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Speech of Mr P Upendra, M.P., and former Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting & Parliamentary Affairs, at the Seminar on "Media and National Unity" organised by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (Singapore), and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Media Centre at Bangalore on May 26, 1992.

Dear Mr Vijay Menon, Dr Bongartz, Mr Rajan, Mr Ashish Sen and Friends,

I am happy to be associated with the seminar, organised by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, Singapore, along with Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Media Centre on a subject of vital and topical importance. I extend my greetings to all the participants in the seminar.

I said that the theme of your seminar is topical, because there is, today, a real threat to our nation's unity and integrity and everyone of us, including the media persons, should be genuinely concerned about the situation. Your discussions will, therefore, not be a mere academic exercise, but will, I hope, evolve a consensus on measures to meet the situation.

This threat to our national unity emanates from varied sources and due to a variety of reasons.

- a) There is the threat from anti-national forces, abetted often by hostile neighbours who are always out to fish in troubled waters.
- b) Threat emanates from secessionist and divisive forces operating in different parts of the country, particularly in sensitive border states.
- c) Extremists operating in different parts of our country pose a serious threat to our democratic fabric and the values which India has always upheld- the tenets of non-violence and tolerance.
- d) Communalism, religious fundamentalism and casteism tend to divide the nation.
- e) Regionalism and linguistic jingoism, in the name of regional identity, sometimes go to extreme limits, causing even violent

incidents.

f) Induction of religion and caste into politics, promoted by politicians of all hues for their narrow and partisan ends, and short-term benefits, has caused enormous damage not only to our electoral process, but to the entire political system.

- g) Then we have been witnessing the phenomenon of over-centralisation grabbing of more powers by the union, depriving the states of their legitimate rights and resources, and thus damaging the federal structure of our constitution. This is also
- the reason for emergence of regional forces and the growth of a feeling of neglect and discrimination. Unless we draw a lesson from the experience of countries like the Soviet Union and
- Yugoslavia, it will be difficult for India to survive as a united nation.

ROLE OF MEDIA IN NATION'S UNITY.

The above factors stress the importance of the involvement of all sections of the society, including the politicians and the media, in dealing with forces which endanger the nation's unity and integration. But, I have no hesitation to acknowledge the role of the all powerful media in performing this task. More than anyone else, media persons can create consciousness among the people about the dangers surrounding the nation, and build up strong public opinion against all sorts of divisive and sectarian forces.

- When I refer to the role of media, in this context, I do not propose to cover the entire canvas of national media, which include not only the electronic media and the press, but also films, other forms of entertainment and books. For example, films are playing a vital role in
- instilling a sense of unity among the people and can be used as effective instruments for national integration. What better example can there be for this assumption than the popularity of Hindi films in a state like Tamil Nadu, where propagation of Hindi is considered as a sacrilege.
- Electronic media have spread their network fast and wide, and their influence on the people and their behaviour is enormous. At the time of independence we had only six radio stations, but today there are more ^{than} a hundred and the figure is going to be around 200 shortly. Radio covers about 95 percent population today. Similarly, the television, which

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made its first appearance in our country as late as in 1959, today covers about 550 T.V. Relay Stations in the country. ~~today.~~

As the people's interest in the electronic media increases, their role in influencing public behaviour and promoting national objectives also assumes greater importance. The reach of the electronic media is extensive and their impact unimaginable. Radio and Television can be used as effective instruments for promoting national unity, through imaginative and sustained programmes, intelligible to the masses. Unfortunately, these two media, particularly the television, tend to cater to the urban elite and the whole thinking of those involved in television broadcasting is conditioned by Urban reactions. The radio, of course, has gradually been shedding this character and it is, in fact, more popular in rural areas, after television distanced it from urban audiences.

Scandals apart, I do not say that our electronic media have not performed their tasks well. Many good programmes have been broadcast and telecast by radio and television, aimed at promoting national consciousness and a sense of patriotism. In a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society like ours, with various categories of listeners and viewers, national programmes put out by the electronic media have their own limitations. That is why, I have always been stressing the need for strengthening the regional programmes both on the radio and the television. That was also the reason for my proposal, as Minister for Information and Broadcasting, to set up second channels of Doordarshan at sixteen more capital cities, including your beautiful Bangalore. But, unfortunately, change of governments has also brought about change in outlook and the baby is still-born.

