

Full text of the keynote address delivered by
Hon'ble the Chief Justice of India
Shri Justice N V Ramana
at the presentation of RedInk Awards by the Mumbai
Press Club.

Wednesday, 29 December, 2021, online, 1930 hrs.

Shri Gurbir Singh, Chairman, Mumbai Press Club,
Shri Siddharth Bhatia, President, Mumbai Press Club,
Shri Prem Shankar Jha, veteran journalist,
Ms. Frederike Siddiqui,
Other recipients of RedInk awards in diverse categories,
My dear journalist friends, ladies, and gentlemen,
Namaskar.

It gives me immense pleasure to be here with you at the Red Ink Awards for Excellence in Journalism, to celebrate outstanding contributions by journalists in various categories. This initiative by the Mumbai Press Club, which was first started in 2011, is praiseworthy.

The city of Mumbai has been at the forefront of protecting the freedom of speech and expression. It has produced great patriots, freedom fighters, human rights activists and journalists of great professional integrity. It is therefore apt that the Mumbai Press Club adds to the city's rich legacy through this award function.

I would like to congratulate all those who are being honoured today. There is no doubt that a healthy democracy can thrive and survive only with a fearless and

independent press. For that, journalists like you need to grow in number.

As someone who started his professional career as a journalist, I can understand your difficulties and struggles. Speaking truth to power and holding up a mirror to society, is an immense responsibility that is extremely difficult to fulfil. There is enormous pressure and stress upon you. In the contemporary world, performing your duty as a journalist is akin to dancing on razor's edge. You are on your feet for long hours and constantly on call and working. Holidays are few and far between and finding time to spend with family is difficult. The stress on your family is also immense. The wages too are not very encouraging. Women, particularly beyond Metros, still find it difficult to gain foothold in the profession.

Those who are serving in conflict zones are willing to risk their lives. Those on regular beats are also no longer safe. Some of those in powerful positions, both political leaders and bureaucracy, mafia of all shades and those on the wrong side of the law – none of them are comfortable with a professional journalist. As a result, you keep getting unpleasant and disturbing messages. I know it is not easy for you and your families to deal with such threats. Another worrisome trend is the concerted effort to bracket

journalists into a particular category. I can imagine how painful it is.

Yet, it is an extremely satisfying profession to pursue. It is often said that the legal profession is a noble profession. I can state that the journalist's job is as noble and is an integral pillar of democracy. Like the legal professional, a journalist also needs to have a strong moral fibre and moral compass. Your conscience is your guide in this profession.

The freedom of the press is a valuable and sacred right enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Without such a freedom, there cannot be discussion and debate that is essential for the growth of a democracy. There can be no flow of information that the public requires, and that a democracy demands.

But the profession is vastly different from what it was when I was a journalist for a brief period. All things change - this is inevitable. As the world around us evolves, so too, has the media profession and journalism. Unless you are willing to evolve and change, you will stagnate and be left behind.

Now the profession demands specialists. Earlier, one reporter could be deputed to report on diverse subjects. However, the nuances of reporting contemporary news in specific fields requires specialisation. Law reporting, for

example, might require a person to be knowledgeable about precedents, legal history, and Court procedure. The resourceful media houses in Delhi have their specialist legal editors covering the proceedings of the Supreme Court. When it comes to other Indian Language media and small media houses, it is the regular political reporter who doubles up as legal reporter whenever the necessity arises. To be able to inform the readers and viewers accurately, the media needs to invest on specialists. I think it might be necessary for working journalists' unions to organise training camps and orientation programmes for journalists like what we do for judges.

Another major change is that, apart from the traditional print media, you now also have digital news media platforms and social media reporting. This has changed the entire profession. Certain things about this transformation by digital media is for the better - there is now more information available to people which is easily accessible.

At the same time, these transformations and changes have also resulted in certain issues with the journalism that is worrying. I hope you would not mind if I highlighted these issues.

Nowadays, everything is subject to reporting. Every moment is available to the scrutiny of millions as things

get reported 24x7. This places an enormous pressure not only on the person or professional being reported about, but also on the journalist doing the reporting. In the race for ratings, the important journalistic tenet of verification before publishing is not being followed.

