22

* Post-war Development of Electric Power in India

Dr. Ambedkar's Address

Problems relating to the post-war development of electric power in India were discussed by the *Reconstruction Policy Committee* which met in New Delhi on October 25, the Hon'ble Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Member for Labour, Government of India, presiding. A number of delegates from the Provincial Governments, leading power States and engineering interests attended the meeting on the invitation of the Central Government.

The Honourable Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, addressing the Committee, said:

Gentlemen, I welcome you to this meeting of the Policy Committee of the Reconstruction Committee No. 3C. A Chairman has both the obligation and the privilege of making an opening speech. The obligation I accept. But I do not wish to abuse the privilege by inflicting upon you a long speech. All I propose to do is to put certain relevant facts into focus so that our attention may be riveted upon them.

For the information of those of you who do not know the machinery set up by the Government of India to study the various problems of reconstruction but whose participation is necessary I would like, if I may briefly, to refer to the plan of work which has been adopted for the better and most expeditious way of carrying out the work taken up by the Reconstruction Committee of Council.

Five Committees

It is, I am sure, within your knowledge that the ex-Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow in March last decided to have a Reconstruction Committee

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* Indian Information, November 15, 1943, pp. 279-81.

of Council under the chairmanship of my gallant friend and colleague the Hon'ble Sir J. P. Srivastava. The Reconstruction Committee of Council has set up five different Reconstruction Committees. Committee No. I deals with Re-Settlement and Re-Employment, Committee No. II with Disposals, Contracts and Government Purchases. The work of Committee No. III is partitioned among three Committees— Committee No. 3A deals with Transport, No. 3B with Posts, Telegraphs and Air Communications, and No. 3C with Public Works and Electric Power. Committee No. IV is concerned with Trade and Industry, and Committee No. V with Agriculture.

Each of these Committees has a Policy Committee which works under the presidentship of a Member of Council which is composed of the representatives of the Central Government, Provincial Governments, State Governments, and such representatives of trade, industry and commerce as are considered necessary. Each has also an official committee which works under the chairmanship of the Secretary to the Department and is composed of the Secretaries of other Departments concerned.

In addition to these two sets of Committees, some of the Reconstruction Committees have a third committee called Subject Committee to deal with technical subjects arising within its field. In addition to these there is an official committee on Social Services and a Consultative Committee of Economists. Such is the plan of work devised by the Central Government to deal with the problems of Reconstruction. Ours is a meeting of the Policy Committee of the Reconstruction Committee No. 3C. The task of this Committee is to study the problems connected with electric power and to make a recommendation as to the best way of solving them.

Before I enter upon an analysis of the problems, there is one question relating to generation of electric power to which I wish to make a reference at an early stage as I wish to get it out of the way. It relates to the question of procurement of machinery, tools and plants that would be necessary for the generation of electrical power. That machinery will have to be obtained from outside, mostly from Great Britain. The prospect of obtaining such machinery is not free from difficulty. Great Britain would require a great deal of her productive capacity to be reserved for her own needs.

There are other European and Asiatic countries which would be in the British and American markets to acquire the necessary stock of tools and plants. In this competition India may find it difficult to obtain the quota she will need. To safeguard India's position it would be desirable if India could register her orders for tools and plants as early as possible and secure as great a priority as can be done. The difficulties regarding priority may not be very great. I feel quite certain that we can depend upon His Majesty's Government to secure for India high priority in view of the aid she has rendered in this War. But there are other difficulties mainly arising from making up the indents and placing them with the manufacturers as firm orders.

In the first place, electricity is a purely provincial subject. The estimates as to tools and machinery must, therefore, come from the Provinces. The Centre can only sum them up.

In the second place, the type of machinery will depend upon the decision as to the prime mover that is to be used for the generation of electricity, whether water, steam, oil, etc.

The third difficulty arises out of the uncertainty of the attitude of the governments which will come into existence after the war. Will the future Government accept the plans and programmes set out by the present Government ? Will the future Governments maintain the level of taxation which the plans and the programmes made by the present Government will require ? On these questions one cannot be sure. All the same it seems that this Government would be failing in its duty if it did not make secure the prospect of India getting the tools and plants necessary for electrification at the end of the war.

Functions Of Policy Committee

I mention this matter as being urgent and important. But I am sure you will understand that this is not the matter with which this Committee is primarily concerned. This is a Policy Committee and our primary concern is to deal with the problems arising out of the administration, production and distribution of electricity and to recommend what we regard as the principles which should guide the future Government of India. We have taken advantage today of our meeting of our Policy Committee to ask Provincial Governments and State Governments to send representatives to this meeting to give us the benefit of their views.

