Off the Record

THE RIVER

THE premiere of the film *The River* in Bombay provided a number of shocks for those who happened to be present at it. It was a Hollywood film produced in India with a mixed" cast. The Indian characters in it were acted by the children of the soil; Indian technicians also worked in the film in various capacities and the music was Indian too. The story was about an English family living on a river in Bengal, written by Rumer Godden, an Englishwoman, whose sensitiveness, delicacy of feeling, sincerity and mastery of English prose are such a rare combination that she has done more to interpret India to the world abroad, at least to the English speaking world, than any Indian writer that one could think of, not excluding those who write in English and are widely known and widely read. The occasion, therefore, was unique. From several directions interest had converged on the film and many had waited in eager expectation for its release in Bombay.

One was prepared for a ceremonial opening, for the distributors and exhibitors of the film could hardly miss such an opportunity of gaining free publicity and giving a little boost to the picture with an eye on the box office. The appearance of the producer on the stage, the presentation of some members of the cast and the glow of pride that Mr K. M. Mody naturally felt, having secured the film for his own chain of theatres, were all in the day's game. But one had not certainly bargained for Lady Rama Rau's discourse on the uplift of the Adibasis, punctuated by bouts of self-righteousness. And worse still, one had not bargained for the Paramount's news-reel which, one hopes, was not incumbent upon the theatre to show, in addition to the 20 minutes of compulsory exhibition of Information Films. One of the items in Paramount News was about America's efforts to tell the truth to the people of the slave countries, with that offensive title " Slave Countries" in bold, big letters in the opening shots. Now, news-reels like other films have to be passed by, the Board of Film Censors before they can be exhibited. The Board of Film Censors, however, apparently take the view that our neutrality in foreign policy only means that films produced by the Information Ministry of the Government of India would not be partisans in the cold war. If any theatre wanted to show a news-reel which presented the American or the Soviet point of view, well, it was no concern of theirs. Since no Russian news-reel has yet been able to cut into the trade circuit, this freedom of exhibition is currently enjoyed only by the British and American news-reels. This particular example of neutrality in action did not, however, fall easy on the eye or ears even of those who have got used to the " iron curtain " and of the things that are said about what happens behind the curtain. It was difficult to swallow the " Slave Country " title with the same ease. It jarred on the ears corning so soon after Mr Mody's encomium on international co-operation in the world of art which had made the production of *The River* possible. Neither was the documentary about the training of pilots for the Indian Air Force calculated to put the audience in a proper frame of mind to enjoy this lovely idyll of Bengal village life. The shorts had not obviously been chosen for creating the right atmosphere for aesthetic appreciation.

These, however, were mere flea-bites compared to what was in store for the audience. For Jean Renoir had succeeded in doing what no Indian producer had done so far, viz., in portraying Indian life on the screen. A big bunch of lies, to which the film industry in this country has clung as gospel truth, was nailed to the Board. To begin with, the ghost was laid, once for all, that because Indian music does not lend itself to orchestration, it cannot be used effectively as background music for films. Then the fiction was knocked on the head that everyday life has not enough drama in it, that it has to be rendered exciting by introducing dramatic situations, or brightened up by bringing in exotic characters, garish costumes and heavy make-up. Life is so full of colour and drama even in an ordinary Indian village that there is no need to dub paints thickly over it or to invent. The rest is supplied by Renoir, gifted with the eye that detects beauty in everyday life, the imagination which builds on it and finds in reality an unending store of enchantment. Jean Renoir paints on the celluloid with the same easy grace with which August Renoir painted on canvas—only the mediums are different.

The location of Rumer Godden's story was a river in East Bengal, sullen, untamed, intractable, full of rage and sudden fury; the one that Renoir has chosen is much more homely and quiet, the Ganges near Calcutta. It does not change its course, neither does it fume and fret. But such anomalies will not be noticed except by those who are intimate with the setting of the original story. This a minor affair and so are the discrepancies that are inevitable when a stranger undertakes to interpret a country for a foreign audience. They neither detract from the beauty of the film nor stand in the way of its enjoyment.

Why is it that none of our producers has yet succeeded in depicting real life or in capturing even a fraction of the enchantment that lies all about us? Since a whole generation has been brought up on the belief that it is the audience—the four-anna class in particular—-who want it to be so and that anybody who ignores the box office will do so at his own peril, it is pertinent to enquire if there is any truth behind it? This is a belief which has come to be accepted by sheer weight of repetition. Its validity rests on the economics of film making. True, the economics of film making has to be taken into account and cannot be ignored. But never was the dismal science evoked to support so invalid an assumption. Since it costs a lot to produce a film, returns on investments have necessarily to be in proportion to the volue of the investment. If a producer is bold enough to cut out expensive sets and do without fabulously paid stars, he gains a freedom which he can turn to some advantage. There is unfortunately such a thing as fear of freedom and where Renoir scores is in the use of that freedom. He knew what he wanted and did not care a damn what the experts and pandits might tell him. If he likes a tune on the flute and thinks that it would be the appropriate background music, he will not allow himself to be cowed down or browbeaten by half a dozen music directors who know all about box office and may din it into his ears that without discord and orchestration, background music will not hold the it that our producers lack this self - confidence?

