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Media as Target - ED's Searches at NewsClick Office

What is the issue?

- The Enforcement Directorate conducted searches on the premises of a digital news platform, NewsClick, and residences of its editors in connection with a case of alleged money laundering.
- This has invited condemnation from organisations representing the media.

What are the allegations?

- The company has received some funds from abroad.
- This is being investigated under Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).
- The search is based on an FIR registered by the Economic Offences Wing of Delhi Police.

What is the concern with ED's investigations?

- Ordinarily, searches and seizures are the legitimate starting point of an investigation, done on the basis of prior information.
- But the ED's raids in the present case have invited justified condemnation from organisations representing the media.
- The ED is empowered by the Prevention of Money-Laundering Act to investigate –
 - if the proceeds of crime related to a 'predicate offence' have been laundered.
- However, whether such a primary offence has been established or not, and if so, whether NewsClick is in any way linked to it, is unclear.
- There is every likelihood that this operation is linked to the platform's in-depth coverage of ongoing farmers' protests.
- NewsClick has also covered the various struggles of the people and the grassroot organisations that represent them.
- Given these, it is difficult to brush aside the suspicion that the website is being targeted for being vocally critical of the government.

What is the larger concern?

- The present regime's record is quite dismal when it comes to the obvious use of central agencies such as the CBI, ED, IT and even the NIA, to rein in dissenting voices.
- It is unfortunate that specialised agencies are allowing themselves to be used as force multipliers in political battles against sections of the Opposition.
- Laws that are serious in nature and ought not to be invoked lightly are being used against the dissenters.
- The frequency with which the offence of sedition is being invoked for speeches and writings, and cases under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act imply the same.
- In other instances, cases of promoting social enmity or outraging religious sentiments are also slapped selectively to 'discipline' comedians and script-writers.

What is the way forward?

- Relentless journalistic focus on protests is basically step taken in pursuit of redress for public grievances.
- A responsible and responsive government should not dismiss criticism of its treatment of dissenters, including journalists, as motivated or inspired by foreign elements.
- On the other hand, there must be no room for suspicion that agencies are being used for curbing dissent.

Source: The Hindu



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