

Pravāda

Vol. 1 No. 8

August 1992

SL Rupees Ten

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| NOTES AND COMMENTS | 03 |
| COMMUNALISM AND THE PRESS | 04 |
| <i>N. Ram</i> | |
| HATE SPEECH | 08 |
| <i>Sunila Abeysekera and Kenneth L. Cain</i> | |
| MEDIA UNDER ATTACK | 13 |
| FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE NORTH? | 16 |
| FOR A FREE MEDIA | 18 |
| <i>Lucien Rajakarunanayake</i> | |
| THE INDO-LANKA ACCORD | 21 |
| <i>Jayadeva Uyangoda</i> | |
| CRISIS OF CONSTITUTIONALISM | 23 |
| <i>Neelan Thiruchelvam</i> | |
| MOB VIOLENCE IN POLITICS | 30 |
| VIOLENCE AND THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS | 32 |
| <i>Civil Rights Movement</i> | |
| GROWING UP - A POEM | 36 |
| <i>Richard Baafour</i> | |

Pravada in contemporary Sinhalese usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and Propositions.

MEDIA FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Amidst a plethora of excessively uninspiring and fruitless political controversies, a positively encouraging issue has entered Sri Lanka's political debate. The question of the freedom of expression and consequently the freedom of the media have become matters of significant public interest.

These issues have traditionally occupied a rather strange place in Sri Lanka's political debate. Freedom of expression is a right guaranteed by the constitution; at a rhetorical level, it has been defended strenuously by all shades of political opinion. At a practical level, however, it has always been subject to an intolerance of dissent displayed by various parties in power at different times, as well as by political groupings such as the JVP and the LTTE.

The availability of media for the free and public expression of opinion has also been at the centre of the dilemma. Radio and television have always been government monopolies, a position not seriously affected even by the entry of private capital into television. The press was not, being in private ownership. However, in the sixties and seventies, statization of private newspaper establishments became the official doctrine of self-proclaimed socialist regimes. 'Freeing the media from private monopolistic control' was the catch-phrase at that time. The media, however, was not freed; rather, under state-ownership and control, that part of the press was turned into an agit-prop department of the ruling party, as radio and television were. The state itself became a media baron—inflexible in character, closed to dissenting opinion and unresponsive to public criticism. The situ-

ation was made much worse because the state also had both the will and the capacity to manipulate and control non-state media as well.

Thus the Sri Lankan media has constantly found its most articulate and evocative champions among politicians out of power. Just to cite one example, Mr. R. Premadasa's contribution to the parliamentary debate on the nationalization of the Lake House by the United Front government can still be read as one of the most energetic defenses of a free press. That was long before the opposition MP Mr. Premadasa became Prime Minister and later President. Champions of the free press when in opposition have not really freed the press when they came to power. Since you can politically utilize the press when you are in the government, your opposition is merely to its being used by someone else.

Several factors have recently combined to create a fresh interest in this issue. The rise of a tabloid press within the last two years, more specifically with the opening up of political space after the impeachment motion, has meant the existence of a press much less amenable to direct or indirect state influence. The growth of violence in the political process is another factor. The necessity to preserve a facade of democracy and human rights precludes open censorship and has led to the use (or rather abuse) of the normal law and, where it does not suffice, violence instruments to intimidate the media.

We publish elsewhere in this issue records of violence against the media and media-personnel in the pursuit of their work by state and government as well as by other forces.



Pravāda

Vol 1 No 8
August 1992

Editors

Charles Abeysekera
Jayadeva Uyangoda

Pravada is published monthly by:

Pravada Publications
129/6A Nawala Road
Colombo 5
Sri Lanka

Telephone: 01-501339

Annual subscriptions:

| | |
|----------------------------|------------|
| Sri Lanka | Rs. 110 |
| By Air mail: | |
| South Asia/Far East | U.S. \$ 20 |
| Europe/Africa | U.S. \$ 26 |
| Americas/Pacific countries | U.S. \$ 30 |

The killing of Richard de Zoysa two years ago and the abduction and 'disappearance' of Kugamoorthi were particularly shocking examples of journalistic experience under conditions of civil strife and state violence. The media community responded to the fate of Zoysa and Kugamoorthi in a somewhat 'private' manner, expressing grief and anger but not incorporating them into a general consideration of the theme of freedom of expression. However, the recent attacks on journalists and other media persons, have created a new awareness in the journalistic community; they have united in new organisations and have energetically taken the issue to the public in a widespread campaign for media freedom.

