

Development of Public Service Broadcasting in India: Roles, Challenges and Possibilities

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Abstract

Public Service Broadcasting as an ethical standard has for long been considered the ideal in Broadcasting. And with the present proliferation of technology in the field of mass communication, a renewed look at PSB is sought for. This article traces the development, roles, challenges and possibilities of PSB in India in the form of establishment of Prasar Bharti, its role in social and cultural development, challenges from autonomy and commercialization and the possibility of outreach respectively. Also included is a look at various policy recommendations made on behalf of the Indian Government as they have formed the base for the development of Prasar Bharti, which is the sole broadcaster with elements of PSB.

Keywords: Public Service Broadcasting, India, Prasar Bharti, Autonomy, Commercialization

1. Introduction

Broadcasting essentially means the transmission of information over airwaves and the character of this information helps in the classification of the broadcast. Here we are primarily concerned with broadcast of information through Radio and Television sets meant for consumption by the public, which

is broadcasting as an instrument of mass communication.

The earliest known broadcast through radio was done by Charles Herrold in April 1909 from San Jose, California. With the subsequent development of technology its assertiveness as an instrument of mass communication started becoming evident. This possibility made it imperative for countries to devise laws and regulations for its usage, as it was concerned with the masses - who in themselves were the subjects of their governments. As is noted in an internal confidential report from February 25, 1924 in which the *Imperial Wireless Telegraphy Committee* stated (Wikipedia.org 2013):

“We have been asked ‘to consider and advise on the policy to be adopted as regards the Imperial Wireless Services so as to protect and facilitate public interest.’ It was impressed upon us that the question was urgent,”

British Broadcast Company, established in 1922, was the first institution which used the air waves for experimental transmissions, these transmissions included programs sponsored by newspapers. But in 1926, the British

government in accordance with the recommendation of Crawford Committee, annulled the British Broadcast Company Ltd and set up the non-commercial British Broadcasting Corporation. Apart from the creation of a public corporation, which would serve as a trustee for the national interest in broadcasting, the recommendations said: "...it was expected that as public trustee, the corporation would emphasise serious, educational and cultural programming that would elevate the level of intellectual and artistic tastes of the audience". On 20th December 1926 the Crown Charter proclaiming the establishment of the world's first public broadcaster were published (Wikipedia.org, 2013). Public Service Broadcasting, as a term, originated after the establishment of the aforementioned British Broadcasting Corporation.

The generally accepted definition of Public Service Broadcasting is the eight principles outlined by Michael Tracey (1998):-

- (1) Universality of availability.
- (2) Universality of appeal.
- (3) Provision for minorities, especially those disadvantaged by physical or social circumstances.
- (4) Serving the public sphere.
- (5) A commitment to the education of the public.
- (6) Public broadcasting should be distanced from all vested interests.
- (7) Broadcasting should be structured as to encourage competition in good programming rather than competition for numbers.

- (8) The values of broadcasting should liberate rather than restrict the programme-makers.

The above outlines do not explicitly mention the absence commercial or governmental control, in ways financial and administrative. But this can be inferred from (6) which says, "Public broadcasting should be distanced from all vested interests" as both political control and commercial control will bring in accountability to the sponsoring body thereby control over content. Public Service Broadcasting content is concentrated towards what the public ought to be given and not public needs. This concept will be discussed further later in the essay when we talk about commercialization.

2. Public Service Broadcasting

Apart from what principles public service broadcasting should be based upon, the importance of PSB has been thoroughly defined and redefined through varying conferences and summits:-

"Public service broadcasting (PSB) has an important role to play in providing access to and participation in public life. Especially in developing countries, PSB can be instrumental in promoting access to education and culture, developing knowledge, and fostering interactions among citizens. For the majority of the world population, comprising inhabitants of huge rural areas and illiterate people, radio and television remain the most available and widespread ICTs, with radio in the first place as primary

communication medium," (Banerjee and Sevaniratne, 2005)

And when we talk about the control of Public Service Broadcasting the following observation summarizes the need for arms-length distance from both commercial and governmental interests.

