

From Within and Without

(A SYMPOSIUM)—1

organisation AIR has since become. Who are the people who train? What are their qualifications for training? Is the period and nature of training adequate? Modern techniques in both radio and TV require modern methods and up-to-date training. I cannot help thinking, when I visit AIR, that it is out of date.

Besides its personnel policies, AIR also needs to change radically its programme policies. The failure of the shortsighted policy of making AIR into a mouthpiece of the Government has finally been realised, though one would have imagined that the public and the Government should have expected this and called it. People have no confidence in the news broadcast by AIR, because of the suppression of awkward facts, the exaggeration of the Government's achievements, and the predominance of pronouncements of ministers. People do not care to listen to AIR for their entertainment, except when it broadcasts music from the films. People do not bother about what AIR puts out in the way of talks and discussion, because no dissenting opinions can be expressed. People abroad do not and cannot listen to AIR, because for the greater part it cannot clearly be heard. These wrong policies are mainly the result of interference on the part of cabinet ministers over a number of years, but also the result of subservience on the part of senior officers—one of the consequences of encouraging courtiers at the expense of normal intellectuals. I do not believe that these policies can be changed without a radical organisational change.

As a management consultant, I cannot help being aware of the very close relationship between the form of an organisation and its success or failure in serving the purpose for which it is intended. If the Indian people want a radio and TV service which is modern, lively and free from governmental interference, they must insist on the form of organisation which alone will make this possible.

A department of the Government, as AIR is today, cannot but function like a department of the Government. Administratively, it is bound by rules and procedures which were appropriate in the 19th century, when they were framed, for providing a postal service and other services of that kind. In terms of personnel, it is bound by the recruitment, training and promotion policies of a bureaucracy. Financially, it is dependent on grants from the Treasury, which can be spent only according to rigid provisions quite unsuitable for an activity like broadcasting, which demands flexibility. To continue with this form of organisation is to ignore the experiences of other progressive societies which have experimented with different forms and arrived at what appear to be far more suitable ones for successful broadcasting.

I refer to the statutory public corporation. It takes several forms in different societies and it should be possible to adapt it to our requirements. If I were Minister for Information and Broadcasting, the first thing I would do would be to appoint a panel of two or three broadcasting experts to examine the constitution of various such corporations in Japan, Australia, Britain and France and to recommend how the Indian Broadcasting Corporation should be constituted. Of course, an independent broadcasting corporation in India may not be any more independent than say, Hindustan Steel and the State Trading Corporation are today! But even if we get a broadcasting corporation which is still not altogether independent of the Government, I have no doubt that the release from

bureaucratic methods of work will itself result in considerably improved personnel and programmes.

The formation of an independent corporation would be a step towards rationalisation, but I believe that even a corporation should not have a monopoly of broadcasting. It is dangerous and reactionary to allow one set of men and women, however competent and well-meaning, to control such an important source of information. The democratic philosophy is based on the assumption that diverse people can hold diverse views and should be free to express them within certain accepted restraints. I would, therefore, favour the establishment of radio stations by non-government agencies, such as universities, municipalities and cultural associations, should any of them wish to do so.

Many persons who have travelled abroad and seen and heard the TV and radio programmes of other countries have commented on the dullness and the lack of choice in ours. While wrong staff policies have much to do with this problem, I believe that inadequate financial resources are also a major factor. It is only during the last year or two that AIR's annual expenditure has been more or less matched by the revenue obtained from radio licences. Even if the licences continue to yield increasing revenue, this can only continue the present standard of radio services provided by AIR. How are we to afford a major transformation, so that people can receive not one but several satisfactory services, providing a variety of programmes from which the listener can choose what he wants to hear? Such a development of the radio services would require massive financial investment, which this country and its taxpayers cannot afford. This is not a problem unique to India. It has been solved elsewhere by adopting various forms of commercial broadcasting and I do not see any reason why this should not be tried in our country.

If radio services cannot be adequately improved without considerable additional expense, the starting of TV is absolutely impossible without supplementing the Government's contribution with revenue from advertising in some form.

I think it is necessary to distinguish between radio and TV programmes of information and education and those of entertainment, in considering methods of financing them. I would be strongly opposed to Government expenditure from the hard-pressed Indian taxpayer's contribution on the provision of entertainment for a small minority of well-to-do persons in the cities of Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Delhi. They alone can afford to buy TV receivers, which are expensive. If they want TV entertainment, it must be paid for by revenue obtained from commercial advertising.

From the experience of other countries it seems quite clear that considerable revenue can be derived by a corporation from the sale of time for advertising in one form or another. It is only proper that this should be used to provide good entertainment for our city folks, without the burden falling on the rural public. A State which does not ensure a supply of clean drinking water to more than a fraction of its people, or primary education to more than a minority of its children, has no right to spend public money on providing TV or radio entertainment to a small minority of its people who are least in need of the state's consideration and assistance. The Swatantra Party will fight any

attempt to divert our scarce public resources to such frivolous uses for the sake of obtaining for the Government popularity with the influential upper-middle-class voter.

