Future of Journalism

***G.N. Ray**

I am happy to join this august gathering on the occasion of the release of Golden Jubilee Souvenir of 'Jan Morcha' and address the conference on the subject which is most relevant today in its true spirit and form i.e., 'Future of Journalism'. Journalism today is passing through a phase which can lead it to great heights or mar the spirit of the mission. I would not like to call it profession.

Jan Morcha set up in 1958, to the envy of many, occupies a unique and unparalleled position as the only newspaper successfully run by its employees for the last fifty years. That Jan Morcha is constantly marching ahead on its journey overcoming all the obstacles on the path of positive journalism of truth, fearless reporting and secular principles stands testimony to the power of the people.

India is a vast country with different shades of language, religion & culture etc. and a shining example of unity in diversity.

*Address by Mr. Justice G.N. Ray, Chairman, Press Council of India at the conference on 'Future of Journalism on 18 January, 2008 at 'Jan Morcha', Faizabad.

So is reflected in the press and media. It is a truism that media is the mirror of society and reflects the contemporary needs, mores and aspirations. But equally it is also a trend-setter and has its own impact on all the above. Press in India is fast growing ahead of its counterparts in several western and developed countries. Here comes the responsibility on the shoulders of journalists to ensure that while marching on the road to growth it preserves its values and heritage that have given our country a unique place in the world.

The power of the media has been recognized since time immemorial. Thomas Carlyle described the Press as the 'Fourth Estate' ranking it with the State, the church and the Parliament. Today it is acknowledged as the fourth pillar of democratic society alongwith the executive, legislature and the judiciary. But the undisputed fact is that press today is more powerful than the other three organs of the state with its enormous power to make or destroy any individual or institution.

Media is a powerful weapon to change the society but journalism today is in danger. Market forces would like to change the role of the journalist from that of guide and soul of the society to that of one serving the interests of the market.

In the wake of technology revolution it is becoming difficult to cope up with the speed but the most spectacular achievements are there in the field of information technology.

With the advent of twenty four hour satellite news channels, internet and blogs etc. the task before today's media person is more demanding. Apart from the task of resisting media imperialism and thereby the colonialism in ideas and ideologies, thoughts and culture, particularly of developing world, journalists today are expected to guard against the attempt of the media monopolists, to shift the focus on marketism. Journalists who have the power to mould public opinion and motivate the society should be pioneers of change and development.

Statistical Growth:

The number of newspapers and their circulation has declined the world over except in India and China. The world is becoming growing digital but technology has helped newspapers as much as the electronic media. Journalists are grasping the opportunities offered by online publishing to write more freely.

According to World Association of Newspapers (WAN) press release, an online poll covering six western countries including Australia has found that "online news and information will supplant television network news as the leading news source over the next five years, but newspapers will remain a vital source on their own, and can become dominant if they successfully integrate online delivery as a part of what they offer the public.

As per WAN's 'World Press Trends' released in June 2007 at the 60th World Newspaper Congress, the total circulation(515+million) of paid for dailies the world over in the year 2006 rose by 2.30 per cent over the previous year. Further 70 of the world's 100 best selling dailies are published in Asia and 60 of then in China, Japan and India. The world's two top countries in

daily newspaper circulation are China (98.70 million) followed by India (88.90 million).

In the world of advertising also in developing Asia Chinese dailies top with 16 per cent and 58 per cent increases in ad revenues in 2006 and over five years followed by India with 23.18 per cent and 85 per cent.

In the national scenario, the growth of Indian press is quite evident. According to National Readership survey 2006 there are an estimated 204 readers of daily newspapers and a jump from 216 million to 222 millions readers of all kind of publications in India.

Encouraging is the rise in ‘rural’ readers who constitute 50 per cent of all daily newspaper readers in striking contrast to the composition of newspaper readership in India twenty years ago.

Another feature highlighted by NRS is that all the top ten most read dailies in India were Indian language newspapers with their estimated readership ranging from 8.41 million to 21.17 million.

The 2007 annual report by Price Waterhous coopers (PWC) on the Indian Entertainment and Media Industry (E &M) titled 'A Growth Story Unfolds' projects that the print media will grow at a 13 per cent compound annual growth each from 85 billion to 232 billion in 2011 at a compound growth rate of 18 per cent.

The figures reflect the achievements of the Indian press especially during the last two decades.

As the new media shapes the newspapers and journalism in India, the journalists need to introspect and choose how they want to contribute to national and human development. It is true that with technological advance and break-neck competition among newspapers, the operation of a modern newspaper with different functions each one requiring skillful planning and execution by knowledgeable and experienced people is not an easy job. The importance of their contribution for the success of the paper must be duly recognized. Care has also to be taken to see that the proprietor's interest in the economic success of his venture does not unduly suffer due to the way the paper is conducted editorially.

However, commercial interests cannot be allowed to override the editorial considerations. The editorial freedom must come first. As the Second Press Commission has observed, the journalistic freedom is the heart of the freedom of the press and the exercise of this freedom depends largely on the editor. "The freedom and independence of the editor is the crux of the matter" said the Commission.

