

Is Prasar Bharati its master's voice?

Left | Jawhar Sircar

The organisation is looking down the barrel unless it is decoupled from its massive sloth and totally detoxified

While episodic outbursts when the public broadcaster commits some sin of omission or commission are natural, they usually peter away after some self-righteous indignation. Such transient interest can hardly achieve anything beyond a few column centimetres, as we need to look at what heavy chains bind Prasar Bharati before calling it a poodle.

On a leash

In 1990, V.P. Singh's government passed a landmark Act to delink the two state monopolies, All India Radio and Doordarshan, from the government that earlier Congress regimes had used to the hilt. A new autonomous corporate holding, namely Prasar Bharati, was desired, but the bureaucrats of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry ensured, through two sections, 32 and 33, that effective control remained with them. In any case, the Act was put into cold storage throughout P.V. Narasimha Rao's tenure and it was only on the Supreme Court's order that it was taken out in 1997, dusted and operationalised.

After bundling off the first CEO who took 'autonomy' too seriously within a few months, the Ministry ensured for several years that its own Additional Secretaries doubled up as CEOs of Prasar Bharati. Though some were outstanding, they were vulnerable and the Ministry clamped 'dominion' status through total funding control. Some 48,000 employees recruited by the Ministry in the Soviet days were unceremoniously passed on to Prasar Bharati, weighing it down with unmanageable numbers and hardwired sarkari mindsets. Under law, their pay has necessarily to be borne by government but it invariably makes a hue and cry about Prasar Bharati bleeding it.

Sign up for newsletters, unlock features and do more on The Hindu

LOG IN

Support our reporting.

SUBSCRIBE NOW

When the Prasar Bharati Board (one must compliment the present and previous one) demanded justice and autonomy, they were laughed away. There were, and still are, several excellent professionals in DD and AIR, but governmental systems demoralise and punish initiative. Almost every minister has enjoyed these hegemonic powers as secretaries could never exercise these without acquiescence or encouragement.

Colossal wastage

Some 10-12 years ago, a couple of ministers pumped money into DD for making its own serials, replacing the earlier successful model of Ramayan, Mahabharat and Buniyaad, and the result was pathetic. All they did was to enrich the private producers and damage DD's TRPs beyond repair but, despite best efforts, that model has not been replaced even now. Over the decades, countless radio and TV stations were set up and even when it was known that less than 2% of India watches terrestrial transmission through rooftop rod antennas, not a single of the 1,400-plus towers could be shut down. These, and short wave radio transmitters, guzzle power, money and bind down a lot of manpower. So do the 45 TV studios whose 100-odd staff produce just half an hour's programme per day. But then, who bells the cat that appoints everyone, including the board members? Section 17 transferred all assets and properties from the Ministry to Prasar Bharati, but in 20 years, the rules of transfer could not be made.

Every time the organisation hires 'updated professionals' from the open market to try to make old elephants run a bit like racehorses, 'insiders' are egged on to complain and inquiries instituted. Parliamentary committee recommendations enjoining autonomy and the Pitroda Committee report are all stuffed into lockers, while control is exercised daily through adroit divide and rule at the top. Until the organisation is forcefully decoupled from its massive sloth and totally detoxified, there is no option but to keep singing the master's anthem.

Jawhar Sircar is former CEO of the Prasar Bharati Corporation

Right | Bimal Julka

There's much that can be improved, but the vision of the public broadcaster is unbiased, credible and autonomous

The public service broadcaster (PSB) acts as a protector of the nation's conscience, preserving its cultural ethos and core values. In a pluralistic society like India, the PSB plays a pivotal role in maintaining the social fabric. Its aims encompass two main strands: radio and television should give people the programmes they want to hear and watch, and also satisfy social purposes such as education and the promotion of citizenship.

The Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) Act, 1990, in Section 12, defines its primary duty of organising and conducting public broadcasting services to inform, educate and entertain the public. Article 19 (1) (a) of the Constitution has guaranteed freedom of speech and expression as a fundamental right. Broadcasting is the most important and integral aspect of communication through which this right to freedom of speech and expression enshrined in it could be freely disseminated and sustained.

In the contemporary high-traction media buzz characterised by TRP ratings, consumerist tilt, aggressive advertising and thirst for brand imaging, TV channels have no choice but to cater to the

gallery — often resulting in not-so-desirable content. It is against this backdrop that DD and AIR play a positive role to strike a balance between the quest for entertainment, the thirst for revenue, and the zest for social, cultural and national priorities. Thus, the priorities for the PSB are quite different from the private channels where key indicators are intangible.