For the services of information and education of the less favoured elements of society, the farmers, the workers in the cities and schools, the state should be responsible, but by skilful management should endeavour to finance even these services as far as possible from the surplus revenue obtained from the commercial entertainment service, supplementing it with such Government grants as the Treasury can afford.

Public opinion should insist that the Government adopt some form of commercial TV and radio to finance adequately these money-consuming services. If the public fails to do so, it will have only itself to thank if higher and higher taxes are levied to pay for services which, in other countries, people receive without such impositions. Several of the countries I have mentioned are Welfare States concerned with doing the best by their people. Who are we to hold up our hands in horror at the idea of commercial advertisement on radio and TV? These antiquated, priggish and irrational attitudes should now be abandoned for more modern and liberal ways.

What does all this add up to? I should say that it asks for bold policies and experiments on the part of the Minister for Information and Broadcasting and her senior staff.

There are always risks in experimentation, and possibly some mistakes will be made in the difficult process of transforming our radio service from its present moribund state into a lively and significant part of our lives, but I feel sure that the Indian listener and the Indian taxpayer will give their full support to all measures that the Government takes towards rationalising and liberalising activities which by their very nature can only flourish under bold and enterprising leadership.

All India Radio (CONTINUED)

could take it over in their own good time. This is a measure of the failure of Indian broadcasting to strike any effective roots as a medium of communication designed to influence the public mind and disseminate information—or even as a branch of the entertainment industry pure and simple.

This must be said at once even if it is bound to hurt. For unless we face this stark fact of the situation regarding broadcasting any inquiry is liable to degenerate into an exercise in disingenuousness and self-deception. The failure, of course, goes very far back to the days of the Raj. It may be worth recalling that broadcasting in India began almost as early as British broadcasting, with which it has had a kind of umbilical link that it has never outgrown. The pioneering phase, if one can speak of pioneering in this in appropriate context, was in the mid-twenties, with the Radio Clubs of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Rangoon (then ruled from Delhi), and Karachi trying to relieve the after-dinner tedium of gymkhana life with brief interludes of music—but generally adding to it.

In 1927 these gave way to a somewhat more ambitious effort. The Indian Broadcasting Company was set up to organise a network of radio stations on a national scale presided over by Eric Dunstan—the golden-voiced announcer of his day—as Lionel Fielden has it. But his "golden voice" did not save the company from going bankrupt in three years. "In 1930," Fielden records, "he was back, mortified, humiliated and enraged." The Company was wound up and the Government of India itself took over the broadcasting business and entrusted it, with a characteristic touch of imaginative understanding, to its Department of Industries and Commerce. Not surprisingly, the Department of Industries and Commerce was no more successful than the "golden-voiced" announcer from the B.B.C. in developing Indian broadcasting anywhere within miles of the point at which it could make any impact.

However, by the mid-thirties it was clear to those who ruled India from afar—and at the time they still harboured the notion that they could go on ruling her for quite a while—that something had to be done to develop the potentialities of broadcasting in their Indian Empire. Something had to be done, not only because Britain's expanding radio industry needed subsidiary markets, but for a more crucial reason. Broadcasting was an important weapon in the battle for men's minds. Even if they could not, in the nature of things, reach the multitudes, they had to try to get at the elite and perhaps the percolation theory would work here, too. Something was done. The talents of a man who may not have had a golden voice, but commanded considerable intelligence and wide sympathies, were enlisted for the task of reorganising Indian broad-

That question touches the heart of the matter even eighteen years after the transfer of power—not a long period, but long enough for us to consider how far the post-Independence therapy has worked. Judging from the state of broadcasting the answer must be: not too well. For the truth is that at the end of almost two decades of effort the result would still make a cat laugh. Only the laugh this time would be at our cost, not at that of a foreign Government illiterate about broadcasting. One can, it is true, quote impressive statistics from official handbooks to prove the contrary. All India Radio, after all, has over thirty stations and the number of receiver sets is approaching three million, not to mention the fact that with our middle-class youth transistors have become something of a status symbol—and not only with the youth.

Much has been done to widen the appeal of the programmes. Why, we have now even External Services programmes which are "broadcast practically round the clock"—and in a score of languages. Before we can turn round television will be upon us.

And yet it is not being churlish to suggest that the quantitative expansion of Indian broadcasting since Independence does not by itself add up to a qualitative break-through to the level of effectiveness which one was entitled to expect. It is always risky to generalise on the basis of a very limited experience, but during his ten weeks in India recently the present writer was struck by one thing: he never encountered anybody in a hurry to turn on his radio set to listen to a particular programme, still less did any programme become the subject of discussion or argument in any intelligent conversation. Comment on the accent of our news announcers in English, yes; general condemnation of All India Radio, yes and often; but one never felt that anything broadcast by All India Radio had made any serious impact on its supposed audience.

