

Address

By

Shri Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi*

Mahamahim Rashtrapati Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, distinguished Chief Minister of Delhi Sheila Dikshit-ji, Chairman of the Press Council of India Justice G N Ray, distinguished delegates from abroad and my friends in the media fraternity and distinguished guests:

It is my pleasure today and my privilege also to be present here with the distinguished delegates and one of the great statesmen of our country, our Rashtrapati-ji. It is an occasion not only to celebrate the National Press Day, but also to pay our profound respect to the journalistic community. Possibly on behalf of the Government I can say to the world outside that Indian press freedom is a unique one, making the pace setter in the entire democratic movement of the world. One can write thousands of words on the rights of the press, but with all humility as Information Minister I only desire not only press freedom, but also real freedom of the journalists, the scribes who write, but editorial freedom of the editors free from the control of the management. That will translate real democracy in full bloom and we expect that it will come to India.

I am happy that the theme selected “Journalism, Ethics and Society in the Age of Globalization” is still important. I will not take much time, as we have so much to hear from Mahamahim Rashtrapati-ji. I can only submit that our government is conscious not to interfere with the self-regulatory mechanism adopted by the Press Council of India.

I may now disclose that the Chairman of the Press Council is unhappy with me because, after I assumed office, though he requested me not less than five times to visit his office, yet I did not do so. I felt that my visit to his office might be described as the Minister’s interference in the functioning of the Council! Therefore, I went to his house as a courtesy call, but I did not visit his office because that is apprehended as interference. Therefore, I hope the Chairman will now pardon me and appreciate why I did not visit his office.

***Hon’ble Minister of Information and Broadcasting and Parliamentary Affairs on November 16, 2006 at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi**

We are contemplating bringing the electronic media under some kind of regulation about which the Chairman of the Press Council made a reference. There are two opinions before the country now. One is expanding the scope of the Press Council of India to include the electronic media and the other is to have a separate self-regulatory body. This is a matter, which we are addressing, very deeply in our proposed Broadcasting Bill. I can assure you today on the National Press Day that the objective of our Government is that when the Bill comes, there would be not even a remote interference in the management of the editorial desk and the contents of the editorial comments in the print or electronic media whatsoever.

I must admit candidly as a political activist as well as Minister that many a time the media did help us to show where we have gone wrong. Many a time they were very harsh critics with their heart-breaking editorial comments, which disappointed us in the morning over a cup of tea. But by the time the sun rose in the morning, we found what they wrote was right and it is time for us to prepare ourselves with the right direction. That is the reason why I salute the Indian media always. They are never against anybody. They only focus on the facts. If a few discordant or misleading voices are there, the exception cannot be the rule. By and large, I say the India media, first and foremost they are patriotic. Secondly, they are more concerned about how to preserve democracy in its right perspective, as enshrined in the Constitution. Today, on the National Press Day, I once again salute the Indian newspapers.

There are many journalists in the recorded history of creative journalists, who have risked their lives while discharging their role of covering news during wartime, natural calamities or communal disturbances. If we do not remember their sacrifices today, the National Press Day, we are failing in our duty to pay respect to them. So, I salute them and pay my homage to them.

If one recollects the role of the press during the freedom struggle, it is impeccable. At the same time, the role played by some of our journalists during the English colonial rule is really unacceptable. But the way some Englishmen came forward to reveal truth along with Indian journalists is a matter of pride in the history of journalists. I feel that is the democratic aspect of the essence of journalism, namely, to express the truth. The

press has no religion, no boundary. They are the commodities of the whole world. Therefore, I salute them once again.

The role played by our statesmen like Balgangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and the words of praise they have showered on the journalists who played an active role during the freedom struggle are well known. The sage advice of Mahatma Gandhi on the freedom of the press is this. Do not limit his freedom; let him have it. He will regulate himself; do not interfere or impose your will on them. That is the essence of what Mahatma Gandhi said. So, again on the 100th year of satyagraha and the National Press Day, I salute all the journalists.

The press had a clear-cut role in the national struggle for freedom. It had put up a big fight in uniting the population and exposing the brutality unleashed by the British regime for the suppression of the freedom movement. Many editors rose in revolt against censorship and regulation to keep the nation informed on the progress of the movement. Once the goal of independence has been achieved, the press took the role, which it has played with remarkable success, of informing the people about the efforts of the government in national development.

