

The Common Man and The Plan

(By a City Clerk)

After all, so many people could not be engaging themselves in the task of planning only to flourish their favourite theories or satisfy their egos. Some good might come out of it yet, who knows?

Has not one been hearing lately of some obscure village leaping from the twilight of the oil-lamp into the full blaze of electricity—of roads appearing where there were only cart-tracks before, of crops growing bigger and better? The impulse for change seems to be spreading over the whole country.

Perhaps, there is something in planning after all, the common man consoles himself.

IF One were asked what the most common obsession of the common man in the sixth year of the Republic is, the answer would be: planning. Planning takes him away from the realities of the present situation; it gives him a sense of importance of being associated in some mysterious way with great undertakings, of being an estimable part of a burgeoning whole; and more than all, it provides food for compensatory reverie and scope for indulging in impressive facts and figures and mouthing learned phrases and abstruse theories. In short, it gives him a transient sense of seeming or sounding uncommon in the dull, drab mass of commonality; and all his inner scepticism notwithstanding, he feels that somehow or other he will be the richer for all this talk of planning, however airy much of it may be. . . .

Planning has a touch of magic about it, and an element of weird ritual too; and what can appeal more to the average Indian mind than magic and ritual? It sounds like an open sesame that will ensure access to a thousand and one things that the common man has been longing for, but not been able to get so far. When his job looks like being a little shaky, his single-room or double-room abode overflows with clamant humanity or springs a leak or comes down in chunks of plaster or brick, when his wife complains that deficit budgeting has gone too far in the domestic sphere or when his soul gets impatient that he has not yet been able to purchase that rocking chair that he has long set his eyes on, nor the radio, nor the steel almlrah, something within him tells him that it will not be long before all his needs are met. For has not the country already gone through one phase of planning and is about to enter the second?

Imagination wanders into the future: a wide assortment of jobs to choose from, one better than another; neat rows of pain-fresh houses rising everywhere and clamouring for occupants; more

money than one would know what to do with; radio sets, almirahs and the like almost for the mere asking, and perhaps a scooter in the backyard, if not a motor car; and leisure for creative activity and facilities for picnics, holiday tours and even perhaps a month or two of sojourn at some lovely hill-station. Yes, let the great national projects start yielding fruit, and who would fritter his energy on the trivialities of everyday life, on counting annas and pice, making little things go a long way, on patch-work and makeshift? Away with it all! Human intelligence and enterprise were surely not meant to be wasted on the petty irritations of life? Even birds of the air and beasts of the jungle do better than struggle all the time for food and shelter. After centuries of endeavour and achievement, is not man entitled to something more?

The mood catches. The existing state of affairs and the environment are forgotten. The rheumatic chair, the torn shirt, the child demanding a new exercise book, the domestic larder calling for more supplies, the bills that keep floating in with every passing wind, the door that could do with a new hinge, the stove that might benefit from a new burner—all these rude reminders of the uncomfortable present seem to belong to some remote age, and the future, rosy and almost near, beckons. The dreaming common man dreams that he is a planner in his own right. Why leave all the planning, all the initiative to others? Do they know better than he—those doctrinaire folk with thick-rimmed spectacles and balding tops?

He starts planning on his own first with the new, spacious home he is almost sure he will get. There the children ought to have a room to themselves for study and unhampered growth, and for qualifying themselves for the inheritance already in the making. He must have a room to himself too—a room where he can read in peace, analyse the plans prepared by others and pro-

duce some of his own and fill those gaps in his knowledge which expose him to the mercy of the planning pandits, progressing from one abstraction to another. He must be able to hold his own with them, and even point out which detail they have missed and where their reasoning has gone astray. Yes, he must have a small library for this purpose, a library of select books, a reading lamp and a type-writer if possible. He would read and write late into the night and, when he tires of that, he would try his hand at painting, music or some other hobby. For is that not what the cultured are supposed to do?

But no, that is too selfish. He must plan for the country as a whole. What is an individual's comfort and opportunity when viewed against the needs of the multitude? He must think in wider terms and nurse bigger ambitions. Bhoodan, the Avadi resolution or the cackle of Communists cannot possibly solve the problem of the country. Something truly colossal like melting the snows on the Himalayas to water the arid regions, wringing water out of every passing cloud, hitching the prodigal sun to constructive endeavour and putting the wasteful wind and wave to use—something like this that strikes the imagination must needs be thought of. Or may not there be some new source of power, as yet undiscovered, which, if discovered by him, could end the nation's misery in a trice? Power that would cost nothing to generate and that could possibly be carried about in a hand-bag?

The planning mood grips, and he wanders farther and farther into the realm of speculation—into a brave new world where none would be obliged to work for his bread and where all would be free to indulge all the time in any form of self-expression that they choose. Released from the daily grind, not perturbed by the thought of catching the earliest train or bus to office or factory, never tied to a chair or work-bench, never under the searching eye of a

superior, never under the obligation to do any work unless one should by one's own free will decide so. what would man not be able to achieve? The purpose of true planning can be only to end the need for ail plans and achieve a freedom that is subject to no restraint. Isn't, that a new idea planning to be planless, or rather to afford to be planless?