The treatment of electricity as a matter of public concern has passed through many vicissitudes. The Government of India seems to have become aware of it for the first time in 1905 when, I find, a circular letter was issued by it to the Provincial Governments. Thereafter both the Provincial Governments and the Central Government seem to have gone to bed. They woke up when the urgency of active interest in electricity was emphasized by the Report of the Indian Industrial Commission published in 1918 and the Report of the Indian Munitions Board which came out a year later.

The Industrial Commission recommended the necessity for a Hydrographic Survey of India to be undertaken by Government rather than by private enterprise. The Government of India accepted this recommendation and appointed the late Mr. G.T. Barlow, C.I.E., then Chief Engineer, Irrigation Branch, the United Provinces, to take charge of the Hydrographic Survey as Chief Engineer, associating with him in the enquiry Mr. J. M. Mcarcs, M.I.C.E., Electrical Adviser to the Government of India. Soon after Mr. Barlow died, and his work was carried on by Mr. Mcares who produced three most excellent reports between 1919 and 1922 containing information Province by Province regarding the possibilities of Power Supply under five heads—(1) water power already developed, (2) plants under construction, (3) areas investigated but not developed, (4) known sites of which detailed examination is desirable, and (5) areas and sites not investigated.

Electricity—A Provincial Subject

Unfortunately under the changes made in the Government of India in consequence of the Act of 1919, Electricity became a Provincial subject. That Act unfortunately did not contain a provision as the present Act does of permitting the Central Government to spend its revenues on matters which it felt fit and proper although they were outside its field of administration. The result was that it became impossible for the Government of India to finance the Hydrographic Survey. A good, great and necessary piece of work for providing India with supply of electrical power came to an end.

There is no officer at the Centre in charge of the development of electricity in India with the result that we at the Centre had till recently

no data as to the production, distribution and administration of electricity in India.

I am, therefore, glad that the subject of electricity in India has come up again for serious consideration. So far as I am able to visualize, the questions which this Committee must concern itself with are :—

(1) Whether electricity should be privately owned or whether it should be State-owned ?

(2) If it is to be privately owned, are there any conditions which it is necessary to impose so as to safeguard the interests of the public ?

(3) Whether the development responsibility for electricity should belong to the Central Government or to the Provincial Government ?

(4) If the responsibility is to be of the Central Government, what is the most efficacious method of administering it so as to provide cheap and abundant supply of electricity and avoid waste of resources ?

(5) If the responsibility is to be of the Provinces, whether the administration by the Provinces should be subordinate to an Inter- Provincial Board with powers to advise and co-ordinate ?

Three Considerations

Every one of these questions has two sides. Each side has its protagonists. I do not wish to express my opinion at this stage. I have *an open* mind. But it is not *an empty* mind. All I wish to say is that in coming to our conclusions as to which is the better way of developing electricity we shall have to bear in mind three considerations :—

(1) Which of the two will give us power not at a cheaper but at the cheapest price,

(2) Which of the two will give us power which will not merely be sufficient but which will be abundant,

(3) Which of the two will enable India to be equipped with electricity by treating it on the same basis as a strategic Railway, that is to say, as an undertaking which must be started without consideration of immediate profit.

I emphasize these considerations because what India wants is an assured supply of power, cheap power and abundant power.

These are primary questions. There may be some hesitation lurking in the minds of some of you to deal with them on the ground that most of them raise the question of changes in the Constitution. Speaking for myself I feel no such hesitation. There is a difference between deciding a constitutional issue and expressing an opinion on it. We shall not be deciding upon constitutional questions. We shall be only expressing our opinion as regards them. We are not debarred from considering them for the reason that they are of a constitutional nature. I feel quite certain that we cannot avoid them if we want to do justice to the subject which is placed in our charge.

Power Supply Department

Besides these primary questions there are others which are by no means secondary. If electrification is to be a success wc cannot leave them out of our consideration. They are :—

(1) Whether it is necessary to establish a Power Supply Department at the Centre whose duty would be to make a systematic survey of the available sources of power, namely, coal, petrol, alchohol and running water, etc., and to suggest ways and means of increasing generating capacity.

(2) Whether it is necessary to establish a Power Research Bureau at the Centre to study problems connected with the relation between the sources of power and the machinery in order to promote the most efficient use of available power.

(3) Whether it is necessary to adopt some means to train Indians in electrical technology so that India will have a staff to plan and to carry out schemes of construction, maintenance and improvement in electrical plant and machinery.

Before I conclude may I make a few observations pointing out the significance of and the ultimate objective that lies behind the need for electrical development in India ? It is necessary that those who are placed in charge of the subject should have the fullest realization of its significance and its objective. If you agree with me in this I will request you to ask yourselves the question, 'Why do we want cheap and abundant electricity in India ?' The answer is that without cheap an abundant electricity no effort for the industrialization of India can

succeed. This answer brings out only a part of the significance of the work this Committee has to undertake.