The freedom of the press is a prerequisite for democracy. Without the media or the press, people have no way of judging the performance or credentials of the aspirants for power in democracy. Further, the freedom of the press is such a potent weapon on the ground to expose the misdeeds of some of the leaders in various fields.

Sometimes I find some media have attempted to develop giving ranks to the Ministers, who is scoring 10, who is scoring 20 and so on. Obviously, the visual activity of a Minister can become a scoring point of the media. Those who do not come out in the forefront, or work silently, they show a poor score. Please take care of them. Otherwise, I think you are creating a society within the Council of Ministers of have's and have-nots.

I must mention here the latest finding of the National Readership Survey 2006. The number of people reading daily newspapers has increased tremendously, as also viewer ship and listener ship on TV and other media. But I would say as a Minister that in spite of what the radio commentators or television have to say about us, I hope they will excuse me, I still feel the writer in the print media is most important for democracy. I know in Parliament many of the editorials of the past 20 years, 30 years or 40 years have

become more referential documents than what is exhibited in the electronic media. The so-called breath-taking news in television is a news good for someone who feels this information is correct and for someone else it is heart-breaking news, but he cannot rebut it while seeking truth. Again in the morning, we are all waiting for the newspaper to explain the details. Therefore, the role of the print media is more important in democracy than the electronic media.

Another new revolution is that the reach of the satellite television, which has exceeded that of the print media. About 230 million individuals are watching the TV, which is far more than 207 million in the previous year. Then most of the newspapers these days are directing their readers to access the Web page on Internet sites for gathering information. So, what is the regulation for monitoring the Internet? Even the regulators say that this uncertainty is a great menace for the digital page.

There are three different ways in which regulation can cause uncertainty. The first is the scope of the current definition. The second is the way they are applied. The third is the way they defeat the changing market structure. The problems of regulation arise also because of the difference in the consciousness between different countries. As there has been increasing number of market players who operate at the frontiers, the discrepancies between national regulations hamper the international activities. We have to consider whether we can overcome some of these problems.

On the National Press Day, when we talk of the freedom of the press, free from any interference, I can only humbly submit before the President that on the issue of the Iran-Iraq War, on the issue of weapons of mass destruction, the BBC commentators have been hauled up in the House of Commons and we also know what happened later on to the management. But in India no management of any newspaper, no management of any electronic media channel, can say they were penalized if they brutally criticized the government on the issue of the deal with the United States on nuclear energy or because they have brutally criticized the government or exposed them in some very serious issue, which has rocked Parliament. No management, no editor, no journalist can be hauled up for such action. If someone is hauled up, the hyper organ of Indian democracy, the Parliament, takes them to task. This is the picture of press freedom and its protection by the legislature in India. I hope we shall continue this practice.

Now the Press Council is on the offensive. They say, give us some more teeth. The Press Council recommends, so and so newspaper should not be given any DAVP ads. The files are still lying with me. I did not reply at all, because we are talking to them. Because my parents once told me, you can afford to annoy your parents at home, you can afford to annoy a political party in a democracy, but do not try to annoy the media, because they can finally take it up in their pen and no one will listen to you but only to this paper. So, when anything comes from the Press Council, I do not instantly act. I think before I act. I try to negotiate with the paper, try to persuade them to come to the line the Press Council determines. Thereafter I release their ads. No instant action happens, where I act very promptly and punish, because punishment is a method, which should not be used frequently in the newspapers.

Now these days the first computation of TRP rates show who can market more. In the morning, one channel markets something; some other channels fail. I miss the market in the morning. So, the morning fish is out. Now there is some meet during the lunchtime. He goes in another direction. In the afternoon, the third one comes. At the end, someone gets a letter from the Legislature or Parliament. It is a question of privilege. In the judiciary it is a contempt case. Contempt you can deal with in courts. But in Parliament and Legislature, if something goes wrong, it will result in a privilege issue. They can haul them and punish them. So, no one should take any criminal proceeding to harass a journalist or to put him on the dock. That is not the objective of our government.

With these words, I salute the press once again. You enjoy press freedom in India. I hope the foreign delegates will enquire from our friends as to how the press freedom is encouraged and cherished in India. That is the basic strength for our Indian democracy to continue with great strength and power for the last so many years after freedom.

