

REVOLT.....

Kubera was vexed by this. 'Dyaus Pita was an Aryan deity,' he declared, 'so it is only right that the Holy Family should champion the Aryan cause.'

And Kubera led a revolt in the Temple of the Holy Family; within its great walls he built his Alaka Mandava. And to his Alaka Mandava flocked the immortals of the Holy Family.

So Tammuz was thwarted. Shiver criticised his for not bringing his case before the Council of the Lion Faced Immortal⁴, although he sat on this council himself.

Vayu saw that things were not going well for his master Akhenaton. Good and faithful servant that he was, he put away the boot-soup he had been partaking of (in fulfillment of a holy vow) and betook himself to the Kshayathianam Kshayathiya.

'Let us have a festival of light,' said Vayu to the KK. And so Akhenaton told Vazurgd Framadar to announce to the mortals that night would be turned to day, in a festival of light, for five days.

But the mortals were vexed. The Light provided by the fiery breathing of Lotan was dim, so there was not sufficient light for both the mortals and the celestial festival.

Vayu was overwhelmed by the fury of the invective of the denizens of Indraprasta. He hastened to Vazurgd Framadar and said to him,

'Let us reduce the number of days for which the festival will run.'

And so, the Festival of Light was celebrated with less than its former glory.

And Vazurgd Framadar picked up the sacred bowl of sustenance and began his pilgrimage to Mammon. And with him went the Phallic Magus, the Guardian of the Celestial Treasury.

And all Aryanam Kshathra looked on with bated breath, for on this pilgrimage would depend the fate of the Mortalization of the Heavenly Spirits. ■

Endnotes:

- 1 Mithra tamed Lotan by enclosing each of the latter's necks within a trap of stone and iron. Lotan's fiery breath was used to illuminate the Lotanic Games, while Mithra caused Lotan's blood to come down from heaven as a celestial rain to irrigate the fields of the mortals. It is said that he who tamed Lotan is sometimes identified with the serpent of Temptation (cf *Genesis*). However, it is also said that the fruit of wealth comes, not from the Garden of Lotan, but from the Temple of Mammon.
- 2 The ritual of the pilgrimage of penance is concerned with obtaining *Manna* from Mammon. Vazurgd Framadar genuflects to Mammon, and the latter fills the Sacred Bowl of Sustenance with Manna. The ritual of filling the bowl is accompanied by an incantation of mortal rites by the angel Unchr, with the ceremonial stamp of approval being carried out by the archangels Imf and Worlb while wielding the two-headed Axe of Mortalization.
- 3 Contrary to popular belief, Dyaus Pita was the father, not of Indra but of Soorya and Chandra. He was, indeed, the Paterfamilias of the Holy Family.

THE TWO FACES OF THE Media commission Bill

Ajith Samaranayake

The history of the Media Commission Bill is as interesting as the bill itself. It has been shrouded in mystery and delivered in secrecy. There has been a curious reluctance on the part of its authors to claim responsibility for it. The Government piously protests that it had no hand in drafting it. It emanated from some parties of the All Party Conference, say its spokesmen. But neither has any party represented at the All Party Conference shown any marked enthusiasm to accept any responsibility for it. Only Mr. Neville Jayaweera, now Sri Lanka's Ambassador in Sweden, has accepted public responsibility for any hand in drafting it and therefore can be termed its putative father.

What nobody has bothered to make clear is the need for such legislation. It is not as if Sri Lanka's media is so vigorous and uninhibited that it has to be muzzled and tamed by legislation. And even if this were so the Press Council Bill, which the UNP agitated

against in opposition, is there for that purpose. On the contrary, public opinion in the country has been that the media is oppressed by constraints and has thus lost its credibility especially among the socially-conscious young, a point cogently made by the Youth Commission. Also, parties like the Liberal Party which has taken a consistent interest in the media have advocated the need to liberalise the media. In such an environment it is difficult to conceive how a Media Commission with wide-ranging powers to regulate the media could have been generated.

According to the draft bill which is said to incorporate suggestions made at the plenary meeting of the All Party Conference held on February 2, 1991, the Media Commission will consist of fifteen persons nominated by the President 'after such consultation with leaders of political parties and other relevant organisations as he may consider necessary'. This lackadaisical approach is typical of the whole conception of the bill. What are the political parties the President is expected to consult and what are the relevant organisations? Isn't it passing strange that organisations of journalists have

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not been specifically prescribed as organisations relevant to this process of consultation? What kind of nominee will this strange process of consultation throw up?

