

'Wind up I&B ministry'

Dr N Bhaskara Rao who is Chairman of Centre for Media Studies and an authority on media policies in conversation with The Observer. Excerpts:

■ What are the contentious issues in the Bill?

There are some ten key contentious issues in the broadcast bill. They are:

- (1) the extent of foreign equity participation and their control;
- (2) the extent of cross-media ownership;
- (3) the extent of level-playing vis-a-vis the state-owned media — AIR and Doordarshan;
- (4) Possibility of big business houses becoming monopolistic operators across the country;
- (5) uplinking and downlinking;
- (6) state and local bodies, universities and the like should be allowed or not;
- (7) implications of liberalisation of broadcasting on print media;
- (8) networking with regional and local broadcast services;
- (9) the bidding process for licensing;
- (10) future of present cable operators, etc.

■ What do you think about the restriction on the cross-media ownership?

The draft bill is rather vague on this most-controversial issue. It merely talks of cross media ownership restricted to 20 per cent. Though there should be provisions to prevent

possibility of monopolistic tendencies in the case of news and current affair flows in the country, newspaper enterprises should not be deprived of operating within the territory and in other than news and current affair programmes even



it they have a circulation of say more than 50 per cent. Also, there should be no restriction on subleasing time on channels for specialised programmes.

■ Is the broadcast bill against the spirit of liberalisation in the country?

Although liberalisation calls for de-regularisation, that very process also compels regulation.

The draft bill interestingly excludes the government media — Doordarshan and AIR — from the regulations proposed for other pri-

vate broadcasters. It rather envisages separate Corporation each for DD and AIR. Whether the Broadcast Authority will end up independent of the government of the time as per the Supreme Court judgement needs to be seen. In no case should the government become a regulator as well as an operator.

■ What will be the role of I&B if this bill comes into force?

The most continuous and controversial part of the proposed bill to be introduced in Parliament envisages a role for the minister for I&B. It is time that this ministry of I&B wound up altogether. The broadcasting wing of this ministry should be merged with the ministry of communication (broadcasting is becoming more a telecom ser-

vice) and the "information" wing should be converted into an independent board with media professionals. Infact, instead of two different regulatory authorities, one for telecom and another for broadcasting, we should have only one commission — more in the lines of the US Communication Commission.