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Television, How To Develop It

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WE have no objection whatsoever to the introduction of television services in India. On the contrary, we welcome them, because they would enrich life, particularly the life of those whose lives lack drama in the villages in the countryside, by entertainment and information, which is not otherwise available. And similarly, it would enrich life by bringing the process of adult literacy and even better education through these audio-visual techniques. In a country as illiterate as this, audio-visual techniques have great importance of an educative nature, as also for information and entertainment purposes.

We are very strongly opposed to the use of public funds of any nature whatsoever for this purpose. So far as we are concerned, there are two fundamental propositions that apply to television: (i) that television services should not be provided by Government; and (ii) that there should be no financing from public revenues.

The Committee on Broadcasting and Information Media, which is popularly known as the Chanda Committee, has itself come to this conclusion – that Government should not provide television services; and that they should have nothing to do with the All India Radio and the present set up. In para 58, the Chanda Committee Report says: "Television services must not be considered by the people as an instrument of the Government of the day as All India Radio is widely regarded today." It goes on to say in para 61: "There was complete agreement among the experts who appeared before us on the desirability of keeping television outside the purview of detailed control by Government. Further, there are certain activities which do not lend themselves to rigid bureaucratic control, and television is undoubtedly one of them."

I come to the second point, finance, which is a more controversial point. The Chanda Report goes on to make it clear that the capital expenditure on this project will be colossal and, in particular, it will need very heavy foreign exchange. The Chanda Committee proposes to meet the problem in this manner. It says that the capital cost should be met by loans from a foreign consortium or foreign collaborators for the foreign exchange component and the rupee costs should be met by the Indian Government. Unfortunately, the Committee gives no estimate of the costs. I saw in the *Statesman's* editorial of 27th February an estimated cost during the Fourth Plan of about Rs. 50 crores, but how much of it is rupee costs I do not know. This much is clear that the I & B Ministry's own proposals, which were prior to the Chanda Committee report, provided for an expenditure of Rs. 4 crores during the Fourth Plan from the public revenues and Rs. 100 crores to be put as a burden on the tax payer over the next 25 years by which time, according to them, the whole country would be covered. I believe that the I & B estimate is a gross underestimate.

Here we must part company with both the I & B Ministry and the Chanda Committee. We cannot provide food and have to go abroad for food also. Schools and hospitals are in short supply. We have not been able to carry out the Directive Principle of our Constitution that there should be free and compulsory primary education within ten years of Independence. Is this a country that can spend Rs. 50 or Rs. 100 crores of the tax payer's money when the children of the poor, the poorest themselves, are going without the bare needs of life, on what is after all relatively a luxury? Mr. C. Rajagopalachari is perfectly correct when he said recently that this was "a criminal misuse of public revenues."

Does it mean that what I am saying involves that there should be no television in this country? My answer is a clear "no." What I say does not mean that television should be postponed or dropped for the present. There are other ways of financing television, and the whole world has been doing so in those ways. Take the case of other countries, the United Kingdom, for instance. There are the BBC and the Independent Television Authority competing for public favour. The BBC relies exclusively on licence fees, while the ITA relies on advertisements. Neither of them gets any public revenue and the tax payer does not pay for them, either the BBC or the ITA service. In the United States, and many other countries, the entire revenue of the television services comes from commercial films and commercial broadcasts. In Italy, Germany and Canada, they have both the licensing fee system and the advertisement system. But in all those countries the tax payer is not touched and no part of the tax payer's money goes into financing television service. In Britain, they gave loans but the loans have been repaid by now. If these rich countries do not mulct their tax payers for television services, is there any conceivable reason why our country, poor and destitute as it is today, should launch out into spending crores of public money, tax payers' money on this luxury? It is true that in India licence fees will not suffice because the number of well-to-do people who can own sets is limited. But there are, even so, two ways out by which television can be a self-financing proposition in India today.

