

ATTN: Mr. BHASKAR RAO

Focus: Pr

Experiments with

The government should have formulated a national media policy before legislating the Prasar Bharati Act, says Dr N Bhaskara Rao

HAVING come into being hardly five months ago Prasar Bharati is in the news once again. The ordinance based on which the Prasar Bharati came into being will be allowed to lapse on May 6. With every change in the party in power if the Prasar Bharati has to go through this kind of uncertainty and change in its very structure can we expect anything better from All India Radio and Doordarshan?

However, allowing the ordinance to lapse is perhaps what any other government would have done considering the kind of imbalanced Board that was constituted based on the ordinance. But what is causing concern now is that the lapse revives the provision of a 22-member Parliamentary Committee, meant initially in the Act to oversee the functioning of the Prasar Bharati. The question is whether such a committee amounts to curbing the autonomy of the Board. The ordinance scrapped this provision with an explicit view that it would erode the autonomy of the corporation. In fact, the then minister Mr S Jaipal Reddy, won public kudos for doing away with this very committee. There cannot be any controversy about the need for accountability of the Board to the Parliament. The issue is of operational control of MPs over and above the review responsibility by the Standing Committee of Parliament.

Of all political parties the BJP was the only one which spelled out at length an outlook and proposals on media in its election manifesto. More specifically, the BJP promised to "improve the provisions of the Prasar Bharati Act to let Prasar Bharati organise an effective public broadcasting system, which would be accountable to Parliament but free from government control, immune from political influence and sensitive to the diverse needs of Indian Society." This intention was reiterated in the BJP government's National Agenda for governance. So the

question now is what improvements can be brought about in the Prasar Bharati and in such a way that successive governments do not propose further changes.

Long felt need

Perhaps no where in the world has the government of a country given up its control over the powerful electronic media as happened in India in 1997. All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan (DD) which were under government control since their inception, now operate under an independent Prasar Bharati Corporation.

For seven years after the Prasar Bharati Act remained comatose until the United Front government abruptly declared its revival in mid-1997. The Prasar Bharati Act had been designed to ensure autonomous public broadcasting in India, the need of which was recognised more than 20 years ago. The Prasar Bharati Bill which becomes operational by the end of November 1997 was first introduced in Parliament way back in 1979.

The AIR and Doordarshan network is unparalleled in the world of broadcasting, both in terms of size and reach. Doordarshan networks today comprise 1,000 transmitters and that of All India Radio about 200 stations including 94 FM stations. Over the years over Rs 40,000 crore has been invested in both the media. The government has transferred all these assets to the new corporation with no tags attached.

The Prasar Bharati Corporation with responsibility for AIR and Doordarshan is a milestone in the Indian media scene. The Act envisages certain activist agenda for Prasar Bharati. The primary objective of Prasar Bharati is to "organise and conduct public broadcasting service to inform educate and entertain the public." Apart from "safeguarding the citizen's right to be informed freely, truthfully and objectively on all matters of public interest". Any changes envisaged in the Prasar

Bharati Act now should help the Board endeavour and achieve this over riding objective.

Relevance

As such the first task for Prasar Bharati is to highlight the difference from state controlled media to that of autonomous ones. Improving broadcasting in India today has to do more with improving the programme relevance, news credibility and transparency in the operations. Prasar Bharati has no bench marks to rely in this respect, except general perceptions of the larger public.

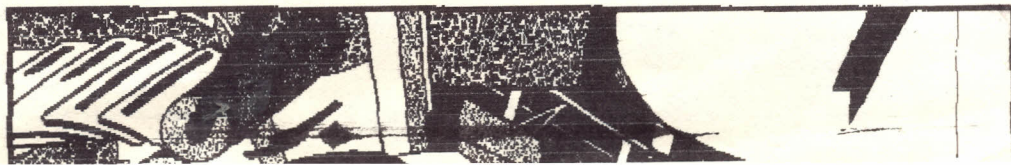
Restructuring of programmes both of AIR and Doordarshan has been the first preoccupation of the Prasar Bharati Board, comprising 10 members including one full-time executive member and the two Director General (of AIR and DD) under the Act. There is provision for two full-time members, one for finance and another for personnel. Where as the ordinance provided for only one full-time member (executive) thereby concentrating the powers in the post of Executive Member and also enabled Mr S-S Gill to occupy that post. The Chairman of the Board and other members are part time.

The Prasar Bharati Board, however, has become synonymous with S-S Gill. As a part of their ambitious endeavour, bailing out of the media from being viewed as *sarkari* is the foremost.

