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GET OUT! SOONEST!!

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SRI LANKA offer the intricate Indian mind vast opportunities for justifying the unjustifiable. We can claim that death and destruction are inevitable in any peace-restoring exercise; we can claim that the Accord signed between Sri Lanka and India in July 1987 was a triumph for Indian diplomacy, and a feather in our Prime Minister's Gandhi cap. It may be so, but the grim reality that has emerged as a result of India's involvement in the internal conflicts of Sri Lanka, is that Indian troops are killing Tamil militants. And Tamil militants are killing both Indian troops and any Sinhalese that they can lay hands on; and the militant Sinhalese are yearning for a fight with the Tamils as well as the Indians.

These are the grim consequences of the immoral stance that we have adopted in Sri Lanka in recent years. The provision of training facilities for Tamil militants on Indian soil in the South, the emotive support they were given by Tamil Nadu, and the connivance of New Delhi in all this, rendered the Sri Lankan army action of five months ago, inevitable. Our response to that action — the air-drop of supplies for the largely Tamil area of Jaffna province — was the harbinger of the tragedy that followed. If India is to play a constructive role in Sri Lanka, it must realise that size and might must go hand-in-hand with generosity, with responsibility.

In Sri Lanka, we have evidently failed in our responsibility. We should have strengthened the hands of President Jayawardene by offering our utmost support to his Government, to tackle the Tamil militants. We should never have permitted ourselves to fall into a situation where we now have to virtually do the Sri Lankan Government's job for them. A military intervention in Sri Lanka, no matter what the compulsion and the temptation, is totally at variance with the principles of *Panchsheel* and any number of moralistic statements about the non-involvement of one state in the affairs of the other — declarations that we have been propounding for four decades and more.

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, American involvement in Vietnam, the involvement of the superpowers in Berlin and West Germany, as well as American involvement in Korea, are all living testimonies of why no country should use its own military power to become involved in conflicts occurring within other countries. In Germany, the Germans were opposing the Germans; in Korea, the Koreans were fighting the Koreans; in Vietnam, the Vietnamese were fighting the Vietnamese; and in Afghanistan, the Afghans are fighting Afghans. In Vietnam, the Americans succeeded in alienating their South Vietnamese allies, if not actually fighting them. Keeping Seoul in check has been a difficult task for the US administration ever since their involvement began during Harry Truman's Presidency. The Afghans and the Soviets are divided, and now, so are the Vietnamese and (the occupying) Chinese. There are lessons for India in all this, lessons that we simply cannot ignore. We cannot and should not stay in Sri Lanka.

All our efforts and energies in Sri Lanka should be directed at getting our troops out of that country. Fast. Such efforts must be accompanied by providing even more materials and resources to the Sri Lankan Government than what we are currently expending in Jaffna. Simultaneously, we need to educate the Indian public, particularly the people of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, that in the long run, it is in the best interests of the Tamils in Sri Lanka to deal directly with Colombo. It is for them and them alone, to learn to live with the reality that Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese nation, and the Sinhalese are as entitled to nationhood, as you and I are, to India.

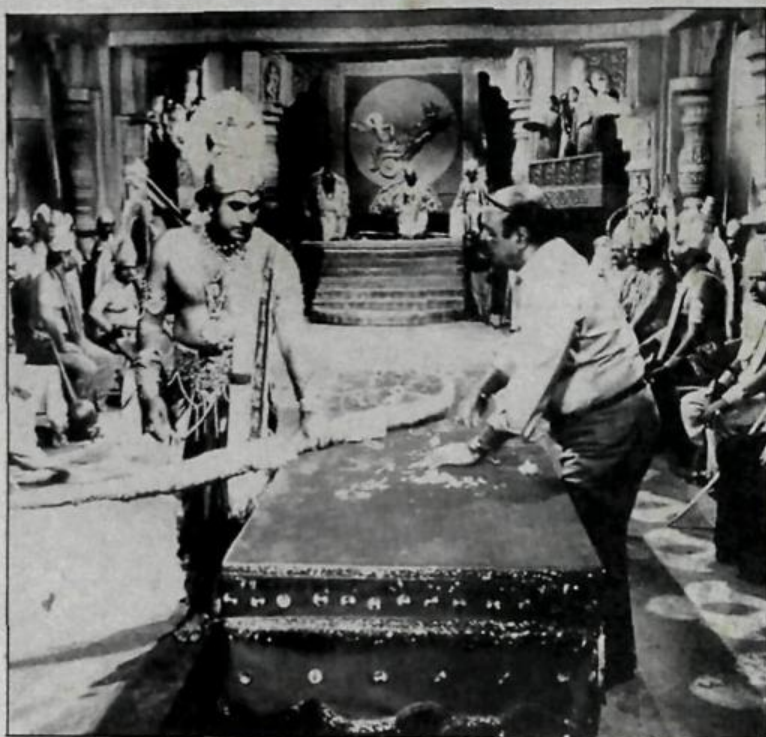
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THE SELLING OF THE RAMAYANA:

