

Ethical Journalism- Role of Press Council

*Hon'ble Chairman Justice C.K. Prasad

It is a matter of great honour and pride for me to welcome you all to this seminar which has been organised to commemorate the Golden Jubilee year of the Press Council of India, an organisation which since 1966 has been constantly striving to protect and preserve the freedom of speech and expression and peoples' Right to Know in India.

I am thankful to His Excellency the Governor of Kerala, and the former Chief Justice of India Mr. Justice PalanisamySathasivam, for graciously accepting our invitation to join us on this momentous occasion of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Press Council. I am sure, his presence today will enthuse more faith in the role of the Press Council in upholding the freedom of Press in India and will also serve as an inspiration to journalists across the country.

Last year, on November 16th we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Press Council of India and choose the topic which focussed on the challenges reporters facesometimes even at the stake of their own life to report from conflict areas. A need was felt to discuss this topic to deliberate options that could atleast ensure the minimum safety and security of those valourous journalists who dare to do their job effortlessly and determinedly thereby enabling us the readers or the viewers to get the minute to minute updates about incidents in conflict areas. However, such reportage needs responsibility, precision and objectivity that would deter augmentation of any kind of violence, and instead should help the stakeholders in resolving the issue.

Over the years the dedication, credibility and hardwork of the journalists have gained them the title of being the 'crusaders of truth'. People tend to believe published reports by the press as the ultimate truth and sometimes such reports can be presented in the Court of Law as facts. Hence the job of a journalist is not only a challenging one but also comes with a huge responsibility. The important objective of journalism is to serve the people with news, views, comments and information in a fair, accurate, unbiased and decent manner.

Today, Media has become more powerful than ever. However, with the immense power and the privileges that it enjoys, the media is mandated to follow a certain code of ethics in collecting and disseminating the information and ensure authenticity of news while keeping in mind its cascading effect on the society.

Freedom of press is a precondition to democracy and ethics in press is a primary requirement, without which the press loses its heart and soul. Ethics is the analysis, evaluation and promotion of what constitutes correct conduct and virtuous character in light of the best available principles. Journalists as members of news organisations have rights, duties and norms because as human beings, journalists fall under general ethical principles such as to tell the truth and minimize harm. As a custodian of public interest journalists shoulder the onerous responsibility to ensure that he does not contaminate the news at source by adopting biased and prejudiced view.

The Press Council of India, which is a quasi-judicial autonomous body, was set up by an Act of Parliament in the year 1966 with the task to promote the freedom of the press and independence of newspapers, news agencies and journalists by raising the standards of journalism. Section 13(1) of the Press Council Act, 1978 provides that in furtherance of these objects of the Council, the Council may 'build up a code of conduct' for newspapers, news agencies and journalists for maintaining high standards in journalism and foster sense of responsibility and public service among those engaged in the profession of journalism in India. The expression 'build up' indicates that the code may evolve with time as per the adjudications taken up by the Council. A compendium of broad principles so evolved by the Press Council through its adjudications/guidelines, was first published in the year 1983-84, with consequent acceleration of the process of 'Building up' of the code.

Media is the eyes and ears of the Society. To be useful these organs need to be healthy, sharp and sensitive. You must possess an eagle's eye not only to sense but to see from a distance. These traits make journalists relevant but not reliable. Journalists can be reliable only when they are independent and have the capacity to withstand outside pressure and influence. The role of the Press Council of India only comes here to insulate the journalists from outside pressure and preserve their independence.

Since its inception the Press Council has received number of complaints each year under the category of complaints by the Press and complaints against the Press. The Council has set up two committees chaired by the Chairman and consisting of members of the Council that represent the Press to adjudicate the complaints once in every month. In several cases the Council gives its recommendation to the newspapers not to publish anything that goes against the code of ethics such as defamatory news items, misrepresentation of facts, revealing the names of the victims or sensationalising news with sensational headlines that mislead or misinform the readers and to avoid use of obscene language in a news story or article and publication of photographs of women in demeaning manner. One of the most eminent fact that the Press Council believes is that accuracy and fairness should be maintained while reporting and all sides of the core issue should be reported without any distortion. It is also mandated by the Council that pre-publication verification is necessary where a publication and the comments based thereon bears the potential of creating complications such as incite communal passion.

