

BHEL

Suppressing Dissent?

EVERY dissenter is in a minority of one, and K. Ashok Rao, 36, deputy manager in Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), is discovering what it is like to take on this public sector leviathan. Rao is, after all, only one of BHEL's 70,000 employees.

Yet, on February 23 this year, Rao filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court that could shake BHEL to its foundations. The petition challenged Rule 9 of the corporation's Conduct, Discipline and Appeal Rules, 1975, which prohibits employees from publicly airing their grievances or criticism.

Sensitive Matter: The petition stemmed from BHEL's refusal to allow Rao to publish a pamphlet titled *'The Peacock's Ugly Legs'*. On May 25 last year, Rao wrote to BHEL's Chairman and Managing Director K.L. Puri, asking for permission to publish the pamphlet, a critique of another booklet written by a former BHEL chief S.V.S. Raghavan titled *'Blueprint Of A Corporate Plan With Reference To BHEL'*. Nine days later, the management wrote back to Rao, saying the matter was sensitive and needed 'deep study.' On August 1, Rao served notice on the management, threatening to publish the pamphlet if he did not hear their objections within a fortnight. The matter ostensibly ended two days before the deadline expired, when a general manager B.B. Bharadwaj wrote and informed Rao that he was not to publish the pamphlet, and would invite disciplinary action if he did.

A former director (Finance) who lasted hardly six months as chairman and managing director in 1978, Raghavan co-authored BHEL's ambitious Corporate Plan in 1974—an exercise that was touted as the catalyst that would transform the corporation from a manufacturing to an engineering organisation, usher in 'renationalisation' of production, and brought about certain organisational changes. Chief among the aims of the Plan was to upgrade research and development (R & D) activities "in such a way as to reduce dependence on foreign technologies and keep the industry continually updated".

His plan was effectively shelved in 1978 when BHEL signed a memorandum of understanding with Siemens AG of West Germany with the ultimate aim of concluding a broad-based umbrella collaboration over a period of 25 years that would account for more than two-thirds of BHEL's manufacturing spectrum. The BHEL-Siemens deal stirred up a tremendous storm of protest, and after a committee of four senior secretaries to the

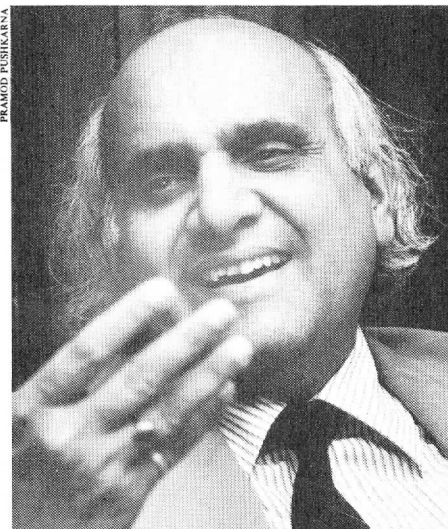
Government came out against it, in June 1979, the then prime minister Morarji Desai scuttled the proposal.

Blueprint: Ironically, Raghavan was forced to quit BHEL's top post in August 1978 because of his opposition to the Siemens deal. The booklet being attacked by Rao contains Raghavan's blueprint for a second corporate plan. When he wrote it, Raghavan was working with Ashok Leyland in Madras.

Rao in his pamphlet, argues that there has been a total collapse of engineering and accountability in BHEL, denigration of R & D, indiscriminate import of technology, and demoralisation of the corporation's ex-



Rao: challenging the rules



Puri: nervous anticipation

ecutive cadre. Says Rao: "Today, the umbrella deal with Siemens has been replaced by piecemeal agreements that are just as bad. The collaborations now cover manufacture of all turbines from zero to 1,000 megawatts (MW), all ratings of motors, both AC and DC, all industrial controls, and all switchgear items and condensers. What does that leave?"

Rao has been a thorn in BHEL's flesh for other reasons too. In January 1979, he formed the BHEL Executives' Association in Delhi to take up the managerial cadre's grievances. The management panicked and formed its own body, the BHEL Executives' Forum, eight days later.

Because of his dissensions Rao himself has been relegated to the head of the services division, and his duties now include stationery purchases, whitewashing, horticulture, and maintenance of lifts, water-coolers, and air-conditioners.

Significance: Rao's petition in the Supreme Court acquires such significance, because a favourable decision could pave the way for public dissent by employees of all the country's public sector and quasi-governmental organisations. The Civil Service Conduct Rules, for instance, have similar rules forbidding the expression of criticism. Bodies like the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) similarly gag any employee protest; so do academic bodies like the Indian Institute of Technology. One result is that even constructive criticism gets stifled.

Puri told INDIA TODAY that he always welcomed "constructive suggestions". Adds R.N. Srivastava, BHEL's director of personnel: "Similar conduct rules exist in the Government. We can discuss things internally, not in public." Unlike Rao, Raghavan was not on the BHEL staff when he wrote his booklet.

BHEL's top brass is understandably nervous about Rao's case in the Supreme Court. Rao has argued that his booklet was pegged on Raghavan's, and his sources were standard reference libraries, published reports on BHEL and annual reports of the corporation.

"Basically, I'd like to think I am a socially conscious engineer," says Rao, whose father Dr K.L. Rao was once India's irrigation and power minister. "I am arguing for the corporation's benefit, not demeaning it. I'm saying we should import technology selectively, I don't say that self-reliance implies buying everything from Khadi Bhandar. How is it that even a *paanwalla* can criticise BHEL but not one of its more informed employees?"

—CHAITANYA KALBAG