



Full text of President of India's Ramnath Goenka memorial lecture

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It is indeed a privilege as well as a pleasure for me to be invited to deliver the Ramnath Goenka Memorial Lecture.

When I think of The Indian Express, I think of Shri Ramnath Goenka.

Ramnath ji embodied the finest virtues of journalism: fierce independence, fearlessness and a determination to always stand up to the powerful and fight against the abuse or misuse of power. In fact, there was nothing he enjoyed more than a fight to protect the right of The Indian Express to publish what he thought was proper and just.

He was a fighter. In the face of attempts to control the press, exemplified his willingness to stake all for his principles and to set the highest standards for press freedom in India. The blank editorial published by The Indian Express during Emergency, under the leadership of Ramnath ji, was perhaps one of the strongest protests ever published against censorship in India.

It spoke more loudly than any words could have.

As Ramnath ji wrote in an editorial in August 1942 when he announced suspension of the paper rather than give in to censorship by the British authorities. He said and I quote: "The hard fact of the situation is that if we went on publishing, The Indian Express maybe called a paper, but cannot be a newspaper." (unquote)

It is also worth remembering today that Ramnath ji was a true patriot. When he founded The Indian Express in 1936 it was in response to a need articulated by Mahatma Gandhi for a national newspaper. He fought for the freedom of the country and for freedom of the press. He took on the Establishment – in colonial times and after Independence – to make democracy more secure and zealously guard the right to free speech as is enshrined in our Constitution. Better than most, he realized that democracy without a free press was like a blank piece of paper.

The ideals he personified need to be reiterated time and again, cast in stone and followed by all journalists who love democracy and freedom.

I am happy to say that The Indian Express has maintained the standards under the leadership of Ramnathji's son, Shri Viveck Goenka. It has not wavered in its commitment to fairness and accuracy, to independence and a pursuit of the truth.

These are not old-fashioned values.

In fact, the values espoused by Ramnath ji were relevant then, are relevant now and will remain relevant in times to come.

In a way, everyone with a phone can be a publisher and a broadcaster, a schoolteacher, a mother, a student and a political activist.

Technology has led to a phenomenal growth in the means of communication, bombarding the public with unprecedented volumes of data, information and, not least, opinion. This has had many positive outcomes: foremost, it has broken the shackles of silence imposed on the powerless. The sense of liberation that the Internet and social media especially, allows, has ensured that everyone has a voice and that even small voices in the remotest areas can be heard.

The average citizen has been truly empowered in her ability to speak out and to find out. All of this growth has resulted in a plurality and diversity in the access to information. There is a whole new information world out there to be tapped by our people across the length and breadth of the country.

However, the downside is that the sheer scale and volume of data and information means that much of what is available today remains unfiltered and unmediated. In many cases, even unchecked.

Take the case of recent developments in the United States of America and France, where personal communications of political leaders during an election were leaked and made available freely to anyone roaming the Internet.

Such information, in order to make sense needs to be carefully vetted – checked and rechecked -- contextualized and made sense of for it to have value or equally importantly, not be misused.

When so many people speak in so many voices across mediums, many voices are drowned out in the cacophony that is created: and in that noise it is difficult to hear or make sense of what is being said.

This is where good journalism plays a vital and irreplaceable role: it intervenes. It sifts through all the data, separates facts from what is now described as "fake news," ensures accuracy and provides context, analysis and opinion so that the public can be better informed and form informed opinions.

Aggregation and algorithms, the multiplicity of choices, have meant that while our access to the news is unfettered and vast, it has become increasingly, personalized. People now have the choice to read only what they want to and more importantly, only what they agree with. Inherent in this process of selective sourcing of news, is the danger of people turning a deaf ear to one another, and a refusal to listen to points of view that may differ from our own. This in turn diminishes the room for agreement and can increase intolerance.