The intoxication of the new idea grips, but not interminably; for the rheumatic chair, the torn shirt, the child in need of a new exercise book, the depleted larder, the hills that have piled up, the door that could do with a hinge, the stove that sputters for a new burner and the formidable wife presiding and fussing by turns over this unsatisfactory state of affairs all these, though brushed aside for a while, rush in with rude vigour and urgency on the plan-intoxicated mind. And there is a sudden descent to reality, followed by bewilderment, heart-searching and scepticism. What is the point in sacrificing the present to build the future? Why plan at all if all that one can hope for is a paradise at an

unpredictable point of time? Who would not readily exchange such an uncertain promise for the immediate prospect of a reasonably furnished two-room block, a fairly dependable and remunerative job, a domestic budget that occasionally balances itself, a chair that does not creak, a door that does not grate, a stove that can burn and a wife that can forget to nag now and then?

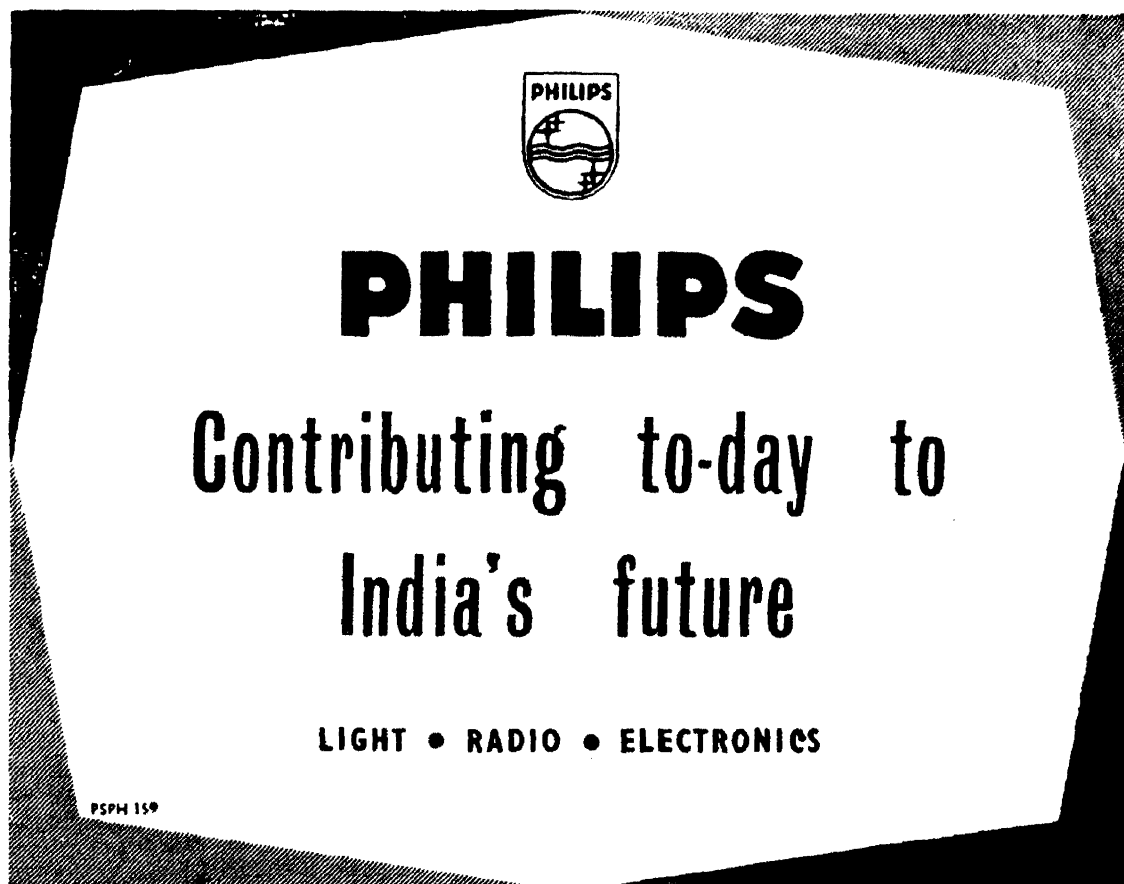
One always knew that the bespectacled, solemn-looking gentry, talking big, recklessly playing with the nation's life, and furiously brandishing facts and figures all the time in self-defence, were not to be trusted too much. At times, they even gave the impression of being more concerned with settling academic scores with one another than promoting the progress of the land through their conflicting theories. These specialists were a menace; still what could one do without them in this age of specialisation? One was apt to feel helpless in the face of their high-sounding phrases, but really what could one do more than hope that they were not trying to be just cynical?

Doubt and exasperation fill the common man's mind; and in between, a little hope arises.

After all, so many people could not be engaging themselves in the task of planning only to flourish favourite theories or satisfy their egos. Some good may come out of it yet, albeit not so quickly, nor so smoothly.

Has not one been hearing lately of some obscure village in a remote corner of the country leaping as it were from the twilight of the oil-lamp into the full blaze of the age of electricity of roads appearing where there were only cart-tracks before, of more and more machines humming, of crops growing bigger and better and of people earning a little more here and there, and, more than all, of an impulse for change spreading steadily over the whole country?

Perhaps, there is something in planning after all, the common man consoles himself. It may not precipitate paradise in a day; but it may well take one closer to it inch by painful inch day after day. Who knows?



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