

FROM THE EDITOR

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Now that the Defamation Bill threatening the Freedom of the Press has been dropped, it is expected that both the Press and the people will make some dispassionate evaluation of the situation. The Government, having done something to deserve congratulations, can relax.

Neither the Government nor the Press is run by angels. They are run by parties or individuals who are ambitious and often envious of each other. Both, in their own ways, are directly linked to the people.

But there is an institution as the Government and an institution as the Press, above the parties and the individuals controlling them. There are ideals attached to these institutions which are independent of the people running them.

But, in a democracy, there is a fundamental difference between the two institutions in regard to the way in which they operate. When the parties or the individuals who run the Government fail in keeping up the ideal of the institution, they can be voted out by the people. If the Press falls from its ideal, no such remedial action is possible. In fact, the damage done by a bad Press can be far too subtle to be undone. (The only saving grace here is, a bad Government can affect all the people. The influence of a bad Press is limited.)

Since the people running the Press cannot be voted out of power, if a group of people running a Government at a given time find the Press to be running amuck with its freedom, it will naturally like to curb its freedom. It can do so by a number of means: threat, harassment, bribe, etc. etc. Perhaps a more civilised means is to do it through legislation.

That is what the present Government wished to do. And it seemed to have stirred up a hornet's nest. The Press has spared no pains to condemn the move. It has perhaps devoted more space to this chorus of condemnation than it had ever devoted to any other issue. No doubt, it has done so in its own interest, but in this case its own interest happens to be the interest of democracy in the larger sense. It is fortunate that the move affecting the freedom of the Press came at a normal time so that the Press could roar. Had it come, say, during an emergency, a faint mew is all it could have raised.

Nobody can deny the fact the Press in India has enjoyed wide freedom. At the same time few would dispute the fact that if it has not reduced that freedom to licence, it has not always used that freedom with conscience and prudence. The Press easily forgets the distinction between the man in power and the Government. In its bid to demolish the image of an individual, it does not draw a line between him and the position he occupies, a *position* somebody else occupied yesterday and somebody else will occupy tomorrow. Even more easily it forgets another subtle but vital line, the line between the individual as a politician and that very individual as a private person—as a father, as a son, as a man with his personal weaknesses or fancies which do not concern his politics or his public life.

The Press generally does not remember when it damages an important *position*, while attacking an individual. This is bad for the country, harmful to a reasonably dignified running of the Government.

During the last two decades there has been an unfortunate deterioration in the level of our social culture. There has also been a fat crop of glossy newsmagazines. (Is it a mere coincidence?) Instead of trying to arrest the aforesaid deterioration, these magazines have contributed to it. Some of them vie with one another in injecting titillation into their readers. When they fail to find enough sensation in the events around, they invent or exaggerate. They do so to sell more. To sell more means to get more advertisements which means to get more profit. There are other benefits too.

Anybody who wields power can go about gathering benefits if he or she so wishes. And the newspaper and the magazine—particularly if it has a large circulation—is a power.

And Nature—millions of trees—are felled to serve the owner's lust for money and the reader's lust for gossip around politicians and film stars.

Thus, the reading habit of a new generation has been corrupted. Such readers look for ever more titillation, more and more sensation and the magazines must fulfil their demand or collapse. It is a vicious circle.

Coming to the issue of defamation, the Press should not claim any greater right to protection than an individual. Common sense tells us that if X brings an allegation against Y, it is the business of X to prove it. The Press should be prepared to be in the position of X and own up its obligation to prove its allegation. The Press has an inescapable responsibility towards the individual whose character or conduct it is questioning in the public. Indeed, that responsibility should be considered sacred.

How many times does the Press publicise as generously its own mistakes as it does the mistakes of others?

Although the issue in question was only defamation, the Press would do good to reflect on its own record in relation to the great power at its disposal—its freedom. Even if the Government of a time is obliged to refrain from passing a legislation to check the Press, nemesis can strike through some other unforeseen manner.

