

## Madras HC Order on Fake Journalists

### Why in news?

The Madras High Court has ordered the Tamil Nadu government to constitute a 'Press Council of Tamil Nadu' within 3 months to weed out fake journalists.

### What was the case on?

- The original case was initiated by a man (claiming to be a journalist) making allegations against a special team investigating temple idol theft.
- It was disposed of with a direction to the Idol Wing CID to proceed with the investigation in accordance with the law.
- But, given the suspicion over the petitioner's credentials of being a journalist, the Bench has proceeded to address the larger problem of fake journalists.

### What are the issues identified with fake journalists?

- Nexus with politicians, smugglers and even murderers.
- Run letter-pad publications, or even print some copies of obscure journals, and work for vested interests, but seek benefits of journalists.
- Fraudsters masquerading as journalists using posh cars with a "PRESS" sticker on the front windshield and "Human Rights" label in the rear.

### What are the Court's specifications for the Council?

#### Composition

- Headed by a retired judge of the Supreme Court or High Court.
- Members - Team of experienced and reputed journalists (both working and retired), retired civil servants and police officials in the rank of IAS and IPS

#### Powers and Functions

- Regulate the distribution of identity and accreditation cards and the recognition of media bodies.
- Power to identify fake journalists and lodge complaints against them to jurisdictional police.
- Sole authority to recognise press clubs and journalists' associations or unions in the state.
  - i. Shall not allow or recognise formation or continuation of clubs, unions/associations based on caste, community or state boundaries.
  - ii. Conduct and approve elections to these associations.
  - iii. Management should be vested with the elected team of office bearers only after such approval by the board.
- The State Government can allot any house or grant free bus passes to any applicant journalists only through the Council, which after due diligence can issue such benefits.
- Prohibit conduct of State conferences by journalists' associations without permission/approval of the Council.

- Get details on the source of income and other relevant details before giving permission to such meetings.
- The government/council shall not issue press ID cards or stickers to the print media / magazines / dailies unless there is proof of circulation of at least 10,000 copies of their daily, weekly, fortnightly, or monthly.
  - ID cards shall be increased or decreased proportionate to their circulation.
- Receive and dispose of complaints about the media/fake journalists
  - Members of the public can send their complaints to the welfare board, which shall inquire and initiate criminal action.

### **Why is the Court's order significant?**

- Creating a body and conferring it with powers and functions is generally done by law and after wider consultations.
- So, the HC's order is a sign that the judiciary has come close to formulating policy and legislation.

### **What role does the Press Council of India have?**

'Newspapers, books and printing presses' are in the Concurrent List.

- As of now, the PCI performs the watchdog role about public complaints.
- But it lacks any substantive enforcement powers.
- Accreditation and dealing with journalist bodies are now the functions of the respective state governments.
- A powerful body to identify and accredit journalists, decide their entitlements and welfare measures, and to act as a complaints authority will need a statutory framework.

**Source: The Hindu, Business Standard**

