

The Covert Control Raj

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Every major nation in the world has a public broadcaster and there must be some reason why they do. Before we can discuss the shortcomings of Prasar Bharati, the autonomous body that supervises Doordarshan (DD) and All India Radio (AIR), we may recall that even as its Act was passed by Parliament in 1990, its spirit of autonomy was vitiated by two sections, 32 and 33, which took away with the left hand what the right gave. They ensured that all its major decisions like manpower, recruitment, service conditions, salaries and critical issues would be decided only by the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (I&B). Though Prasar Bharati boards were constituted by several governments from time to time, none took the initiative to operationalise the Act's mandate for a "Parliament committee" of 22 MPs to oversee its functions, nor the "broadcasting council" to receive and consider complaints against the broadcaster. The "non-lapsable fund" the Act provided was also not created, which meant that it would be 'business as usual' and the ministry would continue to control funds and functioning.

Broadcasting is a highly technical subject and the programme and engineering wings of AIR, and later of DD, picked up their skills in the last 78 and 55 years respectively, which is difficult to convey to ministries. Technologies are changing rapidly and digitisation and the social media have caused havoc in the print and broadcast media. Yet since Prasar Bharati's huge technical infrastructure is dependent on government's munificence, it has no option but to go through the long dilatory processes to get Rs 340 crore per year for essential replacements and modernisation. The broadcaster proposed to the Government to leverage the locked-up value of some 100-odd properties, that are redundant or almost so. While the Act has transferred all properties to Prasar Bharati, their 'terms' could not be finalised by the I&B ministry in 17 years. The Board resolved that specific properties in Delhi, valued at around Rs 20,000 crore, could be handed over to bodies such as DDA, HUDCO or NBCC for the housing colonies, and their annual yields could meet the broadcaster's capital investments. A Rs 2,000-crore expansion of FM services could then have been executed so that nearly 700 million cell phone owners could receive all AIR services. The I&B ministry's response was a clear 'no', expressed in obfuscating bureaucratise, as a self-reliant Prasar Bharati would be anathema to some denizens of the bhavans.

The most glaring example of control is in the news divisions of AIR and DD where over 200 top posts are manned by officials appointed, posted and punishable by the ministry, over whom Prasar Bharati has no supervisory role, except to provide services, support and funds, and then take the blame. All attempts to convince the I&B ministry that this was counter to autonomy failed, and instances like the recent controversy over editing out sections of a Narendra Modi interview are bound to happen when there is a 'shadow' over the news heads, even if direct interference by any regime may not be visible.

There is hardly any living public organisation in India where no recruitment has taken place in 20 years and its ministry tightly controls promotions, which means that none except a tiny handful of the nearly 33,000 employees have been promoted in 20 or even 30 years. Morale and discipline have, thus, been the worst casualties. Despite best attempts for nearly two years, the ministry has refused to set up the Prasar Bharati recruitment board that the Act enjoins. Nearly 15,000 posts have lapsed over two decades while the number of TV and radio stations has doubled to 480 and other installations to 2,000. The group of ministers under P. Chidambaram recommended the creation of 3,452 critical posts in 2009, but the Government has been dragging its feet while thousands have retired and the authorised staff selection commission has already gone ahead with selection.

Nothing could be more absurd than Prasar Bharati being given a showcase notice by the ministry for upscaling four sleepy TV stations in the Hindi belt of UP, Bihar, Rajasthan and MP, where most DD viewers reside, from transmitting for just 3-4 hours a day to beaming 24x7. Similarly, India lost the race for vice- presidency in the world's largest broadcasting union because of myopic babudom and in the last five months, the Pitroda committee report on which a hundred experts toiled, could not even be discussed because it recommends nothing short of total autonomy. Autonomy and bureaucracy are natural adversaries and successive governments have to suffer while the two lock themselves in mortal combat. More so, if the babus can captivate new impatient bosses. As the liberalisation of '91 and the subsequent leap forward proved, India has space for only one of these mindsets.