Need to professionalise

The large networks of AIR and DD play a key role in upholding the unity and integrity of the country and values enshrined in the Constitution. At this juncture there is an essential requirement for autonomy, decentralisation and devolution of power within Prasar Bharati with the aid of professional managers to run its business, specifically for content, marketing, commercial operations and most importantly the regional networks. A thorough look at the systems and procedures is essential to reorient its bureaucracy and increase efficiency, innovation and creativity. Operating procedures and internal processes should be transparent to reduce the possibility of any collusion and corruption.

Urgent action is required in the area of human resource development including cadre review, staff size, organisational structure, etc. as a step towards a more competent, efficient and professional organisation. Both AIR and Doordarshan need to capitalise on its full potential and the possibilities of the new media. Under the Prasar Bharati Act, the Central government can legitimately ask the corporation to furnish all forecast, estimates, information and documents with regard to its financial transactions and engagements. It is incumbent upon the PSB to evolve more aggressive strategies for marketing its programmes, archival material, facilities and services and expertise to meet the infrastructural and technological challenges in future.

The PSB's vision is unbiased, credible and autonomous, which makes Indians better citizens, enriches their lives with correct information, quality entertainment and value education. Presently, the basic flaws in organisation and control need to be fixed in-house. Blindly following foreign models may not be appropriate due to uniqueness of its character, needs of the audience and the relevant constitutional requirements. The PSB has to set its own house in order, to serve the public good and provide information services that commercial broadcasters may find difficult to achieve. The perception created about the PSB being its master's voice is a myth.

Bimal Julka is Central Information Commissioner and was Secretary in the Information and Broadcasting Ministry. The views expressed are personal

Centre | Rajiv Mehrotra

The public, legal face of its autonomy belies the reality of its relationship with the I&B Ministry

The Prasar Bharati Corporation that administers DD and AIR has been in limbo and decay for decades. The average age of its demoralised programme staff is 50-plus. Urban elites see it as

obsolete and out of sync with audiences. The challenges are overwhelming. After a long night, there is a glimmer of possibility. We must support this.

Deepening reach

Prasar Bharati is expanding its reach among regional and rural audiences, the disadvantaged and the disenfranchised, providing them local content in tune with their needs and tastes. This is a core constituency for a public service broadcaster. Last year, the viewership of DD's Kisan channel grew by 60%, that of a bouquet of its regional channels by nearly 70% and the revenue from DD DTH (Direct To Home) service against competition from big players like Tata Sky and Airtel increased by 48%. DD is set to launch a major programming initiative for the critical North-East channel. It is completing a massive content commissioning and acquisition exercise. More than ₹100 crore has been invested in 100 different programmes in diverse genres. The Doordarshan/ Public Service Broadcasting Trust partnership has yielded 650 independent documentary films so far, with more to follow. They have won 59 national awards from the President of India and won an award from around the world for virtually every second film. It can be done! Make in India for the world!

A clear vision

The albatross around Prasar Bharati's neck is the ambiguity between the public, legal face of its autonomy and the reality of its relationship with Shastri Bhawan (where the office of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry in Delhi is located). It is confused about its role, its aspirations, about how its success and failures are to be judged: by the revenues it earns or its audience share. Are these to be compared to the commercially driven satellite channels? Should it be an articulator and promoter of the government's agenda and its point of view or should it strive to be a neutral media space for civil society?

It does not help its agendas and aspirations if its prime-time slots and identity are auctioned off to the highest bidder without even a reference to nature and quality of content — as was done. It will be more prudent to scale down Prasar Bharati in the short term and improve efficiency to lower costs.

An important investment

Public broadcasting justifies and needs public money because its emphasis, unlike commercial television, is to deliver messages to audiences motivated by the public good. It is the antidote to the cacophony of the private electronic media that delivers eyeballs to its advertisers. When successful, public broadcasting sets exemplary standards of quality and serves as an example of good taste, of decency and values; it is impartial and occupies a neutral space between the political agendas of the state and those with commercial agendas.

Prasar Bharati has struggled on most counts. It is not too late. It must have genuine autonomy and be encouraged to create and sustain a professional organisational structure to enable it to function

with the transparency and accountability of a good public enterprise. In time this could evolve into a public-private partnership.

This is as important a public investment as in education, health care and an efficient legal justice system. A society that lacks an effective alternative media space and voice diminishes its fundamental democratic freedoms and choices while reinforcing the cultures of the privileged.

Rajiv Mehrotra is Managing Trustee of the Public Service Broadcasting Trust and has had a long association with AIR and DD