

COMMENT

## Police State

THE SYSTEM IS NOT WORKING. People are getting restive everywhere. Sporadic violent outbursts here and there are simply manifestations of deep-rooted frustration that has gripped the society. The authorities respond by curtailing civil liberties and personal freedom that was unthinkable even a decade ago. 'There's more to fear than fear'.

Under repressive regimes in yester years people lived in constant fear, but the terror they felt and the machinery that enforced it was tangible. Not any more. They now live in a harrowing time when information about their personal lives and behaviour are being gathered, stored and shared by governments and multinational corporations on a scale that no one ever thought was humanly possible.

In the name of fighting terrorism governments across the world have been creating new regulations that infinitely augment the state power of surveillance with no meaningful public or parliamentary debate.

The Information Technology (Amendment) Bill, 2006 passed by the Indian Parliament recently allows the government to intercept messages from mobile phones, computers and other communication devices to investigate any offence. Not just cognizable offence, the kind people witnessed in Mumbai 26/11, but any offence.

Any person who sends, by means of a computer resource or a communication device, (a) any content that is grossly offensive or has menacing character; or (b) any content which he knows to be false, but for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred or ill will... shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years and with fine.

But one has to admit that there is concern on part of the government on what could be the impact of the law on art and literature. So section 67 does not extend to any book, pamphlet, paper, writing, drawing, painting, representation or figure in electronic form, provided it is in the interest of science, literature, art or learning or religion. That means M F Hussein can't be framed under IT Act anymore, and that photos and videos are not considered art.

There is only one answer and it is a Benjamin Franklin quote: Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.

Surprisingly, no political party takes any interest in the amended IT Act. Even the official left seems reluctant to protest against total surveillance that ultimately leads to police state. With the police establishment armed with so many repressive laws and enjoying unlimited power in circumventing citizens' civil rights, India may soon look like a "gulag" of Asian variety. The scale of repression suggests among other things that the ruling circles can no longer rule in old ways. The contradiction between haves and have-nots is getting sharpened with every passing day. Objective conditions are so rife for a radical change. But revolutionary forces are not on the horizon. □□□