

**SPEECH OF SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE,  
FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIA ON THE  
OCCASION OF THE ANNUAL RAJENDRA MATHUR  
MEMORIAL LECTURE, ORGANISED BY THE  
EDITOR'S GUILD OF INDIA**

I am happy to be present here today at the Annual **“Rajendra Mathur Memorial Lecture”**, organised by the Editors Guild of India.

2. The Editors Guild of India has emerged over the years as a strong and independent voice of the media and an upholder of press freedom. Its annual lecture in memory of an outstanding journalist Shri Rajendra Mathur is an event that calls for reflection, introspection and reorientation, that aims at

putting the role of Editors and the nature of journalism in the right perspective.

3. Shri Rajendra Mathur was a professor of English in an Indore college when he started writing for the then pioneering paper, ***Nai Duniya***. He made such a mark that he was invited to take charge as the Editor in his first journalistic job itself. From Indore he moved to ***Navbharat Times***, which he edited from 1982 until his untimely death in the year 1991.

4. Shri Rajendra Mathur, though a professor of English language and literature, opted for Hindi journalism. I am told, his aim was to reach out to the masses and create an environment which inspires and encourages professionalism. He was successful to the extent that he inspired his readers to voice their opinions by writing letters to the editors and in the

process becoming a part of the journalistic discourse, as indeed stakeholders in the issue at hand. Many a times, he took upon himself to write such letters and inspire people - thereby creating a class of “**citizen journalists**” - a phrase that gained currency much later.

5. Shri Mathur was known for his dedication. He continuously strove towards bringing out reader-friendly, content rich and thought-provoking pieces on issues of contemporary relevance. A storehouse of knowledge, he was a democratic editor, unassuming, yet firm in his commitment towards journalism and freedom of press.

6. He was the first editor who broke the myth that an editor's job is to only profess by writing editorials sitting comfortably in an ivory tower. He created a new style of Hindi journalistic writing incorporating many colloquial words from the Malwa region as also other regional streams that are used extensively today.

7. During the emergency in 1975, he was one of the few editors who aggressively opposed Press censorship. He was a visionary who could see through things and interpret the approaching trends objectively. Back in 1990 when the first Gulf war took place and socialism was yet in the reckoning, he wrote an article in which he established that there is no alternative to capitalism. I would like to quote an excerpt: **“Does it not trouble you to think that in the coming future, only capitalism will rule with all its weakness and**

**problem, its conflicts and contradictions. Yet, there will be no alternative to it.” (Unquote)**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

8. **Freedom of the press** is among the many freedoms that all democracies must strive hard to propagate, preserve and protect. Democracy without a free press is like a blank piece of paper. The history of the Press in India bears testimony to the fact that its pioneers created strong and durable institutions as well as traditions. That, ladies & gentlemen, is our inheritance and we must build on it. It is incumbent upon you as a Society of newspapers, periodicals and media organizations to weed out such aberrations as might have crept into the functioning of the media.

9. It is distressing how some publications these days have resorted to "Paid News" and other such marketing strategies to drive their revenues. There is need for self-correcting mechanisms to check such irregularities. The temptation to "dumb down" news should also be resisted. Today, the nation faces critical challenges that go well beyond the pressure of 'Breaking News' and immediate headlines in a discourse alternatively dominated by social media. While you must continue to be effective raconteurs, you must never ever lose sight of the singular talisman of truth and nothing but facts. You are after all the crystal ball that millions of Indians gaze at. It is your responsibility and your bounden duty to ensure that ideas are debated dispassionately and thoughts articulated without fear or favour so that opinion is always well informed.

Dear Friends,

10. The influence, credibility and quality of our media is well recognized. You must be keepers of the conscience of our country. You have to be active participants in our continuing endeavour to nurture a democratic republic committed to achieving justice and fundamental freedoms for all citizens. Journalists must bring to public notice the array of ills and deprivations that continue to beset large numbers of our people – be it malnourishment, continuance of discriminatory practices against sections of society, or the ongoing crisis, or the burdens and tragic consequences of indebtedness. They must shape and influence public opinion even as they provide objective and balanced coverage of news.