Yet another constraint on the electronic media is the government control over them, which robs them of all initiative and scope for imaginative functioning. Radio and television can be used more effectively for bringing people together, and promoting a sense of amity and unity among them, if these two media are given the autonomy and freedom which they need and deserve. The Prasar Bharati Bill was passed in 1990 with rare unanimity but, unfortunately, it lies in the shelves of the I & B Ministry. There does not appear to be any inclination on the part of the present government to implement this Act, notwithstanding the promises occasionally made.

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I propose to devote a large part of my speech to the role of Press in promoting national unity, the dangers and pressures it is subjected to, and the measures to safeguard the freedom of Press

ROLE OF THE PRESS:

The growth of the Press in India, during the last few decades, has been phenomenal. We have a fairly large newspaper industry, two major national wire agencies, which have their language divisions ^{also} ~~as to~~ we have many feature syndicates and scores of reputed columnists and legion of journalists whose knowledge, perception and professional ability are comparable to the best in the world. India has the second largest number of daily newspapers in Asia and the fourth largest in the world. Some 27,000 newspapers are now listed officially, Of course, all of us know that many of them are only titles. Perhaps we can reckon 3,000 of them as real newspapers with a regular readership. The total circulation of all the newspapers in the country is estimated at 60 millions, which is not commensurate with the population, even the literate population. There is, thus, a lot of scope to meet the demands of our growing readership.

A significant feature of the Press in India is that the newspapers owned by industrial houses, though comparatively small in number, are large in circulation. Nearly 67.4 per cent of the total newspaper circulation in the country is accounted by 106 such common units of industrial houses through multi-centre editions and a plurality of newspapers and magazines. Though it is far from a situation of monopoly, it does indicate a certain degree of concentration of Indian Press in the hands of a few industrial houses.

Yet another feature of the Indian Press is its urban orientation. The metropolitan cities in Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras and the state capitals are the main centres of newspaper publication. Nearly 93 per cent of the total sale of dailies is confined to the large urban areas with a population of over one lakh, which account for only about 10 per cent of the country's population.

During the four and half decades since Independence, Indian democracy has acquired a strength and vitality which is the envy of many a nation in the world. In spite of poverty and illiteracy, and a cult of

violence which has engulfed many parts of the country, we have been able to preserve the basic principles of democracy and constitutionalism.

- This is mainly due to the consciousness of the people about their rights in a democratic set-up and the vigilance of our free press.

From the days of the freedom struggle, the media has played a vital role in making the people aware of their fight against colonialism, exploitation, discrimination and injustice of every kind. Our national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Lokmanya Tilak, Jawahar Lal nehru, and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad were themselves noted writers and journalists, who put events in the perspective of a great people awakening to freedom and progress. Their idealism and dedication to society had inspired countless generations of journalists.

In spite of the low circulation and limited reach in rural areas, where majority of India's population lives, the Press in India plays an important role in political administration and social life of the country, as its readership is largely among the decision-makers and other elites who serve as reference groups for the masses. Further, printed words in newspapers have tremendous credibility, and hence influence, even today. As such, the Press, and hence the journalists, are important arbiters of reality. The Press shapes, in significant ways, the opinion and outlook of its readers and indirectly of others as well.

It is difficult to give an overview of the role of the Press in India in a lecture like this. Any attempt to generalise is **fraught** with dangers as its range and depth are very wide. Even so, at the risk of oversimplifying, I may say that the Press influences political administration, social values and interaction patterns. It is sufficiently vigilant about its own freedom. Salience to politics is the most dominant feature of the Indian Press. The watch-dog function against Govt. failures and corruption in public life is fairly well performed. The other functions, like acting as catalysts for development and social awakening, by understanding issues of common concern and giving them expression, though occasionally performed, is still a weak strain in Indian journalism.

Here it will not be wrong to say that the message is more important than the medium. The message has to be socially relevant. In the present social context of our Country, there is a need to pack the message with the basic themes of secularism, communal harmony and national integration. I am not, for a moment, trying to suggest that politicians and politics are no news. While preoccupation with what is political is inevitable, the newspapers should also be concerned with the principal goals of the nation.

The one important area where the Indian Press could concentrate more is that the field of economic development. The importance and attention that it merits has not been bestowed upon adequately. The Press, in general, is more concerned with the political aspects of development. India has undertaken the largest experiment in democratic planning. But, communication of the message of such a great experiment leaves much to be desired. I urge upon the respected members of the Fourth Estate to put in proper perspective the vast economic transformation taking place in our country, particularly on the countryside.

