

SPLITTING PRASAR BHARATI

B J writes :

THE GROUP OF MINISTERS formed to decide the future of Prasar Bharati has failed to arrive at a decision. The proposal is to split Prasar Bharati into two corporations—an *Asset Corporation*, to hold all assets, and a *Programming and Broadcasting Corporation* (PBC) to oversee programming and other operations. As per the plan, the Asset Corporation will maintain all assets such as studios and TV towers, upgrade them and lease them out to any player, including private broadcasters. The PBC will make and including news, entertainment, social serials and social programs. The PBC will also be compensated by the government for airing public service broadcasts. A license fee may be collected from all radio and TV sets to fund this. Both corporations will be run on commercial profit basis. Government control will also remain intact on both corporations.

Indeed there is a role for the government in broadcasting. Leaving it to the fancies of the private sector would lead to much airing of violence, sex and fast food since these sell more like cigarettes and liquor. At the same time people should recognize that entry of private players has led to a great improvement in the content of broadcasts. But it is not necessary that these 'improved' programmes lead to public good just as good quality cigarettes do not lead to public good. It is imperative, therefore, that the government intervenes and gives direction to broadcasts. There exists an important role for *Prasar Bharati*.

Problem is that broadcasting is misused by the government as much as by the private players. In his short history of Public Service Broadcasting, Robert Avery says that in Germany, France and Italy, "The state-owned broadcasting system became the political mouthpiece for whoever was in power." In Nazi Germany, for example, the radio became an instrument of promoting Hitler's ideology. Listening to foreign broadcasts was forbidden. This same allegation has been made by Arun Jaitley of the BJP. "Doordarshan has become the mouthpiece of the government and certain political parties," he said.

Indians are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Private players promote harmful things. They are efficient in doing this. On the other hand government uses its monopoly for partisan ends. In this situation splitting 'Prasar Bharati' is meaningless. Autonomy is not a solution either.

CAG report states that AIR has 91 percent of the country's radio stations but its share in revenue is only 51 percent. Private players garner 49 percent of the revenue from 9 percent radio stations. It is reported that not canceling accreditation of agencies speedily by Doordarshan has led to non-recovery of dues of Rs 513 crores. The Additional Free Time scheme of Door-darshan brought it revenue of Rs 28 lacs while private broadcasters gained Rs 7 crore.

Privatization and bureaucratization are both not acceptable. Perhaps the solution lies in privatization with regulation. A media content regulator should be established that will undertake a social audit of all broadcasts much along the lines that films are certified by the Central Board of Film Certification. The

Government must impose higher rates of taxes on advertisements and recover higher license fees from channels with lower social rating. □□□