

# PRESS AND PRIVATE ENTERPRISE IN A DEMOCRACY

by

N. J. N.

Nothing is so dangerous as a platitude. Since its theoretical truth is regarded as self-evident it is also assumed that it is an accurate reflection of what actually exists. Such a platitude is the declaration which comes often and easily to the lips of Ministers that a free Press is essential to democracy. This is never questioned for the valid reason that it is true but the good faith with which it is accepted spills over and forms the further supposition that the Press is, indeed, free and that the Government, in its attitudes and policies, is informed by a spirit of democratic liberalism. This supposition, at least in this country, can now no longer be confidently upheld. It is not unusual, even in the strongholds of liberalism, for politicians to dislike the Press. The right to dislike is as fundamental as any other right and should not be withheld even from politicians. What is unusual is that an entire Government adopts an attitude riddled with inconsistencies, anti-liberal prejudices, favouritism and even vindictiveness—all this while mouthing the platitude of a free Press.

Let it be perfectly understood that not all newspapers or journalists are as responsible as they should be which is what can be said with equal justification of businessmen, politicians, lawyers or policemen. The Press must be allowed its imperfections as others are allowed theirs. It is only when this margin of imperfectibility is arbitrarily narrowed and exploited against newspapers that there is reason for alarm since, in that event, something more than the interests of the Press will be involved. Does New Delhi realise that it has come dangerously near this point? Two examples out of many over the years may be given as an illustration of the jaundiced vision with which New Delhi balefully regards the Press. A member of Parliament recently asked the Minister for Information and Broadcasting whether there was "any order that no new paper should be given newsprint for more than 10,000 copies." The Minister's reply was that there was no such

rule and that the Registrar of Newspapers had been given a "general guidance" from which Government was free to depart on the "merits" of each case. It is difficult to believe that there could be anything more cavalierly indifferent to logic and impartiality than this. Is not a "general guidance" that successfully prohibited the launching of any newspaper with more than 10,000 copies an "order"? Does the Government think that a vague "general guidance" is adequate for the regulation of an industry in which the free flow of information is so closely involved? If the Government considers that each case must be judged on merit, why is there a "general guidance"? If exceptions are to be made, why cannot the circumstances that justify an exception be written into the so-called "general guidance"? Since there are no answers to these questions it must be assumed that the single instance in which "merits" impelled the Government to set aside the "general guidance" and sanction a quota of 25,000 copies was nothing less or more than plain favouritism.

Every honest newspaperman whose interest in journalism overrides his interest in ideology will wish any newspaper that can successfully persuade the Government to release additional newsprint equal success in its career. The point is not simply one of injustice to those whose claims have been brushed aside. It is that official favouritism among newspapers raises issues of unquestionable importance in a democracy where free speech is supposedly respected and encouraged. Can it be honestly said that all newspapers which receive favours from the Government will in any sense remain as objective as they are supposed to be? Will they be critical of those who have granted them a special privilege? Will they not be inclined to regard Government policies with a kindly eye? Those with the necessary character and independence will not be corrupted by special favours but the Government will be responsible for creating a situation in which the

balance will be heavily weighted against incorruptibility.

The second example was provided, as it often is, by Mr. Nehru himself. During the A.I.C.C. session he announced that "the way certain newspapers gave publicity" to "personal attacks" on individuals was "wholly undesirable and objectionable." This is the latest of an extremely long series of disparaging references to the Press during the past seven or eight years. A Government that has repeatedly asked the Press to be "restrained" has itself exercised little restraint in the choice of its adjectives in denouncing newspapers and newspapermen. Critical articles have been dismissed as "erudite and pompous", the Press has been accused of "wrong interpretations", journalists have been described as obstructive, irrational and even deliberately dishonest, the Press, it has been claimed, is shot through with "evil tendencies", editors, it has been said, do not "shout" enough, editorials are too "anonymous", comment is "injurious to the national cause", leader-writers are no longer capable of "restrained thinking and writing", newspaper policies are based on "hunches", criticism is "general" and not "specific", newspapers are the "jute press" and have developed into a monopoly.

