

NOTES AND COMMENTS

The Morality of the State

Minister Lokubandara has defended his ban on the advertising of meat products on state television and radio, on several grounds. One is that the consumption of meat is not healthy; this is an appropriate argument from one who has been preaching the health-giving effects of herbal gruels for some time. Another argument is based on morality; the killing of animals and the consumption of meat is against Buddhist tenets and is immoral. A third argument, one backing the other two, lies in the assumption that the state is legitimately empowered to use its authority to secure the physical and moral well-being of its citizens, whether they like it or not.

Other politicians in South Asia too appear to share this assumption and to act very much as Minister Lokubandara has done. Interestingly, a recent issue of *Frontline*, the newsmagazine published from Madras, carried an advertisement placed by the Commissioner of Information of the Andhra Pradesh government and adorned with a colourful photograph of Vijayabhaskara Reddy, the Chief Minister, announcing a ban on arrack. The advertisement hails this as a historic decision.

Why has the government of Andhra Pradesh taken this historic decision? "The government took the decision to ban arrack with the noble objective of protecting the poor and the weaker sections from the evil habit. The government gave priority to the health and well-being of the poor and imposed a complete ban on the sale of arrack sacrificing an annual excise income of Rs.600 crores."

Here again is a virtuous government, so concerned with the physical and moral welfare of its citizens, that it is prepared to suffer substantial losses in income, and also to ignore the experience of all countries that have attempted to enforce prohibition.

Two problems arise in these situations. Is the state empowered to act as a moral arbiter? Do we want the state to do that? We do have in this country a well-entrenched state-centered ideology. We tend to ask the state to intervene in and control many activities -from culture to religion, from codes of conduct for politicians to codes for various professional groups - that are best left to civil society. Do we want the state or the regime that is in control of the state to exercise censorship and control what we read and see?

This problem transforms into another in the context of our multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. There may be many groups among us who do not consider the eating of meat moral anathema. Is the state right when it imposes on them the morality of one particular group?

We suggest that Minister Lokubandara or the new minister recently appointed considers these aspects too.

Freedom of Expression

A phenomenon of our times is the proliferation of weekly tabloids and what are now called "strip papers" in the Sinhala language. This begins when the fissures in the state and the government which culminated in the impeachment effort became apparent. Since then, the cracks in state hegemony have widened, permitting the publication of numerous papers and magazines giving expression to various views.

A curious aspect of the phenomenon is that all these publications are anti-state and anti-government. Some espouse the cause of the opposition political parties or some faction within them. Others are broadly anti-establishment, questioning the very basis of established views at political, social and cultural levels. Whether they constitute an "alternative press" as they like to call themselves is debatable; but they do constitute a critical press, something that has been lacking in Sri Lanka for the past few decades. They have played a notable role in exposing to public gaze all kinds of skullduggery by members of the establishment.

Their freedom and their critical stance obviously poses some problems for the government. They cannot be overtly suppressed. That would damage the image of the government, which is trying desperately to convince the world that Sri Lanka's human rights record has shown decided improvement. It is also not so easy now to adopt crude methods of intimidation.

The government has reacted in two ways to this dilemma. One is to talk of the responsibility of the press; this translates easily into talk of the professional standards necessary for journalists to follow and the methods of instructing journalists in such standards. We all agree that the flip side of the coin of freedom of expression is responsibility, but we have to take the government's interest in a responsible press with a degree of caution. Training can easily degenerate into brainwashing.

The other way has been to examine whether the current press laws can be tightened in some acceptable way. This is the task entrusted by the President to the new Minister for Constitutional Affairs.

By some rare co-incidence, a mission from Article 19, the international organisation dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the right of free expression, arrived in Sri Lanka at the same time. And in their new role as respecters and protectors of human rights, the government was forced into assuring the team that they were not contemplating any curbs on the press.

But we must not forget that this is a government that retains a tight control of the electronic media, forbids any local news reporting by private radio or TV stations and is still generally intolerant of criticism and dissent. It is necessary yet, to be vigilant in safeguarding the newly won areas of press freedom.

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