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How Not to Do It

IF the figures given by the Bombay Gas Company are to be taken at their face value, viz, that only 18,000 consumers in the city get coal gas as against 1,04,000 people using liquid petroleum or bottled gas at nearly four times the price, an incontrovertible case could be made out to arraign the Government of Maharashtra as also its predecessor, along with the Municipal Corporation, of being hand-in-glove with the oil companies. The Government has been abusing its power, under the Bombay Gas Companies Act, of fixing the price of gas in such a manner as to create and maintain a protected market for bottled gas at a price four times that of piped gas. What if over the last fifteen years while the population of the city has gone up and up, pressure on accommodation has been mounting, average housing space per family has shrunk in spite of the new constructions, and kitchens have become smaller, only the less satisfactory fuels have been available and at an ever increasing price?

Affluence of a sort and inflationary pressures have gone on too, the latter always a step ahead, and if only a handful of new subscribers have been able to get new gas connections in these years of accelerated increase of city population and suburban development, is it any wonder that people would be willing and only too eager to pay for bottled gas four times the price of piped gas, which they cannot get? Unfortunately the figures given by the Bombay Gas Company have been carefully checked and cannot be challenged. It is a fact that as against 18,000 with gas connections, more than 1,00,000 are using cylinder gas today, compared to 45,000 two years ago. But piped gas not many more are getting today than two years ago. The relative rates of growth should not go unnoticed in these days of growth-mindedness.

The lever used by the Government to hold down the expansion of piped gas and to jack up the sales for the oil companies is that of the legal power it has got of controlling the price of gas. That price has been held unchanged since 1949. How costs have risen over these years and to what extent increases have been allowed in the case of other essential commodities and services when prices are controlled are too well known to need repetition here. Why the Government has been sitting on the fence or on what ground it has been so persistently refusing to allow a fair price for this particular essential service is not something which concerns the Government and the suppliers alone. For it is not that the Government is merely sitting on the fence—that would not bother many people; the most appropriate metaphor is that of the dog in the manger. It won't take over, expand supply and thereby bring a much-needed and long-awaited relief to housewives of middle and lower middle class homes. And why confine it to any particular class? To the most crowded of the 'chawls', piped gas would be the greatest boon, even from the utility angle.

What could be the purpose in keeping down the price of gas at a level where no expansion is possible and no new connections can be given, though thousands and thousands of householders are willing to pay, here and now, cash down to get a connection for gas at a much higher price, a price at which alone it would be feasible for the present suppliers or a public sector undertaking that may take over to provide an adequate number of new connections? Could it be concern for the present consumers who, through a happy accident, have been having this facility over a number of years? Such concern is touching indeed, since the bulk of the present day