

Media and Business – Line of Control

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Dear Amarji, Shri Sreenivas Reddyji, President of Press Club of India, and friends, In have in the last two years as Chairman of the Press Council, seen the Press Academy of Andhra Pradesh taking up issues which greatly concern the health of the press and the media and its commitment to the society and governance for public good. Today's subject is no doubt an integral component of such commitment to these goals.

To my mind, the profession of journalism is essentially a public trust. The media as an instrument of social engineering, acts as a watchdog over the three prime estates of a democracy and also as an instrument to disseminate information and reflect political, cultural, social and economic interest. It is, therefore, essential and those in the media should understand the power they possess and consciously adopt a policy to guide them to this responsibility.

It is also their duty to keep the public, the supreme authority of a democracy, informed about the acts of omission and commission of its elected representatives and the public servants, without any fear or favour and above all without any bias. At the same time, the media is essentially to keep the government informed of what the people of the country are thinking and doing and above all what they require and expect from the government.

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Walter Lippmar has rightly indicated that “without criticism and reliable and intelligible reporting, the government cannot govern”.

I understand that the round table today has been convened in the backdrop of the action of the government of Andhra Pradesh and other authorities, vis-à-vis, the non-media interests of a media house of standing. I also understand that the specific issue is under inquiry at different levels and enquiries are pending. Therefore, it will not be appropriate for me to comment on the said matter because not only complete facts of the matter are not available but enquiries at different levels are going on. But the general issue in drawing up a line demarcating the media and business interest of a common entity deserves sober and dispassionate consideration.

The First Press Commission had sounded warning in its observation that when the effect of allegiance to a particular business interest extends beyond editorial columns and affects the fairness, objectivity, accuracy, or comprehensiveness of news reporting, the community is justified in protesting. The freedom of expression, so vital to our democracy, flows from the constitutional guarantee that the people are entitled to receive news and views without interference or bias and to disseminate it regardless of the frontiers.

Constitutional right in its elemental form covers freedom of expression, which includes the right to communication. Such right takes in its sweep the right to information and media is the prime source of information. Here comes indivisibility of democracy and media in action.

When, however, collection of news and dissemination of the same become subservient to other interest of media personality and/or the

owner of a media house or his close relations, the impartiality implicit in fair reporting is lost and the media house runs the risk of losing its credibility on account of unfair reporting vitiated either by angularity involved in the reporting or overt and covert efforts in advancing the cause of such other business interests. In such case, the media not only tarnishes the image of fair reporting excepted of media but also portend a danger to the privilege enjoyed by a press.

Sean MacBride in his report for the UN 'Many Voices – one World' had said for the journalists, freedom and responsibility are indivisible. It goes without saying that the media plays an important role in promoting good governance and democracy and through democracy the interests of the citizens of the country. For this, it is essential that the media delineate itself from all other interests. Freedom of the press would be a mirage so long as it is beholden to other interests. The situation becomes all the more alarming when these interests are sought to be protected through double speech or confusing disinformation in the name of the freedom of the press.

The Press Council of India in 1996 had considered the issue of considerable influence over the minds of the readers flowing from financial reporting by the print media and had drawn guide lines inter alia to the effect that no newspaper owner or persons closely connected with the newspaper should use his relation with the newspapers to promote his other business interests.

The question of vested interest or potential bias of newspaper owner or his close relations in promoting other business interests in using the media as a platform for such promotion has become a relevant issue requiring indepth and well informed study so that media business does

not deviate from the goal of media reporting in guiding the people and the government for rapid and harmonious growth of the nation objectively and dispassionately. Such impartial and dispassionate functioning of media in all likelihood can not but suffer from the media reporting if the same is guided by the compulsion to safeguard the other business interests of the owner of media house.

Of late, it has been witnessed that there has been rapid increase in the corporatisation of media resulting in running the media business mainly for deriving greater profits even at the cost of fair and desired journalistic practice. If more and more revenue earning dictates a media business, it is bound to lose the lofty mission of the media in acting as a true watchdog of the nation on account of its urge for increasing more and more advertisements by pleasing the business houses. The practice of favourably reporting some facts with deliberate twist and by overtly or covertly advancing the causes of business interest of corporate house and reporting of induced news and projected views in the garb of news and articles designedly written in projecting the business interests of corporate houses and not bringing such facts having unfavourable impact on public even when they are known to media houses are on the rise and this malaise has become a global concern being widely addressed.

The apex court of this country in its decisions has indicated that there may not be actual bias and even the presence of potential bias need to be avoided for fair and impartial assessment of an issue. It is aptly said that justice should not only be done but should appear to have been done. Caesar's wife must be above all suspicions. Therefore, it is only desirable to ensure that a media house has not only an actual bias for reporting in the interest of owner's other business interest but there is also very little scope for potential bias.

To say that owner of media business should not have any other business interest or owner of a media business should not go in for other business is not only too idealistic but is also not constitutionally tenable. The need is therefore, to maintain the distinct identity of the two and to resort to media reporting fairly and dispassionately by not using the media as a platform for championing the cause of other business interest at the cost of fair journalism and accepted norms of journalistic code. There is a saying that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel. Refuse under journalistic freedom for unethical journalistic practice need to be identified, discarded and exposed for not only in the interest of nation but to protect the credibility of media reporting. It must be appreciated that journalistic freedom is neither a shield to protect improper and illegal activities of any one nor a sword to pierce the course of investigation or other lawful action initiated against unfair and illegal activities of a media house by taking a cover under journalistic freedom. To say the least, there is no and can not be any such freedom of a journalist.

Coming to the role of authorities, it needs to be highlighted that the misuse or abuse of the power vested in a government or statutory authority to silence critical reporting, is perhaps the worst kind of censorship. If the government in consideration of its party interest intends to curb the freedom of a media house whose owner belongs to other political party, and champions the case of such political party, the government must be held to be not only unfair but acting against the constitutional obligation of a government to act without fear and favour, affliction or ill-will. After all, the government happens to be the government of every one and not a government of a particular party or parties forming the coalition. The press is under an obligation to expose the actions and inactions, leading to bad governance or corruption among those entrusted with the duty to ensure country's progress and

preservation of its interests. Use of covert means to silence such criticism is not only to be decried but should also bring all the journalists together to rise in solidarity lest it be the turn tomorrow of those who shut their eyes to it today.

In past, the Press Council of India had taken suo motu cognizance of misuse of authority and voiced an opinion against interference with the free functioning of the press. I am confident that those with the conviction of truth in their reporting would stand steadfast and not shy away from inquiry, if any, bonafide initiated to ascertain the correctness.

In conclusion, I say that there is need for all the organs of a democracy to have a very clear perception of the 'Lakshman Rekha' that divides their personal and public interest and if this Lakshman Rekha is respected, it would ensure that they do justice to the responsibility entrusted to them.