"Neither commercial nor State-controlled, public broadcasting's only *raison d'être* is public service. It is the public's broadcasting organization; it speaks to everyone as a citizen. Public broadcasters encourage access to and participation in public life. They develop knowledge, broaden horizons and enable people to better understand themselves by better understanding the world and others. Public broadcasting is defined as a meeting place where all citizens are welcome and considered equals. It is an information and education tool, accessible to all and meant for all, whatever their social or economic status. Its mandate is not restricted to information and cultural development—public broadcasting must also appeal to the imagination, and entertain. But it does so with a concern for quality that distinguishes it from commercial broadcasting. (*ibid*)

This definition though leaves few stones unturned that of the linguistic barrier encountered when the word public is used. The word 'public' is generally construed as something referring to 'the Government' or 'entities related to the government'. Though it is true that when the world is administered through representation by someone or some-people for everyone, take

any form of government as an example, 'public' as a word would invoke the idea of the government. This kind of notion makes 'public service' directly related to what the government thinks fit for the public. Such service can be done by anyone but it should ultimately be in the domain of what the government thinks fit for the public. The problem arises when in a diverse culture what should be fit for the diversity in itself assumes diverse.

But this linguistic problem is not the biggest hurdle that Public Service Broadcasting faces, by virtue of the way it is defined. The major problem that PSB faces is the autonomy it is ceded from those who are in control. Also with globalization PSB has also fallen prey to competition from commercial broadcasters. The latter uses homogenization of content to appeal to a larger audience, but in the way compromise diversity in content.

3. The Indian Scenario

India is a diverse country with 22 official and 216 native languages scattered over a population of 1.2 billion. In such a vast country mass communication itself becomes a challenge. In this section we outline the history from its antecedents, to recommendation and then to the present situation.

3.1 Antecedents

Broadcasting in India started in November 1923 from the Radio Club in Calcutta. Similar amateur broadcasting networks, which were established by Indian Broadcasting Company, sprung up Bombay and Madras. But the expenditure of these setups far exceeded their revenue, which was derived from

two sources:-

1. It received 80 % of its revenues from radio licences. The fee was fixed by the government at ten rupees per radio set per annum. The company had to collect the revenue from those who possessed the receivers.

2. 10% tribute on the invoiced value of imported wireless equipment such as receivers, wireless valves, electric wireless gramophones, which the company had to collect itself from the dealers.

Due to dwindling licenses the company went into liquidation in June 1930. The revenue model described above resembles that which is used for funding Public service Broadcasting Services. Though people contended that the programs aired by the IBC catered to the small European community and westernized Indians there some lobbying from the leaders of political parties in the central assembly, who urged that the service should be continued without interruption. (P C Chatterjee, 1991)

Henceforth, detailed proposal were drawn out to acquire and run broadcasting stations and in early 1930s broadcasting came under the direct control of the government in the Department of labour and Industries and the Indian Broadcasting Company was renamed as The Indian State Broadcasting Service.

In 1935 the designation of Indian State Broadcasting Service was changed to All India Radio which was in 1941 transferred to the Department of Communication which after India's independence became a Ministry.

When India was partitioned the AIR network consisted of six stations and five in princely states. The total number of licenses was 2,48,000 in a population of 35 crore. Subsequently in 1951, with the commitment of the country to centralised planning, AIR's expansion has been included in the government's Five Year Plans.

