
Imperilled Press Freedom

—The Indian Express Case

We are glad that *The Indian Express* and *Jansatta* have resumed publication in the face of government's attempts to close them down or take them over.

From the way events followed one another over the last few months—the orchestrated strike, the violent attacks on those returning to work, the government withdrawal of the *Express* building lease, government lodging of a large number of cases simultaneously against the *Express* management—it was clear that we were witnessing a blatant attempt by government to silence a paper which has exposed many instances of the ruling party's corruption and hypocrisy.

Unfortunately, the government onslaught on the *Express* did not evoke sufficient public protest. Even the press did not react strongly enough in defence of its own precarious freedom. Instead, most debate followed the government red herrings, such as the validity of the strikers' demands, the personality, politics and conduct of the editor and the owner, and whether or not the *Express* had adhered in all respects to government regulations. All these suspicions may be subjects of discussion in their own right, but none justifies the government's arbitrary and lawless attack.

The attempted takeover of the

building in violation of established procedure, the police raids on offices and residences, and the use of brutal intimidation show that the government is quite capable of functioning in Emergency style even without declaring an Emergency.

The press, civil liberties bodies, and all of us who are concerned to safeguard our fundamental right to freedom of expression, should come together to ensure that government is not allowed to get away with this kind of censorship of the press. If *The Indian Express* is wrecked in this manner today, none of us, big or small, will be safe tomorrow.