As a Chairman of the Council, I can preserve the freedom of only those journalists who want to be independent. I am told that a large number of a media persons, journalists, Editors, owner are not truthful and slant their reports expecting favour from the government and the authorities. Though I do not want to believe this, but when senior journalists talk about this, it is difficult to ignore it. It is difficult for us to preserve the freedom of such journalists. Majority of the Journalists do not fall in this category. Many of them have joined the profession of journalism not for money or other benefits but to be an agent of change and uphold the truth. Naturally, such journalists come in conflict with wrong-doers, be it the government or the authorities. They try to suffocate the independence and freedom of media under the garb of friendly relationship with the State functionary and media. This does not impress me at all and I consider it to be harmful for democracy. In fact I am in favour of conflict between media and the authorities, this serves the cause of democracy. Media represents the truth, whereas the political parties many a times are involved in corruption and nepotism. In struggle between right and wrong, truth must prevail. In this fight the Press Council of India is with you. Remember that this autonomous institution is constituted with the purpose to protect and preserve the freedom of Press. You can always approach us whenever your right is violated or freedom is threatened or curtailed. I assure that you will not be

disheartened by our action. The Press Council can legitimately be proud of its Contribution in preserving the freedom of the Press.

From time to time the Press Council has succeeded in handling matters that have threatened to deteriorate the standard of good and responsible journalism in any part of India. In one of the matters, the Press Council came across news reports which stated that the Minister of State, External Affairs, have compared killing of Dalits with stoning of dogs. Council accepted the plea of the Minister that his version was distorted by the newspapers and observed that the newspapers should bear in mind that their duty is to collect the news and place it in perspective but not create the news.

In another case a comment made by the Hon'ble Home Minister was misrepresented by a popular weekly which actually led to the disruption of the Parliamentary proceedings. The inquiry committee in this matter held that the concerned newspaper had failed in verifying the source of the statement, which exhibits utter lack of diligence in its part and therefore had warned the newspaper to be careful in its future reportings.

Dear Friends, I must say that one of the biggest challenge that media is facing today is the competition to survive and the survival strategy has caused huge damage to the integrity of newspapers and news channels. Commercialisation of the media has led newspapers as well as the electronic media to come up with innumerable advertisements and when someone gives importance to such inane commercialisation, then the newspaper or even television news loses its importance. Also paid news syndrome is another ill effect of this competition which has become an often practiced phenomenon these days. Any compromise with ethics is a direct threat to freedom of the Press. Sometimes information are suppressed or misrepresented which is not only unhealthy but denounces journalistic values and directly violates peoples' right to be informed.

With the advancement of technology in the field of communication it has become very easy to publish or report anything from anywhere which sometimes is good but also has a negative aspect attached to it. Most such reports and stories are published or aired without any prior verification which can have a damaging effect. Hence the PCI had written to the Ministry seeking legislative measures for expanding the scope and powers of the Council.

As a Chairman of this prestigious institute I have got the opportunity to know and interact with media persons in close quarter and I believe that media people are the most courageous persons who without any fear not only speak the truth but risk their lives in covering current issues of national importance and they deserve respect and consideration from society and the Government for their commitment to an ethical press and upholding democratic values.

My colleague in the Press Council of India are striving every day in holding up and preserving the freedom of the Press and making the free flow of information easier across the borders and help journalists to work across borders with more freedom and less restriction. For this the Council is working in collaboration with the Press Councils of South Asian nations to make freedom of Press an international phenomenon. The Press Council of India is committed to create a secure and safe atmosphere for journalists to perform independently without any fear or undue pressure and I am here to assure that we in the Press Council are not to regulate your freedom but to preserve your independence which shall serve you to seek truth and report with utmost accuracy.

With these words, I wish to thank you all for your presence, your support and your good wishes.

Thank you