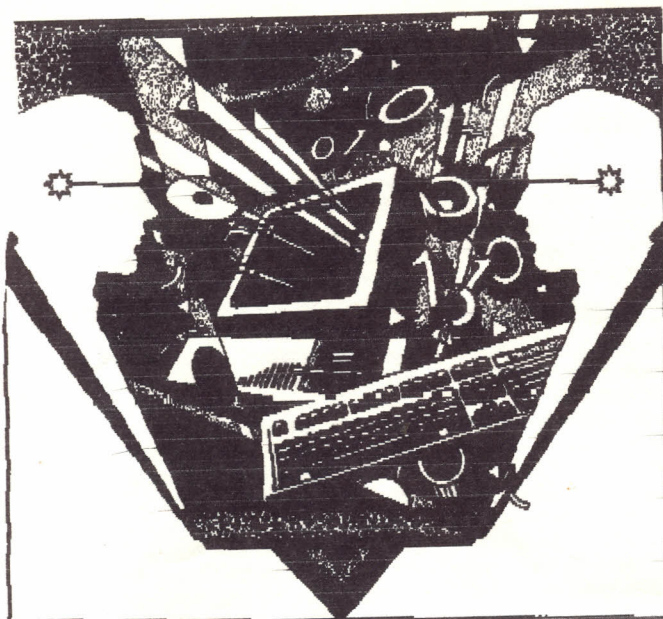
Doordarshan

At the very outset, the Board issued instructions to all those involved in collection and reporting news to de-emphasise the 'VIP syndrome' in the news bulletins and reposition themselves with 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-emphasise the mania for



Prasar Bharati autonomy



mythologies and soaps. Instead, 'entertainment education' type of serials with which Doordarshan started its serials in the eighties are being sought after. Censoring of current affairs programmes produced by outside producers on Doordarshan has been stopped in the very first fortnight of the functioning of Prasar Bharati.

In fact in its efforts to optimise the infrastructure, Prasar Bharati has closed down DD Channel-3 with effect from January 16, 1998 and is expected to convert the channel into an "educational" one. Started three years ago as a channel for culture and quality programmes on the lines of the BBC's second channel for domestic audience, Channel-3 lost of late its distinction.

Also, Doordarshan is now looking into other ways of consolidating its effective reach. The Prasar Bharati Board decided to strengthen the international reach of DD using INSAT-2C to some 50 countries in the Middle-East and South Asia regions. A distinct strategy as to the contents of Doordarshan-International is what we should be debating first.

AIR

Changes in All India Radio are far more evident in the last couple of months. News on AIR since this January is not 'read' as has been the case over the years but 'presented' with 'voice overs'. 'Phone in' programmes have now become more frequent and on subjects of common concern than ever before in AIR's history. Radio is becoming an interactive medium now. In

including the one in power, accusing the media of partisan coverage.

Apart from apprehensions about the future of the Broad in its present form, the availability of sufficient funding from the Government is yet another issue of concern which the new Parliament needs to address in the coming months. Earning money is not the first priority for the new Corporation, but quality and social relevance.

The Prasar Bharati Act provides for Government funding in the form of grants-in-aid. This however is yet to be seen given the kind of uncertainties. With the revival of the Parliamentary Committee it should be easier to get the grants in aid passed. It will also be entitled to license fees on radio and television sets as and when levied. All India Radio and Doordarshan require nearly Rs 1,400 crore for 1997-98 against an expected revenue of not more than Rs 600 crores from commercials. Obviously, viability cannot be expected within a couple of years and the Government has to continue to support Prasar Bharati. As such how autonomous this new organisation can afford to be remains to be seen.

The new Government is apparently exploring the possibility of

going for equity in the Prasar Bharati Corporation in place of grant-in-aid. But then there might also be a re-think on the present arrangement of "leasing" the assets of All India Radio and Doordarshan to Prasar Bharati Corporation for a token one rupee per annum.

The Prasar Bharati Act says that the staffers have four months to make up their minds, starting September 15, 1997 as to whether to remain with the government, or to join the Prasar Bharati Corporation. So far nothing has happened on this front leaving the 48,000 employees of All India Radio and Doordarshan wondering about their fate. Urgent initiatives are overdue in this regard to end the impasse. Also, they need to be motivated with a vision rather than inundated with office memos.

The Broadcast Bill awaiting reintroduction in the 12th Lok Sabha provides for a Broadcast Authority to regulate the working of the private broadcasters which obviously implies the country having two parallel systems — one for All India Radio and Doordarshan and the other for private operators. Instead of two such separate bodies, one regulatory body for public and private broadcasters is perhaps better.

The option of combining the Prasar Bharati Board and the Broadcast Authority, making the latter the overseeing body, bringing the public broadcasters and the private broadcasters under one regulation and licensing umbrella will result in better co-ordination between the two types of broadcasters and reduces wastage and duplication. In fact, these are the days not only of collisions but also of convergence.

Instead of going in for the Prasar Bharati Act and a Broadcast Bill first and then talking of a media policy it would have benefited the nation if it went the other way around. The sooner the uncertainty about Prasar Bharati is ended, the better it would be for its credentials and capacity to cope with the ever mounting competition in the country from private broadcasting from within and outside. The independent nature of the Broad or its tenure should never again be an issue of contention between political parties.

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