

26 June, 1976. *Campsey*
Jah

AN extraordinary situation has existed in this country for the last one year. Thousands have been imprisoned for no crimes save that of holding a different political opinion from that of the ruling party. There have been a handful of prominent opposition leaders who have been released, but the majority of the lower cadre of political workers have remained in jail. When Indians and the world finally get to hear their story they will get some inkling of the extent to which power has been abused at every level for the last 12 months.

Here are some instances that have come to light recently:

1. George Fernandes' mother, Mrs Alice Fernandes, who is 65 and lives in Bangalore with her husband aged 75 - a heart patient - , recently wrote a letter to the President of India. In it she related the horrifying story of how her 44 year old son Lawrence, who has had nothing at all to do with politics was taken by the police on May 1 on a false pretext. She had no idea what had happened to him till May 20 when she discovered that he was in Bangalore jail. On May 21 she finally met him and this ^{is} what she writes:

"I was taken to the cell to see him ... I found him looking dead. He was unable to move except without two persons helping him about, and then too with great pain and limping. His left side is without use as if crippled, and both his left leg and hand are still swollen. He is in a mentally and physically wrecked condition and is unable to talk freely without faltering ... He looked completely haggard and he has lost at least 20 kg during these 20 days."

This state of health was the result of days of continuous beating and interrogation about the whereabouts of George Fernandes. Mrs Fernandes states in her letter that none of her family know anything about the movements of her son George. Yet her youngest son Michael was also detained under MISA on December 22, 1975 and is still in jail. Lawrence was served a MISA detention order on May 22, signed by the Police Commissioner of May 21. According to Mrs Fernandes he has been "detained in a cell meant for condemned criminals or for convicts who are mentally unsound or are under punishment for violation of jail rules". There are no other MISA detenus in his cell.

2. Twenty five year old Mandakini Dave is in jail in Gujarat and shares a cell with prostitutes and women charged for murder. When she took ill and was sent to hospital, she was given pills but no water for swallowing them. Finally she requested that she be sent back to the jail.

3. The system of taking hostages under MISA continues, as is illustrated in the case of Lawrence Fernandes. In order to catch the President of the Tarun Shanti Sena, his brother was arrested. The former surrendered but now both brothers are in jail. Similarly in Madhya Pradesh, in order to catch a woman, her nine year old daughter was arrested and is still in jail.

These are only a few instances. There are hundreds more. They underline the validity of that overworn maxim: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." When excessive power is concentrated in a few hands, when the weapons of fear and terror are used to cow down the people, when the natural checks and balances inherent in a democratic process, like a free press, are pushed aside, the inevitable consequence is the over abundance of this kind of abuse. And it is the ordinary people, the powerless, who suffer and yet the Government continues to perpetuate this state of affairs in their names.

Can a stable country be built on such injustices? Will not the force of the anger and resentment building up in thousands of people burst through at some stage? And is it not possible, that without legitimate outlets like the press, the outburst will be far more violent and damaging than it need have been.

There are many who continue to be complacent about the state of affairs because injustice has not touched them personally or those who are near to them. But if ostrich-like we continue to proclaim that all is fine, that net of injustice will grow bigger and ensnare us when it is too late to do anything. Unless we decide that it is our personal responsibility to create an awareness and an awakening, even in our own circle to begin with, no one else is going to do it.

It is perfectly legal and within our rights to form cells of people who want to know what is really happening in the country, who want to think together what to do and who want to plan for the future. Such cells could be formed within every profession, in different institutions, in various neighbourhoods.