

What Prasar Bharati needs: Not a scalpel, but a hatchet

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Khushwant Singh, arguably one of India's most anecdotally rich editors, used to narrate a droll recollection of his tuning in to the news in the 1970s and 1980s, when Doordarshan and All India Radio were state-owned monopolies that ruled the airwaves.

Every morning, Singh said, he would start the day by tuning in to BBC Radio and Voice of America, and would be alarmed beyond measure by the state of the world, given their breathless reports of wars and pestilence and poverty.

Such news invariably left his nerves frayed, but then, he added, he would tune in to AIR and be immediately calmed by the anodyne news headlines that suggested to him that all was well with the world.



] Facebook page.

The Doordarshan logo. Image courtesy:

The pitiable news instinct of India's state-owned broadcasters, which always rendered them to ridicule of this sort, was brought forcefully home in 1984, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated. Her son Rajiv Gandhi, who was away from Delhi on that day, wanted confirmation of the news, and admitted in an interview later that he tuned in to BBC Radio that afternoon to secure that confirmation.

Here was the Prime Minister's son, whom everyone knew was being groomed to take up the top job, and who had the entire machinery of the government, including the news-gathering network of one of the world's largest broadcasters, at his command. And even he had no faith in either AIR or Doordarshan, primarily because they were waiting for official governmental clearance to announce her death. That alone should have been reason enough to shut down the News Division of the two broadcasters.

Nearly 30 years later, much has changed about India's state-owned broadcasters, and yet for all their extensive reach, particularly in India's rural hinterland, they haven't exactly been able to leverage their long years of operation, their elaborate footprint, and their phenomenally rich archives to come out on top in today's far more competitive broadcast media environment.

Worse, even though private news channels too routinely get a lot of flak on grounds of their purported lack of credibility and the hectoring, rush-to-judgment style of their talkshows, the state-owned broadcasters - and, in particular, Doordarshan - haven't been able to up their game.

A large part of this is because, being state-owned, Doordarshan lends itself to the propaganda of the ruling dispensation, and even the instrument of a broadcasting corporation - the Prasar Bharati - hasn't been a shield from such interference in its core responsibility of providing news and views.

Employing nearly 40,000 employees, Prasar Bharati is something of a white elephant that survives on the taxpayers' munificence to meet its operational expenses of around Rs 2,000 crore a year. It does make about Rs 1,500 crore a year, largely through advertising, but much of this comes by way of a predatory provision under which it is mandatory for rights holder of any sporting event of national importance in India to share the feed with Doordarshan.

Doordarshan's incapacity to leverage its large network for eyeballs that matter isn't hard to establish. [This](#)

[2011 report](#), from FICCI and KPMG points out that in 2010, Doordarshan's programs figured nowhere in the top 10 fictional and non-fictional programs.

In other words, in a country with the world's third largest TV market (with some 150 million TV households), whose landscape has been changing dramatically with the advent of Direct-to-Home and IPTV platforms and LCD/HD TVs, the old dinosaur, with the longest record of play, is looking stodgy.

Even in the rural areas, which are typically considered Doordarshan's domain, it is losing out to private competition, largely owing to the advent of DTH platforms. As the FICCI-KPMG report points out, today, "rural households with a monthly income of less than Rs 3,000 are also purchasing DTH." The arrangement whereby several individual apartments in an apartment complex share a dish and split the connection is spreading even to Tier-II cities, it observes.

Self-owned dishes offer rural viewers a curious sense of control over their TV-viewing behavior. Given that rural subscribers are plagued by frequent power cuts in the locality (including at the cable operator's establishment), a self-owned dish, for instance, allows them to watch uninterrupted television by using personal generator sets.

That Prasar Bharati is on a slippery slope of financial unsustainability has likely dawned on even the UPA government. It is therefore looking to come up with alternative models of public financing of broadcasters - something along the lines that the BBC abides by. That, at any rate, is the ambit of a committee that has been set up under Sam Pitroda to redraw Prasar Bharati's future.

But then, this isn't the first committee to have come up with recommendations to salvage Doordarshan and AIR: but then, the recommendations of, among others, the Narayanamurthy Committee, the Bakshi Committee and the Bagchi Committee are gathering dust somewhere in the Information and Broadcasting Ministry.

But perhaps the most sensible recommendation that the government has received in respect of the Prasar Bharati came from the telecom regulator Trai late last year. Trai recommended that the Union (and State) governments (and the companies they control) should be barred from the business of broadcasting and distributing television channels ([more here](#)).

More to the point, Trai recommended that in order to limit political influence in TV programming, the "arm's length" relationship between the government and Prasar Bharati should be strengthened by providing greater "functional autonomy" to the broadcaster.

Those are sensible suggestions. Throwing good taxpayers' money after bad is pointless, particularly since it is abundantly clear that for all the notional footprint that Doordarshan enjoys, it doesn't command loyalty among its viewership even in rural areas. The state broadcaster may yet have a small and marginal role to play in public education and awareness campaigns, but beyond that, the government should get out of the news broadcasting and distribution business.

Far better to get the white elephant off the gravy train and put it on a crash diet.