"Man does not live by bread alone" is an old adage. Economic development

is not the entire thing in nation-building. A country like ours, with its diverse religions and cultures, has many hurdles to nation building. One such important obstacle is the awful tardiness in assimilation into the national mainstream of the lowest castes and tribes who urgently need to be completely involved in our national life, if we are to mature into a vibrant democracy. The causes that exclude them from national activities are many and distressing. Another hurdle is the reconciliation of linguistic and regional groups. Religion is yet another area with high emotional and sentimental content.

We have to work for a harmonious welding of all these apparently conflicting social forces in a democracy, with so many diverse features. Sometimes, any one of these components going astray may prove catastrophic to our social system. We have witnessed communal tensions and violence and the ill-effects of many such centrifugal factors, with all their attendant consequences. No doubt, the secular fabric of our culture has the resilience and the strength to withstand such onslaughts.

We have, in our country, developed a number of democratic instruments to keep under check the disproportionate demands from various quarters, threatening to disturb our unity and integrity. But the Press has a great potential to unite, harmoniously, the conflicting forces and interests. Its role, in such a context, assumes added importance to serve as a vital communication link between the government and the community and vice-versa and between one section of the community and another. It has to play the role of an integrator and synthesizer to protect and promote the varied interests of the society.

It is not my claim that insular tendencies and inward look are not there. Regional or state identities and regional politics, in many cases, dominate the columns of the regional press. Rightly so, because it is their natural constituency. Salience towards politics, as stated before, is a well noted feature of print journalism. If politics turns communal, if politics turns inward looking, the Press, as instant historian, cannot but reflect this development. When the agitation to build Ram temple at Ayodhya was at its intense peak in 1990, sections of the Hindi Press threw to the wind their traditional restraint relating to communal events. Did not the role of a section of the Press in this episode not injure our national unity and communal harmony? The Press Council has censored some of the newspapers in this respect, and therefore, I do not have to comment much on this.

In Punjab, Assam and Jammu & Kashmir there is a deviation in the Press. In Assam, there is a pronounced regional proclivity in the newspapers.

Against this backdrop, it was heartening to note the stand taken by the newspapers when violence erupted in certain parts of South India on the Kaveri waters dispute. Barring a few papers, most condemned the violence and advised sanity, without in any way giving up the advocacy of the cause of their constituents or readership. It is a silver lining to note.

The influence of the Press on electoral politics and vice-versa in this country is an area which needs to be studied and researched. Elections do mark a brief interregnum in the political process. Sections of the Press follow the political divide. This fractures the national picture for a while. But, so far, in the history of our democracy, the Press that matters pulls back from this temporary precipice.

NEW FERMENT

With forty years of democratic functioning, planned development and enhanced media facilities and communication among people, there is a widespread unease, not only among those who have not benefitted from the fruits of independence and development, but also among many of those who have benefitted immensely. Besides facilitating development processes, increased communication is making socio-economic disparities, existing or resultant from development, more visible and perceptible too. Further, in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society like India, spread of media industry and communication is also, at times, viewed as a threat to the language and cultural identities, as the tendency is towards over-centralisation.

These two processes, singly or more often together, give rise to anger, scepticism and even action to protect and promote their own economic interests and linguistic and cultural identities. The elite among the 'affected' groups and communities exploited such perceptions to sustain their status and leadership by resorting to narrow sectarian appeals, thereby strengthening fissiparous tendencies and even giving birth to sub-nationalism. On the other hand, increased assertion of local identities are often perceived as threats to national polity and culture by the ruling elite at the centre. The result is greater centralisation and control of resources (including media) and polity in the name of nationalism and development.

Sociologically speaking, there exists a strong coherence and close relationship between social structure, culture, communication and development processes. Changes in one have important bearings upon others. Advocates of national culture and nationalism often fail to perceive clearly the links between material conditions

and secular attitudes and/or nationalistic feelings and loyalties. They fail to recognise that neglect of basic welfare and material well-being of the common man and of all the communities and regions will scuttle the progress of nationalism and 40 years of enormous but skewed progress will fan sectarian forces.

The unease, conflict and turmoils that are surfacing today can, however, be viewed as new ferment in Indian polity and social system which augurs well for a search for new approaches and strategies for more equitable development and emergence of more meaningful national identity, with equally strong and meaningful regional and local identities.

