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# Jawhar Sircar

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## ○ Prasar Bharati at the cross roads

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1. Prasar Bharati came into being on 28 th November 1997 after Prasar Bharati Act of 1990 was finally implemented by the Government and the Directorates of All India Radio (Akashvani) and Doordarshan were separated from Ministry of Information & Broadcasting and placed under an 'autonomous body'. It was a momentous decision that came some seven years after Parliament had taken pains to conceive of a Public Service Broadcaster, whose character was eloquently worded in the Statement of Objects and Reasons:
2. "To confer autonomy on Akashvani and Doordarshan so that they may function in a fair, objective and creative manner, it was proposed to provide for the establishment of an autonomous corporation and to entrust to it functions which are discharged by Akashvani and Doordarshan. The proposed corporation would function as a genuinely autonomous body, innovative, dynamic and flexible-with a degree of credibility. It would function in a democratic manner which enriches our democratic traditions and institutions, being responsible to the people and Parliament, and keeping in mind the

variegated traditions, languages and cultures of the country. Accordingly the Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) Bill was introduced in the Parliament".

3. The questions that an Indian citizen may ask after 16 years of the implementation of the Act of Parliament are: a) Is Prasar Bharati really autonomous? b) Is it functioning as a genuinely autonomous body that is innovative, dynamic and credible?
4. It would be difficult to give a straight a '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 by more attractive, more dynamic, more colourful, more entertaining and louder channels and radio stations. The course of history cannot be altered by making pronouncements and protestations, and therefore, let us begin with what is factually correct.
5. In 1997 when Prasar Bharati came into existence, DD had only two channels: DD I and DD II, which had started in the Metro cities and then fanned out to other parts of India on terrestrial mode. This meant that terrestrial transmitters affixed to towers relayed telecasts to each other. In those days, many of the current crop of private 'channels' were incubating on DD as 'programmes', like NDTV and Aaj Tak, though a handful of 'TV channels' were also taking birth. They ultimately broke away as separate satellite channels of their own, once the skies were opened up, as they ought to have be.
6. Similarly, on the radio front, FM was at an experimental stage and in 1997 only Akashvani had a small number of FM channels, with few private operators in sight. The simple point is that once air waves were opened up to the private sector, it was only expected that vibrant democracy would respond with such competition as possible. This was also happening in the midst of an upsurge when India was going "fully private" and had had enough of the lethargic public sector.
7. A small correction needs to be made here: Prasar Bharati is, factually speaking, not a 'Corporation' or a PSU, as the term may denote. It is more of an 'autonomous authority' that administers two major public institutions on behalf of the people of India, and is responsible to Parliament through the Ministry of I&B. Yet, there is no doubt that Prasar Bharati, Doordarshan and Akashvani have strong associations with the government and its system of governance: it is viewed as being very 'sarkari'.
8. And why not? After all, its officers and staff have all been recruited by the Government or their authorised officers, through the Union Public Service Commission or the Staff Selection Commission, and they came with full protection of Government rules and regulations as also pay scales and other attributes of a "secure tenure". After decades of working in a pure governmental environment, it can only be expected that these same officials, who are at the helm of affairs of every department in Akashvani and Doordarshan, carry with them the 'government mind-set' that is not exactly conducive to open market competition. Besides, the Act has specific Sections that ensure all its

Recruitment Rules and other important Regulations be in tandem with those of the Government and therefore 'mind-set' continues to reign unchallenged and unabated. The Government's inheritance does not, of course, always imply stagnation or that everything about it is retrograde, that there is no professionalism. In such was the case, the proud Delhi Metro and the Indian Armed Forces would not have been our pride or the Indian Railway system (that has one of the world's highest burdens to carry within the stringent Government system) would have been branded as 'non-professional', which it is not!