Unquestionably television's most popular serial, the *Ramayana* has succeeded in mesmerising millions of viewers. Its phenomenal success has surprised even its creators, the Sagar clan.

In this Diwali special, MINNIE VAID-FERA reports from Umbergaon on the making of an epic.

Cover photograph: Courtesy 'Dharmayug'.



IN SEARCH OF A NATIONAL ALTERNATIVE:

"There is a growing restlessness among the people to find an alternative focus of political loyalty," says eminent politician MADHU DANDAVATE, who proceeds to analyse the current state of the Opposition parties and issues a call for a united front.

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AIRING DISSENT

When questioned recently about the granting of autonomy to the broadcasting media, Rajiv Gandhi declared that the country was not ready for it. Every successive government has maintained a monopoly over AIR and Doordarshan. P G MENON discusses the implications of government control and reports on two recent writ petitions which challenge it.

IT IS A WELL-KNOWN FACT that on October 31, 1984, when Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, was assassinated, Rajiv Gandhi, who was away from Delhi at the time, tuned in to BBC Radio World Service to learn the details of the event. His reluctance to rely on the news broadcast by All India Radio (AIR) is a grim comment on the standards of broadcasting that prevail in the country. But it is not just AIR that has come under fire for its reporting standards. Rajiv Gandhi is also known to have dismissed television news as "terrible", qualifying his statement by alluding to the broadcasts as being simi-

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lar to advisory bulletins or announcements. In fact, the Prime Minister of India voiced the feelings of many in the country when he asked, "Who can expect the latest news from Doordarshan?"

A severe indictment, indeed. And bitterly ironical, coming as it does from the Prime Minister, whose own government maintains control over both media. The accuracy, quality, range, and bias, of both AIR and Doordarshan, have been criticised repeatedly, leading to the question — how much do Doordarshan and AIR reflect current political realities and inform viewers and listeners of significant events and developments in the country?

A study of any broadcast of Doordarshan's "News in English" is revealing: On October 11, 1987, the lead story reported on events in Sri Lanka. This was followed by news of a plane crash in Burma, Rajiv Gandhi's proposed visit to Canada to attend the Commonwealth summit, and the fact that the Prime Minister had been interviewed by *The New York Times*. The fifth news item announced the increased allocation of funds for drinking water and drought relief. Then followed a string of news items concerned with development issues including the harvest of paddy in Punjab, the near-

completion of a power plant in Himachal Pradesh, and the discovery of oil in Assam by ONGC — all of which pointed to successes and achievements in various fields. Very brief news items about Zail Singh's ill health, terrorism in the Punjab, and the BJP conference followed; and then, to add a 'foreign' flavour to this pot-pourri was news about the Iran-Iraq war, followed by an item about a demonstration against a nuclear waste processing plant in W. Germany. Finally, the programme was rounded off by the inevitable sports clip. Just as in most of Doordarshan's news broadcasts, there was not much that was contentious or critical, a lot that was self-congratulatory, and little that was of any real significance. In fact, what was significant were the omissions from the day's news — the mammoth rally to commemorate the 86th birth anniversary of Jayprakash Narayan addressed by V P Singh, the continuing agitations in Tibet, and the ravages of the drought in Kutch — items which were reported by the press. Thus, a study of any day's broadcast will reveal that a pro-government bias is evident, and that Doordarshan has been successfully used to prop up and maintain the government's interests and image.

GROSS INSTANCES of manipulation, distortion, and suppression of news have been analysed in a report published by The Indian Committee

for Cultural Freedom and the Indian Liberal Group, in early 1987. Based on data collected following a monitoring of Doordarshan's English news broadcast for a period of ninety days, from April to August 1986, the report confirms what is already well-known — that Doordarshan, in its news broadcasts, has departed from standards of objectivity, fairness and good reporting. The report charges Doordarshan with the suppression and censorship of 'inconvenient' news, distortion of news, unnecessary and excessive projection of ministers, and concludes that the government is guilty of using the medium as a tool for propaganda.