3.2 Policies Regarding PSB

This move cemented AIR's position as a part of the Government for then and for posterity as till now AIR and Doordarshan are firmly in the control of the Central Government with little autonomy being ceded to it. But in the past 66 years several committees and working groups were established to look into the issues related to broadcasting. The most important of which are briefly discussed below along with their recommendations:-

1. The Chanda Enquiry Committee 1966 – This committee was setup after Indira Gandhi became the Cabinet Minister of Information and Broadcasting. The committee was headed by A.K. Chanda, former Auditor General of India. It suggested that AIR be converted into a corporation run by a Board of Governors on the BBC Model; that television be separated from radio and given a twenty year development plan; and that Vividh Bharti channel be commercialized and its profits ploughed back into radio for the improvement of the programmes. The latter two recommendations were accepted but the foremost was rejected. Such financial relation between Vividh Bharti and All India Radio, could

have been used to make AIR to become more oriented towards the PSB model.

2. The Verghese Working Group 1978 – Set up under the Janata government, the working group was to look into the possibility of granting AIR and Doordarshan complete autonomy. It recommended that AIR and Doordarshan should function under a single trust, the autonomy of which would be entrenched in the constitution itself. The trust would have decentralized administration for better state and regional level functioning. It also proposed that the Trust should have powers to license educational institutions to run 'franchise stations'. This would ensure diversity of content and the broadcasting education specific programmes.

But the subsequent bill which was introduced into the parliament rejected the concept of forming a trust and giving it constitutional autonomy. And as far as giving financial autonomy was considered the government did no better and kept control with itself. Also 'Franchise Stations', which was a genuine attempt towards Public Service Broadcasting found no place in the bill, which was called the Prasar Bharti Bill.

3. Joshi Working Group 1983 - This group was headed by Dr. PC Joshi, Director of Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi and had thirteen members. Its mandate was to 'prepare a software plan taking into consideration the main objectives of television of assisting in the process of social and economic development of the

country and to act as an effective medium for providing information, education and entertainment.' The report pressed on the need to decentralize the television system and to give top priority to providing community sets in Indian villages for which adequate funds are earmarked.

In order to restore Doordarshan's original purpose of promoting social education and development the report recommends that each transmitter network be equipped with studios and facilities to produce programmes in regional languages and that adequate funds should be provided and personnel should be posted at each Kendra to discharge these functions. It also recommended that at least 50 per cent of Doordarshan's programme time should be given over to programmes which are socio-educational.

This report takes recommends concrete steps towards the decentralization of Doordarshan. It envisaged television to be a vehicle of development and recommended such steps which would make the Indian village the primary subject.

4. Prasar Bharti Act, 1990 – This act was passed by the parliament in 1990 and its aim was to set up a Broadcasting corporation for India, called Prasar Bharti, which would encompass both Akashvani and Doordarshan. And to define its composition, functions and powers. This act came into force on 15th September 1997. According to the act the Prasar Bharti board was to consist of 15 members of which 2 were ex-officio members

and 1 was the political representative nominated from the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Though the remaining members were to be from public domain, they were to be nominated by the president on recommendation of Chairman of the Council of States and the Press Council of India (Which have in effect an inherent political character by virtue of their mode of appointment). Clause 12, 2 of the act lists 16 functions of the corporations which broadly resemble the functions of a Public Service Broadcaster. Those deemed important are listed below:-

- 1.12,2(c) obliges the broadcaster to pay special attention to education and spreading literacy agriculture, rural development, environment, health and family welfare and science and technology.
- 2.12,2(j) serving the rural and weaker sections of the people and those residing in border regions, backward or remote areas.
- 3.12,2(k) providing suitable programmes keeping in view the special needs of the minorities and tribal communities.
- 4.12,2(m) promoting national integration by broadcasting in a manner that facilitates communication in the languages in India; and facilitating the distribution of regional broadcasting services in every State in the languages of that State.

But there is further political influence on broadcasting in the act,

as is suggested in clause 13 which seeks to establish a parliamentary committee, which would oversee the functioning of the Corporation and submit reports to the parliament. The said corporation was to be funded by the central government in accordance with clause 17 which says the Central Government may, after due appropriation made by Parliament by law in this behalf, pay to the Corporation in each financial year, proceeds from broadcast receiver license fees and grants-in-aid and loans, by way of equity. Apart from central funding the corporation can have its own funds which it generates from various means.