It is obviously ridiculous to blame the financier for financiers are only after money and if a film pays, they will not quarrel with it whether the film is good because it portrays real life or it is good, .because it has half a dozen dance sequences and a dozen song hits. The only formula he is wedded to is return on investment. And it remains to be proved that it is only the latter sort of film which pays while the former does not, because the other sort of film has never been produced and shown. So the economics of it remains unproven.

Book Review

The Riddle of Income Differences

National Income and Its Distribution in Under-developed Countries : United Nations, 1951. pp. vi + 35; price US 40 cents. (Available from Oxford Book and Stationery Co., Scindia House, New Delhi.)

THIS is one of a series of statistical papers published by the. Statistical Office of the United Nations. Its main purpose, as indicated in the preface, is " to summarise the information available, generally official statistics, and to draw preliminary conclusions from the data". While the paper is in the main concerned with under-developed countries, statistics relating to some of the industrially advanced countries have also been given at relevant places, to facilitate comparison.

In reviewing such a monograph, one is faced with two difficulties. Firstly, it is admittedly a summary of available statistics; it does not attempt any assessment of the statistical methods used in different countries and their suitability for the purpose. The reviewer, consequently, is denied the pleasure of expatiating on the relative merits of sampling and census methods, or on the esoteric mystery of statistical errors and significance. It is therefore a paper which is slight in more senses than one to the pure statistician. Secondly, the authors confine themselves to the plainest of economic interpretations of the data. This is no criticism of the authors, as the scope for interpretation was limited both by the nature of the data at their disposal and by their terms of reference. They were required to report on the volume and distribution of national income in under-developed countries, and if they have tried to draw any inferences from the statistics, it is probably because they have had to string together the various tables into the form of a report.

Within the limits set, however, the report is a considerable achievement. Information about the level and sources of national income, foreign commitments and claims and the internal distribution of income in more than thirty countries in various stages of development have been given. As one would expect, data relating to the more advanced countries included for purposes of comparison arc fuller and more reliable than those of under-developed countries. Even so, in the thirty-odd pages of the report, more statistics on the national income of under-developed countries have been brought together than one would have thought possible. Net geographical product at factor cost, or national income produced within the country, has been computed for the various countries, though not for the same year in all cases; ratios of income arising in agriculture, mining, manufacturing, commerce, etc., to the total have been calculated. While in general, the proportions of national income arising from agriculture and mining in the under-developed countries are very high, that originating in the " commerce " sector varies widely. In the case of Argentina, for instance, it was as high as 23.8 per cent (in 1945) compared to 16.8 per cent in India (1948-49), 16.7 per cent in Colombia (1947), 13.5 per cent in China (1946) and 10.2 per cent in Egypt (1945). It is, further, interesting that the range of variation of this component is not much different in the advanced countries. Compared 'to 28 per cent in the USA in 1949, income originating from commerce was only 15.5 per cent in Denmark (1948), 13.2 per cent in the UK (ˣ949), I3.1 per cent in France (1946) and 10 per cent in Western Germany (1949), What causes these wide variations in the share of commerce, it is difficult to say. Part of it would undoubtedly be due to differences in the size of the monetized sector of the economy, and part to differences in methods of computation. Since it is in this field that the difficulties of assessment and computation are greatest, it is not surprising that the contribution of commerce to national income should vary from country to country. The magnitude of these variations should emphasize the need for caution in drawing conclusions from comparisons of national income estimates.

Besides highlighting the wide discrepancy in *per capita* income as between the under-developed and advanced countries, the report throws up several interesting points. In the first place, all under-developed countries made net outward payments of investment income in the years under study, so that net national income (in the sense of income accruing to *nationals* of the country) was less than the net geographical product. The proportion of such payments to net geographical product was in most cases under 6 per cent, with three notable exceptions. These were Northern Rhodesia, Venezuela and Iran—net payments of investment income forming in their cases 27 per cent, 17 per cent, and 13 per cent respectively of their net geographical products. It may be noted that all these three countries derive the greater part of their national income from mining, in which foreign investments have been heavy. While under-developed countries have all paid out, not all advanced countries have been *net* recipients. Indeed, apart from USA and the European imperial powers such ax the UK, France, Netherlands and Belgium, the only country which received substantial net investment income from abroad in 1949 was Ireland. What special conditions favoured Ireland, it is not clear. In view of the large and continuous emigration of population from Ireland, remittances of income earned abroad could well be a substantial amount. It is possible that such remittances have been included under investment income.