

BROADCAST A CHANGE

Time is up for the I&B ministry unless it downsizes right away

By Dr N. BHASKARA RAO

With the Convergence Bill about to become a reality very soon and the era of convergence on the anvil, the information and broadcasting ministry with a yearly budgetary outlay of over Rs 2000 crores will have little to do as a ministry. Once "broadcasting" becomes the responsibility of the Communication Commission, all that will remain with the ministry is "information". In the new national paradigm, functions of "information" would be converged into a professional body, somewhat in the lines of a "Coffee Board" or a "Railway Board" with the PIB becoming its nucleus. The spokesperson — a Cabinet minister — can be made accountable to Parliament instead of the ministry.

In this context the Geethakrishnan Committee Report which recommended downsizing various divisions of the I&B ministry deserves a second look, before it is shelved. Not surprisingly, in the name of "rightsizing", the ministry is trying to give a fresh lease of life to the divisions which have outlived their effectiveness and relevance. Union finance minister Yashwant Sinha proposed in his Budget speech that the I&B

The government can easily save Rs 750 to 1000 crores annually if the ministry of I&B realises the reality of today's media scene and closes down the redundant divisions. Neither the compulsions for which these units had come into being several years ago exist today, nor the modus operandi of these divisions is an effective way of achieving the objectives, even assuming they are valid in today's context.

The contention of the ministry that the reach of the field publicity units is much more than the reach of television is far from the actual reality. Today television in India not only reaches a greater number of people, but it is also watched more often in a week and has a greater impact on the life styles of people, including those belonging to the rural areas. In contrast the potential reach of some 268 field publicity units is hardly half of that of television and in any case nearly one-third of these units are located in urban centres where a radio station or a newspaper and one or more cinema theatres exist. A CMS analysis brought out that for a couple of years these units were hardly

Song & Drama units, whose annual outlays are over Rs 150 crores. There are some 700 registered and 1000 empanelled artists operating from 10 regional centres. In the absence of money, training to cultural troops and focus on relevant themes, these too have lost their relevance. In any case their reach is insignificant.

Apart from publishing books and journals, the Publications Division brings out a weekly employment news in English, Hindi and Urdu for which about Rs 150 crores is spent yearly. The rationale behind the existence of this weekly is now some 20 years old. It was launched to broad-base recruitment to various public sector units and government jobs. Nowadays every television channel has a programme on employment opportunities at least once a week and every newspaper has columns devoted to this as also "counselling columns". Hence such a weekly does not help achieve the objectives of providing a level playing opportunity and has become redundant. The finding was brought out by a ministry spon-

sored study a couple of years ago.

The books published by the Publication Division are languishing in godowns. A study by this researcher some years ago had brought out that books worth more than Rs 100 crores were lying in godowns as they could not be sold for whatever reasons. In any case most of the titles published recently have hardly any incremental value to add to the range and variety of book publishing in India. If the ministry wants something to be published, private publishers can do a much better job in a more cost effective way and can also sell them in the market. In the case of journals, sponsored by one ministry or the other, they are already being printed outside. These journals have been there for decades, but hardly have any circulation beyond the government's own agencies and offices, although some of the issues are of excellent quality.

With the proliferation of professional advertising agencies, several ministries have started using these agencies instead of going through the DAVP as was the practice some years ago, including those which have to

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Similarly the Films Division, which has a budget of nearly Rs 300 crores, has outlived its utility. It was created to cater primarily to the cinema-theatre circuit when there was no television in the country. Today the production of films is mostly given out, its distribution function has no relevance in the changed media scene and yet its administrative set-up is so huge that it is a big burden on the national exchequer. With the recent proliferation of television the cinema-circuit has lost significance for the Films Division to continue its operations.

Then there are the Indian Institutes of Mass Communication at New Delhi and Dhenkanal, and the Film and Television Training Institutes of India at Pune and Kolkata. These bodies, fully funded by the I&B ministry, are not fulfilling any special role for which the government needs to spend over Rs 220 crores. They are suffering for lack of policy and direction.

Of all these bodies the Press Information Bureau (PIB) still has some relevance. However, it needs to acquire credibility and should be more efficient. The PIB needs to be

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In this context the Geethakrishnan Committee Report which recommended downsizing various divisions of the I&B ministry deserves a second look, before it is shelved. Not surprisingly, in the name of "rightsizing", the ministry is trying to give a fresh lease of life to the divisions which have outlived their effectiveness and relevance. Union finance minister Yashwant Sinha proposed in his Budget speech that the I&B ministry should implement the Geethakrishnan Committee recommendations by July 31, 2001. However, it is business as usual with the I&B ministry.

The ministry spends about Rs 1500 crores annually at the present level on these "subordinate divisions". This does not include autonomous ones like the AIR, Doordarshan and institutes under its direct control. The divisions are DAVP, Publications Division, Field Publicity, Song & Drama, Films Division and, of course, the better known PIB.

The government can easily save Rs 750 to 1000 crores annually if the ministry of I&B realises the reality of today's media scene and closes down the redundant divisions. Neither the compulsions for which these units had come into being several years ago exist today, nor the modus operandi of these divisions is an effective way of achieving the objectives, even assuming they are valid in today's context.

The contention of the ministry that the reach of the field publicity units is much more than the reach of television is far from the actual reality. Today television in India not only reaches a greater number of people, but it is also watched more often in a week and has a greater impact on the life styles of people, including those belonging to the rural areas. In contrast the potential reach of some 268 field publicity units is hardly half of that of television and in any case nearly one-third of these units are located in urban centres where a radio station or a newspaper and one or more cinema theatres exist. A CMS analysis brought out that for a couple of years these units were hardly being given any money to go into the interior villages and that in any case they were not equipped with any locally relevant software. Field publicity units can hardly revisit the same village once in five years even if routes are rationalised and a recurring budget is given. Little over Rs 200 crores is spent annually on these units when in fact a far more reliable and more frequently viewed medium is available to simultaneously reach the concerned people.

The same rationale applies to

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With the proliferation of professional advertising agencies, several ministries have started using these agencies instead of going through the DAVP as was the practice some years ago, including those which have to do with rural development. This is the case with both creative strategy and media planning. At best the DAVP is a "releasing agency". For that there is no need for a big establishment. In fact, there is no reason why the DAVP in its present form, with an annual outlay of around Rs 450 crores, should exist at all. Its mailing lists are outdated, its exhibition expertise archaic and it does not have any professional expertise or data base. The Prime Minister's speeches which it publishes in regional

languages could be published and distributed more efficiently by private publishers.

Similarly the Films Division, which has a budget of nearly Rs 300 crores, has outlived its utility. It was created to cater primarily to the cinema-theatre circuit when there was no television in the country. Today the production of films is mostly given out, its distribution function has no relevance in the changed media scene and yet its administrative set-up is so huge that it is a big burden on the national exchequer. With the recent proliferation of television the cinema-circuit has lost significance for the Films Division to continue its operations.

Then there are the Indian Institutes of Mass Communication at New Delhi and Dhenkanal, and the Film and Television Training Institutes of India at Pune and Kolkata. These bodies, fully funded by the I&B ministry, are not fulfilling any special role for which the government needs to spend over Rs 220 crores. They are suffering for lack of policy and direction.

Of all these bodies the Press Information Bureau (PIB) still has some relevance. However, it needs to acquire credibility and should be more efficient. The PIB needs to be reorganised and should be converted into a professional body.

Convergence of communication technologies works for the better only when there is also a convergence in government policies and departments. If ministries do not try to reinvent themselves in the convergence era, India will miss yet another opportunity to catch up.

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