All this adds up to a formidable indictment but how much of it is true, how much has been proved and how much is at the level of slogan-mongering? By repeated disparagement of the Press the Indian public has been conditioned to applaud when any Minister or politician, communist or Congressman, mouths the hypnotic words "jute press" and "monopoly". There is immediately an automatic suspension of original thought and a situation in which the Press can co-operate with the party in power to make Indian democracy more meaningful than it is is reduced to one in which Government-Press relations are blighted by mutual suspicion and favouritism. Let us examine the charges which the Government so artfully revives from time to time.

Monopoly? How many newspapers must someone own to attract this charge? No single person or agency, save in a totalitarian state, owns and controls all the newspapers, magazines and weeklies in a given country. We have here, therefore, a characteristically

loose usage of the word "monopoly" to mean chains of newspapers that do not by any means include all newspapers. The objection, then, is not to monopoly but to a chain which is a helpful clarification if only Ministers would recognise it. A chain is not possible unless it is a success which further means that the Government objects to any successful enterprise. It is customary elsewhere abroad to prohibit the unfair practices that enable the less scrupulous to acquire a chain of newspapers. But this again is a distinction which the Government has not bothered to make, preferring the easier way out of penalising success and efficiency. On these grounds a successful grocer's shop which attracts and, therefore, "monopolises" the available custom in a neighbourhood will be similarly objectionable.

The only answer to a chain is another chain and more chains thus making possible healthy and lively competition in which there is a sustained conflict of different views and ideas. The final arbiter is someone New Delhi has consistently ignored—the newspaper reader who has the freedom—rather we suppose that he does—to buy and read the newspaper of his choice. A chain, Mr. Nehru complains, is controlled by a "few individuals" but is this not true of the Government, of every commercial enterprise and of any public utility? The Government itself by the fact of being in power is a gigantic monopoly and this may be said without a slovenly and incorrect use of the term.

A newspaper is answerable to its reading public and when this public, for any reason, refuses to respond to a given chain or newspaper that chain and that newspaper will immediately collapse. The role of a newspaper is not, outside its news columns, to reflect the opinions of either the people or the Government. It is simply to reflect its own opinion, carefully and responsibly considered. The Congress party has a right to its opinion, the communists have a right to theirs and, incidentally, express them in a number of publications numerically superior to that of any other group. Why deny the right of the private sector to express its views? What is precisely meant when we speak of a newspaper's policy? Nothing else except that it has a certain outlook on public affairs within the framework of

which it judges every issue. This is what the Congress does, what any organisation does, what any individual with an opinion does. No newspaper can express every possible opinion under the sun. If the reader finds its opinion objectionable his right not to buy and read comes into play which means that the reader's freedom is the only real democratic safeguard against an irresponsible Press. A cheap Press can thrive on the gullibility of the reader but on this point a three-fold comment is the only answer—that a cheap Press is better than a controlled one, that gullibility can be removed through education and that the influence of the Press that is not cheap is far greater than that of one which is.

It is the newspaper whose journalistic habits are governed by tradition and the policy that derives from it which is more important than the "few individuals" who have properly submerged themselves in the institution to which they belong. The average newspaper reader and the majority of Ministers can have little idea of the anxious scrupulosity with which responsible editors attempt to remain faithful to the tradition of the institution to which they belong while serving the interests of the people and, therefore, of the nation. It is these people whom the Prime Minister has dismissed as having a mental equipment "slightly above zero". It is some of these people who many years ago warned the Government and the people of the Chinese threat, of the inadequacies of New Delhi's China policy and of the dangers of a non-alignment wrongfully applied. It is these people who continue to support the Government over the China issue while reserving the right to criticise and comment within the limits of national security. It is these people who have repeatedly asked New Delhi to define what is and what is not objectionable under the emergency so that they could co-operate—as they sincerely wish to do—without relinquishing their right to criticise and comment.