But the primary danger to autonomy from government control of the envisaged corporation comes from clause 23 listed in the miscellaneous section of the act which empowers the Central Government to issue directions to the corporation as it may think necessary in the interests of the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India or the security of the State or preservation of public order requiring it not to make a broadcast on a matter specified in the direction or to make a broadcast on any matter of public importance specified in the direction. And in situations in which the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India means the longevity of the Political party in office such control could jeopardize the functions listed under 12.2 of the act. A few years a bill was tabled in the parliament titled **THE PRASAR BHARATI (BROADCASTING CORPORATION OF INDIA)**

AMENDMENT BILL, 2010 which aimed at only administrative amendments and nothing more.

In spite of all this it must be mentioned that in Doordarshan and AIR through their decentralized system have done a commendable job in introducing programmes which work towards educating and enriching the masses. Programmes like Tarang, Krishi Darshan and Yuva Bani are case in points

Though Prasar Bharti in its administrative architecture is far from what a Public Service Broadcaster should be, its programming does have certain elements PSB.

3.3 The Present Situation

3.3.1 Television

A FICCI KPMG report claims that by 2017 Cable and Satellite television viewership in India will grow to 173 million, representing 91 percent of TV households. This report excludes DD's free Direct-to-Home platform DD Direct.

DTH service which presently caters to 44 million subscribers is expected grow to 90 million subscribers by 2017, thereby becoming the biggest platform. (The power of a billion, 2013)

As regards to Public Service Broadcasting this fact is important because in comparison to digital cable satellite cable gives the consumer access to multitudes of channel on a demand basis. Also it is to be observed that these channels are available in the form of packages though it is criticized that private players garner profit by making different channel packages for different genres.

But it is not the packaging of

channels which is of concern; it is the possibility of easier outreach to distant places which is to be looked at.

Satellite television can be used to provide broadcasting service to people in rural areas. An example to be cited is DD Direct, which is a Direct to Home service started by Prasar Bharti. Also known as, Free Dish, it has about 9 million subscribers and its free-to-air service covers 81% of India's geographical area via 1415 transmitters. It currently offers around 60 television channels and 25 radio stations. The channels include 27 private and 6 international channels apart from all regional and national television and radio channels of Prasar Bharti.

The technical advantage with DD Direct is that it uses Ku-Band on the INSAT-4B. This gives it the ability to have pan-India coverage and is the reason why the slots on DD Direct are much sought after by private players.

This technical advantage is only compromised by its penetration which is far less in comparison to other Satellite providers, which stands at 44 Million. These private broadcasters do not have an obligation of providing channels with content pertaining to 'Public Service'.

3.3.2 Radio

There are 245 private FM stations in India operating from 86 cities which have a Combined Annual Growth Rate of 14 percent. According to IRS 2012 Q2 data, radio had an estimated audience of 158 million people (out of which FM radio accounts for 106 million).

(FM Radio: Facing challenges, embracing growth, 2012)

As far as AM is considered there are 48 Short Wave and 144 Medium Wave stations and that belong AIR apart from which there is BBC India broadcasts its programmes on Short Wave. All India Radio has spate of programmes aimed at regional and national audiences which are broadcasted through Medium and Short Wave respectively.

In Delhi, there are 10 FM mainstream broadcasters, of which one channel belongs to the AIR, called AIR FM Rainbow. All these channels broadcast commercial content. The legislation which would allow them broadcast news has not yet been properly formulated. News is only available on an hourly basis on the FM channel which belongs to AIR. On the national level AIR has 382 FM radio stations of which 86 are Local Stations which broadcast programmes which serve small communities, showcase local culture and broadcast area specific programmes for the benefit of the community.

