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OPINION

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WILL YOU COME INTO MY PARLOUR

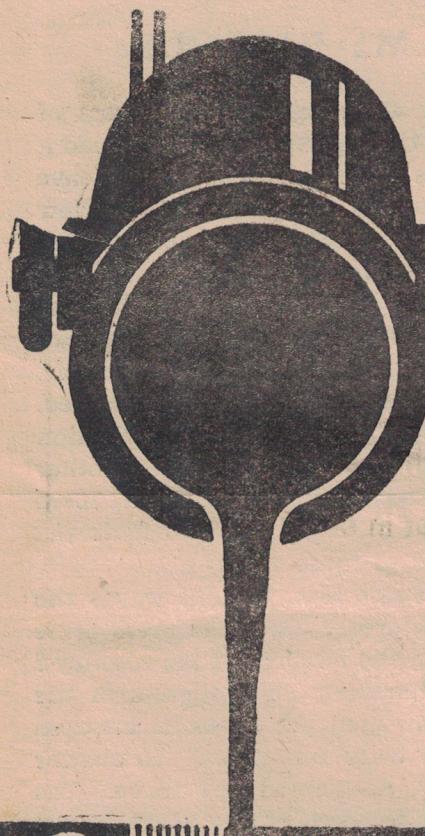
VERY courteously did Mrs. Gandhi last week ask the free Press of India to commit suicide. "She posed the question 'Is the freedom of the press greater than the interests of the country ?' She would leave it to the press to judge its own performance and discipline itself." Now between the true interests of the country and freedom of the press there is, and can be, no contradiction. Without freedom of the press, the true interests of the country cannot be served, and one of the first of the true interests of the country is the maintenance of a free press. Assuming of course that the country is, and proposes to continue to be, democratic. And that's where the rub comes so far as Mrs. Gandhi is concerned. For it is obvious from the reports of her speech that her whole inclination is toward the guided press, the journalism of the Soviet Union and other dictatorial countries, where the Press ends up by being a mere transmission belt of the Government and the ruling party, and finds the true interests of the country in the interests of these sections.

Western standards of Freedom of the Press Mrs. Gandhi warns the Indian Press against, calls 'insincere' and abjures. "Does the press come above the country ? Is it more important than the freedom of the country ? Is it more important than the peace and harmony and progress of the country ?" These are her questions, all straw-men put up to be knocked down, and so strengthen her case against a truly free press. To answer them seriously however, the first is absurd, as pointed out above. The question of freedom of the country against freedom of the press cannot arise, one of the latter's main purposes being the former. So, too, as regards the third, the existence of a free press does not militate in any way against the freedom of a democratic country, nor against the peace, harmony and progress of the country. On the contrary it helps in all these directions, however inconvenient the Government may find some of the views expressed by some of its members, however opposed some of them may be to the policy of the time, or to the personalities it favours.

What then are the standards of the free press that Mrs. Gandhi finds so undesirable ? "The public must be informed. It must be told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as early as the truth can be ascertained and told." "To provide sound comment upon public life in all its aspects," that is, "to be King over all the children of pride, to chastise the haughty and succour the weak, to scorn the bigot and confound the sceptic, to serve truth without fear, to admonish the people and

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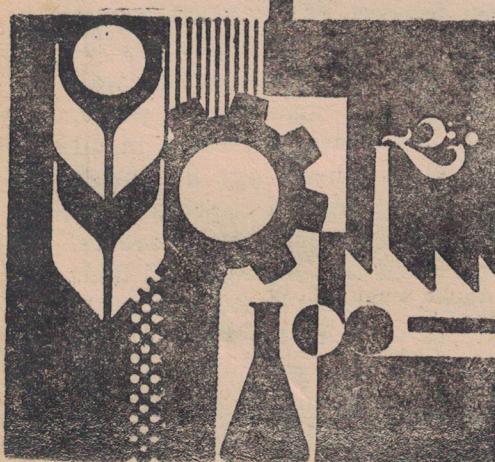
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expose the demagogue, to hide the wayward and embolden the faint-hearted." Difficult to live up to undoubtedly—yet this is "the task of the Press and the source of its power." So wrote a great journalist about forty years ago, and so it remains today, despite all the changes and innovations, technological, commercial, etc., of these forty years.