This leads to incorrect reporting. The social media amplifies that incorrect news in a matter of seconds. Once published it is difficult to take back. Unlike print and electronic media, unfortunately, it is almost impossible to hold the social media platforms such as youtube accountable even after they host most derogatory and defamatory stuff which has potential to ruin careers and lives. You media professionals will have to voluntarily come forward with solutions for such a menace. I advise all of you to follow the principles of natural justice before making adverse comments against someone who is not in a position to defend himself.

Another trend that I witness in reporting nowadays, is the seeping of ideological stances and biases into the news story. Interpretation and opinions are colouring what should be factual reports. News mixed with views is a dangerous cocktail. Connected to this is the problem of partial reporting, of cherry-picking facts to give it a particular colour. For instance, select portions of a speech

get highlighted – mostly out of context - to suit a certain agenda.

Nothing can be more lethal to democracy than the deadly combination of confrontational polity and competitive journalism. Tragically, they feed on each other. History is witness to this hard truth.

Allowing yourself to be co-opted by an ideology or the State is a recipe for disaster. Journalists are like judges in one sense. Regardless of the ideology you profess and the beliefs you hold dear, you must do your duty without being influenced by them. You must report only the facts, with a view to give a complete and accurate picture. As the famous US reporter, Walter Cronkite said-I quote:

“We all have our likes and our dislikes. But... when we're doing news - when we're doing the front-page news, not the back page, not the op-ed pages, but when we're doing the daily news, covering politics - it is our duty to be sure that we do not permit our prejudices to show. That is simply basic journalism.” Unquote.

Another issue that has gained prominence recently, is linked to what is called the attention economy. In the hope of grabbing the eyeballs, the headlines that are given for news reports are catchy, but misleading. The headline is often unreflective of the actual content of the reports. It is interpretative and imaginary. The headlines are then

shared widely on social media, and become the news. The content is forgotten.

I can empathise with the pressures journalists are operating under. Experience and reflections suggest that the media organisations run by independent and exclusive Trusts and by the companies which are only into the business of news are still in a position to ward off the pressures of various kinds to a great extent.

The freedom of the press is a sacrosanct Constitutional right. From the very beginning, the Supreme Court of India has upheld the freedom of the press as an important facet of our Constitution, from *Sakal Papers* and *R. Rajagopal* to *Anuradha Bhasin*. However, this freedom comes with an enormous responsibility that must be borne by every individual who is part of the journalistic enterprise, the journalists, editors, and management. As Justice Frankfurter, the judge of US Supreme Court once said-

“The freedom of the press is not an end in itself but a means to the end of achieving a free society.”

As the Chief Justice of India, I am restrained from commenting on specific issues that may be under judicial consideration. Let me simply say that the judiciary is a robust pillar. Despite all the constraints, it is working to further Constitutional goals. The recent trend to sermonize about judgments, and villainise judges, needs

to be checked. The media must have belief and trust in the judiciary. As a key stakeholder in democracy, media has the duty to defend and protect the judiciary from motivated attacks by evil forces. We are together in the Mission Democracy and in promoting national interest. We have to sail together.

Coming back to the event organised today, I am glad to see journalists who uphold and represent the highest standards of journalistic ethic being awarded today. The recognition given to them, and their work, is an important symbol of the standard to be achieved. Their example must be followed by all in the profession. I again congratulate all the awardees.

I would like to take a few moments here to congratulate Mr. Prem Shankar Jha, who has received the Lifetime Achievement award. Mr. Jha has had a long and distinguished career. His reputation for hard work, the highest ethical standards, and intellectual rigour is unparalleled in the field. He is an inspiration to journalists and other professionals everywhere.

I would also like to pay my respects to the late Danish Siddiqui. He was a man with a magical eye and was rightly regarded as one of the foremost photo-journalists of this era. If a picture can tell a thousand words, his photos were novels. War time correspondents have always had the

most difficult and risky job. His unfortunate passing in Afghanistan again brings to the fore the issue of sufficient safety protocols and protections for journalists in conflict zones. His spouse Ms. Frederike Siddiqui joined us online a while ago. My condolences to his family, colleagues, and friends.

I would also like to take a few moments to pay tribute to all journalists who lost their lives while reporting from the ground during this pandemic. Their reporting was integral for highlighting issues and to bring much needed attention to the plight of our citizens. I thank them for their service. I look forward to your work in the coming year. I hope that you continue to fulfil your all-important Constitutional task with passion and commitment. With honest, hardworking, and ethical journalists like you, the democratic republic of India will continue to progress and achieve new heights.

Thank you and wish you all a better and brighter New Year.