

NOTE

## Where Journalism is a crime

Sankar Ray writes :

Hong Kong-based *Asia Sentinel's* Singapore Correspondent Ben Bland was chucked out in November, 2009 by the authoritarian and quasi-dynastic hukmat in a veiled way. His employment visa was not renewed unlike a crude practice of harassing and repressing scribes in vogue in other ASEAN states. The city-state is in a prolonged state of emergency in the interests of Lee-autocracy which does not brook intrepid journalism. Scribes it considers uncongenial for the dynastical interests are pushed out by cancelling employment visa to convert them into persona non-grata. That's the "brand of soft authoritarianism honed by Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party", stated Ben.

No newspaper in India carried the news. Ben's plight began when his story filed on 24 November 2008 was spiked. He narrated his irritating experience in the Lyon's City where he landed in October last year from London to work as a freelance journalist "Over a cup of coffee at their office in a former colonial police station—possibly the world's most stylish propaganda ministry— they probed me politely about my background and intentions in Singapore. They were friendly but seemed perplexed about the concept of freelance journalism, even though it forms the backbone of much foreign reporting these days", Ben wrote.

Free Press is a farcical term in the police state.

So Ben was queried by an official.

Stories which Ben used to file for not only AS but *The Economist*, *The Daily Telegraph*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the *British Medical Journal* and also Singapore's government-owned *Straits Times* and *Business Times* as well, weren't palatable for the Lee administration, particularly the ones highlighting the rising crime, healthcare and ageing in the tightly-controlled city-state and its business links city-state has with Myanmar. The Lees slapped libel cases against *The Economist*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Financial Times*, *Bloomberg* and, most recently *Far Eastern Economic Review* and won in all of them, thanks to Lee-designed jurisprudence.

Ben's tactic of not filing stories on Lee, the city-state's *shah-en-shah* and Singapore's founder Prime Minister, now Minister Mentor, nor even of his son the present Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong who heads Temasek, one of Singapore's two sovereign wealth funds with his wife Ho Ching was of no use.

Which was why Ben's application for renewal of visa rejected with a one-line love letter from the police-state biggie : an example of media-savvy dynasty's "subtler approach to repression". Ben's endeavour to get it reversed through the good office of the British High Commission fell flat. "I was told that the government was not willing to disclose the reasons for turning down my application".

The financial outfit run by the PM and his better half hasn't a clean slate. Any expose—even indirectly or subduedly unnerves the power that dictates. Which is

Singapore caresses an insidious climate of self-censorship that cows both Singaporean and foreign journalists.

Twenty-one years ago, AS editor John Berthelsen was given the same treat, but more unceremoniously when he was chief of Singapore bureau of *Asian Wall Street Journal*. His visa was valid up to 1990 but he couldn't stay for three years. In March this year, he was there for a one-day stopover. The eagle-eyed immigration officials took little time to browse out that this was the man whom Lee- coterie threw out of the police-state.

Democracy is a bad word in Singapore where Opposition leaders are jailed and judiciary is a pawn of Lee family. □□□