CHAIRMAN'S NATIONAL PRESS DAY SPEECH

"Reporting to Interpretation: A Journey"

His Excellency the Vice President of India Shri Venkaiah Naidu Ji; Shri Prakash Javadekar Ji, Union Minister for Environment, Forest, Climate Change, Heavy Industry and Information & Broadcasting; Chairperson and Members from the Press and Media Councils of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Delegates, Jury Members, awardees, past and present members of the Press Council of India, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I take this opportunity to convey to the media fraternity all over the world our greetings on the National Press Day.

The theme of the National Press Day 2019 is 'Reporting to Interpretation – A Journey'.

Journalists in their curriculum and during training are taught to keep their personal feelings out of their reporting, they are told to write what they know, not what they think, to play it straight and give all sides a chance to be heard. Reporting of news is often described as coldly impersonal job. It is an art of storytelling through a process that involves the gathering of facts, selecting the vital points in relevance of the story, verifying the facts and background and merging the facts to present the story in an objective truthful manner without lacing it with personal opinion or subjective comments. Five 'Ws', 'Who, What, When, Where, and Why' are the golden words which guide them. A good reporter is one who always adheres to fair and impartial reporting of the story leaving the rest to its readers to decide.

Gandhi an ardent believer in the power of the word wrote in '*Young India*' in the year 1925,

> **"I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life. My mission is to teach by example and precept under severe restraint the use of the matchless weapon of satyagraha ... therefore, I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion."**

The press has covered a long journey since then from reporting facts to analysing and interpreting it but Gandhi's philosophy has not lost its relevance even in today's era when fake news, paid news, morphed news, embedded news and baked news have overshadowed the real news. We read newspapers, listen to radios, watch news channels or navigate through our social media pages to get information about things happening around us. Any unusual event falls under the purview of news. Today, people are being constantly bombarded with information through various news platforms including social media that the line between the real and fake news, truth and false news has blurred. 'Deep-fake' has become the new reality. In this fast-paced world, where people have more virtual friends than in flesh and blood, readers or consumers of news do not have the time to verify the sources of news. When the edifice of public opinion is built on the foundation of fake and half-baked news, the reality becomes trickier and even dangerous at times, especially when public resort to violence in response to fake news or misinformation. This has axed down the media credibility and human dependability

on the news media. Gone are the days when people looked to the media to confirm a gossip, many a times they create gossips themselves.

In the initial days of development of the press in India, it was considered to be the vehicle of social and religious reforms and political independence. With the introduction of the Constitution, people were given a pluralist liberal democratic polity along with which came into focus the free press. Over the period, the press as a mass communicator, as a representative of the people, as a voice of voiceless and as their regular and constant spokesperson has achieved the position of almost a natural ally of the society for its existence, projection and well being. Since then, the press enjoys an enormous power of supplying information to people that condition their mind. This has elevated the media to a most privileged and powerful position in society.

Reporters have a lot of facts in their head when they turn to report, it is their legitimate right to interpret facts. Readers, in turn, look for perspective, purposive interpretation and serious thinking. Interpretative reporting goes behind the news, brings out the hidden significance of an event and separates the truth from falsehood. It is a combination of facts with interpretation. A reporter delves into reason and meaning of development of a story and by using the knowledge and experience, he presents an event with explanation of the consequences it could lead to. But in the garb of interpretative reporting, journalists cannot change the very essence of the news or distort or concoct facts and enter into surmises and

conjectures. Before doing that they must look to all sides and shades, and do not rush with story. It is difficult to imagine that reporter can add meaningful perspective within hours of an event. Bob Woodward, a highly renowned investigative reporter of 'the Washington Post' observes that most of the high flying interpretative reporting is generally impulsive, often silly and mostly wrong. It breeds public cynicism.

Ms Janet Cooke won the most prestigious 'Pulitzer Prize' in journalism for a story published in the '*The Washington Post*' on drugs abuse involving an eight-year-old boy '*jimmy*' injected with heroin supplied by his mother's boyfriend. A story found later on to be fictitious conceived in fraud and delivered in deceit resulting in withdrawal of the prize.

Nearer home, the glaring cases of obnoxious interpretation by the media which come in mind are the Prime Minister of India comparing the Muslims who suffered during the riots as '*kutte ka Pilla'* , the *'Chehra'* becoming *'Mukhauta' for one* of the most charismatic leaders of India and 'Dalit' equivalent to *'street dog'*. All these have been attributed to members of one political party and honestly speaking I do not know whether these are just a coincidence done inadvertently or with malice or a calculated design.

These forms of misinterpretation of facts, where 'spoken words' are given connotation which the speaker never dreamt of leads to loss of media credibility and are toxic for the society and ultimately lethal to the Media Industry. One interesting fact which I notice is if one newspaper misinterprets facts related to an incident, it is

often followed by others. Thriving on sensational news or headlines could be a short term survival strategy for the press but comes at a very high price in the long term. Given the distinct stature that media enjoys in our society fading media credibility is a matter of concern, nationwide and globally.

To address this issue of waning media credibility and accountability, the Press Council of India has this year made the deliberate choice to navigate the journey of Indian Press from its days of reporting of facts to its complex interpretation. Print journalism is already uncertain about its future and in the garb of interpretation, if journalists deviate from the path of ethical journalism, no force on earth can keep newspapers from sinking in the rising sea of 24/7 television and social media.

I earnestly hope that today's discussion on the subject "Reporting to Interpretation- A Journey' by media may open a course for further deliberations and actions leading to the rise in media credibility. I am a rank optimist and believe that talking the flaws is also a path for remedying it. Indian media which is the backbone of our nation may strive better every day to stand upright with dignity and integrity.

I take this opportunity to congratulate all the awardees on whose shoulders lie the future and relevance of media and wish that they continue keeping the spirit of "new India" and "Golden shot" alive.

Thank you.