

Ramnath Goenka Awards for Excellence in Journalism 2007-08
(New Delhi – April 13, 2009)

Address by Hon'ble Sh. K.G. Balakrishnan, Chief Justice of India

Mr. Shekhar Gupta, Mr.Vivek Goenka,
And Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like thank the Indian Express group for inviting me as the chief guest for this awards programme. It is only appropriate that these awards are being given in the memory of Shri Ramnath Goenka who founded the Indian Express in 1936.

Over the years the publications of the Indian Express Group have continuously engaged with political developments and have become known for their strong emphasis on investigative journalism. Shri Ramnath Goenka first made his mark as an editor by confronting the colonial government and later on in his career he took on entrenched governmental and business interests. While he may have had admirers as well as critics during his lifetime, there is unanimity about his lasting contribution to the way political journalism is conducted in our country.

The Indian Express Group is well respected for its independent editorial positions and rigorous reporting. As a leading player in the print media sector there is also an additional onus of setting a good example for other players. This demonstrative role is important because in recent years the increasing commercialization of the mass media has also had some adverse effects on journalistic practices.

When media establishments come to be preoccupied with the size of their readership or viewership, there is an increased likelihood of journalists using intrusive newsgathering methods and editors approving of content where facts are often not verified or reported without explaining their proper background.

This tendency of resorting to undue sensationalism or reporting only one side's viewpoint is especially worrying, given the central role of the mass media in a democratic set-up. In many ways the conduct of journalism and politics in a free society is inherently interlinked. Without the free flow of information and opinions, individuals and groups cannot form the rationale choices which are ultimately translated into public policies and governmental action. The essential components of politics – i.e. representation, legislation and administration – all depend on how information is exchanged between the citizens and the government as well as between citizens themselves. Very often, some statements and actions come to gain meaning only on account of the publicity given to them.

At the time of the French Revolution, the press was described as the Fourth Estate in the political establishment. In our times the expanding reach of newspapers, television, radio and the internet – have made the media an even stronger pillar of our political existence. At present, India is one of the few countries where the markets for the print media as well as the electronic and digital media have been continuously growing. As more and more Indians become literate and gain access to television and computers, there is also a

commensurate responsibility on the news-media establishments to present accurate and balanced reports.

The 'freedom of press' is an extension of the fundamental right to 'freedom of speech and expression' provided for under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. In our times, ideas and information reach the masses largely to the extent that they are permitted entry into the prominent dailies and news magazines. With the concentration of the mass media in a few hands, the chances of an idea which is antagonistic to the interests of the proprietors of big newspapers getting access to the market becomes remote. The news media cannot possibly support the public's right to know when there is no acceptance of a duty to inform. To the press, the public's right to know extends only to what the press elects to tell. There can be no doubt that any mass medium having the greatest circulation would influence the political life of the country because the ideas for which a prominent paper stands have the greatest chance of being circulated among the public. It will affect the economic pattern of the society. The integrity of the news becomes a matter of profound social concern. There is also an affirmative obligation on the part of the Government not to abridge the freedom of expression or to allow monopolization by any party in the mass media. Our vibrant democracy survives to a great extent by the contribution made by the newspapers. The rights of millions of people who have no scope or opportunity to raise their voice should be given a voice in the mass media. It is said that the victories of freedom of speech must be won in the minds of the people before they are won in the courts. Justice

Felix Frankfurter, one of the great American Judges said that at best civil liberties draw only limited strength from legal guarantees and that preoccupation with constitutionality instead of the wisdom of legislative or executive actions is preoccupation with false values.

The interface between the news-media and the legal system obviously touches on many issues that merit a rigorous discussion. I hope that the Indian Express Group will continue to engage with these issues while maintaining the high standards of independent and investigative reporting that it is known for. I would like to congratulate all the individuals who have won awards under the various categories today and will look forward to seeing their work in the future.

Thank You!
