

# THE INDIAN PRESS IS A PRIVATE INDUSTRY IN PUBLIC SERVICE

A. B. Nair\*

There are important questions relating to the Press in India and the newspaper industry, which call for our close attention. Let me at the outset make it clear that the problems of the Press in India today are those created by the Government—or very largely so.

The Press in India has been the subject of elaborate enquiries in the past and voluminous recommendations have been made by the Press Commission and the Press Laws Enquiry Committee. Looking to the developments in the Press during the past decade, however, these recommendations have now become absolutely outdated. I am not certain if any useful purpose will be served in pursuing those recommendations at this late hour. The manner in which the Government approached these problems, I am constrained to say with great reluctance, has only resulted in promoting mutual distrust.

One hears too often these days responsible leaders of the ruling party calling the Press names. In no part of the world one finds this kind of abuse of the Press indulged in by the topmen in the country's administration and public life. This places the Press in a defensive position and impels it to seek some kind of safeguards against unwarranted attacks on it. What has stung them, perhaps they do not want to divulge. But, because of the special position they occupy in the Government and the public life of the country, they think, they can get away with the abuse they indulge in. Not only that. Attempts are being made to fetter the Press in this country by imposing restrictions on it in the name of "Ethics" and "Code of Conduct."

I do not minimise the importance of

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"Ethics" and "Code of Conduct" in the profession—and, by and large, the Press in India has a creditable record in this respect. I must point out, however, that these are mostly self-imposed and are in conformity with the highest traditions associated with the newspaper profession. They are not externally imposed through coercive threats and methods. I have a feeling that what is sought to be done now is to blame the Press for the failure of the politicians to reach agreement on a 'code of political conduct' among parties. Must the failure of the politicians be visited on the Press? In this context, I cannot do better than to quote what John Adams had said about a century ago:

"If there is ever to be an amelioration of the condition of mankind, philosophers, theologians, legislators, politicians and moralists will find that the regulation of the press is the most difficult, dangerous and important problems they have to resolve. Mankind cannot now be governed without it, nor at present with it."

The point is that the newspaper has become the instrument of mass communication and education. As literacy grows—and it is growing fast in the country—its importance as a mass medium of communication will also grow. It is, therefore, important that there should be complete understanding between the Press and the Government. Every effort to promote and foster such understanding will be welcomed by us and will evoke utmost co-operation from us. But I must stress, at the same time, that the process cannot be one-sided. There must be guarantees from the Government and its spokesmen that they will not abuse their position either in the Government or in the party to indulge in uninformed and malicious attacks on the Press. Reciprocity is the grain of understanding.

In formulating a code of the kind under contemplation, the attitude of the

Government, I am sorry to say, appears to be that of an interested observer. Such an attitude will be deplorable in any circumstances, and much more so in a democracy. What we expect from a democratic government is to provide the profession with the facilities it would require to function as an independent self-regulating community within the framework of the large national community. It is this precisely what the Indian Press has been demanding.

This demand and the popular recognition of the Press as an important arm of the corporate life of the community found crystallisation in the various recommendations of the Press Commission. A very significant recommendation of the Press Commission was the setting up of a Press Council for the purpose of evolving a code of conduct for the Press and for the public authorities in relation to it. In spite of the lip sympathy paid by the Government in this behalf, nothing so far has materialised. It is now proposed by the new Information and Broadcasting Minister to start with a Joint Press Consultative Council. The object, no doubt, is to promote understanding between the Press and the Government on the one hand, and among the various interests in the industry, on the other. I welcome the move, however limited may be its scope.

In this connection, it may not be out of place to refer to the efforts now being made towards national integration. A National Conference was held last year and a National Council was set up to further the objective. One could draw immensely from all the published material of the National Integration Conference and of the National Integration Council. It needs, however, to be pointed out that the Government and the Integration

Council are approaching the problem from the wrong end.

The Indian Press, as you know, of course, has no cause to be ashamed of the role it has always played as an instrument of national integration and public good. There may be exceptions; but they are rare. What is important is that the Press as a whole has functioned with responsibility and can be proud of its contribution to the cause of national unity and progress. Given the opportunity and the facility, the Press is quite capable of looking after its affairs and the interest of the nation without the aid of politicians and the bureaucracy. What the Press needs is freedom from interference and abuse by them. For, no code of conduct can be effective in an atmosphere of distrust. To repeat the words of John Adams, "mankind cannot now be governed without the Press."

As the Press evolved into an agency of mass communication through the application of the technological process, it has assumed a larger degree of responsibility. It was also forced to take on itself a moral and, to a great extent, a legal accountability to the public for its performance and conduct. A free press may be shackled only at the risk of misleading a free people through the dissemination of only part of the news, or by obsessed opinion or partial reporting. This is not conducive to healthy growth. Such growth is possible if the Press is vigilant, independent and competitive. The Press in India is, fortunately, a highly competitive and relatively individual kind of business. The Press is a private industry today which performs a great public service. Any measure, any code that may be adumbrated must lend to strengthen this character of the Press.

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*The views expressed in this leaflet do not necessarily represent the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.*

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*With best compliments of:*

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