

# Policing the Press

## The Press and Registration of Books (Amendment) Bill

Having been compelled by public protest to put by the Defamation Bill, the central government has now come up with an equally ferocious antipress bill, by the name of the Press and Registration of Books (Amendment) Bill, 1988, introduced in parliament on December 5, 1988. The Bill seeks to amend the Press Registration Act of 1867.

From 1867 to 1954, this Act required that a newspaper furnish information about its publisher, editor and place of publication. From 1955 onwards, papers were also required to give information about their average number of pages and circulation.

The new Bill makes it compulsory for a paper to supply every detail about its staff, capital investment, machinery, advertisements "and other particulars as

get away with such fraud do so with the active connivance of government machinery. The government should overhaul its own machinery instead of penalising citizens for it.

Even with its existing powers, the government constantly harasses the press. **Manushi**, for instance, although we furnished all details required by the registrar, had its paper quota so delayed that we would never have been able to publish regularly if we had stayed dependent on the paper quota. We had to discontinue taking it because the procedure was so dilatory.

The wide ranging powers conferred by the new Bill on the government can easily be used to harass, even shut down, dissenting newspapers, particularly small ones.

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may be prescribed." The newspaper may be compelled to publish any of this information in its own columns. If a paper fails to comply, the Bill empowers the press registrar, any gazetted officer or any district magistrate in the country to enter the premises, inspect documents and interrogate staff. The fine for not supplying information has been increased from Rs 500 to Rs 5,000. The Bill, sponsored by information minister H.K.L. Bhagat, pretends to safeguard the interests of genuine newspapers by checking the practice of fraudulently registering a paper and getting paper and advertisement quotas without publishing or circulating the paper. But the fact is that those who

The Bill empowers the registrar to cancel the registration of a paper or a periodical which does not publish every three months, and empowers any district magistrate to stop the publication of any paper whose declaration contains any error. The title of such a paper can immediately be given to anyone else who wants it. This means that a small magazine whose publication is delayed for financial reasons, or a large one in whose declaration there may be a small error, can be put out of circulation once and for all. Handing over the paper's title to someone else amounts to destroying the paper's identity since a title acquires significance in the course of the paper's existence.

The provision which compels a paper to publish information on government's orders is almost more dangerous than censorship. Some papers protested against censorship under the Emergency by carrying blank spaces in editorial columns. To be forced to carry material against one's will is to be converted into a tool of government.

The real aims of the Bill are stated in its penultimate paragraphs: "It is proposed to make the Registrar of Newspapers for India's office a repository of comprehensive information in regard to the newspaper industry... This will help the government to formulate various policies for a healthy and balanced growth of newspapers."

Clearly, the central government is alarmed by what it considers the unhealthy and unbalanced tendency of a number of papers and journals to be openly critical of government's actions and inaction. Government therefore wants to use the press registrar's office as a kind of police intelligence wing. The information required of the press under the Bill is far in excess of information demanded from any other individual or business enterprise in the country. Further, while information given to tax authorities is confidential, information given under this Bill will be public. The press is being singled out for attack.

The Bill is not only an assault on freedom of the press but constitutes a serious infringement of the Constitutional provision of freedom of speech, as it empowers government to stop publication of any paper and then punish a proprietor who continues to publish it thereafter.

It is unfortunate that the opposition in parliament has not made an issue of the Bill nor has the press so far reacted with adequate vehemence. □

## We Condemn This Political Murder

THE brutal murder of Safdar Hashmi, founder member of the street theatre group, Jan Natya Manch, caused widespread shock and indignation. Safdar, aged 34, was murdered by hired ruffians in Sahibabad on January 1, 1989, while the group was staging a play *Halla Bol* based on the recent strike by factory workers of the area. It is alleged that Mukesh Sharma, who is standing as an independent candidate in forthcoming elections with Congress (I) backing, accompanied by other armed hoodlums, disrupted the play, and in the ensuing melee, battered Hashmi to death. A factory worker Rambahadur, aged 22, was also killed in the incident.

That such a well known, Delhi based person should be murdered in broad daylight on the outskirts of the capital, shows how powerful the hold of criminals on our polity has become. The murder evoked widespread protest from many sections of public opinion. Hashmi's funeral and the subsequent rallies and meetings in Sahibabad and in Delhi were attended by thousands.

A fulltime worker of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Hashmi was a multifaceted personality — ex-teacher, song composer, film maker and theatre person. He was married to Mala, a schoolteacher and a leading member of the Jan Natya Manch. This group, one of the pioneers of street theatre in Delhi, has put up numerous performances of plays on a wide variety of political and social issues in colleges, parks, streets and at factory gates and public meetings.

Government has instituted an enquiry into the murder. It is to be hoped that this will not be allowed to go the way of most government enquiries but that the facts will be brought to light. Unless the nexus between politicians and criminals is exposed and dismantled, we cannot hope effectively to combat violence in our society. □

## Voice in the fire

You count me I am  
twenty three parts in all  
There are flames speaking  
softly to the shadows around me

I lie white drowned in  
air like an eye without  
blinking

This must be at least five hundred  
watts put it off  
and stop screaming at me  
with your opened face  
Give me space space:

The ring is under my mattress  
Why are you so silent?

The walls around me  
seem to be made of paper they shake  
with light

I feel numb my  
footsteps make no sound

I am a mouth  
speaking wordless words  
I hear no one  
not even myself

— Maya Khosla