9. I would submit that it is neither fair nor proper to continue with this binary thinking because if one approaches the real core of governance, and not get hurt by the prickly outer core of frustrating babudom that every citizen has to face, one would see a degree of professionalism and dedication (and absolute honesty) in what way we can call "engine room" of governance. Otherwise things would have come to a halt long, long ago.
10. So one needs to look at the facts: dispassionately, clinically and where required, ruthlessly. The fact is that DD with its 6 All India channels (DD National, DD News, DD Bharati, DD Urdu, DD Sports and DD India), 11 Regional channels, 4 emerging Hindi heartland channels (that are now "work under progress") and a handful of a 'few-hours-a-day' channels not only survives, but holds its own. It is against tough competition from multi-nationals and big independent business houses. There is no flexibility in recruitment or possibility of minimum incentives to its staff, as government procedures reign and take their own time, everywhere. No fresh manpower, except a tiny number of junior technical hands, was inducted for nearly 20 years and yet the organisation grew, in leaps and bounds, from 236 radio and TV stations in 1997 to the present staggering number of 455 stations. In a small State like Manipur, Akashvani broadcasts in Manipuri, six major dialects and 23 minor dialects every day! 30 languages: this is what a public service broadcaster has to do, to hold the 'idea of India' together in one common bond. This speaks volumes of Prasar Bharati's tenacity and its capacity to carry out its appointed task, without screaming out to the nation.
11. There is no perfect rating system or TRPs (Television Rating Points) in India and the only one that exists, executed by M/s TAM- India, reports on over 750 million TV viewers with a sample of some 8000 'people meters'. One can well understand the small fraction of the viewership that can be calibrated, with any degree of certainty, and even this has also been heavily biased in favour of the urban population. 'Terrestrial TV', which still covers approximately 10% of India's TV population (some say only 8%, while others claim it is 13%), is not covered at all by TAM. So exasperating was the viewership measurement situation that Prasar Bharati had to take TAM to a quasi-judicial body for redress. In the last few weeks, newspapers indicate that TAM has started stretching out its 'people meters' to LC1 towns, i.e., small towns of one lakh population or below. Whether as a result of this, or whether as a result of the strenuous efforts that PB put in (with assistance from the MIB) to change its entire 'look and feel', the fact remains that DD's

present ratings are quite comparable to other channels.

12. In the Prime-Time News segment, between 9 pm and 10 pm, DD News appears first by a wide margin, over all other English News channels and even TAM has been reporting this trend for months together. During the same period, TAM also indicates that DD News is either second or third in the Hindi News segment in Primetime (i.e., between 8 pm and 9 pm), well ahead of a large number of Hindi News channels. On the General Entertainment (GEC) front, DD and PB simply do not have the funds and the flexibility to go in for the high cost production of expensive TV programming. Yet, it has managed to remain 3<sup>rd</sup>, beating some 300 or more competitors, including world-class foreign-owned TV channels and others owned by mega Indian business houses. There is, therefore, a space for the 'great Indian median' of entertainment, i.e., a form that can be viewed by a large cross-section of Indian society, from the urban to the deep rural. DD strains to perform this function, without resorting to excess glitz, loud sounds or controversial tastes that often injure sentiments of sections of India's viewership. But such ratings are not the only indices of achievement and there is no doubt that DD and AIR have to struggle against fleet-footed competitors, many of which are foreign-owned entities with deep pockets and decades of experience in devastating old orthodox players in developing countries.
13. The fact is thus that neither TRP nor large viewerships carry much meaning if an organisation cannot be flexible and cannot adopt to latest techniques and professionalism. Here, there is no doubt that Prasar Bharati and its two bodies have received a battering. Part of the fault lies definitely in its leadership, or the lack of it, as several people claim quite vociferously. But it also lies in the extreme constriction within which it is forced to operate. Under the Prasar Bharati Act, all Regulations relating to Recruitments (including professionals) and all service condition, etc., need prior approval of the Central Government. Thus it becomes very difficult to convert existing posts that were determined decades ago (and are lying vacant for several years) into more dynamic technical or highly professional ones. This is not only because of the Ministry of I&B, but simply because this Ministry has to send, under the governmental system of working, every such proposal to other different Ministries and expert bodies. We cannot just look the other way and quote scriptures of governmental procedures, when for two long decades, the organization was gripped with complete demoralization of its huge workforce: as private channels weaned away many good but low-paid government-recruited talent, with attractive offers and the rest just rotted in Prasar Bharati with neither promotion nor fresh blood. Some one has to own up!
14. The whole process of governmental decisions on any major issues takes its own time: which could run into several years. Thus the leadership of Prasar Bharati, DD or AIR may have been overwhelmed by the entire eco-system or had given up after the same proposals came back in a classic governmental mode with the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> query, many of which may not be strictly relevant but are asked nonetheless. Or, may simply not have tried sincerely: only proper examination of files and archives can tell us. One can well

imagine what are the problems of looking after the needs and demands of nearly fifty thousand employees and ten or twenty thousand other 'casual staff' who are posted in hundreds of TV and radio stations and at nearly two thousand transmitters can be: especially as they are scattered in every conceivable part of India. The sheer magnitude of the problems is or may have been enough to deter any sensible head of organisation from embarking on too many adventures with the 'existing system'. But, as many Associations say bluntly: the leadership of Prasar Bharati, Akashvani and Doordarshan was just not adequately visionary or persistent: many among them had other interesting power or other games to play. The Ministry can always say that unless perfect proposals of Prasar Bharati are unanimously agreed upon by several other Ministries, what can or could they do ?

