

Broadcasting for people

It's not the concern of Prasar Bharati alone

by N. Bhaskara Rao

HOW much concerned are we today about Public Service Broadcasting (PSB)? Of course, PSB cannot be appraised in isolation of the larger broadcast scene in the country. There is a misnomer that "public interest" contents cannot maximise viewership/listenership, and that "commercial viability" is not possible without going for "popularity" programmes irrespective of their public interest.

That being the general assumption, there can be three options in a broadcast scenario. One, maximise viewership for public interest broadcasts, unconcerned about commercial viability. Two, maximise viewership so that commercial interests can be served better; unconcerned about public interest. Three, the balance between commercial interest and public interest where popularity programming can subsidise public interest programmes and make "public interest" programmes in such a way that they too become "popular".

The intervening factor that dictates the course is the government policy towards broadcasting. For example, if the government is serious of public service broadcasting, the much-awaited "community radio" scheme should not have been languishing. At the end

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The role of PSB becomes even more important where socio-economic inequalities within the country are so glaring as in India. The "hawa" of privatisation of government-funded bodies should not be extended to Prasar Bharati.

What is "public interest"? Is it the same as what interests the larger public and "in the interest of the public"? Not necessarily. More often, in a competitive scenario, as broadcasters have to "attract" viewers/listeners, they go more for what interests the public. In fact, channels do so constantly. "Popularity" should not be mixed up as "interest". Even more so in the context of visual media. All broadcasters should have public service concern and programmes but, in a competitive situation it is the degree of concern for public service or the extent of such coverage. For, every broadcaster would claim that he is serving the public.

The Television Rating Points (TRPs) system is the villain of public service

Expecting Doordarshan to be a "public service broadcaster" in isolation of the broadcast scene and without any moderation or restraint on the part of a laissez faire policy of the government, for channels is an unworkable and unfair proposition. The public service broadcaster cannot be left at the mercy of market forces or expected to fight (an unequal) competition and with irrelevant benchmarks. Adding to this basic contradiction in the government policy on broadcasting is not to assure Prasar Bharati budgetary requirement as a long-term commitment. And such a budgetary commitment for public service broadcasting has to be irrelevant of which party the government is in power and as an obligation.

All broadcast channels should have the obligation for certain "minimum public service" conditions in their programme contents. Such obligations could be in terms of time devoted to community interests, in the interest of

set of public service concerns associated with "national issues" like communicable diseases, literacy, vocational education, right to information, and minimum wages should be identified for all broadcasters (not just DD) to take on. Also, a certain section of people like children and farmers should be identified for special programmes.

Having formed Prasar Bharati as a public corporation, the government has never reconciled to the fact that it is supposed to operate with some independence and financial commitment. In both respects the government has let down Prasar Bharati. In fact, on the issue of finance, the government showed its ignorance of public service by mending Prasar Bharati to "earn from the market" - which means in competition with other broadcasters operating without any government regulation and obligations to the public. There has been so much indecisiveness and inconsistencies in government policies towards the broadcasting sector. The government should view the budgetary allocation for Prasar Bharati from the Consolidated Fund the same way as in the case of allocations for education, drinking water or irrigation. The government should fund research and specially for reaching the unreached. As we have for the telecom sector, there

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The intervening factor that dictates the course is the government policy towards broadcasting. For example, if the government is serious of public service broadcasting, the much-awaited "community radio" scheme should not have been languishing. At the end of two years of a policy, only one community radio service has actually come into operation (that too in the heart of Chennai!) out of some 60 applications from across the country. The priority, on the other hand, has been for "commercial broadcasting". For, more than a dozen FM broadcasts have come into operation during the same period.

All India Radio has set good benchmarks as to what public service broadcasting is all about. AIR has been offering programmes on information, entertainment, culture and motivation. And it has adopted to changing times with CBS and opened up its channels for advertising. The difference then and now, of course, is that AIR was never looked upon as a source of revenue. Going by the Supreme Court's judgment of 1995, "airwaves belong to the public". If that is so, their use cannot be primarily for "private profit". And going by this, every broadcaster has to cater to public service as a responsibility and obligation, and it is for the government to prescribe

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broadcasting. That is, TRP measuring of viewership, programme-wise, segment-wise and region-wise, day in and day out, has become the criterion for popularity. As this has become the sole yardstick for advertising outlays, all broadcasters/ channels have succumbed to such a benchmark.

This TRP phenomenon is at the root of wrong concerns, priorities and preoccupation of broadcasting in India. Doing anything without addressing this menace will not make much difference to PSB in India. The concern should also be about the implications and impact of broadcasting. This also means recognition that broadcasting influences people, changes their attitudes, values and lifestyles. That is why advertisers do so much research and spend so much for TRPs. That is how the TRP system ended up being advertising-centred.

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All broadcast channels should have the obligation for certain "minimum public service" conditions in their programme contents. Such obligations could be in terms of time devoted to community interests, in the interest of

children and by way of and in ensuring pluralism, taking into account public grievances, and observing certain codes on advertising and programmes, etc.

All this ideally should be the job of an independent regulator. A regulator should not be merely a problem-solver and as a stop-gap arrangement. For that is how TRAI is being viewed as of now.

At least three conditions are expected to be ensured for a public service broadcaster to remain so. But does the government want a PSB today? The first and foremost condition is guaranteed funding, adequate to meet its objectives and in a competitive market. The second is the independence of organisational structures, operations and programme priorities. The third is the accountability to larger "public" (Parliament and such other bodies) and certain transparency in that process. A

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The concern for PSB should not be limited to Prasar Bharati. The government should ease the procedures for setting up community radio networks. Every broadcaster should do some PSB as an obligation. The extent of dependence on advertisements need be moderated - both in the case of Prasar Bharati and other broadcasters. Even more urgent is the revamping of the TRP system, which should be more broad-based. All broadcasters should observe certain accountability discipline and transparency obligations. An independent commission or regulator should be there as a nodal agency to regulate broadcasting services. Decentralised broadcasting is better for PSB, and yet Prasar Bharati is going for centralised DTH. Prasar Bharati should be assured of funding as annual budgetary provision. It cannot be expected to be viable otherwise. There should be monitoring