In India, in view of immense diversities the mass media have a special responsibility of building a sense of national identity. While each of the linguistic and cultural sub-groups in society may demand and deserve communication facilities and development opportunities, which encourage the growth of each one of them, nevertheless, communication in India, among other things, also needs to take on the role of a cultural force which builds a climate of appreciation and understanding between various groups, communities and regions and feeling of oneness among all the people in the country.

The Press and other media of mass communication can be important vehicles in creating national identity. They can diffuse a set of common norms, values and symbols. They can create awareness of the national heritage which is an important integrating factor. An appreciation of sub-cultures can also be achieved only through mass media. Common norms and symbols need not exclude projection of regional aspirations but the two need to be judiciously mixed. As a matter of fact, regional or local "loyalties" are not exclusive of national identity or loyalty. In a democratic society, particularly, commitment to social group, religious faith or to an economic ideology can coexist with the process of integration and unity at the national level. All depends upon how they make use of modern, powerful instruments of mass communication to strengthen the forces of national unity, while not suppressing or obliterating the local or regional identities.

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

As I said earlier, the media feedback makes the government responsible and accountable in a greater measure. Therefore, we are committed to full freedom of the press and elimination of all practices that lead to direct or indirect arm-twisting of the Press. We should create conditions which foster this freedom and guard the independence of the Press.

But freedom enjoins tremendous responsibilities, the full realisation of which is only possible through the highest form of discipline, i.e., self-discipline. While it is the government's fundamental duty to stand as the guarantor for the freedom of the Press, the Fourth Estate has to determine for itself the corresponding responsibilities and obligations.

In this context, it is worth recollecting what Mahatma Gandhi had said.

I quote: "The Press is a great power. But, just as an unchecked torrent of water submerges the whole countryside and devastates crops, even an uncontrolled pen serves to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more pernicious than when it is lacked. It can be profitable only when restraint is exercised from within".

In the discharge of its functions as the saviour of public interest, there is bound to be some friction between the government and the Press.

This should be no cause for alarm. This is how growth takes place. Criticism is an important ingredient in the perfection of one's actions. Governments should not be hyper-sensitive to criticism. On the contrary, they should welcome criticism from the Fourth Estate. Constructive criticism should justify and strengthen the concept of freedom of expression and thought. It is not without reason that the Founding Fathers of our Constitution were inspired by a noble vision of Independent India—a democratic republic, resolved to secure to all its citizens not only justice – social, economic and political – but also liberty of thought. Thus, it is accepted **that** social justice and individual liberty should march hand-in-hand. Democratic societies live and grow healthily by a plethora of ideas, experimenting with them and, if necessary, even rejecting them. It is, therefore, imperative that constructive criticism is one of the responsible functions of the Press in a democracy. I may sound repetitive when I recall what Jawaharlal Nehru has stated and which has been quoted umpteen number of times by all lovers of freedom of the Press:

I quote: ". . . .I would rather have a completely free Press, with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of the freedom, than a suppressed or regulated Press".

PRESSURES ON THE PRESS

While performing its duty as mediator between the Government and the society and in promoting national unity and integration, the Press today faces a lot of pressure from various quarters. While sermonising to the Press to play its noble

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role of keeping the country united, one should not gloss over the threat to the freedom of the Press - covert and overt.

In a democratic society, the Press, the State and the governed must form a **triangle** in their relationship. The Official Secrets Act and the Code of Conduct prescribed for the civil servants ensure that the governed do not get the information about what the Govt. is doing or has in mind which affects the future of the people. Except through the Press, the people have no other means of finding out whether the Govt., duly elected by them, is functioning in their interest and according to the promises made to them at the time of elections.

The Press acts as a safeguard against the danger of the executive and the Government not using their vast powers for public welfare, but using them for private gains, arbitrarily and capriciously. A Govt., which pursues secret ends or which functions in secrecy or which turns information services as propaganda agencies, would lose the confidence of the public. It would be faced with ill-informed and destructive criticism.

A democratic Govt. should be sensitive to public opinion. For the public to form a rational and correct opinion about the Govt., it should have the facts, and nothing but true facts. It is in the Govt's own interest to allow people to have access to facts, to allay their fears, doubts, suspicions and rumours.

In our country, quite a few people in their authority seem to think that the Press should be an ally and not an adversary of the State. When wrong doings are exposed, they call the Press "irresponsible", "sensational" and "yellow journalism".

There are innumerable pressures on the Press, particularly from three sources - a) The State - Executive, Legislature and Judiciary, b) anti-social elements like mafia dons and goondas and c) faceless terrorists.