The penetration of radio in the form of PSB is limited to programmes broadcasted by All India Radio apart from which there are 148 working Community Stations in India which also include Institute Radio Stations or 'Franchise Radio Stations' which serve very limited audiences.

AIR claims that it reaches 92% of the country's area and 99.19 % of the total population with programmes in 23 languages and 146 dialects (All India Radio, 2013). The reach is calculated by using

transmitter range and the population in the given range. Though this is a remarkable fact, the question that is needed to be asked is that of the content. To say that AIR is successfully fulfilling its mandate as a Public Service Broadcaster would be a tall claim because of the overriding governmental control.

3.3.3 Public Service Broadcasting Trust

This organization deserves a mention because it is the only organization in India which closest to being a Public Service Broadcaster. Public Service Broadcasting Trust works in the domain of cinemas. It is a non-governmental not-for-profit trust which gives film fellowships to filmmakers from across the country. It operates in partnership with the Films Division (MoI&B), Doordarshan and several other international organizations. Though Doordarshan meets half of its production costs and also provides air time, the autonomy of programming content is commendable. Trustees of this organization include Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal among others, which has helped it maintain a high standard of quality.

4. PSB in Britain – A brief look
Britain warrants a mention in every study of Public Service Broadcasting because that is where the term took birth and incidentally it has more or less lived up to its ideal of Public Service. The history of PSB in Britain has already been mentioned therefore we will straight away get to details about its functioning. The White Paper

introduced in 2006 as a precursor to the new Charter which perpetuates the establishment of BBC lists six purposes for the corporation: -

1. Sustaining citizenship and civil society;
2. Promoting education and learning;
3. Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence by using the licence fee as venture capital for creativity;
4. Representing the UK, its nations and regions;
5. Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK;
6. Building digital Britain.

Every activity that BBC undertakes must aim at meeting one or more of these purposes. (A public service for all: the BBC in the digital age, 2006)

BBC is funded through the following routes:-

1. Through the collection of license fee levied on everyone who has a connection. The fee is collected through the Post Office. (The evasion of license fee is punishable with imprisonment.)
2. Commercial earnings through sale of air time to advertisers and by running commercial services. This earning is used to return extra value through programming for the license fee payers. This is similar to what was suggested by the Verghese Working Group in 1978.

But what made the BBC maintain high standards of programming and independence with the remit of Public Service Broadcasting?

Stephen Hearst in his article Broadcasting regulation in Britain says "There is, in truth, a subtle relationship which depends more on the BBC's Governors wise exercise of their temporary authority and on Ministers restraint than on the precise letters of agreements that are in force". This implicitly means that the functioning of a Public Service Broadcaster in accordance to its principles is realistically possible if those at positions of power are willing (Hearst, 1992).

5. Issues with Public Service Broadcasting

5.1 Autonomy

The autonomy regarding content has been a question of its constitutionality. Even in the Verghese Working Group Report the recommended Trust was to be given autonomy guaranteed by an amendment to the constitution. But it is worth pondering whether this autonomy falls within the purview of our Fundamental Rights. Article 19, 1(a) of the constitution guarantees freedom of thought and expression though with caveat clauses. This is the right under which the Press guards its freedom. Broadcasting as a defined therefore can also be included within its ambit, as it is also a form of expression. Looking at it from the other side it should be right of every individual to have access to varying opinions. This has not yet taken place in case of Broadcasting as in the case of Press because not much litigation has taken place regarding the issue. Also the government has never ventured to draft a policy for broadcasting in India whereas the Press, through a sea of judicial

rulings have a cemented notion of Press Freedom. Take for example the following excerpt from the Supreme Court ruling in *The Indian Express vs Union of India* (AIR 1986 SC 515):-

Freedom of press is the heart of social and political intercourse. The press has now assumed the role of the public educator making formal and non-formal education possible in a large scale particularly in the developing world, where television and other kinds of modern communication are not still available for all sections of society. The purpose of the press is to advance the public interest by publishing facts and opinions without which a democratic electorate [Government] cannot make responsible judgments. Newspapers being purveyors of news and views having a bearing on public administration very often carry material which would not be palatable to Governments and other authorities.

