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**Welcome Address**

**By**

**Vijay Menon**

WELCOME ADDRESS BY MR VIJAY MENON, SECRETARY-GENERAL, ASIAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE (AMIC), SINGAPORE AT THE CONSULTATION ON "PRESS SYSTEMS IN SAARC", KATHMANDU, NEPAL, APRIL 2 - 5, 1991

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this Consultation on "Press Systems in SAARC" organised jointly by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, AMIC as we are better known, and the Nepal Press Institute, with the active encouragement of the Dept. of Communication, His Majesty's Government of Nepal.

The need to re-examine the role and responsibility of the press in Asia is articulated periodically by the region's policy-makers and planners. This is not confined to the SAARC countries but extends to all Asia.

Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry summed up the Asian sentiments when he said that "value systems or political structures cannot be transplanted from different societies, take root in a totally different environment, and solve problems for which they had never been designed...No single system of government can suit every nation, and no single model of the press can serve the purposes of every society".

The differing perceptions of the role of the press as between the West and Asia are not confined to officials but are also shared

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by the region's journalists. At the Asia-Pacific Conference of the International Federation of Journalists in Hong Kong in 1987, an Asian journalist proposed "an Asian model of journalism in which the press worked with the government to build a national consensus".

He said that the western-style press freedom which stressed confrontation with the authorities was not in harmony with the traditional Asian values and milieu. The role of the press in developing countries was to promote team work which was necessary for political development and nation-building.

Another Asian delegate echoing this view said that the national press should be an instrument of national development and nation-building, and must support development efforts.

It is clear that any scale of values based on western communication theories cannot be automatically applied to Asia. Indigenous philosophies have a greater bearing on press systems in the region. It is a widely shared feeling, among communication scholars and practitioners that there is need to re-examine western theories and practices in the light of Asian cultures and traditions.

Dr. Godwin Chu of the East-West Center has pointed out that the Western perspective of communication is an individually oriented

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perspective. It tends to ignore the social structure and pays relatively scant attention to the social functions of communication. But he is careful to point out that the search for an Asian perspective does not imply the total rejection of the Western perspective. Rather it will take whatever is useful but at the same time it should take into account the social structural contexts, cultural values and religious beliefs.

When the Third Asean Editors' Conference met in Bali in October 1987, the Director-General for Press and Graphics of the Republic of Indonesia presented a paper on 'The Pancasila Press System'. It was an interesting paper as it discussed the Pancasila philosophy and its constitutional foundations, the basic principles of the Pancasila press system and its contribution to universal press systems. This opened up some interesting possibilities for further inquiry and activity and so, we met a year later, to look at the historical background and at the legal and philosophical tenets of the press systems in the region, to examine the role and responsibility of the press and the balance between freedom and responsibility. It was a productive meeting and resulted in a book.

We were keen to replicate this useful meeting in the SAARC region. The officials, journalists and academics we approached were positive in their response. The Dept. of Communication in

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Nepal and the Press Institute were most enthusiastic and TAF Dhaka provided both moral and material support. Unfortunately, developments beyond our control delayed this meeting by almost two years.

For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with our organisation, I would like to explain that AMIC was established in 1971 in Singapore as a non-profit organisation focussing on mass communication in the region. Although it began as a regional documentation centre, AMIC has expanded the scope of its activities to include publications, research, training and consultancy services.

AMIC conducts training programmes, seminars and workshops throughout Asia for the benefit of media professionals, communication planners and policy-makers. We have been privileged to assist Bhutan's sole newspaper with equipment and training, to help in the upgradation of journalists' skills in Bangladesh and Nepal and to involve senior journalists from India, Maldives and Pakistan in discussions relating to crucial issues.

What is most gratifying to us is the support that we are privileged to receive from within the region and outside. The Government of Singapore and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung have helped us since our inception. The governments of Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have formal agreements of cooperation with

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us. And a number of institutions in Europe and America support our efforts to promote mass communication in Asia. Our thanks also go to our participants -- officials, professionals and scholars -- who readily give us the benefit of their time and thoughts so that our meetings might be fruitful. A special word of thanks is due to Dr. Jon Summers and Ms. Susanne Wallen<sup>of The Asia Foundation</sup> for their support to this project.

Dr. Wimal Dissanayake in his introduction to the AMIC book, "Communication Theory: The Asian Perspective", has this to say: "Culture is communication and communication is culture. Asian nations could not possibly have created such magnificent cultures if they had not subscribed to and nurtured certain distinct approaches to communication. Modern communication scholars, in both the East and the West, need to rediscover and re-examine these approaches, with a view to finding out how relevant they are to our concerns". These words have a direct bearing on and relevance to the theme of our Consultation.

We are confident that during this Consultation we can look forward to some fruitful discussions which contribute to a better understanding of the philosophy that animates the press in this region and to the role of the press in context of the cultural and political realities of SAARC.

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