

## **Adjudications Rendered by the Council on 16.02.2021**

### **Section 13 – Complaints by the Press**

**Cases heard by Inquiry Committee-II in its meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2020 at New Delhi.**

<b><u>S.No.</u></b>	<b><u>File No.</u></b>	<b><u>Subject</u></b>
1-2.	13/82/19-20 & 13/86/19-20 (tagged matters)	Complaint of President Press Association, President Press Club of India General Secretary INPC and President, Foreign Correspondent Club, New Delhi against Ministry Finance Govt. Of India New Delhi and Complaint of Shri Ashok Malik President NUJ (India), Shri Monohar Singh, President, National Journalist Association, Shri Rajeev Ranjan Naj President, India Federation of Working Journalist Delhi Chapter against Ministry of Finance

## **PRESS COUNCIL OF INDIA**

S.No. 1-2

File nos. 13/82/ND/19-20/PCI &  
13/86/ND/19-20/PCI

<b><u>Complainant</u></b>	<b><u>Respondent</u></b>
Shri Shishir Soni, Vice President, Press Association.	The Finance Secretary, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, North Block, New Delhi
Shri Anant Bagaitkar, President, Press Club of India,	
Smt. Vinita Pandey, General Secretary, IWPC.	
Shri Venkat Narayan, President, Foreign Correspondent Club	
Shri Ashok Malik, President, National Union of Journalists (India).	
Shri Manohar Singh, President, Delhi Journalists' Association	
Shri Rajiv Ranjan Nag, President, Indian Federation of Working Journalists.	

### **Adjudication dated 16.02.2021**

Shri Shishir Soni, Vice President, Press Association; Shri Anant Bagaitkar, President, Press Club of India; Smt. Vinita Pandey, General Secretary, Indian Women Press Corps, (IWPC) and Shri S. Venkat Narayan, President Foreign Correspondent Club vide communication dated 11.7.2019 brought to the notice of the Council that the Ministry of Finance has banned entry of even GOI accredited media persons to enter into the Ministry without prior appointment and approval. All the leading media organisations have opposed this undemocratic act. Some journalists also met the Union Finance Minister and tried to convince the Minister about the professional hazard journalists will face because of this unilateral and undemocratic move of the Government but in vain. They have further submitted that if such practice continues, all the Government offices will be out of bounds for whole media. They have requested the Council to intervene in the matter and direct the Ministry to withdraw the unwarranted restrictions on media.

The Notice for Statement in Reply has been issued to the Finance Secretary, Ministry of Finance, Govt. of India, New Delhi on 15.7.2019.

In the meanwhile, the Council had also received a representation dated 17.7.2019 jointly forwarded by Shri Ashok Malik, President, National Union of Journalists (India); Shri Manohar Singh, President, Delhi Journalists' Association; Shri Rajiv Ranjan Nag, President, Indian Federation of Working Journalists whereby they have brought to the notice of the Council that some departments and ministries, including the Finance Ministry denying access to its offices in the National Capital, even to those journalists that are accredited to the Press Information Bureau (PIB), without prior appointment. According to them, journalists need access to information and public servants to perform their challenging job of news gathering and informing public at large. In their opinion, such bar on media freedom can result in a further fall in India's global press freedom rankings, especially as the contagion can easily spread to other ministries as well. They requested the Finance Minister to reconsider her decision and withdraw this bar forthwith. They have requested the Council to intervene in this matter so that the media persons get unrestricted entry in all government offices across the country.

Notice for Statement in Reply was issued to the Finance Secretary, Ministry of Finance, Govt. of India on 19.7.2019.