These rulings form the bedrock in the argument for press freedom in a democracy, of which it is the fourth foundation pillar. Unfortunately broadcasting never came into this picture because in India private entities had not ventured into Radio and Television in its nascent stage. AIR and Doordarshan were the sole broadcasters and were owned by the government. Which even after numerous recommendations; did not cede the autonomy requisite for being Public Service Broadcaster.

5.2 Commercialization

With the onset of commercialization of air space many radio stations and

television channels have cropped up whose programming motive is centred round Television Rating Points. Also they operate in a profit-maximizing structure. These channels bank on homogeneity of content which is expected to have mass appeal and hence larger viewer base. An argument may be that there is mass viewing then that is what the public requires, but in an environment where the viewer is at the receiving end and has practically no say in the content creation the above argument proves shallow. It is somehow a vicious circle, that at one end the suppliers are choosing the content and then reviewing the public in what they find best out of whatever is being provided, and then defending the perpetuation of such a program on the basis that it is well received by the masses. This kind of programming does not help in educating or enlightening the viewers. Though it should not be concluded that television for masses and television of quality are mutually exclusive examples are shows like *Satyamev Jayate*.

In such an environment Public Service Broadcasters witness dwindling viewership. It may be that homogenous content appeals more to the viewers but it may not be socially or culturally enriching.

As is noted by Blumler (1992):-

Even when there is no linguistic difference, the need for commercial broadcasters to attract audiences of a sufficient size also limits their preparedness to serve regional audiences or sub-groups. Guarantees of this kind apply primarily to public broadcasting. Commercial broadcasters are

inevitably circumscribed by their need to address commercially-viable audiences, though they can be reached through satellite or cable.

Commercialization in broadcasting has an upside also, in that it creates competition. This competition is beneficial for the public because it gets the option of choosing what is best for it. Here in comes the role of the commercial wing of the public broadcaster. This commercial wing if existent can function in a manner in which it satisfies audience requirements created through their exposure to such programmes which do not fall under the umbrella of a Public Service Broadcast. This leaves the organization to broadcast programmes through their separate PSB channels, of such remit as can be considered a Public Service Broadcast.

Another aspect of commercialization is that the channels generate their primary revenue through advertising. This implies that shows aired are interspersed with advertisements and controlling the content of advertisements is difficult and their presence makes the audience susceptible to them which leads to the dilution of the overall effect of the programme.

6. Conclusion

The way Public Service Broadcasting has been taken up in the country leaves room for much improvement in the spheres of Content and Control. Though the third sphere of financing does influence the broadcast it should not be considered the biggest impediment, this is said citing the

example of PSBT.

In the 21st Century with technology capable of taking information to the remotest part of the country the debate of Public Service Broadcasting becomes a necessity. If we are to develop as a democratic nation we should make renewed efforts at making the concept viable.

As we have seen India has to bank on its sole Public Broadcaster, Prasar Bharti, for these purposes and though it has the advantage of reach it is plagued by issues of autonomy from government control. On the other side there are private broadcasters who have commercial disposition towards programming with elements of Public Service Broadcasting here and there.

To forward an idea of a completely independent organization which chooses its content in the best interests of the public and is neither controlled nor financed by the government would be a utopian conception which would not be practically viable in today.

Thus what is needed is an organization which is established with a mandate of Public Service Broadcasting in partnership with the government. Government's role will similar to that which it plays in PSBT, of making available its reach to the corporation and giving it autonomy with regard to content. Also such an organization would eliminate the monopoly of the government over Public Service Broadcasting. Such an organization which is representative of the people will help them in their right to free and fair information. ■

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