Having thus been nominated, any member of the Commission can be removed by the President subject to certain provisions. In the case of the Chairman the President can remove him from office and cause the reasons for such removal to be placed before Parliament. The powers the President enjoys in this area will needless to say vitiate the capacity of the members, especially the Chairman, to perform effectively. This process of nomination will ensure that the Media Commission would be a body bearing the imprint of the country's prevailing politics. A comparison with the Indian Press Council would be relevant in this regard. In India only the first Press Council is nominated by the President. Each succeeding Council is nominated by the outgoing Chairman of the previous body. Thus, men of professional eminence and moral substance find a place in the Indian Press Council.

The objects of the Commission exemplify the basically ambivalent nature of the whole exercise. On the one hand they embody noble concepts such as the freedom and independence of the media, the public's right to be informed, ensuring a balanced and fair representation of views etc; on the other hand the Commission is also empowered to advise the government on 'any matter pertaining to the regulation of the media'. Even more curious are some of the other still nobler objects. Among the objects are 'to ensure the upholding of the unity and integrity of the country and the rights, freedoms and social values reflected in the Constitution, in the media.' Other objects include the ensuring of the strengthening of national unity, ethnic harmony and multiculturalism by means of the media.

How can the media for example ensure the upholding of the unity and the integrity of the country or the rights, freedoms and social values embodied in the Constitution? If the media does take this seriously a situation can well be created where it might find itself in direct collision with the state. On the other hand can one single body like a Media Commission impose a rigid philosophy and set of guidelines on so complex and multi-faceted an organism like the print and electronic media? The most charitable interpretation one can place on all this is that the framers of the bill have been guilty of an idealistic overestimation of the functions and capacities of the media. The basic function of the print media in particular is to inform and articulate opinion. It is true that the media shapes public opinion to an extent but public opinion is also shaped by other forces not least of all the Government in Third World societies where Governments have begun to aggrandise themselves at the expense of civil society. The media is part of the superstructure of society and is not the only agent which shapes public opinion. To expect the media to uphold grandiose expectations and set up a Commission to ensure that the media conforms to these standards is to be guilty of naivete.

The Commission will have all the powers of a District Court and can summon and compel the attendance of any person and if any person

is found guilty of contempt of the Commission can report such persons to the Supreme Court.

One of the principal reasons for which the Commission can be invoked is where a journalist complains to the Commission that a proprietor has threatened to dismiss him or her if he or she refuses to carry some material in a newspaper. On the face of it this looks like a progressive measure seeking to guarantee the independence of journalism but in practical terms it will only lead to a rift between journalists and proprietors and the virtual crippling of newspapers. Certainly, journalistic ethics must be adhered to and the independence of journalists guaranteed not merely from proprietorial interference but also government interference but this has to be done by a process of internal democratisation of the media and not by policing the media with a Commission enjoying the powers of a District Court.

The whole thrust of our argument so far has been that the media in Sri Lanka needs to be liberated from its many constraints whereas the whole purpose of the Media Commission Bill is to place yet another incubus on it. The Media Commission is all the more pernicious for seeking to place such an incubus on the media in the guise of high falutin good intentions. The Bill does not seek to alter in any way the prevailing pattern of media relations. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation will remain government monopolies. The Media Commission can only recommend names for the position of Chairman and Directors of these two bodies. In the case of the press however there is provision for the Commission to check 'developments in the media which may tend towards concentration and monopoly and to suggest appropriate remedial measures in relation thereto including measures to broadbase ownership.' Again while the intention appears indisputably noble this provision can easily be used against independently owned media companies to compel them to toe the line. In this context it will not be inappropriate to note that some time ago a few convenient letters to the editor appeared in the Daily News suggesting that newspaper owners should not engage in other businesses not connected with newspaper publishing and hinting that steps should be taken to correct this situation. It is not difficult to envisage a situation where the Media Commission will be expected to undertake a pious crusade against such companies under the banner of concentration and monopoly.

With the radio and television as Government monopolies and a major newspaper group under Government management the main problem of the media today is that of Government monopoly. There is no provision in the bill to correct this situation. In the case of the small independent press while there is no censorship the shadow of Government lies heavily there too.

Through the allocation of newsprint and advertisements and economic pressure through banks the Government can make life for these newspapers uncomfortable. These are the hidden realities of press unfreedom which many observers used to western liberal democracy will not be able to appreciate. It is difficult to believe that a body wholly nominated by the President in the context of the patronage politics of our day will have any contribution to make in correcting these imbalances. ■