

Corporatising Prasar Bharati

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THE NEW Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr. Arun Jaitley, has, like his predecessors, raised new hopes for an early regulatory mechanism for broadcasting. But unlike his predecessors, he is not a full-time politician and in articulation capabilities none of them matches him. Also, he is not the first one to raise the twin issues of accountability and efficiency of Prasar Bharati. That calls for concrete initiatives going beyond clichés — on the part of Mr. Jaitley. Only then will he be taken seriously and only then will he be able to make the much-delayed difference in the mass communication scene of the country. How soon he would get down to it and with what specifics is what everyone is waiting to see. There is no end to the search for a “consensus” or a “comprehensiveness” on ever-changing technology-dependent policy issues such as broadcasting. What is needed is an “understanding” of the urgency of having a broadcast regulatory mechanism. His predecessors too lost a lot of time in the name of “consultations” and an opportunity in the process. Now Mr. Jaitley has a “millennium opportunity.”

Today we have a brave new media world where access to reliable and credible information and a wide diversity of entertainment are the new rules of the broadcasting regime; where profit-driven and performance-oriented companies are fighting for the mind and heart of the viewer. In such an environment, the Government-run national broadcaster's bureaucratic style of functioning is not conducive to quick decision-making and operational efficiency.

In the current media scenario, radio and television have become tools that render a service to consumers. This is inevitable given the dynamics of funding in broadcasting. But a public broadcaster is not merely a “service provider.” Because it still plays the role of giving to its viewers/listeners the freedom to choose from the widest possible range of programme matter — and not just programming that is dictated by the objectives of advertisers and sponsors. Public broadcasting is still an instrument of social and cultural devel-

opment, rather than just an alternative consumer service, which has relevance for every community and social group in our multi-cultural society.

Corporatisation is the only option available today for Prasar Bharati to make the transition into a dynamic media environment and ensure it a chance to compete with its rivals by installing a viable structure, and effective systems and processes. It ensures relevant and unambiguous policies related to finance, personnel, sales and marketing and other important func-

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tions. The recent professional exercise by the Centre for Media Studies on formulating a vision and a mission for Prasar Bharati towards its corporatisation is a good first step — the Minister should care about.

A Strategic Action Plan for Prasar Bharati should include: First and foremost, certain criteria should be laid down for budgetary support. A minimum level of budgetary support should be ascertained, irrespective of which Government is in power. Since Prasar Bharati's activities would be in the interests of not just the national Government but also the State Governments, funding for public service broadcasting activities could be raised through contributions from the Centre and State Governments. This could be worked out based on the ratio of national-to-local programming and based on the viewership base for local programming in the States.

On the advertising revenue front, Doordarshan should realise that the minimum guarantee scheme has gone completely off the track creating an oversupply of free-commercial-time (FCT) thereby forcing producers to sell these at ridiculously low prices, often much lower than the spot rates charged by Doordarshan as per its official rate card. With a deterioration in programming quality, the official rate card

of Doordarshan is highly unrealistic. And measures need to be taken to match pricing with value.

Unscrupulous dealing in the sale of commercial time and the nexus between dubious marketing agents and officials of Doordarshan have led to a corrupt system where there is no accountability or monitoring of revenues. There is an urgent need to set up a monitoring and analysis system which keeps track of advertising traffic.

A lack of coordination between market-

ing and programming, poor scheduling, unviable programming have all diminished Prasar Bharati revenue-generating capabilities.

Equally important, a marketing strategy that focuses on the following elements need to be developed:

Programme sustainability: Determining the mix of socially-committed and commercial programming. The ratio of programming should be decided in a manner that the commercially-oriented programming sustains itself and pays for the responsibility-oriented programming.

Audience analysis exercise needs to be undertaken to understand its primary audience segments. Such an analysis should help create programming and attractive advertising slots for customers interested in targeting these specific segments.

Developing market oriented systems: Protocols need to be “established in respect of sourcing of programmes (both internally and externally). These should be transparent and perceived to be fair by all suppliers of programmes and other stakeholders. Ad-hocism and arbitrariness in the organisation's present systems is what is stifling its potential for growth.

Developing local advertising markets: Local programming creates local advertising opportunities. This reality needs to be

given a marketing direction and initiatives.

On the programming front, as a public broadcaster whose mandate is to “inform, educate and entertain,” Prasar Bharati needs to urgently restructure its programming mix and channel positioning based on careful analysis of viewer segments. The use of educational radio and TV programmes, creating genre-specific specialist teams, developing and setting quality benchmarks and sustained audience research, transparency in the procedure of awarding commissioned programmes, decentralisation of programming and a greater role for regional kendras are some of the initiatives urgently needed to meet its “service objectives”. Motivated employees and a performance-oriented work culture is the direct result of sound human resources policies, and transparency in operations lead to an all-round improvement in the image of the corporation and leads to improved work standards.

Digitalisation at user end: Technology is a crucial aspect of every broadcasting organisation. Doordarshan should leverage new technologies to sustain its leadership position while offering more options in the new millennium. Upgradation of technology and keeping up with the technological changes sweeping through the industry is a significant aspect that both Doordarshan and All India Radio need to focus on. Which today means digitalisation. Not merely on an experimental scale, but to ensure adaptability with a large segment of present users and in the earliest timeframe. Despite the expansion in the infrastructure FM radio, it is yet to pick up at the receiving end. In fact, there are some lessons for Prasar Bharati from FM radio.

The CMS report looks at the inter-related aspects of running a corporatised broadcasting set-up — right from defining the role of a public service broadcaster in a changing media environment, developing a vision and mission statement, providing guidelines on setting up corporate systems, processes and benchmarks for day-to-day functioning and developing a strategic plan of action to ensure Prasar Bharati leadership as a broadcaster in the short and long-term.