

## OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT

## Right to know in India

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A citizen without Right to Know is like a bird without wings. Hence, true democracy insists that even devil should be allowed to put forth the devil's point of view. As John Stuart Mill put it: "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion and only one person were of contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind." Clear understanding of the Right to Know needs the separation of facts from fairy tales.

Expression and information are two sides of Right to Know. Our Constitution (Article 19) guarantees freedom of expression but is silent of freedom of information. Its silence has been skilfully exploited by the union and the state governments. Both invoke the Official Secrets Act and confidentiality to suppress information. Consequently, freedom of expression in India has become a mockery. Worse, secrecy breeds corruption in high places and confidentiality covers machinations and manipulations of the top brass in the Civil Service. Together they destroy democracy and deny a decent life to the people of India.

Press, radio, and television are the masterkeys to information. In India, the keepers of keys are not the seekers of truth. Our newspapers are classified as big, medium and small. Big papers are owned by big business. The mission of big press is to preach that what is good for big business is good for Indian democracy. Hence, whenever the Government of India exposes evils of big business, big press cries that "democracy is in danger". There cannot be two opinions about existence of corruption in high places in India. But to highlight corruption only in the government and the gloss over its existence elsewhere is to deceive the people. Do we have angels in big business? Are the leading lights of various professions sea-green incorruptibles? In 1987, when an industrialist-owner of the big press was caught on the wrong foot, an intellectual on his pay-roll defended him thus: "then, only Bhagwan Sri Ramchandraji can make accusations. Nobody else is completely clean". (*India Today*, 30 November 1987).

Free press alone enables people to judge public affairs. Free press means presentation of matter-of-fact information and publication of opposite viewpoints on every issue in one and the same paper. A newspaper that emphasises one viewpoint and suppresses others is not a free press. It is a propaganda press. Free press does not exist anywhere in the world, certainly not in India. Big press tells only half-truths. Half-truths are worse than lies. The champions of big press admit it, but contend that one can know the truth by reading all papers and anybody can own a newspaper. Is that true? Reality indicates that a common man in India cannot afford to buy even one paper. The contention that anybody can own a newspaper is as absurd as the contention that anybody can become a billionaire.

In India, the editors of big press parade as the crusaders of public good. On this year's Republic Day, the National Front Government have conferred *Padma Bhushans* on some of them. Factually, the editors of big press are only His Master's Voice. They are hired, fired and re-hired according to the needs of big business. M C Setalvad, India's first Attorney-General, became the chairman of the board of trustees of *The Statesman*. He discovered that it is very "difficult

for industrialist-proprietors of a newspaper to give editorial freedom to its editor". In 1967, the owner of *The Statesman* disliked its editor Pran Chopra for his policy towards the United Front Government of West Bengal. The owner ordered the trustees to remove him. When they refused to oblige, the owner got rid of both the trustees and the editor (M C Setalvad, *My Life-Law and Other Things*, N M Tripathi Pvt Ltd Bombay, 1971, pp 606-10). In 1989, Vinod Mehta, editor of *The Indian Post* was fired by the owner for publishing "reports against prominent persons (which) seriously jeopardise our business interests". (*Times of India*, 27 July 1989). The examples could be multiplied, but the exercise is not worthwhile. Doubtless, credit for such free press as it exists in India to-day goes entirely to the medium and small newspapers. They deserve full moral and material support of people of India.

Our Civil Service is often praised for its "steel frame". Unfortunately, its gauge is weaker than that of the steel produced by our public and private sector plants. In swaraj, the civil servants crawl when their masters ask them to bend. The spineless civil servants manage the electronic media. No wonder, the AIR and the Doordarshan become the mouth-piece and mirror of our Prime Ministers, particularly Indira Gandhi and her son. The National Front Govern-

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ment have piloted *The Prasar Bharati* (Broadcasting Corporation of India) Bill in the Lok Sabha. The Government think that by giving "autonomy" to the AIR and Doordarshan, it will give them spine and establish their credibility. Much depends upon how "autonomy" would work. University is a well-known autonomous institution in India. The Government of India should carefully reflect upon the achievements of our universities before designing autonomy for the media. It is said but true that our temples of learning are nurseries of mediocrity because autonomy has placed them under "autocratic rule of cliques and coteries."

Everywhere in the world, change of leadership in the government means the change of sycophants in the top offices controlled by the government. The rats desert the sinking ship. The intellectuals desert the fallen patron. In India, intellectuals change their loyalties faster than the chameleons changing their colours. Therefore, the administrators of autonomous agencies should not be given any discretion in the selection of the artistes, features, films and commentators. The selection should be open and strictly according to clear, concise and precise rules. It should be truly an all-India selections. Those seeking a rise through the favours of Delhi Durbar are perforce obliged to crowd in the capital of country. It is a gross mistake to think that talent in India

exists only in and around Delhi.

Many plead that we should imitate the BBC model. Does BBC always tells the truth? Is BBC really free? At Prime Minister Harold Wilson's order, the BBC branded India as an aggressor in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965. In the fight between Shah of Iran and Ayatoola Khomeini, the BBC distorted news in favour of the Shah to protect the British oil interests. In 1985, when the British Government ordered, the BBC cancelled a TV programme connected with the Irish Republican Army. The British Spying Agency MI-5 "advises" the BBC on the questions falling within its "responsibility" and the advice is scrupulously respected by the BBC. In 1987, the British Government deprived the BBC of the film *The Secret Society*. Its Director-General Milne was ordered to choose between immediate "resignation" with full compensation or immediate "dismissal" with compensation left vague. He resigned. The ultimatum speaks volumes about the "freedom" of the BBC (*The Times of India*, 26 February 1987). Tony Benn's congenial analysis shows that the British media is the handmaid of the "British Establishment" tightly controlled by the merchant-princes. (Tony Benn, *Arguments for Democracy* edited by Chris Mullin, Penguin Books England 1982).

Modern democracies make themselves abominable and ridiculous for two reasons. First, they boast to be the "open society" but their financial business is transacted only in the closed cabins and shrouded with complete secrecy. Secondly, their government, parliament and judiciary profess to be the guardians of "public interest" and prove to be the guardians of "private interests". In our times, "public interest" seems to be an excellent channel to pump public funds into private pockets. India's ruling class ought to raise an imposing monument to him who invented the Official Secrets Act. Knowing black deeds of the rulers after 30 or 35 years when they are dead and gone is like rubbing salt into the wounds of nation. The Official Secrets Act enables India's ruling oligarchy to build family fortunes and to perpetuate dynastic hold on the Government of country. Like Dumas' *Three Musketeers*, corruption, nepotism and favouritism always live together. They flourish when right to Know is only a name and not a thing.

How to make Right to Know meaningful in India? It needs concrete steps. We should abolish secrecy and confidentiality which governs the management of public affairs. Except military aspects of India's security, nothing should be secret. All the contracts should be open for public scrutiny as soon as the agreements are signed. All payments made to the parties from the public exchequer should be publicised within a week in order to assess the quantity and quality of work completed. People should have easy and free access to all files in the government offices and so-called autonomous institutions. Perpetual public scrutiny of public affairs discourages corruption, guarantees accountability of the rulers to the ruled and compels efficiency in the Civil Service. History tells that people ruin themselves when they accept the thesis that "public interests" are better known only to their representatives, ministers, civil servants and the judges. Short of such steps, press, radio and Doordarshan cannot be effective channels of information. Without them, Right to Know is a pure fiction.