15. What is the existing scheme of governance in Prasar Bharati ? It consists of an 'operational autonomy' within which PB functions, to reach the high levels that one has mentioned in the earlier paragraph. Normally, no worthwhile government has either the time or energy or even the inclination to get into micro details. The PB Board consists of a Chairperson, 6 noted professionals as Part-time Members and 5 Whole-time Members i.e., the CEO, the 2 Members in-charge of Personnel and Finance in PB, 2 DGs of AIR and DD and Ministry's Nominated Member. This Board meets once in 2 months or so and takes or approves decisions of the PB Secretariat, which are usually at a macro or policy level. The Board sets the compass for the organisation as well and guides the executive Members in carrying forward its advice. It has also certain disciplinary powers where employees are concerned, after the amendment brought about by Parliament, at the instance of MIB in 2011. Under this, officers and government employees of AIR and DD have been 'placed on permanent deputation' with Prasar Bharati. Government has delegated its financial powers up to Rs 300 crores to Prasar Bharati: but every tranche of governmental funding comes after several frustrating delays, meanders and dogged pursuit. With not a single Financial Appraisal Officer in position despite months of efforts, what does financial autonomy matter? The Prasar Bharati Act gives a lot of operational autonomy but Sections 32 or 33 of the Act take away most of these by insisting of the prior approval of government on all critical issues: hence the mess! Facts are facts but the Prasar Bharati Board is also unanimous that even if the Act is amended, we must have a proper oversight mechanism in place, because accountability is a must.
16. Where funding is concerned, let us look at the 11th Five Year Plan. It would appear both PB and the Ministry, have contributed approximately half each to the 'salary and operational expenses' for running the organisation for five years. This works out to approximately Rs. 6000 crores each. There is no reason why, with extra efforts, Prasar Bharati would not be in a position to cross this 50% mark and maintain its large work force, which is almost inescapable for maintaining such a huge and far-flung infrastructure, almost all of which has been bequeathed by government. But after going over salaries and operational expenses, let us see what funds were actually spent in technology and programmes the last Plan period: as this is different from the original stipulated 'Plan Outlay' or 'Budget Estimate': that keep spiralling downwards to reach reality, with a thud.

Only Rs. 1589 crores were spent on Prasar Bharati's for this over a period of five years in the 11th Plan. Out of this, 'Capital Plan' funds that are for replacement and modernisation of technology, transmitters, studios, cameras, transmission facilities, satellite connectivity, out-door coverage and the lot were only Rs.1152 crores. This means that average expenses per year over the 11th Plan came to Rs.230 crores per annum for an organisation that covers well 92% to 98% of India's 1.24 billion people, through a large and complex network. We mention the existing resources for process of technology as this is the prime area where we have reached certain critical 'cross-roads' where we have to choose our direction.

17. Let me elaborate the term 'cross-roads' by giving one example: that of Digital Terrestrial Transmission. While India has been swept by satellite TV in the last two decades (all 850 odd private channels have received/operate licenses on the satellite mode), it is only DD and AIR that are carrying on telecast/broadcast through both satellites and terrestrial towers. The advantage of this latter mode is that it can be downloaded and viewed with hardly any expense, just a simple aerial or a wire, and seen on a TV set without any recurring cost or monthly payments. Such 'free to air' public service constitutes the core of Prasar Bharati, and despite the fact that this mode of transmission is currently giving way, year after year, to the more popular cable and satellite platforms, the experience of various nations across the world hold some contrary lessons for us. Many nations had moved from terrestrial to satellite but many have come back to the good old terrestrial towers: like UK, Australia, Japan, Korea and many European countries. Obviously, there is some merit to terrestrial television over satellite and it will take too long to explain the technology advantage that only digitization can bring to terrestrial transmission. This digitisation has reached the shores of India, and odd it may sound, the first tranche of 11th Plan funding has now started bearing fruit: as 23 digital terrestrial transmitters are being shipped towards India. Once these digital transmitters are "operationalized" and once they are incorporated into the TV environment of India, with proper linkages and business models, there is every likelihood of a total paradigm shift. In the cities covered by this new digital terrestrial transmission facility, most people would flock to watch TV programmes being 'streamed' on to their mobile hand- sets or tablets, if they are attractive, as they go about with their busy lives. This has happened all over the world and there is no reason why it should not happen here. But then, we need more than 23 transmitters, even though each of them can carry 8 to 9 SD TV channels, ie, Standard Definition, which is what is mainly in vogue in India. .

