

# Why India can't have its BBC

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Why can't India have its own BBC? This question pops up at fairly regular intervals, especially in 'cocktail circuits', where the rather provincial presentation of Doordarshan comes up. It also features in media discourses, with the obvious innuendo that Prasar Bharati – along with Akashvani and Doordarshan – is not fulfilling its mandate as an autonomous body in the same spirit as BBC. Let us get into the facts and gain some clarity.

We may begin with size and mandate. The UK has one major and five 'minority' languages, while India has 22 official languages and over 600 dialects. The audience base of the British public broadcaster and its Indian counterpart are also vastly different, where literacy and worldviews are concerned. After Independence, AIR took up the task of 'uniting' a fragmented polity, which was conscious that it was one nation but spread over 14 British provinces and 565 princely states. The large number of languages, ethnic groups and multiple competing cultures did not make its task any easier.

In a way, Akashvani brought India together in the 1950s and 60s through a renewed respect for its own classical traditions, with Nehru's information minister B V Keskar leading the campaign. This was then reinforced by spreading, intensively and extensively, the denominator that soon emerged as the nation's common idiom: Bollywood's filmi music, through Vividh Bharati.

It was popular film music which actually brought much needed 'emotional unity' to diverse Indians, especially when several elements were up in arms to secede from the Union. Doordarshan came in later, and further helped consolidate the nation with iconic serials like Hum Log, Ramayan, Mahabharat, Nukkad and Buniyaad.

No such task was bestowed upon BBC except during the World Wars and it does not have to broadcast in 30 different languages every day for 30 lakh people, as in Manipur. India's broadcaster is present from the freezing heights of Kargil to the solitude of Car Nicobar, from the Rann of Kutch down to the islands of Lakshadweep, and right up the nation's lengthy borders. BBC does not have to operate programmes in highly disturbed areas like Dantewada.

One is not attempting to gloss over the obvious inadequacies of Prasar Bharati – it simply does not have the sheen, élan and image that BBC possesses. To the urban Indian, BBC is a metaphor for quality, autonomy and fearless independence, but this autonomy is paid for by the people of Britain through an annual licence fee of Rs 13,500 per person to maintain the broadcaster. Are Indians prepared to pay such a levy, or even half?

In 1997, GoI handed over 47,000 of its own employees to Prasar Bharati. This number has come down to 30,000 but let us remember that more than half would go just to maintain its 2,000 transmitters, even if three persons are deputed per shift for three shifts a day. Besides, AIR has 414 radio and relay stations and Doordarshan has 67 programme stations and studios.

Whether such a gigantic setup is required or not is another matter, but the fact is people are required to maintain what the nation has created over the decades. Put in perspective, we find that BBC employs 22,000 people to service 64 million British – that works out to one employee for every 3,000 citizens. For Prasar Bharati that ratio is just one employee for every 42,000 Indians.

Why can't Doordarshan's programmes improve in quality? The answer lies partly in the inability of Prasar Bharati to infuse fresh blood and update practices, as no new blood has entered the body in the last 20 years. Most employees have not even received a single promotion in even longer periods: thus morale, motivation, imagination and skills are at their lowest ebb. But with the new government giving considerable importance to the public broadcaster after decades – about which there is some snickering – all one hopes is that a turnaround may now be feasible.

The Pitroda Committee made an analysis of the percentage of total spending that is for building good 'content'. It found that while Japan's broadcaster spends 75% and BBC 71%, Prasar Bharati is able to spend just 13% on content. So, quality is obviously at stake. This committee also discovered that while India's broadcaster earns about 40% of its revenues from commercial sources, BBC's equivalent figure is just 20%.

BBC spends a lot more on content which accounts for its world class quality, while Prasar Bharati has to cut through a jungle of questions and objections from ministry officials to send just a couple of programmers abroad. UK spends \$111 per capita on its public broadcaster and Norway spends as much as \$164, but India spends just 31 cents. These are hard facts that the nation may consider, even when government extends a helping hand.

The last question is on autonomy, which is enshrined in the Act and remains a constant goal. But it is futile to imagine that an orthodox organisation manned by government employees is actually pining for it. One learnt this the hard way and then started focusing first on building internal efficiencies and professionalism and also seeking greater operational freedom, before trying to become a BBC.