A review of the news broadcast on a single day, as outlined in the report, revealed gross discrepancies and blatant suppression of news. On August 12, 1986, Gulam Nabi Azad assured the Lok Sabha that General A S Vaidya's assassination was unfortunate and had occurred in spite of the introduction of tight security measures; the press, however, contradicted this and stressed that existing security measures had failed miserably. The TV news broadcast on the following day mentioned, as its eleventh item, that the Centre had asked the CBI to investigate Vaidya's murder and the failure of the security personnel to prevent it. But this was preceded by news of the SAARC inauguration, the *Quami Ekta* seminar on peace, and a programme held in Kohima, Nagaland, for communal harmony, all of which were obviously deemed to be more important. A news broadcast also announced that peace prevailed in Pune, despite the assassination. However, there was no film clip to assure viewers that this was so. And the papers told a different story. *The Times of India* reported on the centre pages that "frightened Sikhs may quit Pune", and added that business establishments belonging to Sikhs were looted and damaged.

THE LIBERAL USE of the scissors to delete items detrimental to the



image of the Government has also been shown to be a hallowed practice. During the period of the survey, the items that did not receive coverage included Sobhraj's escape, the Chernobyl disaster (not broadcast until much later), the Gorkhaland agitation, communal clashes in Ahmedabad, and the Karnataka-Maharashtra border dispute. Little has changed, and the practice of suppression of news continues unchecked. Today, there are other issues which receive the same treatment — the Bofors deal, the hiring of Fairfax Group Ltd, and the rapid strides made by the *Jan Morcha* led by V P Singh.

In this scheme of things, what is more relevant is what has not been covered, and why. In the rare instances that we do hear voices of dissent, when the medium does don the mantle of 'conscience-keeper', it is silenced — witness the fate of 'Newsline' presented by M J Akbar.

The report also claims that much of Doordarshan's broadcast on econ-

omic issues is an exercise in Newspeak — viewers are bombarded with news about share market booms, all-high investments, record outputs, and other successes. Rarely is mention made of rising prices, failure of development policies, the failure of crop insurance schemes, starvation deaths, and the like.

The government seldom misses an opportunity to pat itself on the back. Witness the following: On March 11, 1986, Charles Sobhraj's escape from Tihar Jail found no mention in the news broadcast of that day. However, when bread containing concealed morphine was discovered being handed over to one of the prisoners in the same jail, Lieutenant Governor H L Kapoor applauded the efficiency of the jail administration staff! More re-

cently, on October 8, 1987, viewers were treated to a visual demonstration of the efficiency of the Bofors gun, which, according to the report, "outperformed" other medium-range guns. No mention was made of the national controversy that the Bofors issue has generated, a 'scandal' which has serious implications for the present government. Even the recent drought, reportedly the severest in

The report was not startling in its discoveries or conclusions. It merely confirmed and provided evidence for what was obvious anyway. It was on the basis of the irrefutable evidence collected by this study that Minoo Masani and P C Chatterjee filed a joint writ petition in September 1987,



this century, has provided the Government with a glorious opportunity to congratulate itself in its role of benign benefactor to the millions affected. Of course, the failure of government policy in preventing drought in each successive year, has not even been alluded to.

"It is fortunate that the Government's propaganda is so blatant," says Anil Dharkar, well-known TV critic. "The people are not fooled. . . it would have been dangerous if the propaganda had been more subtle."

challenging the legality of the government's current monopoly of the media (see box for interview). But they were not the first to have done so.

EARLIER THIS YEAR, (the late) Mr Romesh Thapar had filed a writ petition demanding that greater autonomy be granted to the media. The petitioner stated that:

"At present the entire organisation is run and/or is capable of being

CHALLENGING GOVERNMENT MONOPOLY OF THE MEDIA

Mino Masani discusses the implications of his petition with Shekhar Ghosh

On September 11, Justice Variavallad admitted a writ petition filed by Mino Masani, former MP, and Mr P C Chatterjee, former Director General of AIR, in the Bombay High Court. The petition challenges Government monopoly of Doordarshan and AIR as well as the government's refusal to grant the petitioners a licence to establish an independent broadcasting company.

Although the petition is unlikely to be successful in the near future, given the demands it makes on the Government, Mino Masani refuses to be deterred in his campaign to establish that government control of the media is illegal and unconstitutional.

