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242

Thou Shalt Not Travel

It has been said that, of all forms of control, the control of foreign exchange is the worst since, like water, the real value of any particular currency finds its own level and no artificial dam or dyke can distort the reality. The truth of this is illustrated by the recent ban on foreign travel by Indian nationals except with the by-your-leave of Government through the Reserve Bank of India which, apart from its dubious constitutional validity, is worthy only of an authoritarian regime.

It is well known that, even when foreign exchange was freely given earlier for foreign travel, the total amount spent by Indian nationals abroad did not exceed Rs.2.50 crores a year. With all the prohibitions in force in recent years, that amount had probably dropped to Rs.1.50 crores. Compared with India's colossal gap in foreign exchange, this was a mere bagatelle. The fact that such a ban should have been thought of, while hundreds of crores of foreign exchange are being wasted otherwise, shows in what illiberal grooves the mind of the "New Class" in New Delhi is working.

India is an adherent to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is thus committed to the proposition that "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country." [Article 13(2)] This commitment made by India to the United Nations is now being dishonoured.

While protests made by Mr. Samuel Mathai, Secretary to the University Grants Commission, in the cause of the development of education and by various commercial institutions on behalf of India's international trade are to be welcomed, it is a pity that not a single Member of Parliament has so far denounced this step down the slippery slope of authoritarianism.

The ban on foreign travel by Indians, except with the permission of Government, is a concrete proof of the general proposition that excessive economic controls must, willy nilly, truncate individual liberty to an undesirable extent.