist that there was no difference between flying a plane and running a channel—couldn't make the channel soar. After nearly six months on air, a DD official confided, the channel attracts hardly 45 lakh views per week in a country with some 15 crore farmers. Experts blame it on poor programming.

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Worse, Mukherjee nose-dived into controversy: there was public outrage over reports that he'd agreed to pay filmstar Amitabh Bachchan Rs 6.31 crore—Big B's highest ever endorsement fee—to be the channel's ambassador at a time farmers were expecting a drought. Bachchan reportedly dropped the fee on hearing of the row. But in internal communications, senior Prasar Bharati officials wondered what to do with Mukherjee. He has now been put in charge of DD-India, and also looks after the commercial side of DD's work, including liaising with ministries for broadcasting their ads on DD's various channels. DD-Kisan is now under another IAF officer—Grp Capt P.J. Matthews, who heads it as DDG-programming.



Military Mind: Union minister of state for I&B Rajyavardhan Rathore. (Photograph by Tribhuvan Tiwari)

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The other defence officers with Prasar Bharati are Lt Col Manish Asthana and Lt Col Rohit Singh Sahi, on deputation from the army, and Grp Capt P.A. Naidu, who sought early retirement from the IAF. Asthana is DDG-Security for the radio wing; Sahi holds the same post for the TV wing; and Naidu is ADG-Administration.



“In DD, there are 191 senior posts in programming, but only nine are occupied. We rely on deputations

A senior official confided that most of these appointments were recommended and pursued by the ministry, and had little to do with Prasar Bharati, which would like to have civilian officials in posts with programming responsibilities. Rajyavardhan Rathore, the current minister of state for information and broadcasting, of course, has an army background—an Olympic medallist in shooting and a former colonel.

The Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) Act requires that a recruitment board be set up to employ officials. But there has been no recruitment board—right from 1997, when Prasar Bharati took charge of DD and AIR, with 48,000 personnel, many now redundant or retired. In March

from other central services.”

*Jawahar Sircar, CEO,
Prasar Bharati*

2015, Prasar Bharati chairman A. Surya Prakash (a former journalist) had said a recruitment board was urgently required as he expects vacancies to run up to as high as 50 per cent within a few years.

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Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar places the blame squarely on the UPSC and the ministry being at loggerheads. “There has been a deadlock for 20 years between the I&B ministry and the UPSC, because of which there has have been no promotions or recruitment. In DD, there are 191 senior posts in programming, but only nine are occupied. So, **whenever a programming executive retires, we have to fill up the posts immediately with deputations from railways, revenue, defence accounts and so on,**” he says. Officials say the information and broadcasting ministry wants to do it as a joint exercise with the UPSC, which is opposed to any such exercise. At present, a staff selection commission recruits entry-level programmers and engineers; higher posts are filled through intra-governmental deputation. The ministry approves these appointments as long as the candidate fulfil some requisite qualifications.

Prasar Bharati also has problems of obsolescence. DD has 1,500 towers across the country, which are supposed to be manned by 10 personnel each or more. That means some 20,000 people to maintain obsolete transmission towers, most of which are not in use because viewers get DD via cable or DTH. Sircar agrees that most TV towers should be phased out.

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As for the induction of defence officers, reactions are mixed. One view is that uniformed officers will bring in discipline in the state-controlled media channel, known to face severe corruption issues. Recently, DDG M. Sailaja Suman, head of DD-Saptagiri, was suspended on alleged corruption charges after a central vigilance department inquiry against her for financial irregularities. She has now hit back by dragging Prasar Bharati itself to court. The Prasar Bharati CEO admits there is a coterie that operates in programming, and DD should move out of the previous “socialist method of hiring a large number of people” and instead outsource a bulk of its programming.

Another view is whether defence officers should—even if they are at all capable of—be running a media house. Especially when there is a talent pool of trained and experienced information service officials and experienced journalists around. Though most posts at Prasar Bharati are administrative and can be handled by people with general capabilities—including defence officers—there’s a problem when they oversee programming. Sircar, in fact, wants to outsource all of DD’s programming to professional production houses instead of pushing “sarkari creativity” which murders TRPs.

By Ushinor Majumdar in Delhi