As I have said on many occasions earlier, discussion, dissension are crucial to public debate for decision-making in a vibrant, healthy democracy such as India's. There should always be room for the Argumentative Indian but not for the Intolerant Indian.

That would be contrary to the spirit of the Constitution of India, to the very idea of India itself.

I believe that the bedrock of Indian civilization has been its pluralism and its social, cultural, linguistic and racial diversity. It mesmerises me when I shut my eyes and think that in our country 1.3 billion people who are using more than 200 languages, practicing 7 major religions, belonging to 3 major ethnic groups are residing under one system, one flag and one identity of being Indian. That is the celebration of our diversity. That's why we need to be sensitive to dominant narratives, of those who make the loudest noise, drowning out those who disagree. That's why social media and broadcast news

have seen angry, aggressive posturing by state and non-state players literally hounding out contrarian opinions.

People in power, across the spectrum of politics, business or civil society, by virtue of the position they enjoy, tend to dominate the discussions and influence its direction. Due to technological advancement, they can now reach out directly to their audience, completely bypassing this crucial process of filtration and mediation.

This often becomes a one-way only communication from the powerful to the less privileged, and an effort to push the narrative in one direction. Indian civilization has always celebrated plurality and promoted tolerance. These have been at the core of our very existence as a people, binding us together for centuries despite our many differences. We must continue to “throw open the windows for fresh breezes” as Mahatma Gandhi observed, without being blown away.

Thus the need to ask questions of those in power is fundamental for the preservation of our nation and of a truly democratic society.

This is a role that the media has traditionally played and must carry on playing.

All stakeholders in the democratic system, from parties to business leaders, citizens to institutions, have to realize that asking questions is good, asking questions is healthy and, in fact, is fundamental to the health of our democracy.

As its role of the primary source of information has diminished due to the variety of mediums now available, the media’s other responsibilities have increased: it must be the watchdog, the gatekeeper and the mediator between the leaders and the public.

It must raise and create awareness about issues concerning public welfare, hold public or private institutions and their representatives accountable for all their actions or indeed, their inactions.

In particular, the media has a duty to give space to the millions who still face the injustices of deprivation, gender discrimination, caste and social bias.

I believe the media must safeguard the public interest, and provide a voice to the marginalized in our society. Our people face enormous inequalities which need to be articulated and highlighted continuously – by the media -- in order to ensure they are addressed by those who govern.

The media can help the one-way communication become a multi-faceted, multi-layered conversation between those who exercise any form of power and the average citizen. It can build a thoroughfare where ideas can travel up and down, to and fro, as it strives continually for accountability and transparency in public life.

I have said before that the media plays a crucial role in educating Indians and providing space for the expression of diverse views. This role of giving a voice to all has become more important than ever before in an atmosphere where there is too much noise out there jostling for our attention.

At the same time, more than ever before, the media needs to play its role with greater responsibility and the utmost respect for facts. I believe fact-checking is one of the most significant roles the media can play in the contemporary space where extreme opinions to the left and to the right, present what is now called ‘alternative facts’.

When opinion is deeply divided on issues of public importance, be they related to governance, the law, social change or personal beliefs and conduct, objectivity is at a premium. Facts must never be sacrificed to elevated opinions as truth.

In such a situation, journalists must strive – as I know many of you do – to obtain the facts and restore their sanctity.

For it to be able to aim for the highest standards of professionalism, journalists and media organizations must turn the spotlight inwards, on themselves. They must hold themselves to the standards they demand of others.

There is the ever present danger of ‘paid news’. Ownership of media, concentration of ownership and distribution platforms in a few hands, and the personal beliefs of individual journalists can and do create conflicts of interest. They also reduce the plurality and diversity of the media. Objectivity has to be restored to regain public trust.

As Ramnathji showed us, the moral courage of the owner or the publisher is fundamental to the level of freedom in the newsroom.