We welcome and support this campaign. Freedom of expression is, for us, a right of value in itself, essential for our well-being as citizens of a democratic polity. Censorship in any form is abhorrent; so are attempts to limit freedom of expression by violence. This does, however, give rise to some other considerations: first, the recognition of the many and various sources that threaten freedom of expression, second, the responsibility of the media in the exercise of that right and third, the

location of this right in a general project for enhancing and strengthening democratic rights.

Censorship, as all men and women who wield the pen would agree, is a pernicious practice that governments employ for purposes of securing power. The debate in Sri Lanka on censorship is however confined only to its exercise by the state. As recent experience shows, censorship by non-state agencies and politico-ideological groups, not only of the press but also of culture and arts, has also assumed devastating proportions. In the North-east, the press and other media of expression have come under severe attack and control by the LTTE. Writing books or poetry, critical of the LTTE, may bring the death penalty, as was the fate of Rajini Thiranagama who was courageous enough to criticise the LTTE. In the South, several radio and television personalities were killed by the JVP in a horrendous attempt to impose its own control on the media owned by the state. The JVP also went to the extent of banning the selling of newspapers branded as 'traitorous'; indeed, this ban applied to some opposition newspapers too. This is, of course, a new form of censorship—censorship by counter-state violence.

Another facet of this process is that some ideological forces in our society have used 'patriotic' pressure to impose outright censorship on artistic freedom of expression. Last year, the Sinhala nationalist press mounted a massive campaign to ban a film which was branded as anti-Sinhala-Buddhist. Similarly, a film crew was forcibly evicted from its film location for the simple reason that it went to a Southern coastal town to make a film on a fictional character who happened to be a Tamil. In both these instances, ideological groups that believe in ethno-cultural fundamentalism had become self-appointed cultural policemen and voluntary executioners of censorship.

The point we are making is that freedom of expression has been and can continue to be threatened by the state, non-state armed groups and non-armed ideological groups. Recognition of all such sources of threat is essential for building safeguards for free expression.

There is another factor that needs emphasis. The notion of free expression cannot be isolated from responsibility. We are emphasizing the concept of media responsibility because irresponsible exercise of that right can lead to the very negation of the goal of that freedom. The two articles on hate speech and the media and communalism that appear in this issue specifically highlight the question of media responsibility. Reckless and cavalier exercise of media freedom, guided by sectarian and communal commitments, can indeed turn the press into an agency of incitement, group hatred and even counter-democratic violence. In Sri Lanka, certain sections of the press, both in Sinhala and Tamil, as well as the radio, have shown a disturbing propensity towards incitement journalism. It is often difficult to draw a fine line between reporting, commentary and propaganda; yet when propagandist considerations take precedence over the commitment to objectivity, the press can become, as many examples of contemporary Sri Lankan journalism would testify, destructively provocative. This indeed calls for critical self-examination on the part of the Sri Lankan media community; the commitment to the freedom of expression could best be nourished by an equal commitment to responsibility.

In the final analysis, the violence against the media community cannot be separated and abstracted from the broader question of the authoritarianist use of violence in politics. We have witnessed over the past few years the emergence of a distinctly macabre political culture of violence, in association with a number of competing authoritarian projects. This is where the larger question of political democracy enters the picture. Media freedom and responsibility are essential to sustain such democratic values as tolerance, the right to dissent, plurality of views, and the free access to information. And these values have been threatened by people whose sole desire is not limited to a gagged and submissive media; their's are essentially authoritarian desires. The struggle for media freedom is also a struggle for strengthening the democratic foundations of a civilized civil society, a necessary component of the struggle against all forms of counter-democratic projects. **P**