11. Having said that, I will be failing in my duties as an Indian citizen, if I do not point out that all is not well in the media industry. Selective, orchestrated, one-sided, out of context, or motivated reporting and display, aimed at pushing the partisan agendas of one group or the other cannot or should not ever be the nature and character of Journalism. Whatever is one's personal belief, or ideological positioning, Journalist, like civil servants can never let their biases color the news that is being reported.

12. We are living in times when the essential distinction between views and news, opinions and objectivity is fast blurring. While media organizations cannot compromise in their basic role of watchdogs of our society, polity and economy, at the same time they cannot criticize just for the sake of criticizing. Similarly,



in the name of highlighting 'positive news', they cannot become the mouthpiece of the government or a corporate house.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

13. The media has an important role to play in cleansing public life. However, to undertake this role, the conduct of the media itself should be above board. It must be always be kept in mind that ends and means are both important. The highest standards of ethics must be maintained at all times. Sensationalism should never become a substitute for objective assessment and truthful reporting. Gossip and speculation should not replace hard facts. Every effort should be made to ensure that political or

commercial interests are not passed off as legitimate and independent opinion.

14. Integrity and independence are two sides of the same coin and both must be equally important for our media and for every one of us. There should be recognition that the media is accountable to its readers and viewers at large and through them to the entire nation.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

15. The Press and the media are considered to be the fourth pillar of democracy. It wields extraordinary powers of not only holding the other three pillars accountable, but also influencing and shaping public

opinion like no other institution of democracy can. While this enormous power, to sustain itself requires the basic dictum of freedom of expression, at the same time it puts an equally enormous responsibility of accountability and credibility on the media itself. To my mind, while the press will be failing in its duty if it does not pose questions to the powers that be, it will have to simultaneously judge the frivolous from the factual and publicity from reportage.

16. This is a tremendous challenge for the media and one that it must stand up to. It must resist the temptation to take the path of least resistance which is to allow a dominant viewpoint to prevail without questioning it or allowing others the opportunity to question it.

17. Media must learn the art of withstanding pulls and pressures, as also inducements, without sacrificing its commitment to free and fair reportage and always remain on guard against conformity. Because any tendency towards conformity to be enforced, often requires disguising or disassembling the truth and the facts. This is completely alien to the ethics of professional journalism.

18. The question that faces all of us including the media is whether we will choose to define ourselves as a nation enriched by the diversity of views or allow partisan views to dominate our national narrative? We ought to remember that democracy will be the loser when and if we cease to hear voices other than

our own. I am reminded of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who said and I quote – ***“In a democratic set-up we must have freedom of the Press, freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of association and all kinds of freedom.”***(Unquote)

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen

19. For centuries, India has witnessed an interplay, synthesis and adoption of civilizations and philosophies – and emerged through it all, to grow into the world’s largest functioning democracy. As we go forward as a nation we face contradictory forces: on the one hand is a country with immense potential for growth and prosperity; on the other is a growing sense of unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. The media should reflect both in equal

measure but it can only do so if it truthfully reflects the reality on the ground.

20. Such a reality is a contested space where different points of view jostle to be heard. Will the media give a hearing to the voices from Ground Zero? Will it continue to be a forum where people debate, disagree, dissent?

21. In conclusion, let me remind that one of the most prolific and influential journalists as well as publishers of our nation was Mahatma Gandhi. His thoughts on journalism are most illuminating and must guide our media.

22. Gandhiji wrote in My Experiments with Truth, and I quote, "***The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper press is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countrysides and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within.***"(Unquote)

23. He also said and I quote, "***Week after week I poured out my soul in its columns and expounded the principles and practice of satyagraha as I understood it. I cannot recall a***

***word in these articles set down without thought or deliberation or a word of conscious exaggeration, or anything merely to please. Indeed, the journal became for me training in self-restraint and for friends a medium through which to keep in touch with my thoughts.”***

24. If the media believes in the freedom of expression, a free and a fearless independent media as Shri Mathur did, it must choose to reflect a plurality of opinions for that is what breathes life into our democracy and has defined us as Indians. It must always remember that its fundamental task is to stand up and ask questions with honesty and fairness. That's the sacred compact it has with citizens in a democracy.



Thank you.

Jai Hind.