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Welcome Address

By

Vijay Menon

Welcome address by the AMIC, Secretary General, AMIC,
Mr. Vijay Menon

Seminar on Media and Pluralism in South Asia
Kathmandu, March 22-24, 1994

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this seminar on "Media and Pluralism in South Asia" organised jointly by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, or AMIC as we are better known, and the Nepal Press Institute with the support of The Asia Foundation. We are doubly honoured today to have with us the Honourable Minister of State for Information and Communications and the Secretary General of SAARC.

Media and pluralism as a concept has been the subject of much international attention in recent years and it is not only fitting but essential that we should examine this in the context of South Asia.

Three years ago, at Windhoek in Namibia, a UNESCO-sponsored meeting declared that "the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation and for economic development".

The declaration defined "independent press" as a press independent from governmental, political and economic control or from control of materials or infrastructure essential for the production of dissemination of newspapers, magazines and periodicals".

"Pluralistic Press" was described as "the end of monopolies of any kind and the existence of the greatest possible number of newspapers, magazines and periodicals reflecting the widest possible range of opinions within the community".

Eighteen months later, a similar meeting in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, declared its full support for, and total commitment to the fundamental principles of the Declaration of Windhoek.

South Asia with its diversity of languages, religions and cultures has every reason to accept and encourage the concept of pluralism. This is especially so as the countries of the region, despite the diversities, are also bound together by ties of history and geography and, no less of economics.

It is essential that we should consider media pluralism from the standpoint of the countries of the region and examine how a pluralistic media can be a positive force in furthering development. We will then not merely be paying obeisance to an abstract idea but endorsing and adopting a strategy that is in the common interest.

It would be pertinent to recall the words of Singapore's Minister for Information and the Arts when he addressed his Asian colleagues in Manila last December. He had this to say: "While we should support freedom of information, we should never allow this to weaken the family and other social structures...We

must find ways to preserve our values and to transmit them. We should open our markets to each other's media companies so that they can grow and compete internationally. Otherwise the ASEAN point of view will be poorly represented in the coming Asian renaissance" These words apply equally to the countries of SAARC.

AMIC was glad to hold its first seminar on Media and pluralism two years ago in Karachi, jointly with the South Asian Media Association (SAMA). We are glad that we have with us at today's meeting the chairman of SAMA, Mr. Javed Jabbar. It is our hope that the Kathmandu meeting will advance the debate on pluralism and not only develop a framework for promoting pluralism but also an action plan for strengthening the role of the media.

AMIC's mission, in the 23 years of its existence, has been to assist efforts to improve the quality, spread and accessibility of mass communications in the region, to foster an exchange of ideas, information and experience and to aid in the development of skills, so that the potential of mass communication for development is more fully realized. We have been assisted in our efforts by the steadfast support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and the government of Singapore, by agencies such as the Asia Foundation and by partner institutions such as the Nepal Press Institute. Equally important is the positive response of individuals and organizations who participate in our programmes.

In conclusion, Honorable Minister, I would like to thank you for demonstrating your interest by being with us this morning. I would also like to thank you, our distinguished guests, for giving us the encouragement of your presence.