**National Press Release**

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**Swarna Bharat Party condemns Modi government’s attack on democracy and media freedom**

Mr Sanjeev Sabhlok, senior leader of Swarna Bharat Party, India's only liberal party, condemned the Modi government’s ongoing attacks on democracy and the media.

Barkha Dutt’s recent exposure of the use of TV licensing by the Modi government to intimidate those whom it doesn’t like shows that India’s press freedom is under severe attack. Dutt has even said that she has been asked to cool her heels till 2019. This is an unprecedented attack on democracy. India is fast sinking to the bottom: even the lowly 136th rank on global press freedom indicators is under threat.

Dutt’s exposé has come close on the heels of the Cobrapost’s Operation 136. The common denominator between the two is the BJP government. Just before these exposes was the abortive attempt by Smriti Irani, the former I&B Minister, to control the media through accreditation on the pretext of regulating “fake news”. Of course, it is widely known and documented that BJP’s own IT cell is the most prolific in photoshopping and spreading lies and fake news.

BJP and the Modi government are jointly mounting an attack on the media, first through bribes, so the media will publish their lies and divide the country communally, and second, through direct obstruction of alternative views. And just the other day, a Tamil singer who criticised Modi was jailed. These attempts are reminiscent of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Democracy is in peril.

Numerous mechanisms – created long before 2014, and which SBP thoroughly opposes – are being used by governments to restrict press freedom. These include licensing of television channels, accreditation of journalists, content requirements under cable television rules, censor board, indefensible defamation laws including laws on criminal defamation, and foreign direct investment restrictions.

Further, the very nature of India’s socialist crony capitalist model means that corrupt businessmen and politicians now own a significant proportion of the media. That the press often asks for money to publish anything (including such press releases) is well known. SBP has directly experienced this corruption but we refuse to bribe the press. The press is the eyes and ears of the people. It must not be gagged. And no one should corrupt it through bribes. The press must stand on its own feet.

Mr Sabhlok said that SBP is committed to absolute freedom of the press and rejects any regulatory control over the media. Achieving this will also require fundamental governance reforms to bring honesty into the institutions of government and the judiciary that have been long corrupted by decades of socialism.

Mr Sabhlok asked the Modi government to abolish all restrictions on the media including all non-transparent licensing and accreditation requirements. Where a scarce commodity is involved such as bandwidth, it must be auctioned transparently. The people must directly engage with the media and control any of its excesses through their voluntary commercial decisions. Bureaucrats and Ministers are not needed to tell the people who can be a journalist, who can report on news or who can invest in the media.

**Notes for Editors**

SBP is India’s only liberal party, committed to defending liberty and promoting prosperity.

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