

PRESS, PARTIES AND THE PEOPLE.

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The stature of a democratic state can conveniently be likened to a pyramid. At the apex is the authority of the government the sides represent the various political parties; the base consists of the people. In a structure of this kind the base freely and of its own volition delegates its inherent power to the apex.

What are the channels along which authority flows? This question is of vital importance, for the answer marks the difference between dictatorial rule and a truly representative government responsible to the people.

Let us examine first the various autocratic systems — it matters not whether they be fascist or communist. Between base and apex there is no visible link: power seems to travel through a vacuum, for the people are atomised. In a democracy, however, the paths along which power flows are there for all to see — the divergent, conflicting, contrary, but vital paths of public opinion.

It is no shibboleth that human liberty may survive without a government but cannot survive without a free and untrammelled press. Newspapers have their failings, their petty meannesses, their factionalism and a thousand other faults; but they have a cardinal virtue that outbalances all sins — the ability to bring authority to heel before it gets completely out of hand by subjecting it to the iron discipline of public opinion.

Every government, to some degree, is subject to the temptations of the absolute power that "tends to corrupt absolutely". It is the function of the press to prevent authority getting drunk on the fumes of an omnipotence that is not self-generated, but derives from the freely-given votes of the electorate.

In the mythical pyramid described above, the press, therefore, acts as the cohesive force that binds disparate elements — people, parties, authority — and combines them into a whole and unified structure — the State.

Under any form of representative government the people — in theory are masters, for they attach themselves to different political parties and, under their various labels, vote a government into office. In practice, this popular supremacy is limited for any party, once it has tasted authority, begins to depend less and less on mandates and increasingly on its own urges.

In the very nature of things, it is impossible for the people — the citizens who have been sedulously ~~manipulated~~ wooed at election time — to exercise effective curbs or know how far a government has moved from its sworn ideals unless there is some incorruptible medium of ascertaining the facts. The press it is that spreads knowledge of these facts and, if we are sincere in our allegiance to the precious words emblazoned on our Republic's emblem, we should ~~insist~~ insist that those in power let Truth Prevail by ensuring that the press functions without the least direct or oblique pressure.

Tragically, however, we not only take freedom for granted, but a free press for granted, ignoring the lesson of history that curbs on the right to dissent are only the first step on the road to tyranny. Though it is human enough to dislike criticism, abuse is certainly preferable to mindless servility. The rubber-stamp newspapers we find in communist countries are an affront to the brave men who in the past have paid heavily

for asserting the inalienable right of every man to speak his own mind.

It is a mistake to believe that free speech is a luxury, not, like food or drink, vital to survival. If man requires food to live, he also needs to think, to feel, to speak if he aspires to a higher status than the dumb creatures of field and forest. Speech is an expression of man's identity as an individual, and it is a statistical axiom that in any group of a thousand human beings you will find a few at least who will refuse to jog along tamely with the herd.

In times of stress or of despair, men have abrogated their previous rights. Whether in Nazi Germany or in Soviet Russia, the end result has been identical — a sheep-like populace with rare exceptions tamely doing its masters' bidding after abdicating mind, heart, will and the last trace of the spark divine that quickens every human soul.

What is the ~~app~~ position in India? Our Constitution tells us we are a Free and Sovereign Republic. A republic, by its very definition, is a "thing of the people". Why are we so ashamed to employ the Rights guaranteed us by the Constitution? Why are we, when need arises, afraid to speak out against those to whom we have temporarily delegated authority? Power may lull men into the belief that they are super-human, beyond error and above reproach; but do we, as citizens of a land that won its liberty after centuries of bondage, have to believe such fairy tales?

In time of crisis it is the people's right to expect their representatives to remain within the broad confines of a "popular" mandate. Men who guide a nation's destiny have a right to solid support — but they cannot forgo the obligation of being accountable to those from their authority stems, or stray far from popular directives. Yet we, in India, seem content to grumble awhile and then, after an "assurance" from the powers that be, relapse into our customary inertia, allowing them to pursue unwise policies unhindered by criticism.

