

FROM THE EDITOR

EDITORS, DAUGHTERS AND DESTINY

We have reasons to be proud of the standard maintained by India's major newspapers. Only a few of them pursue the primrose path to easy popularity.

This comes to mind while reading a report that an actress won libel damages of £ 300,000 and cost of fighting the case amounting to another £ 50,000 against a British newspaper which had dished out stories of the actress's romance with a member of the Royal household. The actress's marriage had already run into troubles and the scandal totally wrecked it. The newspaper's enthusiasm has now been snubbed in a matching style by the actress's lawyer who forgets euphemism and describes the people who run it as "scoundrels" and asks, "wherein lies the courage to use falsehoods to attack a young girl whose marriage is on the rocks and a member of the Royal family who cannot take proceedings?"

It is possible for the affluent to go to the court, specially in countries where the courts are not trailed by unending backlogs of unresolved cases. But what about the Indian situation?

Let me share with you an incident that continues to cause me pain since my student days whenever it surfaces in my memory. The scene is an old Indian town; time: 1954.

It was an awfully hot summer noon. If I sat talking to the editor of a fortnightly in his residence-cum-office, it was more out of my fear for the heat outside than for my interest in his speech. But I respected him. He was a celebrity in some sort.

I could see an elderly man with a bundle tucked under his arm, peeping into the room. He was sweating. He had a companion behind him looking as rustic and dusty as himself.

"What do you want here? Both the subscription and distribution departments are downstairs," said the editor, surveying them.

The two visitors got over their hesitation and told their story. They came from a distant village in another district. They had just arrived by train and had walked to the newsmagazine's office. The older of the two had a daughter who had become a "Gram Sevika"—a social worker employed by the Government in the rural areas. A woman official was still a rarity in the villages and as such aroused strange reactions—a mixture of disapproval and suspicion on one hand and curiosity and appreciation on the other. But the male superiority was easily offended and such feelings often found vent in circulating scandals.

"My daughter's marriage was to take place the next month. But that is out of the question now, thanks to the story in verse your esteemed paper carried last week!" the father said. He sat down on the floor. He tried to keep his head steady with both his hands. "You know, there are people who are just envious of my daughter. They have not pardoned her for her audacity in competing for a job and getting it. She has to talk to several men in the course of discharging her duty, specially to the office-bearers of the Panchayat. What can she or I do if someone views it as a sign of her bad character?" He threw the question at nobody in particular. What surprised me, he had no rancour in his tone; he betrayed no grudge against the editor. He was as though talking in terms of Destiny.

"I'm so sorry!" said the editor. "It is so irresponsible of our correspondent to play with your daughter's future!" commented the editor. "We will surely say it in our next issue that the observations regarding your daughter were unfounded!" he added.

"Will you?" asked the villager, wiping his sweat. "That may do us some good," he said hopefully and stood up. "I am lucky to be able to see you immediately. We can now catch the next train to go back! God bless you." He picked up his bundle of bedding and clothes and left, after bowing to the editor.

I happened to be still in that town when the next issue of the journal struck the stands, I picked up a copy to see how well the editor had kept his promise. I went through the pages again and again. No, there was not a word of regret over the character assassination of the poor Gram Sevika.

I met the editor and reminded him of his assurance to the villager. "Oh, that!" he smiled sophisticatedly when he remembered what he seemed to have already forgotten. "My young friend, if we have to publish regrets and corrections and errata as demanded by the aggrieved parties, we have to publish a supplement to every issue of our journal," he said in his characteristic witty way.

The father must have anxiously leafed through the pages of the journal for several issues and then given up. He would have resigned to the conclusion that the editor's silence, like his frivolity, was yet another prank played by Destiny.

Thirty eight years have passed. There are more magazines, more journals and more newspapers today. But is there any greater exercise in conscience or restraint? It is necessary for the editors and correspondents to put this question to themselves periodically.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

ACCENT ON MADRAS

India's city-system has a certain uniqueness about it. Our four major cities are distributed over four zones of India; Delhi in the north; Madras in the south; Bombay in the west and Calcutta in the east.

1989 marks the 350th birth anniversary of the city of Madras, though, it seems, the modern Madras was founded on an ancient town in existence for centuries prior to it, with the Mylapore area as its hub. What the city signified to the British would be evident from the very title of Lieut. Col. H.A. Newell's book (1919): MADRAS, THE BIRTHPLACE OF BRITISH INDIA. But Newell admits that the birthplace of British India was already a great place in terms of the native history: "At the beginning of the Christian era Mylapore is reputed to have been a large and prosperous city, the capital of a Hindu Raja. Tradition likewise asserts that the sea has since encroached some three miles or so, swallowing up the ancient metropolis..."

THE HERITAGE will commemorate the 350th anniversary of the city with several special features and rare paintings and photographs of yesterday appearing in its next (January 1989) number. We hope, this will unfold to the people of today unfamiliar glimpses of a city so familiar to them.