On the contrary, the impression one got was that if broadcasting intrudes at all upon the attention of an Indian household, it is as background noise; that as an instrument for moulding opinion and forming attitudes for informing people on important issues of the day and encouraging argument on national and international problems it has not yet even "begun to be", to quote a telling phrase of Dr. Leavis's in another context. As a vehicle of mass entertainment, it does probably play a role, now that we can draw on the delights offered by Vividh Bharati, but it is at best a marginal role. In other words, it seems hardly to count as a medium of mass communication or as a determining influence on a minority culture. Why?

It would be comforting to believe that this double failure is due to want of adequate resources. Admittedly, to provide a broadcasting network to meet the requirements of a country with a population of 450 million and such regional and cultural diversities as India is a formidable undertaking. Before World War II, Mr. Sreenivasan of Mysore University worked out a scheme, which he described as "modest", for giving India a broadcasting organisation capable of meeting at least her essential requirements. His calculation was that it would need five national transmitting stations, 60 regional stations, with an additional five short-wave transmitters for long-distance international broadcasts. Three decades later we are not there yet.

These physical inadequacies and handicaps are no doubt a factor in the equation. All the same one is almost afraid of recommending that All India Radio should be furnished with much larger funds to develop an infra-structure commensurate with its needs. One is afraid, because greater resources would not by themselves impart animation to what remains essentially a singularly inert agency. It could only accentuate the original core of inertia around which the institutional edifice of Indian broadcasting has been built, and it might lead to greater wastage. Wastage, moreover, not only of treasure but of talent.

For, again, it has not been lack of talent which has accounted for the failure of Indian

broadcasting to make any difference to the way we live, or feel, or think. Indeed, from one's own intermittent and necessarily limited contact with All India Radio over the years one would be inclined to say that from the start it has been able to draw on very substantial reserves of talent; and as far as technical know-how and competence are concerned, it could always have obtained them. Its deficit in vitality cannot be explained as due to dearth of talent. The tragedy has been in the prodigal misuse and misdirection of talent available.

One other point needs to be made in this context. There is a facile assumption that the persistent, if not pernicious, anaemia from which Indian broadcasting has suffered is attributable wholly to the dead hand of bureaucracy that lies so heavily upon it; that it would have been much more able-bodied if it could have been developed independently of Government control. But there is nothing in the experience of broadcasting in other major countries to justify this assumption. Some of the most successful broadcasting systems in the world—and the B.B.C. for one—have been government-owned or government-controlled in all but name. On the other hand, private enterprise in the field of broadcasting has often tended to produce the most inane and fatuous results, both in the old world and the new. The root of the trouble surely must be sought elsewhere.

"BROADCASTING is a great thing. I believe in it," wrote the late Prime Minister of India to Lionel Fielden. But what does belief in it imply in practical terms? Certainly, he used it to advantage; and when he used it he could always command a vast audience. But, then, he could do so anyway. After all, had not Gandhiji, whom Fielden had tried to persuade to broadcast, said: "My dear Fielden, you know and I know that if I do so I shall increase the number of your listeners by four or five millions overnight?" But believing in broadcasting means also giving it some thought and there is little evidence that the Congress leadership applied any serious thought to the problem of broadcasting, or to the purposes to which it had to be turned, or to the way it could best be done. It is even true to say that the British Government probably gave more thought to Indian broadcasting—partly because it was more certain of its purpose—than its successor has done.

Perhaps this was implicit in the concept of "transfer of power", which meant continuity rather than change. What was taken over was maintained; it was expanded, not developed. Changes of personnel there have been from time to time, but the expansion itself gives the appearance of having been ad hoc, departmental or imitative, the model invariably being the B.B.C. Imitation is not a bad thing; we all learn by imitation; but at some point we have to go beyond imitation. All India Radio has not reached that point and the lines on which it seems set are not likely to lead it to that point. Paradoxically, though it models itself so closely on the B.B.C., it does not appear to have grasped what the B.B.C. is about and how it goes about it.

For the first thing about the B.B.C. that any dispassionate observer notices is that it is profoundly rooted in British interest and purpose; that "Reithopia", as it has been called, is not only concerned with providing entertainment but subtly and systematically preserving the national myth and projecting it; that everything that it does has a great deal of deliberation behind it even when it gives the impression of being frivolously irresponsible; and that it is at all times engaged in propaganda but does it so well that hardly anybody notices that the process of persuasion, even brainwashing, is at work. Its success is owed not just to the technical mastery of the medium, important though that is, but to certitude of purpose and direction.

These are precisely the elements which seem to have been wanting in the conduct of All India Radio. Perhaps it is unfair to say this, especially because this deficit can ultimately be traced back to that "bigger whole" of which, as Nehru reminded Fielden, broadcasting is a part. Nevertheless, the fact of this deficit has to be faced. For unless it is faced, any radical improvement cannot come. In one's more pessimistic moments one is even inclined to believe that the best thing to do would be to blow up