Govts., not only in India but world-wide, have always been putting pressure on the Press through various means. Advertisements are denied as an arm-twisting act. Ministers and bureaucrats feel that by releasing advertisements they are distributing charity. In the process, they adopt a pick and choose method. This is the hidden way of pressuring the newspapers.

The police have always been brow-beating and even physically assaulting journalists in various parts of the country. A number of such incidents have been reported from different States recently.

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What is most shocking is the attempt made by the Central and State Govts., now and then, to curb and control the Press freedom.

Censorship was imposed country-wide during the emergency.

Censorship was imposed in Punjab during the recent elections.

The Bihar Press Bill was the most obnoxious Bill, passed in the State Legislature in 1980. The entire Press, political parties and public in general stood in unison, forcing the government to withdraw the bill.

In 1988, the Union Govt. introduced the infamous Defamation Bill. This time also, the Press and the political parties, as well as the public, opposed it tooth and nail and ultimately the Govt. retracted and the Bill was withdrawn.

In Jammu & Kashmir a Bill to control the Press was introduced and later withdrawn. Even today, obnoxious laws restricting freedom of the Press exist in States like Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Assam.

The case of Mr. K.P. Sunil, erstwhile correspondent of the Illustrated Weekly of India at Madras, is a glaring example as to how efforts are made to bring the Press to its kneel. This incident has led to an unprecedented confrontation between the legislature and the judiciary at the highest level.

Journalists are facing grave threat from terrorists in Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, extremists in Assam and Nagaland, and Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh. In Punjab, the terrorists even issued a Panthik code of conduct for journalists.

In Jammu & Kashmir most of the journalists were asked to play to the tune of the terrorists. Recently, the reporter of a leading national daily was asked to leave the valley by the terrorists. In Andhra Pradesh, most of the mofussil journalists, working in small towns, face constant threat to their lives from Naxalites.

At great personal danger to themselves and their families, journalists in these States have succeeded, more or less, in resisting pressures from anti-national and extremist elements to introduce bias in reporting. Their dedication to the nation and adherence to journalistic ethics should be gratefully acknowledged.

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Muscleman at various places put all sorts of pressure on journalists. The danger from the coal mafia in Bihar to the journalists in that State is known to all. In several places in the country, there were incidents of murder and assault of editors and journalists of small newspapers, who expose the activities of anti-social elements and vested interests in their areas.

MEASURES TO ENSURE FREEDOM OF PRESS

If the Press has to play its assigned role in maintaining the unity and integrity of the country and reflect the public opinion as a guide to those in authority, a number of steps have to be taken to ensure freedom of the Press and to facilitate safe working of journalists.

I would go to the extent of suggesting that the journalists on duty should be treated as public servants, so that if any attack is made on them they will get full protection from the Govt.

Though Article 19(1) of the Constitution of India guarantees freedom of expression and thought, the time has come to make a specific reference to Freedom of Press in the Constitution.

Right to Information must be given a Constitutional cover.

The Official Secrets Act should be suitably amended.

The proceedings of the Parliament and State Legislatures should be allowed to be covered 'freely and the privileges of legislators should be codified clearly.

Arrangements should be made to provide legal and financial aid to journalists and their families who are victims of violence or arbitrary acts of the Government.

The defamation laws should be suitably amended and the judiciary should not be oversensitive in regard to contempt proceedings against the Press.

The Press Council, which is supposed to be the watch-dog of the freedom of the Press, is badly resourced, with insufficient powers. It should be strengthened.

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The Press, in its turn, should avoid sensationalism, irresponsibility and lack of accountability. It must highlight which is essential for our unity and play down the activities of those who want to disintegrate our nation. They should not indulge in any writing which may inflame communalism.

The Ombudsman system, introduced by the Times of India sometime ago, as a check against irresponsible journalism, should be emulated by all other newspapers. Self-regulation by the Press is the most desirable.

As I mentioned earlier, important newspapers are owned by the big business. Freedom of the Press should not mean only freedom for the owners of the Press, but also mean freedom for those who work in those papers.

The Press is a private institution discharging a public responsibility. In the present context in our country, when fissiparous tendencies are increasing and divisive forces are at work, the Press has a great responsibility in promoting communal harmony and national unity and integration. This can be done only through restraint and self-discipline and a sense of fairness, impartiality and accountability. I am sure, the Press in India would rise to the occasion.

I wish the seminar all success and once again thank the organisers for giving me this opportunity and to all of you for your patient hearing.

Thank you.

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