

Licence fee on TV, radio sets

It's not in the people's interest

by N. Bhaskara Rao

THE idea of licence fee on TV and radio sets at the point of purchase is not new. At least twice in two decades such an idea was mooted. In fact, earlier the government was collecting licence fee on TV and radio sets through post offices, which was given up in 1975 after a review by a committee of which this writer was a member. The argument that Doordarshan is a public broadcaster and, therefore, it needs public funding was far more convincing at that time. And yet the licence fee was given up. It was found that, firstly, there was considerable inconvenience and even harassment to the public in that process and, secondly, most of what was collected was going into collection costs of the Postal Department. The need today is to remove all kinds of taxes on radio and television sets so that they become much cheaper and affordable. Such a move should be a priority of the ministry today. For, despite all that proliferation of media, there is stagnation in the penetration of the electronic media among one-third of the households of the country.

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the role of the State by way of budgetary support should be definite but transparent.

In the interest of the public broadcaster, its priorities and pre-occupations require periodical scrutiny by some public fora. As a public service broadcaster, Prasar Bharati has been closing and starting channels without a consistent policy. For example, what has been the pattern of cross-channel subsidisation? As a public service broadcaster, it should put its best foot forward to make programmes relevant to a large section of people as well as consistent with its mandate. Whatever that be, Prasar Bharati is of late overwhelmed with engineering opportunities when the need is all-out efforts on the programming front, on quality and marketing.

Doordarshan and AIR have excellent infrastructure by way of transmitters

and the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, putting their own personal interests above that of the nation, had agreed a few years ago with the Planning Commission which treated Doordarshan and AIR on a par with a PSU steel mill or a hotel and insisted that two media units should compete in the market and "earn their revenue".

The mandarins in the Finance Ministry and the Planning Commission need to rethink today as to the role of a public service broadcaster and the need for budgetary support irrespective of the party in power. To pursue this, Doordarshan must have a vision and a mission. Because of the lack of understanding of the unique role, both AIR and Doordarshan are languishing for want of financial support. And yet most ministries, at the Centre and in the states, expect AIR

to pass a channel as a public service broadcaster, even if it amounts to a loss of Rs 20 crore or Rs 40 crore. As a unique institute, contribution of AIR over the decades has no parallel for the public service it provided. AIR continues to make yeoman service in keeping the country together and enriching its people in so many ways. Doordarshan too can be credited for several initiatives over the years. But because of perceptions and priorities of the government, those concerns for which AIR and DD deserve praise were neglected. This includes the extent of the programmes for children, farmers, artisans and even women. The more obvious shift in the priorities of Doordarshan was perhaps because of all-out attention of the governments at the neglect of AIR. That apparently has saved AIR and helped retain some of its virtues so far.

Yet another issue is dichotomising TV channels or even radio channels into public service, and commercial is uncalled for. In the absence of a pro-active national media policy, unfortunately, such a distorted view has taken roots. All channels should have some public service responsibilities as a licensing condition. The difference, however, could be by way of

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That a public service broadcaster cannot survive on its own and that it needs to be supported by the government, or has to depend on "public funds", is an accepted practice in many countries. However, the argument of the minister that since the government is funding mostly, "it was not possible to stop government intervention" needs to be questioned. For, by that logic one could ask whether the government is intervening in the operations of the Supreme Court of India or even in the tasks of the UPSC? Also, the assumption that "financial autonomy" ensures "functional autonomy" is questionable and, in fact, it is a fallacy. Functional autonomy, no matter what the source of the support, eventually depends on the organisational structures, status of functionaries and the caliber and concerns of the political leadership.

Nevertheless, it should be the responsibility of the State to fund the same way as in the case of the Supreme Court. The best bet is to fund Prasar Bharati as a part of the annual budget, but on the basis of certain criteria. Financial support comes either from the market or from the State. In today's competitive scenario, it cannot be this or that, but a mix of both where

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spread across the country, making them the best equipped to be public service broadcasters. Abandoning such a unique potential for decentralised broadcasting in favour of centralised operations does not justify a public service broadcaster. How else Prasar Bharati could go for Direct-to-Home? (DTH) without first exploring the potential already on hand. DTH involves heavy investments and that is how it is being viewed as meant for affluent sections. Even more, as a broadcast platform, DTH implies putting public service channels and totally commercial ones, which include violence, vulgar and porno ones, at the doorsteps of the viewers indiscriminately and at par.

Doordarshan and AIR do need financial support to pursue their mandate, and the commitment should be on a long-term basis, not on a year-to-year basis. It is unfortunate that certain senior offi-

cials of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, putting their own personal interests above that of the nation, had agreed a few years ago with the Planning Commission which treated Doordarshan and AIR on a par with a PSU steel mill or a hotel and insisted that two media units should compete in the market and "earn their revenue".

Minister after Minister had talked of the need for financial support, but did nothing beyond. The need is the recognition of the role, relevance and status of the public service broadcaster and the compulsions for budgetary support, but based on certain criteria. That is a better way to ensure support than the minister going on appealing colleague ministers to "pay the public broadcaster for highlighting their programmes". Another option that could also be examined is that many state governments and city administrations levy cess on education or libraries as a percentage of annual property tax. Why not a cess be considered on property owners or taxpayers for a more responsible public service broadcasting in the country.

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tify or pass a channel as a public service broadcaster, even if it amounts to a loss of Rs 20 crore or Rs 40 crore. As a unique institute, contribution of AIR over the decades has no parallel for the public service it provided. AIR continues to make yeomen service in keeping the country together and enriching its people in so many ways. Doordarshan too can be credited for several initiatives over the years. But because of perceptions and priorities of the government, those concerns for which AIR and DD deserve praise were neglected. This includes the extent of the programmes for children, farmers, artisans and even women. The more obvious shift in the priorities of Doordarshan was perhaps because of all-out attention of the governments at the neglect of AIR. That apparently has saved AIR and helped retain some of its virtues so far.

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The minister's concern to support and strengthen Doordarshan is welcome. However, the "initiative" to sound the nation about cess on radio/television sets is misplaced. The issue that should be raised first is the television scenario in the country and the direction in which it is going. The issue of levying cess cannot be taken in isolation. Public should be given an idea about what AIR's and Doordarshan's role would be in an intensely competitive scenario. Their vision and mission need to be reiterated. That is not possible without a national media policy, at least for broadcasting. In the absence of such a policy, ad hoc and isolated decisions are being taken, ignoring their long-term and larger implications. ■

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