

A Danger Signal

SHOULD not something be done to stop the anti-social activities of those who are planning to weaken the employment, potential of the Five Year Plan by offering prizes to inventors of labour-saving appliances? A particularly bad case has come to light of late to which attention is specially invited. The Indian Central Arecanut Committee has decided to award a prize of Rs 2,000 for the successful invention of a 'time-saving' machine for husking and slicing arecanuts. This advertisement appears over the signature of K. K. Nambiar, Secretary of the Committee.

True enough, the Committee wants a time-saving and not a labour-saving machine. But the difference is between a tweedle-dum and a tweedle-dee. The deception is too thin and can be seen through by anybody. Think of the numbers of arecanuts that one of these machines, if successful, will husk and slice in a day. Even a moderately successful one will replace the labour of hundreds, if not thousands, of women in Malabar who work all day long at this traditional occupation of theirs of husking arecanuts and elsewhere, all over India. spend hours on slicing them. The further specifications are that the machine should be simple in design and cheap, capable of husking arecanuts in all stages of maturity, without injuring the shape of the tender kernel inside and also capable of slicing the kernels to the required shape and size. It should be workable both by mechanical (*sic*, manual?) labour and by power.

The Indian Central Oil Seeds Committee, New Delhi, has also offered a prize of the same amount, viz. Rs 2,000, for the best model of a decorticator for mohwa seed but it has been more prudent and circumspect in that the model it wants has to be hand-driven, no mechanical power here to confound the planners and undermine the employment potential of the Five Year Plan. The labour saving capacity of even a hand-driven decorticator must be dangerously high indeed. How many hundreds of people will lose their part-time occupations if such machines are installed in the villages of the mohwa growing districts? The Committee, however, does not seem to have had much luck. It has ex-

tended the last date for receiving entries from August 31 to the end of February next. This it did by a notification issued from New Delhi on the 17th of last month, after waiting in vain all this time, for chance late-comers.

For what the Indian Central Arecanut Committee or the Indian Central Oil Seeds Committee wants, the prize money appears to be too small. And how do the intending competitors set about their business? For an essay competition, one can sit down at home and write. For more scholarly pursuits, requiring research and hard study, there are public libraries for whatever they are worth. But for mechanical or scientific experiments, there are no laboratories or workshops which will allow outsiders to fool around and try to find out things for themselves and make things for themselves. Much talent in quite unsuspected places go waste because there is no outlet for it. There is no premium on inventions either, no social encouragement or organised attempt to draw out inventive skill so that the load of labour can be lifted ever so slightly and human ingenuity can be directed to produce greater abundance.

Far from saving labour and making life for the average individual easier, there is both considerable awareness in high places and influential special pleading for making production more labour intensive, so that the back-breaking load of labour can never be lifted or lightened if these people have their way, and no escape for the bulk of the people condemned to manual labour from uninterminable grind except by death.

In a phantasy written in the last century, the author had poked fun at a committee of experts who sat in judgment over washerwomen's mangle to decide whether it was a machine or not, in which case, it was to be destroyed. The mangle was saved by the skin of its teeth. That was in *Erewhon*. Now it is news from Free India.

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It seems strange that in a city where advertisers do not respect the dead and desecrate the walls of the cremation ground with film advertisements and the authorities allow it just as they allow temples of the

gods to be desecrated in the same way, there should be people who bother ethics of advertising. Strange, but true. There are such people even in Bombay, today.

For selling a 'product, is it right to claim more for it than can be substantiated or proven? If it is not right, can it be legal? True, law and morality are not the same. The principle of *caveat emptor* is specious enough. But can it entirely absolve the seller from all responsibility? The common pre-occupation of the Indian peasant used to be litigation. It has visibly declined. While condemning this unfortunate predilection of the villager, the more enlightened of the urban population have not taken to law for the more worthwhile object of upholding the rights of the public. Had they done so, the bogus claims made by advertisers could not have gone unchallenged.