I would like to emphasize that steps are necessary for a secure future of the media itself. Primarily these may be encouraging accountability of the press through social audit; plurality of functional structure of a newspaper; establishment of internal Ombudsman to lend an ear to the readers; encouraging better flow of information and news between the urban and rural areas; encouraging small and medium newspapers in this multi-regional, multi-lingual country like ours and most of all the establishment of a media commission to examine the matter in a new perspective.

I would like to remind you that having the enormous power of pen in your hands, you can illuminate the future of not only your own country but that of the whole of the world.

Remember if you want bright future, you have to sow the healthy seeds today.

Future is not something you await! It is something you must create.

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Press Council of India

A Brief Biography of Contribution to Defence/Promotion of Freedom of the Press

The Constitution of India gives its people a government which is of the people, for the people and by the people. It ensures for its citizens as a fundamental right, inter alia, the total freedom of speech and expression subject only to reasonable restrictions specified in Article 19(2) of the Constitution.

Post-independence, a Press Commission was set up to take stock of the functioning of the press – its standards, its freedom and its further growth.

The Press Council in India was born in 1966 out of the Recommendations of this First Press Commission that examined in-depth the role and responsibilities of the press in the new democratic set up. The Parliament of India debated for long on the mode and modalities of the constitution of the regulatory body of the print media and by enactment of 1965, formally brought the Press Council of India into existence. The founding fathers had clearly legislated that the body, despite being a creation of the statute will function totally free of government interference and thereby even though a large part of the funds of the Council is sanctioned by

the Parliament through the nodal Ministry of Information & Broadcasting of the Indian Government, there has been no effort by the state to interfere in its functioning. In the past eventful 40 years with a break of three years between 1975 to 1978, the Council has worked with as much force for the freedom of the press as its standards. The Press Council of India now functions under the Press Council Act of 1978.

The Council has by convention being headed by a sitting or retired Judge of the Supreme Court of India and who is selected by an independent Committee of three members consisting of the Vice-President of India, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha and one member nominated by the twenty eight members of the Council from among themselves. He is ably supported by 20 members of different categories nominated by the press organizations and eight members nominated by the Parliament and the country's apex literary and legal bodies to represent the readers' interest.

The unique feature of our Press Council, unlike many others, is that it enjoys the statutory status with compulsive jurisdiction on all newspapers while retaining its character as essentially an internal self-regulatory mechanism of the Press. This is abundantly clear from its objects, its composition and its actual functioning. It has been entrusted with the task, among others, of promoting the freedom of the press and independence of

the newspapers and the news agencies, of raising the standards of journalism, of keeping under review any development which may interfere with the free flow and dissemination of information, of monitoring developments such as concentration of ownership of newspapers and news agencies which may affect the independence of the press and at the same time, of building up a code of ethics in accordance with high standards of journalism and of fostering a sense of responsibility and public service among all these engaged in the profession of journalism. Its composition makes it completely independent of any outside authority including the government.

The Press Council of India functions like a Court of Honour, guiding the print media along the path of ethical conduct through its adjudications and other pronouncements building up simultaneously a code of conduct for the press, the emphasis being on 'building up' to allow it the flexibility against laying down of a rigid code.

The Press Council of India is required under the statute not only to promote the standards of the press but also to protect it from any onslaught or threats to its freedom. Such threats may emanate from the authorities of the governments, the public or even from within the press itself. The statute empowers the Council to make observations against the conduct of any

authority including the government. These have at times fallen from the Council in discharge of its adjudicatory functions vis-a-vis complaints made against public or governmental authorities by press for curtailing the freedom or in its advisory capacity in giving out opinion or action on matters impacting press freedom. In the course of the above, it has laid down important principles and guidelines for the authorities in their dealings with the press.

The Press Council as advisory body to the government on matters affecting press freedom has rendered valuable advise on several legislations proposed or in force. These cover the areas of libel, invasion of Privacy, Right to Information, Parliamentary Privileges, Prevention of Terrorist Activities, Official Secrets Act, and many more. Lately, the Press Council had advised the Parliament on 'Truth' being accepted as a defence in contempt of court proceedings, and the enactment incorporating these provisions in Contempt of Court Act has recently been passed.

The Council believes that the press and the authorities are not adversaries in the task of nation building but partners in trying to promote a better society and give a better administration to the citizenry which is the ultimate sovereign in a democracy. To this end, it has organized workshops and created platforms to sensitize the authorities on their relationships with

the members of the press in the interest of free and unrestricted flow of information.

The Council is quick to take cognizance of and launch immediate inquiry into incidents which could pose threats to the free functioning of the press, prominent among them being its assessment of the situations in Punjab, J&K and Ayodhaya at the hands of separatist forces or in times communal tensions.

Of vital importance have been Council's attempts to raise awareness against the inroads into editorial freedom by managements of the paper.

Thus, while the Press Council of India has, as a Court of Honour guided the press into the path of ethical rectitude, it has successfully stood up against any attempts that tended to make inroads into its free and independent functioning.

Encl: 1. Press Council Act, 1978
2. Norms of Journalistic Conduct
3. List of Publications
4. Note on Council's functioning 1966-2007