The first is the model of the United States where the field is left for private enterprise. We have the CBC, the NBC and the ABC, very fine corporations giving excellent programmes of information, entertainment and education. Professors who are friends of mine lecture on philosophy and on every conceivable subject without any cost to the schools, without any cost to the universities, and educate people about the subjects that they are concerned with. There is nothing wrong with commercial broadcasts and commercial television. Today in the United States it has produced the finest television services in the world and the most developed. I am glad to say that even the Chanda Committee, despite its hesitation in certain respects says this:

> "Experience elsewhere has shown that the acceptance of advertisements to accord with the programme policy of a television organisation does not bring it even remotely under the control of commercial interests nor does it lead to the presentation of material which is in questionable taste."

There is a second alternative which should be much more acceptable. It has been brought forward by the Chanda Committee, namely, a Statutory Corporation created by an Act of Parliament, modelled on the Independent Television Authority in Britain with the necessary modifications. That is the second alternative. It is true that the Chanda Committee says that the rupee finance for the capital expenditure for setting up this Corporation and the television apparatus should come from Government. At that point I would like to part company with that Committee. As I said, we are opposed to any rupee grant from this Government. I am quite sure that this rigid limit of seven years within which the benefits of television are to be carried to every nook and corner of this country should go. There is no reason why it should not be longer. Why not television take fifteen years to reach everyone in India? What is so sacred about seven years? If this time-limit were abolished, as I suggest it should, there is no reason why this new autonomous corporation should not be self-financing.

First of all, all licence fees should be given to the Corporation. Secondly, some time should be reserved for adult education and school programmes which the Ministry of Education and other educational authorities may utilise and for which they must pay like all other consumers of time. Then, the Corporation should be free to accept sponsored programmes and advertisement following the practice which the Chanda Committee has rightly described as "almost universal." There are ways in which the entire burden can be lifted from the shoulders of the tax-payer and the television services can be run on a self-sufficient and self-financing basis.

Television is a good thing, but there is such a thing as a priority. There is such a thing as putting first things first, and there are a hundred things in India that deserve priority, so far as public funds are concerned, over television.

— *Based on a speech in Parliament.*

MIZO REVOLT — Continued from page 2

ing to some Indian observers who have recently been in the Mizo hills, the main body of the rebel forces there is still intact and in good spirit, and renewed fighting is to be expected when the monsoon breaks." This is in apparent contrast to the *Statesman's* correspondent's evaluation that the M.N.F.'s "bluff has been called militarily" and that "what has been called the Mizo uprising looked large from the outside because there was no evaluative information from inside the area. Actually the uprising collapsed at the slightest show of military activity."

Be that as it may, there is no room for complacency. Every precaution against eruption of another revolt should be taken. Similar alertness is needed on the political front as well. Here the record has been a most unfortunate one.

True, Laldenga's revolt and his recent antics — the letter to poor Sukarno and the bid for Pak protection — have made matters worse. Government may not talk to Laldenga any longer. But it is time it heard with greater attention the voice of the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference. Neglect of the moderates leads to the rise of the extremists.

A conference of leaders from all hill Districts in Assam is an urgent necessity. It could discuss the Pataskar Commission's proposal for a Hill Areas Committee of the State Assembly to which the Assembly will refer all "proposals relating to legislation concerning the hill areas." Any dispute as to whether a Bill concerns the hill areas or not will be decided by the Governor. "Normally the State Assembly should accept the recommendations of the Hill Areas Committee". Differences of opinion between the two will be decided by the Governor "in his discretion", in practical terms, by the Centre. Additionally there will be a Cabinet Minister in charge of the hill districts, a separate department for the region in the Assam Secretariat and a Commissioner for hill areas "to guide, direct, and supervise administration and development work in the field in the hill districts."

There has been a "strong reaction" from the Assam Government and Pradesh Congress to the Commission's proposal to make Mizo district a Centrally—administered unit. Neither the Government nor the local Congress has been a shining example of understanding and tolerance towards the hill districts. These qualities must be forthcoming and soon, if the political problem in the Mizo and the other hill districts is to be satisfactorily resolved. So long as these areas remain within the Indian Union there should be no objection to giving them the autonomy that is their due. Meanwhile every effort should be made to redress the grievances outlined in the joint statement of Dr. G. G. Swell and Mr. Nichols-Roy. It makes very sad reading indeed.