There are so few court cases which are fought to establish principles affecting public rights. And yet unless legal channels which are open to all, are availed of for the wholly laudable purpose of ridding society of attempts to dupe people, the subtle form of brigandage that goes on today cannot be stopped. This ranges from selling a product with palpably false and fantastic claims about its efficacy, to the confidence trick of offering service, as in selling a life-guaranteed fountain pen and then not giving it, except for an exorbitant price.

It is better to leave out in this connection the more outrageous claims made by vendors of all sorts of nostrums, drugs and talismans, etc., which are often rendered comparatively innocuous only because the boosting is so grossly overdone, as to defeat its own purpose.

The remedy that the ordinary law of the land offers is for some public spirited person to file a test case, to compel the advertiser to prove his claims or to compensate his customers for the loss inflicted - which may be only grievous mental disappointment as when hair fails to grow on a bald patch from a hair restorer, or the complexion of an ageing spinster does not become any fairer after using a soap that promises to make dark people fair.

Where the law does not provide adequate relief, what is the remedy? The question of ethics is more difficult, where the advertising offends commonsense or decency, rather than infringes rights or is a down-

right deception. Here, irrespective of the legal aspects of the case, advertisers in other countries have voluntarily set up a code of ethics and follow it. They can be more readily induced to impose upon themselves this measure, of voluntary restraint when newspapers and periodicals, particularly the better ones among them, insist on a certain standard of honesty and decency in the advertisements which they publish. Even the better class advertisers in this country have not yet thought of such a code. Nor have the advertising agencies taken up the matter.

To talk of these finer points of the ethics of advertising in the face of gross and flagrant violation of ordinary decency every day may sound somewhat unreal and over-much 'refayned'. But this country levels in strange contradictions and paradoxes, which daily remind one of Alberuni's penetrating observation that in Hindustan one finds diamonds mixed up with dung. The people here, Alberuni was amazed to find a thousand years ago, could forecast the occurrence of an eclipse accurately to the fraction of a second. "This, we Arabs," he said, "cannot do." But when the eclipse actually occurs, people go down on their knees and wail that the moon had been devoured by a demon, bathe in the Ganges to wash away their sins, throw away their cooking utensils because they have been polluted by the dark shadow of the monster, and do all manner of strange things. This the Arabs did not do.

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Toilet soap can wash one clean; but can it also make the skin fairer? 'Fairer,' not in the sense of more lovely to look at, but in the sense in which the word is expected to appeal to dark-skinned people, to fond parents who find it difficult to get their daughters married because they are dark?

Again, can medicated soaps really perform all the things that are claimed on their behalf? Any scientific book on the subject will tell you that even so common an antiseptic as carbolic acid is much less effective in a soap than when it is applied in isolation. More important and more to the point, that good clean soap by itself is a better antiseptic than in combination with carbolic acid or any other acid. Anyway, if the chemicals are really to be effective, the soap that contains them in the requisite pro-

portions will be of little use for purposes of toilet. And yet, from boardings and posters, from the pages of newspapers and illustrated magazines, medicated soaps shriek at you that they would perform the miracles which science considers quite impossible!

One has also to think of the tem-

ples and the talismans. Even then, to stick out for these finer points of the ethics of advertising is not to cry in the wilderness. For some people bother about such trifles and are troubled in their minds which holds out hope for our eventual rederuption, though one never knows when redemption will come.



FIGHT TUBERCULOSIS

BUY THESE TB SEALS



1952-53

TB SEAL

TUBERCULOSIS !

In this country TB claims a death a minute !

WHAT ARE YOU DOING ABOUT IT?

Join the people in their fight against Tuberculosis.

Buy TB Seals in large numbers and help raise funds for the fight

A TB Seal costs ONE ANNA only

These Seals can be had from : The Honorary Secretary,
Bombay State Anti-Tuberculosis Association,
Red Cross Buildings, 141 Mint Road, Bombay,
and other Agencies in the State

THE THIRD TUBERCULOSIS SEAL SALE CAMPAIGN

(Sponsored by the Tuberculosis Association of India,
New Delhi)

Space donated by :

Messrs BHARAT VANASPATI PRODUCTS LTD.,
BOMBAY

