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Police state

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CAPTAIN AMARINDER Singh's lament that the arrest of a reporter by the Punjab police showed up the mindset of the hardline anti-militancy years reflects poorly on the functioning of his own government. Whisking away an *Indian Express* reporter, because of a news item, befits the style of tin-pot dictatorship, not the allegedly mature democracy we are supposed to be. Following the general public outcry, the Punjab chief minister has ordered an inquiry. But this is simply not enough. The blatant manner in which the journalist was bundled away and his family refused permission to meet him reveals a pattern of impunity that seems to characterise the Punjab police. It also speaks volumes for the continuing inability of governments in the state to reassert control over its police forces.

Having given them an enormous amount of latitude during the anti-militancy years, the political class now seems to have become dependent on them. An example of this is the Director General of Punjab Police, S.S. Virk — a veteran of the terrorism days — who was handpicked by the chief minister against the advice of the Union Home

Ministry. In turn, Mr Virk's proximity to the controversial police officer, Sumedh Singh Saini, who heads the Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing what has come to be known as the 'Nayagaon minor rape case', is well-known. Mr Saini has not been a stranger to controversy in the past and he has been accused of a range of excesses, including 'disappearances', during the anti-militancy period.

The obvious point that comes to mind is that if the police could behave like this with a vocal and influential group like the media, what must be the fate of the common man? The Punjab government, and indeed the Union Home Ministry and the government in New Delhi, would do well to reflect on this. The freedom of speech guaranteed by our Constitution has been manifested by the freedom of the press in our country. While no one, including journalists, can be above the law, it is worth reflecting that in our country, institutionally at least, the press has been a guardian against official high-handedness and a safety valve for public discontent. Any government or individual that has sought to restrict this has done so only at their own peril.