Limbs that are used atrophy; the tongue is not immune. In today's political content, such loss of speech is not altogether fanciful. Newspapers, though free on the surface to reflect the view either of private interests or political parties, are in effect subtly prevented from too far away from the "official" line. One result is that many no longer give either news or an independent viewpoint priority; they "play it safe" doling out platitudes.

"Fissiparous tendencies," "emotional integration," "co-existence," "panch shila" — these are among the catchwords — doled out these past few years. Ministers will talk — and newspapers will report them at length: such is the current formula. This pleasant habit of giving generous publicity to each and every footing utterance by little men in authority is harmless in times when the country is muddling through from Plan to Plan.

But when the very existence of India as an entity is challenged, surely there must be a change of outlook. Yet, only a few days before the Chinese brought up ~~xxxxxxx~~ tanks against our heroic defenders on the border, some minister or other was reported while enlarging on the topic of Sanskrit technical terms.

Apart from wasting newsprint (a minor matter), this form of complacency tends to deflect the mass mind from realities. No person of reasonable intelligence can seriously believe there is a crisis when a responsible member of the government gives linguistic bigotry priority over Chinese aggression.

Pick up a newspaper today and you will read about China's perfidies at length. Is this not rather late in the day to jolt our-slaves awake? The excuse that a large section of the press merely reflected the views of those in authority is a trumpery excuse indeed. The Prime Minister, ignoring history, believed that China and India could live in peace — that lion and lamb, wolf and sheep, predator and chosen victim, could enjoy the paradise of Panch Shila. Was there not a double charge on the press to blow up these absurd myths?

The mere fact that the government could, long after even pacifist wishful thinkers had been disillusioned, persist in believing these myths proves only that, by and large the press (to Government, at least) is a handmaiden that can be exploited as it wishes.

Chinese leadership has made no secret of the fact that China considers much of South East Asia its homeland. We could have blocked China in Tibet; instead, we tamely handed its unfortunate people to the Chinese dictators. Why was the Press content briefly to thunder and then be silent?

Barring the Communists (who were gagged by their duty to "the cause") and a few Congressmen who had long ago shed all pretence of thinking for themselves, most citizens of India were vehemently critical of government torpor. Yet criticism could not adequately express itself for the reason that many newspapers were afraid to offend government directly and lay themselves open to withdrawal of patronage.

In the last elections, responsible papers ranged themselves against Krishna Menon, who they honestly felt was not the right man to handle so crucial a portfolio as Defence. Soon there were incitements to violence, threats of burning the offending establishments. Is this democracy? When one paper relegated the Prime Minister's speech to a single-column head on page one, the perpetrator of this "outrage" was sharply pulled up — by the "victim" himself! — and soon learned that taking "democratic rights" seriously is a costly luxury in the Bharat of today.

Were India under a dictatorship no man could quarrel with its Premier insisting on free space as a matter of right. But if it is a democracy, it needs respectfully to be pointed out that not even Jawaharlal Nehru can demand more space than a paper feels he is worth. As a democrat, the Prime Minister himself will concede that this proposition is not altogether fantastic.

It is time journalism stopped its little game of Follow the Leader. With the country itself in peril, support to the Government in the defence effect is certainly a duty. Yet this support cannot rob the Press of its right to point out defects where it sees them and oppose policies it believes are wrong. Honest support is beyond price: forced support is worthless. To ensure one and avoid the other is in the government's own interest.

The Press, a vital pillar of democracy, must shed fear and servility and have the courage to stand up for what it believes is right. It need not wield the "big stick" — but that does mean it should not point out follies and press for a change in thinking that has brought this country to its present sorry pass.

Parties, Press, People: one can only hope and pray that all three will march unitedly forward to ensure the survival of the free way of life which every decent man must hold precious beyond life itself.