But if the Press is found wanting in performing its own duty and in discharging its responsibility, the remedy is not to curb its freedom. There must evolve a sound way for a continuous dialogue between the Press and the Government, between the Press and the people. The people involved in the Press themselves must make a continuous evaluation of their performance and at least some mutual criticism and self-criticism. They can call for a review of their performance from the intellectual elite of the country.

However irresponsible a section of the Press may prove, given the freedom, there will be always sane and sensible voices. Experience shows that the people respect newspapers and magazines projecting such voices and not the ones which simply command circulation. Besides, it is only the free Press that can expose a My Li massacre or a Watergate or a Bofors. Once the freedom is gone, the Press may not be able to speak lies, but it will not be able to speak the truth either. Hence, the politicians must ensure the freedom of the Press at all cost—even at the cost of having to endure malice. No group of politicians can dream of ruling the country forever. For their temporary gain, they must not scrap an ideal which is far more important than their interest.

The freedom of the Press must be guaranteed even for a far greater reason. It is through freedom that an individual can give his best; you can meet a genius in an individual, not in a state machine. It is through freedom that mankind can evolve. Freedom is a truth of our soul.

Freedom of the spirit is a must and hence freedom of the Press. This is the most important thing to remember. We do not know how many people of the Press were protesting against the Defamation bill with this truth for their inspiration. We need not be very proud of the fact that the 'entire Press' was one on the protest front. Many of them were crying because they would lose their licence; they are not very serious about the real freedom because they do not believe in the freedom of the individual to retain his' or her dignity.

ON THE TIDES OF TIME

THE THIRD CHILD

"This is the third time; I hope good luck lies in odd numbers. . . There is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance or death," said Shakespeare in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

In the East, 'Three' has always been a mystic and auspicious number. We have three great Gods, three modes of Nature (Sattva, Rajas and Tamas) so on and so forth. But the governments today are not influenced by this. There is a growing tendency in several countries including ours to brand the third child as unwarranted, deserving to be deprived of at least some of the social benefits.

God planned a good earth. Even after Satan sabotaged it, God saw to it that good people outnumbered bad ones. He destroyed the whole towns of Sodom and Gomorrah when their residents grew vicious, but only after His angels whisked away to safety the solitary family that was good.

But that was at the infancy of humanity. Over the ages man has grown adult. He is capable of destroying himself without God's help, for Satan now remains distributed among more or less all. It was nearly two hundred years ago—when few would have thought of population as a problem—Malthus cautioned, "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical progression. Subsistence only increases in an arithmetical progression." (*The Principle of Population*, 1798). His theory that nature achieved a balance between population and subsistence through the decimating effects of war, famine and pestilence has been held up to much ridicule. But as time passes, Malthus tends to vindicate himself with a vengeance—thanks to man's propensity for helping nature in that direction.

A European father once reported to me the reaction of his little son to a class explaining sex and procreation: "For shame! Is it that easy? I thought there was something really arduous and great behind my making!".

That is it. Every child, if we expect him to take himself seriously, ought to believe that there was really much behind his making—the parents' aspiration, a lot of care and preparation, love and expectation—not just a mechanical physical act. Indispensable though the family planning propaganda is, there is no doubt about the fact that it has knocked off the sort of mystery and sanctity which went with the institution of child-birth, particularly in India. No villager now argues against the drive saying that Mother Devaki had to wait till her eighth conception for Lord Krishna to incarnate!

While family planning has come to stay, what can be avoided at this stage is anything that would make the third child feel unwanted and guilty. Whip the parents by all means, but spare the child. We have already too much pessimism and anarchy among the new generation of kids. Let not the third child add to the situation by feeling himself a third class citizen. Once born, if born at all, let him grow as innocently as the little logician in this limerick:

"Two kids make the parents happy"
The family planning ad was observed by Bapi.
Said he, "My parents dear,
Must be four times happier,
For we are eight round kids altogether!"