### **Reply from the Ministry of Finance**

In response to Notice for Reply in Statement, Ms. Annie George Mathew, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Finance (MoF) vide reply dated 17.1.2020 submitted that the Ministry of Finance has put in place new procedure for streamlining and facilitating the media persons inside the MoF and it has no intention to curtail the freedom of Press. She has further submitted that the procedure for entry into North Block has been streamlined to provide hassle-free conducive and convenient environment for reporting on issues related to MoF. She has submitted that the MoF is facilitating media to adopt a better procedure in news gathering and reporting by giving a closer access to senior officials on individual basis. There is no ban in place on the entry of media persons in the MoF, North Block. PIB accredited media persons will not require any separate entry pass after the appointment is fixed. She has further submitted that there is regular flow of communication with the media on all important matters through press releases issued by DG/ADG (Media & Communication). Further, she has provided list of Press releases held during the period from July to December, 2019. Further, based on the requests of the journalists to the Finance Minister, adequate arrangements have been made for media persons.

### **Counter Comments:**

The Press Association, Indian Women's Press Corps, Press Club of India, Foreign Correspondents Club and National Union of Journalists vide their joint Counter Comments dated 27.1.2020 submitted that the new procedure supports better and focused news gathering is completely wrong. Media persons, who have got the accreditation after a thorough security clearance, are denied entry in the MoF, part of North Block even though, at the time of being granted accreditation, they have been assured of free access to all ministries. Since May 2019, the journalists have been denied entry to the MoF. They have further submitted that the MoF has not even bothered to respond to their memorandum. This shows the utter disregard by one of the most vital region of the government. They have submitted that all other Ministries housed in the same building as MoF allow access to PIB accredited reporters and only Finance Ministry behaves differently. While referring the claims that MoF stays regularly in touch with journalists through press release they pointed out that MoF figures themselves show a dip in releases issued from July 2019 till December 2019 indicating increasing communication gap. Moreover, the government considers only its press releases being published as favourable

and accurate stories and any criticism is taken adversely. They have further submitted that the story flow has been greatly affected because the number of appointments have dried up with the ban. The rebuttal does not take into account the struggles of journalists who cover North Block, because they have not been asked for their feedback before putting this system in place. The Minister had a few meetings with some editors and senior reporters on the issue of ban, but beyond that, the majority of Finance Reporters have not got an audience or been allowed to put their views on the issue. They have submitted that if not stopped now, the practice adopted by MoF will set a precedent and other ministries too may start blocking journalists. Such a practice can never be good for a healthy democracy. They have further submitted that all the parameters of economy are showing signs of decline and apparently the government does not want the true picture to come out and which is why the curb on media persons entry in the Finance Ministry has been imposed.

### **Further reply from the Ministry of Finance**

Ms. George Mathew, Additional Secretary, MoF vide further reply dated 13.3.2020 submitted that reply by the media organizations is completely false and wrong. The new process has led to streamlining news gathering for media persons. There are no obstacles in the way of free reporting of MoF. This is proved by the fact that around 339 “source based” news items have appeared between September 2019 and December 2019. She has further submitted that PIB accredited journalists enjoy their privilege on the basis of prior appointment. Therefore, invoking a privilege as a matter of right is perverse interpretation of the logic of privilege. No journalist is denied entry inside MoF. They gain entry on the basis of (a) prior appointment (b) invitations of discussions by officials of MoF (c) briefing/press conference inside MoF. She has submitted that the MoF neither can or takes responsibilities of the conduct of other Ministries of the Government of India. The scope of work and operation differs from Ministry to Ministry. Further, the claim of the media persons that there are less stories after July 2019 is completely wrong. The fact is that there are more stories in July 2019 due to presentation of Economic Survey 2018-2019 and General Budget 2019-2020. She has further submitted that the number of source based stories fell to 14 in November 2019 was reflection of poor occurrence of news worthy events rather than due to news process. The claim of the complainants that MoF takes criticism adversely is wrong as the new system only streamlines appointment and not the content of interaction between media persons and officials.

### **Report of the Inquiry Committee**

The Inquiry Committee has gone through the submission made on behalf of the parties but before it makes any specific directions deems it expedient that the Ministry of Finance itself visit the entire issue in true perspective. Accordingly, the Inquiry Committee recommends that the merit of the case be examined by the Ministry of Finance afresh in accordance with law.

### **Held**

The Press Council on consideration of the report of the Inquiry Committee accepts its reasoning and adopts the report and, accordingly, disposes of the matter.