

Autonomy in Paper?

In a historic decision, the Government of India has decided to relinquish its control over Doordarshan (DD) and All India Radio (AIR) by September 15, 1997. Even as it appeared unlikely that the Broadcasting Bill would be cleared in the monsoon session, the Government notified the Prasar Bharati Act, 1990, which provides for the establishment of a Broadcasting Corporation in India. Prasar Bharati would run the two broadcasters in place of government control, in effect, giving autonomy to them.

Once in force, the government would not just give over control of DD and AIR to the corporation, it would also pass on all property and assets to the corporation. The transfer would take place on the terms and conditions made out by the government. The corporation, while free of state control, would receive annual grants from the government. The funds may be granted as equity, grant-in-aid or in the form of a loan.

Tracing its origin to the Verghese Committee (Working Group on Autonomy for Akashvani (AIR) and DD, 1978), the Prasar Bharati Act was introduced in the Lok Sabha on June 29, 1989 by Upendra (after it fell through in 1979, with the fall of the Janata Party Government). It was passed by Parliament in July 1990 and received presidential assent in September 1990. But it was not notified as the Congress government felt that the Act needed urgent changes. Though the Act has been notified ostensibly to give the Prasar Bharati time to stabilise before the Broadcasting Bill was passed, the latter seems nowhere in the horizon.

Would this be able to sail through? Wait and Watch is the best policy.