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A SCHEME OF BROADCAST DEVELOPMENT FOR INDIA

ELSEWHERE in this issue of *Current Science* appears an article on the development of nation-wide radio broadcasting in India to serve as a most valuable tool for national reconstruction on the only possible basis of the renaissance and reconstruction of the village and village life. An examination of the development and present status of broadcasting in such typical countries as France, Germany, Great Britain and Russia in Europe, Canada and the United States in Northern America, and China and India in Asia, leads to the irresistible conclusion that the fundamental cause of the deplorable absence of any progress in India is the apathy and the lack of appreciation by the public and the governments in India of the value and potentialities of broadcasting as a matchless universal propagandist instrument for the promotion of the welfare and happiness of the community and for safeguarding its interests.

The reasons usually put forward for the present pitifully backward condition are unconvincing and really not correct. It is said that the contributory factors are the size of India and its huge population, the pronounced racial, linguistic and religious divisions, the enormous disparity in cultural development between the various sections of the people and chronic poverty and mass illiteracy. But these are not peculiar to India alone; each and every one of them has been and continues to be a striking characteristic of Russia and Russian life. Yet these undoubtedly serious difficulties and disadvantages did not prevent the builders of modern Russia not only from putting Russia on the radio map of the world, but achieving for it a position in the front rank in the radio world in the short space of some half a dozen years. Nor is it correct to say that the severe political unrest and the economic troubles of recent years have stood in the way of Indian radio development. Many other countries, notably, Austria, Germany, Italy and Russia have passed through or are still in the midst of acute political and social turmoil and severe economic distress. Yet they are noted for extensive broadcast development. Even Mexico and China are ahead of India in this respect. Further, it is not clear if the conduct of the broadcast service from the Bombay and Calcutta stations and their programme composition

are based on any well-defined policy with a clear understanding of the main objectives. There is none so poor in the world as India in the matter of broadcasting.

But the budget allotment of 20 lakhs of rupees for broadcasting by the Government of India, their decision to put up a 25 kw transmitter at Delhi and the highly commendable procedure of the Government of Madras in putting forward a worthwhile scheme for the whole presidency after detailed examination of the question by a competent radio engineer, appear to indicate that India has started on the road towards having a satisfactory system. The question arises if behind these there is a well-considered comprehensive plan of development for the whole country in regard to (a) organisation, finance and programme policy; (b) number and powers of stations and their location; (c) the interconnecting wire network; (d) receiver distribution; (e) manufacture in India of the necessary apparatus; (f) development and research in regard to all matters of technique, materials, apparatus and operation; (g) the training and recruitment of the necessary personnel of all grades; (h) relations with the press, the state departments and foreign broadcast administrations; (i) the important question of television and allied matters. A *laissez-faire* policy will be thoroughly wasteful in men, money and effort, besides causing confusion and inequitable and non-uniform development in the country. Any worthwhile development plan has to be based on a thorough examination and critical study of the world situation in broadcasting in all its aspects. And that can be done only by sending out a competent and fully authorised commission of inquiry as advocated at the end of the article. Will the Government act on the suggestion?

Even a brief consideration of the question of broadcasting *on a nation-wide basis* shows that low powers and short wavelengths for transmitters are out of question. There is really no satisfactory alternative to high power and medium wave policy, if the whole area of the country should be brought under adequate and reliable broadcast coverage as determined by daylight reception on an average type of receiver so as to be free from atmospheric disturbances at all parts of the year. Short wavelengths are suitable for long

distance reception during limited parts of the day and have entertainment value only with well-designed and rather expensive receiving apparatus.

The transmitting system as visualised in the article is an essentially conservative estimate of requirements. It will probably be found that the number of stations in each category may have to be doubled; the individual powers, particularly of the regional transmitters, may have to be increased by 50 per cent. A receiver per cent of the population is an under-estimate but is a satisfactory objective to start with.

Community ownership of receivers and community listening were first started in Russia; in countries of high development such as Great Britain, Germany and the United States, this practice is a feature of schools and clubs of all sorts. There is no suitable alternative to this in India, at least for the present.

In regard to the organisations of broadcasting, the article is most emphatic on four basic requirements: (a) to retain the unreserved and whole-hearted trust and confidence of the people, the organisation should be completely above the slightest trace of suspicion of allegiance to party and sectional interests of any type; (b) the organisation should be an unqualified national monopoly, financed exclusively by the licence fee and public funds and existing solely for the education, enlightenment and entertainment of the community; private commerce should be rigidly excluded from any voice or control on policy or day-to-day conduct of broadcasting; (c) the organisation should be such as to ensure uniform broadcast facilities throughout the land and the maintenance of the highest standards of excellence in apparatus, methods and operation; and (d) each region should have and exercise the utmost possible freedom in all programme matters.

Organisation as a government department or as private commercial enterprise is both impracticable and intolerable. A highly centralised system such as the British Broadcasting Corporation which has made Great Britain so pre-eminent in broadcasting is wholly unworkable. A non-profit making autonomous public utility organisation with complete centralisation of all technical services and as complete decentralisation in all programme matters and of the type advocated in the article is the only solution. It goes without saying that advertisement by radio should not even be thought of.

Everywhere and at all stages, the success or failure of a broadcasting system depends on the underlying programme policy and daily programme composition. The only criterion is entertainment and educative value as determined by variety, balance, utility and wide appeal to every section of the community in regard to age, sex, occupation and linguistic and racial grouping. Monotony, stiffness and heavy seriousness kill broadcasting outright. It is futile and shortsighted to design and put up receivers tuned to the local station. That is the finest way to create suspicion and repel the listener. Foreign station listening should be encouraged; it is of some educative value occasionally to hear completely unintelligible music and talk and the sounds of strange voices and instruments far away. And in any case, it is far sounder to make the daily programme so rich, varied, interesting and instructive and of such high entertainment value, that the rural listener, of his own accord, prefers it to others.

Of vital importance to broadcasting and the radio industry in India are the questions of the manufacture of radio apparatus, research and the training of engineers. It is impossible and intolerable to be dependent for them on countries abroad. Distance, cost, natural differences in the conditions of working are all against it. In these matters, private commerce in India and the various educational institutions have a large and fruitful part to play on the basis of a carefully considered definitive formulation of a progressive and far-seeing broadcast development policy.

While the article rightly insists that the broadcasting system has to be built up it has not ventured upon any discussion on the first step to be taken. Such a discussion would have probably been useful though rather premature. But whatever its merits or demerits, it is based upon a careful study of the history and present status of broadcasting abroad and prolonged and earnest consideration of the possibilities and requirements in regard to India and Indian conditions. The article will have more than amply served its purpose if it helps "to create a correct perspective of the vast problem and provoke reasoned discussion on what is inherently a national question" and "to offer some concrete basis for such discussion".

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