

point programme implementation committees turned into drought relief committees.

Almost immediately he found that he was taken to task by the Opposition on several counts. State Janata Party General Secretary Saryu Rai said the Government should have declared the state a "famine area" instead of a "scarcity area".

They also objected to the fact that the chief minister had not bothered to involve the opposition parties in the relief effort. Lok Dal(K) chief Karpoori Thakur described these actions as all that could be

expected from a corrupt ministry. Mishra, however, defended his action on the grounds that the creation of new committees would have been an unnecessary and time-consuming exercise.

But the Government was quick to re-sile from its own decisions. According to a modified order issued the very next day after the first one, Mishra announced that "red cards would be issued to just one per cent of the population and not two per cent as decided by the Cabinet." Mishra reasoned that the number of red card holders

had been halved because 23 lakh people were already covered by the social security pension scheme.

While the Government fiddles with its own decisions, the suffering continues unabated. And it remains to be seen whether Jagannath Mishra and his inept cohorts will be able to live up to the trust that the people have placed in them. However, going by the abysmal performance of Mishra's government to date, there is little hope for Bihar's suffering millions.

—FARZAND AHMED

## BIHAR PRESS BILL

# Battle Cry

**W**HATEVER else the Government is butter-fingered at doing, it is adept at keeping the results of its impetuosity in a state of continuing suspense. The campaign against the Bihar Press Bill is almost four months old now, but the Government has only indulged in a lot of double-talk—swearing by press freedom in one breath, and fulminating against "rag journalism" in the next.

But the anti-bill movement has galvanised the nation's community of print journalists. Editors of every political hue have rallied together to condemn the long-term implications of 'Juggernaut' Mishra's brain-child, and last fortnight's rally by the press in Delhi once again brought forth the bill's catalytic effect. More than 3,000 journalists, and leaders of every national level press organisation, marched from Connaught Place to that favourite soap-box sward, the Boat Club. Deena Nath Jha, editor of the *Indian Nation* and leader of the Patrakar Snagharsh Samiti in Bihar, led a large delegation, and the Indian Federation of Working Journalists (IFWJ) and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) were represented by all their state units.

At the Boat Club, the rally was addressed by senior journalists A. Raghavan, president of the IFWJ, S. Sahay, editor of the *Statesman*, Upendra Vajpayee, president of the Delhi Union of Journalists, and Kapil Verma, president of the NUJ. Khushwant Singh, editor of

the *Hindustan Times*, and M. Chalapathi Rau, senior journalist and former editor of the *National Herald*, were also present, as were Madhu Dandavate of the Janata Party, Indrajit Gupta of the All India Trade Union Congress, N.K. Bhatt of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), and Bharatiya Janata Party President A.B. Vajpayee.

**Unanimous Condemnation:** The speakers at the rally unanimously condemned the bill and demanded its

Gandhi said in the Rajya Sabha that she "neither endorsed nor rejected" the bill since she had not yet "read it".

The Government has already indicated that it may ask Bihar to make changes in the bill, particularly in respect of the proviso that allows even a lowly executive magistrate to throw "scurrilous" journalists into prison for as many as 180 days. Moreover, even the pro-Government INTUC and the NUJ, have come out strongly against the bill.

**Official Dilemma:** But the prime minister has not distinguished herself by claiming not to have read the bill carefully. Observers in Delhi feel that the Central Government is now trapped in a dilemma—any move to scuttle the bill would immediately weaken Mishra's crumbling base, and add to the uncertainty of his tenure created by the Patna Urban Cooperative Bank case currently being heard by the Supreme Court.

Salve has predictably sought to queer the pitch by accusing the press of providing the Opposition ingress into the agitation. But the

essential nature of the agitation has been distinctly non-partisan.

As the anti-bill agitation enters its plateau phase, there is talk of formulating a code of ethics for journalists. But, as *The Times of India* commented editorially, "(the press) cannot possibly wish to take on this (policing) role, so long as those in power find it expedient to patronise those very black sheep whom they say they wish to be disciplined". The rally was yet another expression of journalists' conviction to maintain the momentum of the agitation through a period in which a dithering government is keeping its options in limbo.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG



The New Delhi rally: keeping up the pressure

withdrawal. Significantly, that very day Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, N.K.P. Salve, told the Parliamentary Consultative Committee attached to his ministry that the Government was taking a "rational and objective" view of the bill, but "rag journalism" had to be curbed. Salve told Parliament that the bill would be sent to the President for assent only after a full dialogue with journalists' organisations.

On October 12, an anti-bill procession in Patna, consisting mostly of youth activists and several legislators, was lathi-charged and tear-gassed, and two days later Prime Minister Indira