

India: birth of the Prasar Bharati

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Perhaps nowhere in the world has the government of a country given up control over its powerful electronic media as has just happened in India. All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan (DD), which were under the control of Government since their inception, now operate under an Independent Prasar Bharati Corporation.

The first task for Prasar Bharati is to highlight the difference from a state controlled media to that of an autonomous one. Improving broadcasting in India today has to do with improving the relevance of programmes, news credibility and transparency.

Restructuring of the programmes of both AIR and Doordarshan has been the first preoccupation of the Prasar Bharati Board, comprising ten members including one full time CEO and the Director Generals of AIR and DD. The Chairman of the Board and other members are on a part-time basis. The Board has so far had three formal meetings. As a part of their ambitious endeavour, bailing out the media from being viewed as sarkari (Government) is the foremost.

Doordarshan:

At the very outset, the Board issued instructions to all those involved in the collection and reporting of news to de-emphasise the 'VIP syndrome' in the news bulletins and reposition themselves with a constant concern for objectivity. Simultaneously, programmes on current affairs are being liberated from being initiated 'officially'. TV serials which have been the mainstay of viewers are being re-examined with a view to de-emphasising the mania for mythologies and unending soap operas. Instead, the 'entertainment - education' type of serials with which Doordarshan started its serials in the eighties are being sought after once again. Censoring of current affairs programmes produced by outside producers has been stopped in the very first fortnight of the functioning of Prasar Bharati.

In its efforts to optimise the infrastructure, Prasar Bharati closed down DD Channel-3 with effect from January 16, 1998. It is expected to convert the channel into an educational one soon. Started three years ago as a channel for culture and quality programmes, (on the lines of the BBC's second channel for its domestic audience) Channel-3 had lost a lot of its distinction. It is now looking into other ways of consolidating its reach. The Prasar Bharati Board has also ended uncertainty by deciding to strengthen the international reach of DD Channels 1 and 2 using INSAT-

2C to some 50 countries in the Middle-East and South Asia regions AIR:

Changes in All India Radio have been very evident in the last few weeks. Since January 1998, the AIR news is not 'read' as has been the case over the years but is 'presented' with lots of 'voice-overs'. Phone in programmes have now become more frequent and are on subjects on common concern. Radio is becoming an interactive medium now. The 'out of bounds' approach of AIR is being reversed. The gates of radio stations are being opened up to new talent and to make radio more accessible to citizens. Music is no longer only recorded. Live music is encouraged once again after some 40 years. Centralised programme scheduling is being looked at again to take AIR closer to the people and to be a lot more locally-specific.

Lok Sabha Poll - first test for Prasar Bharati:

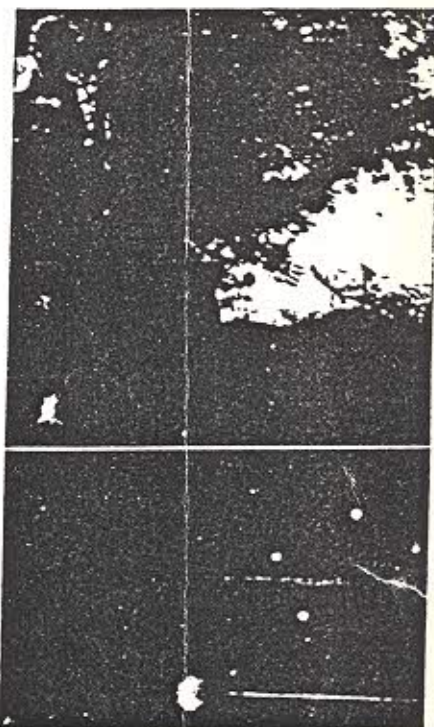
The abrupt dissolution of the Lok Sabha, or Parliament, on December 4, 1997, within a month after the coming into being of Prasar Bharati Board, has been the first challenge for Prasar Bharati. Elections are always a testing time for any media; more so for the ones just released from the clutches of 'government control' and which have earned the reputation of being 'manipulated' by the party in Government.

The forthcoming Election provides an opportunity to restore the credibility of AIR and Doordarshan in the shortest time possible. The evidence so far, one month after the 1998 poll process has started, however, is not all positive, with three major national political parties, including the one in power, coming out with accusations of partisan coverage.

The Board cannot convincingly debunk the accusations as yet.



Doordarshan headquarters in Delhi



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