Ask another question, ' Why is industrialization necessary ? ' and you will have the full significance made clear to you at once ; for the answer to the question is, we want industrialization in India as the surest means to rescue the people *from the eternal cycle of poverty in which they are caught.* Industrialization of India must, therefore, be grappled with immediately.

Industrialization Of India

Industrialization of India has been in the air for many years. But one fails to notice any serious drive to bring about industrialization. There are still some who pay only lip service to it. Others look upon it as a fad, if not a craze. There are very many who are never tired of preaching that India is an agricultural country and therefore the best thing to do is to devote all energy to improve agriculture and not to run after industrialization. Nobody needs to be told that India is primarily an agricultural country. Everybody knows it. What is surprising is that very few people seem to realize what a great misfortune it is. I know this will not be readily admitted. What *more* evidence is wanted to prove that this is a misfortune *than* the famine which is stalking Bengal and other parts of India and where so many from the agricultural population are dying daily from want of food or from want of purchasing power ?

To my mind there can be no greater proof necessary to show that India's agriculture has failed and failed miserably when it is as plain as anything could be that India which is engaged in producing nothing but food does not even produce sufficient food to feed its people. What is this due to ? The poverty of India, to my mind, is due entirely to its being made dependent upon agriculture.

Population in India grows decade by decade in geometrical progression. As against this unlimited growth of population what is available for cultivation is not merely a limited amount of land but a liimited amount of land whose fertility is diminishing year by year. India is caught between two sides of a pinccr, the one side of which is a progressive increase in population and the other is a progressive increase in the deterioration of the soil.

"A Rot Has Set In"

The result is that at the end of a decade we are left with a negative balance between population and production and a constant sqeezing of the standard of living. At every decade this negative balance between population and production is increasing in an alarming degree, leaving India with the inheritance of poverty, more poverty and chronic poverty. A rot has set in. This rot, I feel sure, is not going to be stopped by organizing agricultural exhibitions or animal shows or by propaganda in favour of better manuring. It can stop only when agriculture is made profitable. Nothing can open possibilities of making agriculture in India profitable except a serious drive in favour of industrialization. For it is industrialization alone which can drain away the excess of population which is exerting such enormous pressure on land into gainful occupations other than agriculture.

To sum up, our Reconstruction Committees are no doubt modelled, so far as intention and purpose is concerned, on the Reconstruction Committees which have come into existence in most European countries whose industrial organization has been destroyed by the Germans. The problems of reconstruction differ, and must differ from country to country. In some countries the problem of reconstruction is a problem of reconditioning of rundown plant and machinery.

Nature Of Problem In India

In some countries the problem of reconstruction is a problem of replacement of tools and plants which have been destroyed in the war. The problem of reconstruction in India must include consideration of all the questions with which other countries engaged in war are concerned.

At the same time we must not forget that the problem of reconstruction in India is essentially different from the problem of reconstruction in other countries. In other countries the problem of reconstruction is a problem of rehabilitation of Industry which has been in existence.

The problem of reconstruction in India, as I see it, is a problem mainly of the industrialization of India as distinguished from the rehabilitation of industry and industrialization but in the ultimate sense the removal of chronic poverty.

I, therefore, hope that we shall tackle the problems connected with electricity in an earnest and in a statesmanlike manner thinking it terms of human life and not in terms of the competing claims of the Centre *versus* the Provincial Government.

I do not like to end on a note of pessimism though the memory of the past efforts of reconstruction is nothing but sad. War seems to give birth to an urge for Reconstruction for the same reasons that necessity gives rise to invention or adversity to belief in God. The pity of it is that this urge which is born out of the war seems to the with peace. That did happen in India with the reconstruction scheme put forth by the Indian Industrial Commission and the Indian Board of Munitions after the last war. I have faith that this time the reconstruction plan will not be allowed to languish and fade away. We have in this war the compelling force of what William James called "the pungent sense of effective reality" of what poverty in India is, which the statesmen of the last War did not have.

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* Help for Scheduled Castes Students and Indian Evacuees

Proposals Approved by Standing Finance Committee

Grant of scholarships to scheduled castes students pursuing education in scientific and technological subjects and expenditure on Indian evacuees from war zones and dependants of persons detained there, were the two important proposals approved by the Standing Finance Committee at its meeting held in New Delhi on November 20, 1943, with the Hon'ble Sir Jeremy Raisman, Finance Member to the Government of India, in the chair.

The former proposal will involve an annual grant of Rs. 3 lakhs for 5 years and the latter is expected to entail an expenditure of Rs. 225 lakhs in 1944-45.

Scholarships

It was stated that in order to assist members of the scheduled castes, who had reached the high school stage, to obtain higher education, it was proposed to grant scholarships to the extent of 3 lakhs a year for five years. The scholarships would be awarded for scientific and technological studies both in India and abroad.

The Committee approved the proposal.

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* Indian Information, December 15, 1943, p. 337.