During the present crisis one newspaper, a member of the so-called "jute press," drew the Government's attention to a report from the newspaper's special correspondent which had been passed by the censors and officially approved but which the newspaper concerned considered undesirable. The Government hurriedly and belatedly

though not very thankfully agreed with the newspaper and suppressed the report. On other occasions some highly placed in New Delhi were reported as making irresponsible comments abroad but which were, in the editor's discretion, and fortunately for the individuals concerned, not passed for publication. Cases of this kind are not few and are a continuous part of the burden which a responsible editor is asked to shoulder. New Delhi in fact should be thankful that some editors do not, as Mr. Nehru has recommended, "shout" and "thump" much as though a newspaper were an egoistic extension of the editor concerned. It should perhaps be noted that the editors of what is known as the sensational Press are well-known individualists who do "shout" and "thump" but that the editors of that section of the Press which is governed by tradition and policy are as self-effacing as they can possibly be.

It is the newspaper which speaks and not its editor and the "anonymity" which Mr. Nehru deprecates is perhaps the one single greatest safeguard of a healthy Press. It is not for nothing that Ministers are always anxious to be informed not what a newspaper has said but which member of the staff is responsible for the comment. Anonymity here concentrates attention on the paper and the standards it seeks to uphold. When the Press recently concerned itself very rightly with the question of the party funds, Mr. Nehru's reaction was that the Press was guilty of making "personal attacks". Perhaps some papers edited by editors who "shout" and "thump" were more personal than they should have been but the condemnation of the entire Press with the possible exception of one paper that is distinguished by the special privileges it has acquired is so sweeping that it almost paralyses the capacity for rational report. All that can be done is hopefully and wearily to point out that Ministers in their ministerial capacity are not "persons" and cannot be distinguished from the policies with which they are identified. Many newspapers have discussed the question of party funds, concentrating on the larger public issue and not on individual Ministers but these also have been swept aside as "objectionable".

Can newspapermen and others be blamed for fearing that these developments are a prelude to controls—through a newsprint policy that does not

distinguish newspapers from any other commodity—quite inconsistent with a genuine democracy? Can it be that the Government identifies the national interest with its own which is not always justified, that New Delhi has become increasingly intolerant of criticism, however sincerely and constructively offered? Can it be also that New Delhi intends, by professing solicitude for the smaller papers, to discriminate against the stronger and, therefore, more independently critical newspapers and build

up a Press dependent on the favours it can offer?

It should perhaps be remembered that the greatest of all Press freedoms is freedom from Government interference and prejudice. It is no exaggeration to say that unless the present trend of constant vilification is replaced with a genuine understanding of what newspapers are for the Press alone will not be the loser.—(Reproduced from "Times of India" of April 15, 1963, with kind permission of the editor).

---

*The views expressed in this leaflet are not necessarily  
the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.*

---

## HAVE YOU JOINED THE FORUM?

The Forum of Free Enterprise is a non-political organisation, started in 1956, to educate public opinion in India on free enterprise and its close relationship with the democratic way of life. The Forum seeks to stimulate public thinking on vital economic problems of the day through booklets and leaflets, meetings, essay competitions, and other means as befit a democratic society.

Membership is open to all who agree with the Manifesto of the Forum. Annual membership fee is Rs. 10/- and Associate Membership fee is Rs. 5/- only. **Bona fide** students can get our booklets and leaflets by becoming Student Associates on payment of Rs. 2/- only.

Write for further particulars (state whether Membership or Student Associateship) to the Secretary, Forum of Free Enterprise, 235 Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji Road, Post Box No. 48-A, Bombay-1.

*With best compliments of:*

## Forum of Free Enterprise

235, Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji Road, Bombay 1.

Published by M. R. PAI for Forum of Free Enterprise, "Sohrab House", 235, Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji Road, Bombay 1, and printed by H. NARAYAN RAO at H. R. MOHAN & Co., 9-B, Cawasjee Patel Street, Bombay 1.