SHEKHAR GHOSH talked to the sprightly 82-year old about several pertinent issues raised by his petition, and future plans.

Excerpts from the interview:

Shekhar Ghosh: Since when have you been aware of the need for greater autonomy of the two Government-controlled media, Doordarshan and All-India Radio (AIR)?

Mino Masani: Since Independence. All of us, including myself, are to be blamed for not having done anything sooner. Also, it had never struck me that the monopoly of the media by the Government could also be constitutionally illegal.

That Mrs Gandhi did not take any steps to grant autonomy to these media is hardly surprising. But why did the Janata Government, in its three-year tenure, also fail to introduce even partial autonomy?

Mrs Gandhi had accepted the recommendations of the Chanda Committee (1966) which proposed, amongst other things, the formation of corporations which would run broadcasting services. But then, given the shrewd diplomat that she was, Mrs Gandhi

did a volte face and shelved the idea. The Janata Government was no better. In those days, it was going through the ostrich syndrome, oblivious to everything.

Recently, the leftist Government in West Bengal refused to use AIR for its election campaign, as a protest against the existing bias; an action for which Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, was severely criticised. What do you think of Basu's boycott?

I think Basu was amply justified in boycotting the AIR platform. When I met him, he expressed utter helplessness in trying to curb the Centre's monopoly of the two media. In the circumstances, he did the right thing. I would say that the press, rather than analysing the reasons for his boycott, displayed a shallowness in criticising his move.

All the opposition governments in the states have a similar complaint against AIR's and Doordarshan's pro-Centre bias. How have they fared in attempts to change this?

Mr Hegde has spoken out against the Government monopoly of the media. However, much more has been said than actually done. If I were the chief minister of, say Karnataka, I would ask the Centre to withdraw AIR and Doordarshan from the state, unless the state is granted a degree of autonomy in these media. The Constitution provides for it. Besides, it would be easier for the states to take the Union Government to court than for ordinary citizens like ourselves.

Like yourself, Shashi Kapoor was also denied permission to establish an autonomous TV channel. Why is the Government averse to this idea? Wouldn't the competition it offered help to improve existing standards?

That is a naive assumption — when has Doordarshan ever expressed a de-

sire to improve the quality of its broadcasts? This Government only wants to maintain the status quo and exploit its monopoly of the media for its own gains.

Why had your co-petitioner, Mr P C Chatterjee, done nothing to challenge Government monopoly of AIR, during his tenure as its Director-General? Actually, it was the very fact of government interference during his tenure that prompted Mr Chatterjee to campaign for independent broadcasting services. According to him, the prevailing system, in which ministers insist on bullying AIR officials on the telephone, is what disgusted and disillusioned him.

If your petition is successful and you are granted the licence, what are your plans?

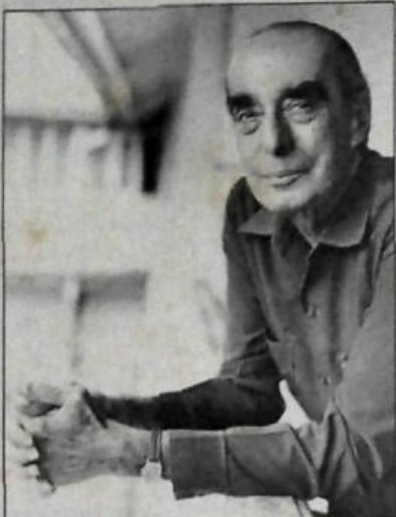
If we are granted the licence, we intend to establish a public limited company, with a board of directors whose integrity, and neutrality are beyond doubt. We will also recruit professionals knowledgeable in the technical aspects of broadcasting. We intend to establish a radio station and a television channel, both of which will broadcast to Western India, with headquarters in Bombay.

Do you think your project will be commercially viable?

Yes, professionals in the field have repeatedly told me that it will be. In fact, experts maintain that it will take less than a year for an independent broadcasting service to break even.

Will your company adopt a particular slant?

No. The idea is to introduce objective broadcasting with a professionalism hitherto not experimented with in the country. The Congress (I) will still get the lion's share of the time, as it is the largest party. The differ-



ence will be that other parties or fora will also get ample opportunities to air their views; the amount of time given will depend on the strength of the party. The only slant, if you can call it that, will be in favour of objectivity, neutrality, and, of course, unbiased reporting.