The sheer scale and diversity of growth in media has been breath-taking and had its own consequences. India already has 400 million Internet users, 300 million smartphone users; Facebook and Whatsapp have close to 200 million users in India while Twitter has become the most immediate source of information and opinion.

The media too, has witnessed continuous growth, although not on the same scale. Print media continues to grow at a healthy 5 per cent – the regional language press has been at the vanguard of this growth. There are over 400 TV channels which carry news and over 150 dedicated news channels in all regions and languages.

This abundance of media outlets has led to a highly competitive media environment which often results in the survival of the shrillest voices rising above the others to be heard. Dumbing down the news to attract an audience is another consequence of the phenomenal growth of the media.

Together, these compulsions have led to complex issues being reduced to binary opposites which, in turn, create a polarity of views and distort the facts.

Media houses need to ask themselves how they can find sustainable economic models that will allow them to resist all kinds of pressures and let them perform their role with honesty and transparency.

We are living in challenging times, globally and nationally. In India, as awareness has grown and spread through literacy and technology, the people’s aspirations have increased. A young and vibrant population—over 65 per cent of Indians are below the age of 35 -- is eagerly looking towards a future which will offer it sufficient opportunities to fulfil its ambitions.

Even as the youth look to the future, there has been considerable questioning of the past in the public discourse over the last few years. Each generation has the right to look back and reassess the strengths and weaknesses of the past. Let the brave new India draw its own conclusions.

However, such inquiry should not be blinkered by biases or resisted with a closed mind. Indian history and centuries’ old civilization is replete with examples of a willingness of the people to, as I have said, ‘doubt, disagree and dispute intellectually’. This is the bedrock of our nation; our Constitution is a testament to the accommodation of our differences within the framework of an overarching idea of India. What makes us Indians is our spirit of tolerance and accommodation towards each other and those who differ from us. That has been the survival mantra of our civilization over generations. Dear Friends,

The Press and the media are considered to be the fourth pillar of the democracy. It wields extra ordinary powers of not only holding the other three pillars accountable, but also influencing and shaping public opinion like no other institution of democracy can. While this enormous power, to sustain itself requires the basic dictum of freedom of expression, at the same time it puts an equally enormous responsibility of accountability and credibility on the media itself. To my mind, while the press will be failing in its duty if it does not pose questions to the powers that be, it will have to simultaneously judge the frivolous from the factual and publicity from reportage.

This is a tremendous challenge for the media and one that it must stand up to. It must resist the temptation to take the path of least resistance which is to allow a dominant viewpoint to prevail without questioning it or allowing others the opportunity to question it.

Media must learn the art of withstanding pulls and pressures without sacrificing its commitment to free and fair reportage and always remain on guard against conformity. Because any tendency towards conformity to be enforced, often requires disguising or dissembling the truth and the facts. This is completely alien to the ideals which inform professional journalism which lives and even dies by chasing the facts and the truth.

The question that faces all of us including the media is whether we will choose to define ourselves as a nation enriched by the diversity of views or allow partisan views to dominate our national narrative?

We ought to remember that democracy will be the loser when and if we cease to hear voices other than our own.

For centuries, India has witnessed a clash of civilizations and philosophies – and survived it all to grow into the world’s largest functioning democracy.

As we go forward as a nation we face contradictory forces: on the one hand is a country with immense potential for growth and prosperity; on the other is a growing sense of unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. The media should reflect both in equal measure but it can only do so if it truthfully reflects the reality on the ground.

Such a reality is a contested space where different points of view jostle to be heard. Will the media give a hearing to the voices from Ground Zero? Will it continue to be a forum where people debate, disagree, dissent?

If the media believes in the freedom of expression, a free and a fearless independent media as Ramnath Goenka did, it must choose to reflect a plurality of opinions for that is what breathes life into our democracy and has defined us as Indians. It must always remember that its fundamental task is to stand up and ask questions with honesty and fairness. That’s the sacred compact it has with citizens in a democracy.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!

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