In the last resort, the free press rests on the character of the journalist, his personal integrity, his love of the truth, his independence of mind. To destroy it, Mrs. Gandhi will no doubt sap away at these individual cases, but that will be a long process, she realises, so this mass invitation to suicide on grounds of the highest patriotism. "We have no lack of direction here. We know exactly where we want to go. We know exactly how to get there." So, come on, join up you of the free press. Your role is very important. Will you not then fall in with the times, good journalists, men to whom your profession is still despite much disillusioning experience, a vocation? Knowing that worse may follow, censorship, etc., if you don't, you may be tempted. But between what one accepts voluntarily and what is imposed upon one by force, there is always a difference in quality. You lose your soul in the first case, you retain it in the second, do what you may under rigor and compelling force.

Those journalists and proprietors and managers of journals inclined to walk into Mrs. Gandhi's parlour, may perhaps like to consider this before they take the fatal step :

"Of social and political freedom a free Press is at once the expression and the guardian; but under a political system which treats the individual as subject in all things to the will of an Absolute State, expressed by the dictates of an Absolute Leader, a free press and free journalism can have no warrant or justification. Nor does the matter end here. It reaches down to the very foundations of the philosophy of freedom. In free countries it is not and cannot be the business even of what are sometimes called 'responsible' journalists merely to echo the views of a Government or to observe the reticence which statesmen impose upon themselves or believe to be due to the positions they hold." And this classical definition of the differences between the duties of a free press and the duties of statesmen : "The purposes and duties of the two powers are constantly separate, generally independent, sometimes diametrically opposite. The dignity and the freedom of the Press are trammelled from the moment it accepts an ancillary position. To perform its duties with entire independence, and consequently with the utmost public advantage, the Press can enter into no close or binding alliances with the statesmen of the day, nor can it surrender its permanent interests to the convenience of the ephemeral power of any Government."

The first duty of the Press is to obtain the earliest and most correct intelligence of the events of the time, and instantly, by disclosing them, to make them the common property of the nation. The statesman collects his information secretly and by secret means; he keeps back even the current intelligence of the day with ludicrous precautions, until diplomacy is beaten in the race with publicity. The Press lives by disclosures;

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whatever passes into its keeping becomes a part of the knowledge and the history of our times; it is daily and forever appealing to the enlightened force of public opinion—anticipating if possible the march of events—standing upon the breach between the present and the future, and extending its survey to the horizon of the world. The statesman's duty is precisely the reverse. He cautiously guards from the public eye the information by which his actions and opinions are regulated; he reserves his judgment of passing events till the latest moment, and then he records it in obscure or conventional language; he strictly confines himself, if he be wise, to the practical interests of his own country, or to those turning immediately upon it; he hazards no rash surmises as to the future; and he concentrates in his own transactions all that power which the Press seeks to diffuse over the world. The duty of the one is to speak; of the other to be silent. The one explains itself in discussion; the other tends to action. The one deals mainly with rights and interests; the other with opinions and sentiments; the former is necessarily reserved, the latter essentially free.

It follows, therefore, from this contrast that the responsibilities of the two powers are as much at variance as their duties. For us, with whom publicity and truth are the air and light of existence, there can be no greater disgrace than to recoil from the frank and accurate disclosure of facts as they are. We are bound to tell the truth as we find it, without fear of consequences—to lend no convenient shelter to acts of injustice and oppression, but to consign them at once to the judgment of the world."

* * *

"Here we have the secret of the power of the Press in so far as that power is derived from fearless service of public interest: 'Barnes was a journalist.' He believed neither in the suppression of unpalatable news, nor in euphemisms when straight, hard language was called for."

* * *

"The Press will endure and deserve to endure so long as it can discharge, in free communities, its function of public criticism and its wardenship of the public conscience."

54. Shri B. Venkatappiah,
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