18. In fact, for digital terrestrial technology (DTT), one would not need so many transmitters and only 630 would do against the present 1415 analogue transmitters. Each analogue channel that operates now for one transmission could give way to 8 or 9 SD channels after digitization! Or, if we go for High Definition (HD), we could have 2 chnnels in lieu of one analogue. Prasar Bharati may consider opening up this digital resource to other broadcasters: after guarding its own interests, as content matters more than carriage. But the terms and conditions have to be totally transparent and make economic sense to PB and the people. If this works out, then one would soon be seeing one's favourite

channels (not necessarily DD) on the mobile, tablet or laptop as a young and vibrant India is always on the move, always on the run, with these gadgets as their 'essential survival kit'. The shift everywhere has been in favour of digital terrestrial TV, but where is the funding? DTT is only one of the many modernisation programmes that Government, the Planning Commission, the Ministry and Prasar Bharati have taken up: it cannot be given all that is required. If we go by the resources made available in the 11th and 12th Plans, it would take about 60 years or more to reach the 630rd number of DTT. Though the annual Capital Plan Funds for technology development may go up from Rs. 230 crores in the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan to approximately Rs. 330-350 crores per year in the 12<sup>th</sup> Plan (if go by the trend of first two years) and this may appear to be a quantum jump, but it really means little where a large country like India is concerned. Frankly, many large public sector workshops or other large single installations spend much more per year in just replacing their spares. This also means that during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan, the nation spent less than Rs.3 per citizen for its own Public Service Broadcaster: that brings the 'idea of India' together. Can we forget the role of Vividh Bharati in emotionally uniting India or the far-flung stations perched on icy slopes like Kargil or deep in the forested areas that link this vast nation. So what do we do: wait for 60 years to digitize transmitters or speed up the Plan-funding process to (say) 20-25 years (as if technology will wait for us to find funds) or pretend that "all is well" or just give up, in frustration ?

19. Where Prasar Bharati is concerned, we may decide to cut down the digitization programme of terrestrial transmitters from the requirement of 630 (let some continue of analogue mode if funds are scarce now) and cover only 50% to 60% of India's geographical area, that has dense urban population, with some 350 to 400 digital transmitters. India has decided on the latest DVB T2 (Digital Video Broadcasting, ie, Terrestrial Transmission, 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation), and these 350-400 would require approximately Rs.3000 crores for digitization, though exact calculations are yet to be worked out. The entire tech upgradation could be done with the required speed if this fund is available in 3 to 4 years, without glitches, and put into a Technology Development Fund, rather than approaching a phalanx of Ministry officials for each tranche. Prasar Bharati can also earn extra revenue and enrich this Tech Fund, as we feel that digitization's benefits can only be reaped, only while the iron is hot and India is taken by storm. Like antibiotics the dosage has to be adequate and taken in one time-bound matter, not one capsule a month! Obviously, the Tech Fund and its operation would be with a High Level Technology Committee, with reputed outside experts also, certainly not with non-technical officers or the CEO. And, for total transparency, we suggest a Concurrent Audit Committee with the best available professionals be set up.
20. There is no doubt that wireless technology is the one which belongs to the near future. We have an assured 660 million activated mobile phone users and 850 million+ 'subscribers' (which includes 'tablets') against some 31 million land lines. Wireless and mobile technology will go up because more and more people are on the move all the time. Hence, reaching them through mobile broadcasting is where the key lies: not in expecting the TV viewers to run around to the nearest fixed point TV or get to the fixed

table-top computer, to see. Their programmes. Frankly, I feel that just like we moved away from the mammoth room-size computers of the 50s and 60s (which churned so little data) to the personal computer (PC) that became smaller and sleeker in the 80s, 90s and thereafter, we will move away (effectively, except on Sundays?) from the 'fixed point TV and computer' at home and in office to the mobile TV and computer. These are already available on hand-held tablets and laptops and if this logic holds good, the 'streaming' of TV services onto mobile sets has to be done forthwith. We have been told that this cannot be expected to be successful through the existing telecom band-width, which some advanced broadcasters are relying on through their special applications (apps). Any major traffic would simply make it unworkable, because once numbers pick up, the services would get considerably 'jammed' or 'buffered'. It is only broadcasting spectrum that can solve this 'TV on mobile' problem and Doordarshan has within its fold hundreds of transmitters that are waiting to go digital and 'stream' broadcasting into mobile sets and tablets.