The illiterate, rural masses and sections of the middle class are dependent on AIR and Doordarshan, as the press is out of their reach. How do you plan to woo these sections?

We are not going to 'woo' them at all. We will merely place a range of options before them. Our job will be to appraise them of what the various parties, other than the ruling party, have to say — up to now, they have not had the chance to be aware of their policies.

What kind of proprietorial interference do you foresee occurring in such private autonomous bodies?

I do not believe that there is much proprietorial interference in the independent media — the few reports of interference within the press are either exaggerated or deal with exceptions. In any case, it is easier to cope with interference from one proprietor than from the entire Government machinery!

Do you think it necessary to have some kind of governing body which will keep a check on standards and prevent any possible abuses from occurring?

We're not averse to a degree of social control. Some broad guidelines could be introduced or some sort of Code of Conduct drawn up; a Standing Committee consisting of eminent members from the two Houses could be set up to constitute a body which would keep a check on any defiance of social norms, rather like the Independent Television Authority which supervises the Independent Television network in Britain. But I definitely do not see any need for any other means of control.

Do you have any ambitions to increase the scope of the project to cover the entire country?

That will amount to putting the cart before the horse. The matter is still sub-judice. We haven't even received the licence, so, talking about nationwide expansion at this stage is indeed very ambitious.

Have you introduced your petition only to bring the issues into public focus, or is your demand for an independent broadcasting authority an end in itself?

The petition serves a threefold purpose. Primarily, it is intended to establish a point, to dramatise the crying need for autonomy of the two Government-controlled media so that a strong public opinion is built up against the current Government's monopoly of them. Secondly, we hope that the petition will force the Government to pass legislation to regulate and encourage objective broadcasting through its own media, or through independent ones. And finally, we *do* want to establish a company that will be able to broadcast objectively and exist independently of all the machiavellian manipulations and biased reporting that the present media are riddled with.

run entirely according to the wishes and to promote the interests of the political party in power at the Centre ... as a result of political control and excessive centralisation, the functioning of the public media has come to be characterised by sheer ineptitude and arbitrariness."

Thapar's petition, however, was not designed to confront the government, but only to provoke reaction, to "make people think".

Masani and Chatterjee's petition seeks to do more than foster awareness about media bias, and is deliberately confrontationalist. The petition has challenged the 'illegal' monopoly of the media, by the Government, and has sought to urge the courts to permit them to establish broadcasting stations in Western India.

A year-long correspondence with the Ministry had preceded the writ petition. In September 1986, Masani and Chatterjee had applied to V N Gadgil, the then Minister for Information & Broadcasting, for a licence to set up two broadcasting stations. By way of reply, Mr Gadgil sent them a proforma of an application for a licence to own a wireless set! Clarifying that they were, in fact, interested in setting up independent broadcasting stations, the duo then submitted their application to Arjun Singh, Minister for Communications, on March 10 1987. A categorical refusal prompted them to file the writ petition in the Bombay High Court.

