

Behind FM Radio

Mudrarakshas

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Last year, during a tour of the aboriginal areas of Madhya Pradesh, I had the opportunity to spend a few days in Betul. I had been there ten years earlier, but I hardly recognized the place. The jungle had thinned out terribly, and its narrow creeks had all but totally dried up. Here and there, what was once a full river was now nothing more than sand, stones and dry banks. The beautiful hills now were ugly and had already been reduced by landslides. Without hindrance now rain washed away the soil to the point that stones that had been buried deep were appearing like skulls. The situation is so bad that in the next ten years Betul will probably become like Jabalpur is now, overrun with rocks.

That alone gave me enough despair, but an incident occurred there that was even more troubling. The Director of the Betul All-India Radio Station is an old friend, and while I was there, he suggested that he record an interview with me. Then my hosts in Betul made a comment that amazed me. They congratulated the Director on a wonderful idea, but they said it was a shame they would not be able to hear it.

I assumed that the reason they would not be able to hear the broadcast was that they would be busy at that time. The next day I came to the station for the recording, and then I learned the real reason. The Director introduced me to an Army Colonel who was there asking him when the transistor radio set he wanted would arrive. Without it there was nothing for him to listen to. That conversation astounded me. I could not understand why an Army Colonel would have any trouble at all getting a radio.

When I learned the whole story, I was even more taken aback, and the fact that the country knows nothing about this is shocking. The radio

transmitter set up in the aboriginal area of Betul is capable of carrying only FM frequency bands. In order to listen to FM broadcasts one must have a radio capable of receiving FM bands, and those radios are foreign imports, not easily available and terribly expensive.

Forty-three FM radio stations have already opened in India, and another twenty-four FM radio centres are about to open. The cost of opening one such centre is approximately Rs. seven crores (\$24.5 million US). To set up the FM transmitter cost the country approximately Rs. 470 crores (\$1,645,000,000 US). So the country spends all that money for FM-capable All-India Radio transmission in backward regions, and even a Colonel in the Indian Army finds it difficult to be able to listen to the broadcasts!

FM broadcasting is a new technology. What does the coming of this new technology mean for India?

First, it deprives almost all of India's seventy million poor, tribal and backward peoples from listening to radio broadcasts. Nor do those people have it in their power to get some entertainment by means of film, video or television. Some entertainment used to be afforded them by means of an inexpensive transistor radio, and by that means they also used to get some useful information and some education, but FM radios are hard to find and much too expensive for them.

This means that we will no longer be able to give entertainment to the country's seventy million poor, backward and tribal populations, nor will we be able to broadcast to them All-India Radio's educational and news programmes.

The country has the right to know why so much money has been spent to deprive so many people of enjoying the radio.

As I have already stated, in order to hear FM broadcasts one needs an expensive, imported radio. Radios made in India are not able to receive the signal. So what lies behind this?

Individual nations are not able themselves to decide which frequencies their radio stations will use. That decision is made by an international agency. It gives each country permission to decide the type of frequency mode and the name given to each particular station and its frequency.

So far in India the frequencies used for radio broadcasting have been those that Indian-made, inexpensive transistor radios can receive. In every medium-sized town and hamlet in India lower middle class families make small, inexpensive transistor radios. Even more so than light industries, this is a large and pervasive cottage industry that provides a great

number of people their daily bread.

As a matter of fact, the products of that cottage industry did so well in the Indian marketplace that it became a serious threat to large multinational corporations such as Mitsubishi, Bush, Philips and HMV. It was taking away from them more marketshare than they had expected or were willing to give up.

The situation of the foreign multinational corporations in the face of this domestic cottage industry of transistor radio production is similar to that of the Manchester textile industry in the face of the Indian weavers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

When one looks closely at the situation, the effect of the spread of the new technology of FM broadcasting in India will be the destruction of our domestic cottage industry of transistor radio production.

Foreigners sold India machines for FM mode radio broadcasting, but they did not give India the right to make FM radios. India had to accept the condition that she would either import ready-made FM radios or she would have to have a multinational company make them for her.

The result of this has been that for the past few years the Government of India has held discussions with the Philips multinational corporation, and in those discussions the Philips people put off any proposal for the production of inexpensive FM radios until such radios would be almost as expensive as black-and-white televisions.

Obviously, foreign multinational corporations have no concern whatsoever about whether or not the poor people of India are able to receive through the radio entertainment, information and education, and they care even less whether the people employed in the transistor radio cottage industry are able to continue living or die from hunger caused by unemployment.

Neither the World Bank nor the International Monetary Fund has any concern at all for the effect its policies has on the average person in India, and the Government of P.V. Narasimha Rao has become such a slave to the World Bank and the IMF that it is even prepared to forgive foreign companies for causing hundreds of deaths. It is even eager to take the entire salt industry of Kadla out of the hands of Indians and put it in the hands of foreign multinational corporations. So why would they have any concerns at all if the tribals of Betul were to become deprived of radio broadcasts!

From experts on the subject I learned that the excuse foreigners used

when they forced Indian authorities to accept FM broadcasting was that the airwaves had become crowded. In response why didn't the Indian authorities or those running the Government say that in the case of far-flung tribal areas where broadcasts are local and of limited range the airwaves are totally free? Because they are too beholden to foreign interests.

It is incredible that in this horrendous situation, where almost Rs. 500 crores (\$1,750,000,000 US) were wasted, the transistor radio cottage industry has been ruined, and poor people have been cheated out of being able to listen to their radios, in India's Parliament no one said a word! Why didn't someone ask: In this campaign for FM radio, in which Rs. 500 crores were wasted and multinational corporations had a hand in worsening the state of the country, how much Bofors was involved, and who got rich?