

The C-DoT affair—more than a question of self-reliance

A controversy has been raging for quite some time in several dailies and popular magazines over C-DoT, the Centre for Development of Telematics, in Bangalore. Allegations and counter-allegations about this fairly young centre of technology have become almost a part of the daily menu of the national press. The heart of the matter, it appears, is that a massive investment is slated for developing facilities for telecommunications in our country and that C-DoT was entrusted six years ago with the responsibility of providing state-of-the-art technology appropriate for this development. The proponents of C-DoT claim that it has accomplished that task to a large extent and there has hardly been any slippage. The opponents, however, allege that C-DoT is lagging far behind the goal assigned to it and, further, recommend delinking C-DoT from the proposed technology and substituting in its place a multinational manufacturer.

The community of scientists and technologists of our country can ill afford to watch this controversy from the sidelines while scores are being settled through the national press. The challenges thrown up by this controversy are much too serious for that. Seldom are the occasions when scientists and technologists of our country are confronted with challenging problems in the frontiers of their areas of specialization that are, at the same time, so vital for our development programmes. Have Indian science and technology really attained the adulthood of measuring up, on their own, to the challenging development problems of our country? This, in essence, is the challenge underscored by the C-DoT controversy. The controversy puts also to severe test the faith and confidence that the leaders of our country can repose in Indian science. The important question is whether the platitudes for Indian science and the accolades for Indian scientists that emanate regularly from the Government can be translated into a calculated but determined risk in self-reliance in so

vital and expensive a development programme like telecommunication. The academies of science (INSA, IASc, etc.) can, in my opinion, play a very crucial role here by liaising between the community of scientists and technologists and the leaders of our Government.

The prerequisite for any intelligent opinion about the C-DoT controversy is an objective assessment of the claims and counterclaims that are being aired in the press. In the heat and dust of the prevailing partisan atmosphere objectivity tends to be the first victim. Your journal can provide an appropriate forum for unfolding the situation objectively.

HARIDAS BANERJEE

Saha Institute of Nuclear Physics
92 A.P.C. Road
Calcutta 700 009

When I received a similar letter I talked to a number of young engineers (and scientists) working in C-DoT, Bangalore. Many of them are former students of the Indian Institute of Science or the Indian Institute of Technology (most of them top-rankers). Almost without exception they said: (a) The organization they work for—C-DoT—is a progressive one which generally encourages creativity and creative design. It is goal-oriented and they enjoy working in it. (b) There was no case of 'senior' engineers exploiting 'junior' ones or any case of pirating away credit. The team-work in C-DoT is to be seen to be believed. (c) The digital telecom systems they had developed/ designed could compare with any recent ones from anywhere in the world. (d) They were especially proud of their design of the rural automatic exchanges on which production had already started, and 120–150 pieces had been actually delivered. (e) The programmes related to most of the other exchanges were going on smoothly and satisfactorily.

What appeared to be tragic—as far as I was concerned—was the hurt I saw in

their eyes. They could not believe that a group of our countrymen would make a concerted attempt to destroy and dismantle a good, ongoing design group which was working so well. I must remark that I saw no personal fear in them. Each one was confident of getting jobs (lucrative ones) in France, Sweden, Germany or the US (probably in the firms that are now competing to see their products in India!).

I know very little about digital communication. Nor will I be able to judge personally the competence and achievements of C-DoT. But for the last 47 years I have been associated with what is known as 'research and development in science and technology'. The only reason I can speak is because during these four and a half decades, I have been in continuous contact with young scientists and engineers. From such experience, one develops a nose for recognizing talent and intellectual honesty amongst them.

It seems to me that the matter of what is happening in C-DoT must be looked into very critically; how the actions contemplated will affect science and technology in India; whether what is happening at present is just a personal controversy between two individuals at the top baring their teeth or whether there is the larger question of vested interests preventing the development of indigenous high technology in the country. Especially important, in my view, is to see it from the point of view of the bright engineers we have produced and trained in India and who have also been persuaded to remain in this country to undertake a national task.

Should not some 'real' experts (who normally have a tendency not to interfere and to keep out of controversies, and so keep their mouths shut), come out openly and tell us about C-DoT, its philosophy, its achievements, and also its failings? This seems a fit case for the scientific community to express itself in.

S. RAMASESHAN
Editor