21. It is not that as if one is placing only figures or rhetoric: it is simply that figures are knocking on our doors, crying for some attention! If we let this option slip past us, a golden opportunity to digitise terrestrial transmitters will be lost. In the last part of the last century and in the first part of present century, India had the option to convert its Public Service Broadcaster from terrestrial mode to an 'only satellite' form of transmission. But this could have excluded the masses and the poorest from availing of free to air transmission. Again, there was a choice here: government could have subsidized (even the United States and other major western nations do 'subsidize' their Public Service Broadcasters) by offering free set-top boxes to the really poor. In hindsight, some feel that this may have cost less than the expansion and replacement of terrestrial transmission, as well as their costly operation and maintenance in different corners of India. But this is only an opinion which has not been tested fully.
22. Doordarshan can revolutionise its gigantic transmitter network through vigorous time-bound digitization: provided the first trials succeed and one assured flush of funding is available. Government recently set up an Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati under Shri Sam Pitroda to examine the best options available on every issue. The Committee and its discourse has led to a lot of churning of thoughts in the public domain and within the organisation: it has opened up new vistas and possibilities. One idea that came up during discussions (just an idea so far) is that Prasar Bharati could even think in terms of 'forward planning' of monetizing 'future receivables'. This line suggests that we plan for immediate or systematic monetization of those transmitters and properties that would soon be redundant and shut down after digitization. Prasar Bharati could liquify these assets to fund the digital modernization of these chosen 350-400 or even 630 DTT. This is only a preliminary idea, and would require very careful calculation as well as total transparency, to avoid any possible controversy. It would need the complete involvement of all sections of the organization, but this possibility exists: if government is willing to look at it seriously, as most properties belong to the 'Union of India'. It needs vision and strength to move it forward by all the players.



23. There is another possibility, which the USA and certain other advanced countries have gone in for, and this is a national policy on utilization of one of the world's most valuable resources: 'spectrum'. Since this has been allocated by the World Frequency Plan, fixed by the International Telecommunication Union (Geneva) through its Radio Regulations, each country is duty bound to make the optimum use of its spectrum for the 40 plus types of users and contesting claimants. From defence to space; from telephony and mobiles to wireless services for the police and security forces; from audio transmission to FM radio; from television to the walkie talkie: spectrum is in demand, more and more. By going digital, India could save a lot of spectrum, but how is it to be implemented? The problem lies in the existing infrastructure that is located and fixed against spectrum of different band-width over the allocated range. To re-farm and compress them within a defined compact band-width is not impossible: it is just a stupendous task, and one that calls for one solid doze of quick funding. A major Ministry in the Government of India has received several thousand crores of rupees to vacate precious spectrum: so why not MIB and Prasar Bharati also, in the greater national interest?
24. The solution lies in imaginatively thinking through all the options. The United States spent nearly US\$ 2 billion (over Rs.11,000 crores) in distributing vouchers to its citizens, so that spectrum could be saved and sold at much higher prices. Several other countries have followed such major financing routes for the greater good. The deliberations of the Sam Pitroda Committee on Prasar Bharati also appear to be moving in this direction, although it is yet to formulate the final suggestions. This is the first 'cross-road', where we stand today, and if there is a positive decision in this, Prasar Bharati could also go in for out of the box solutions for a national FM network, on similar lines. No one listens to Short Wave and very few hear Medium Wave: even receiver sets are not available. So why are we expanding or replacing SW or MW? FM reaches millions through mobiles and car radios, but it has a limited range for each channel and thus needs a huge number of channels, co-channels, network and transmitters for ensuring that all radio services of AIR, ie, Primary channels and Vividh Bharati (that are mostly on MW) are also available on FM. Without such simultaneous transmission on FM, millions of Indians will miss out AIR's services if we go on endlessly with SW or Medium Wave. There are such other crossroads as well where India's public service broadcaster has its infrastructural-funding issues and great opportunities are open. But let us first solve the immediate question of digitization of terrestrial transmission of TV services: it's possible funding pattern and immediate time schedule.
25. Each crossroad offers a route forward: it can permit leap-frogging to the restless pro-changers and it also has the in-built temptation or danger to get deflected to the left or to the right, by just arguing our heads off, as we often do. Or, we could also move backwards, as we done at times. So, having placed all the cards on the table, in exercise of the 'autonomy of thought' (a la Sam Pitroda), let us see which direction is finally taken by India.

## No comments on 'Prasar Bharati at the cross roads'

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