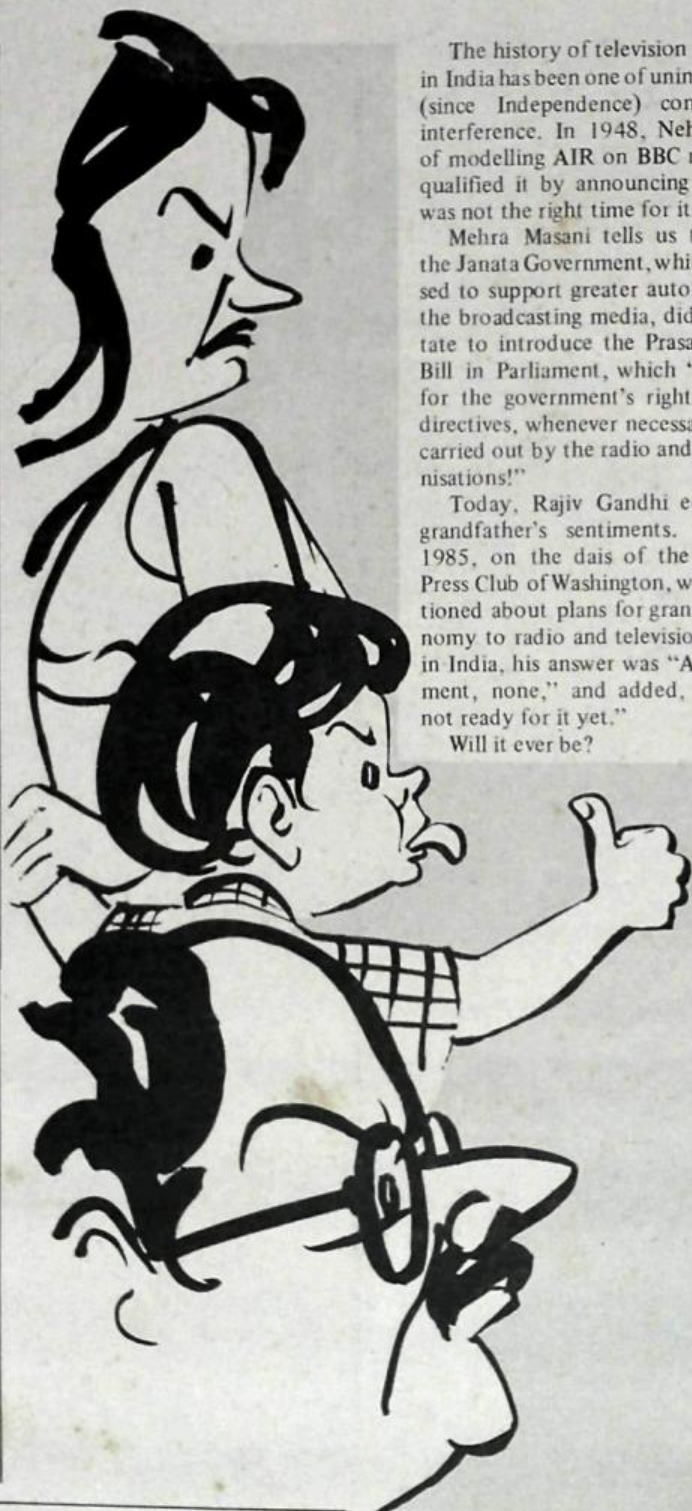
The petition demands that the Government's monopoly over the two media be declared *ultra vires* of Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, which grants the citizen freedom of speech and expression. The Constitution does not permit the Government to restrict this right except on the grounds outlined in Article 19(2), whereby reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right can be imposed in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, etc.

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SUCCESSIVE GOVERNMENTS have refused to relinquish control of both AIR and Doordarshan. During the Emergency, the use of the broadcasting media as the official mouthpiece of the Government, was at its most obvious. The then Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, while addressing a meeting of the Akashwani Station Directors on September 9, 1975, questioned the "fuss" made about AIR's credibility. "I have said in a public forum that it (AIR) is a Government organ. It is going to remain a Government organ. We are proud that it is a Government organ," she proclaimed. V C Shukla, the then Minister for Information and Broadcasting, went on to add his own 'informed' view that Government controlled media would inevitably reflect the policies of the ruling party and stated that "... among the truth we pick and choose..."

Over the years, little has changed as far as the government's version of the 'truth' is concerned. Distortion, suppression, and censorship of "inconvenient" news continue.

Of late, however, the Opposition parties have voiced their protests. Mr Hegde had expressed umbrage at the Government's refusal to permit the States to use the media. "Why not a channel for the different States?" he asked. Mr N T Ramarao, too, had expressed discontent at the suppression of news from Andhra Pradesh. The latest instance of suppression of news was the complete blackout of the seminar held at Netaji Stadium in Calcutta on September 11, in which V P Singh and other prominent national opposition leaders had participated. On September 14, 1987, the West Bengal Government challenged the Centre's ownership of the media and Doordarshan and AIR's partisan and politically motivated coverage. Mr Pritin Bhattacharya, the West Bengal Government's representative on the Inter-Media Publicity Board (AIR) and the TV Advisory Committee, resigned, following a directive from Jyoti Basu's government.



The history of television and radio in India has been one of uninterrupted (since Independence) control and interference. In 1948, Nehru spoke of modelling AIR on BBC radio. But qualified it by announcing that this was not the right time for it.

Mehra Masani tells us that even the Janata Government, which professed to support greater autonomy for the broadcasting media, did not hesitate to introduce the Prasar Bharati Bill in Parliament, which "provided for the government's right to issue directives, whenever necessary, to be carried out by the radio and TV organisations!"

Today, Rajiv Gandhi echoes his grandfather's sentiments. Early in 1985, on the dais of the National Press Club of Washington, when questioned about plans for granting autonomy to radio and television services in India, his answer was "At the moment, none," and added, "India is not ready for it yet."

Will it ever be? ♦