Prof. S. BASHIRUDDIN MEMORIAL LECTURE 2023



MEDIA TODAY IN INDIA

by

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Hyderabad

On 6th February, 2023
At Mini Auditorium, CSTD Building, University Campus

Organised by

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University
Prof. G.Ram Reddy Marg, Road No. 46,
Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad (TS) 500 033

Prof. S. Bashiruddin Memorial Lecture

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"Professor Bashiruddin was a great communicator. He did his MS in journalism from Minnesota University in the US. He was the head of Journalism department when I did my post graduate degree in journalism in 1972-73. His class used to go on and on for hours. He used to smoke in the class room and he allowed us to have tea and smoke. Most of the times it would be an animated discussion on current affairs. Girls and boys were free to talk out their minds. All kinds of views used to be expressed. He encouraged students to talk without inhibition. He made us to report for Osmania Courier, the laboratory magazine."Prof. Bashiruddin used to sit through the seminar class which would take two to three hours. A student has to write a seminar paper on a given subject and he or she has to answer questions asked by other students. The professor was a humorous person. Students are allowed to cut jokes on him and he enjoyed them. He was a fat man with ever smiling face.

We enjoyed the freedom given to us, never misused it and sat through the classes with a lot of interest. "Bashiruddin was a pioneer of journalism education. He was heading the department for almost two decades, from 1970 to 1990. His students are all over the world in journalism and Public Relations. He was the founder of Public Relations Society, Hyderabad chapter. He was sent to Qatar as Indian ambassador by Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao in early nineties. On his return, he was made Vice Chancellor of BR Ambedkar Open University. He got the new campus of the university built during his stewardship. Even after retirement from the university, he used to guide and encourage students. He has been a

great source of inspiration for us.“Bashiruddin’s first wife was an English professor. His son Akbaruddin is a celebrated diplomat who is presently heading a department in a private university in Hyderabad.“I am grateful to Prof. Seetharama Rao, Vice Chancellor of BR Ambedkar Open University, for giving me the opportunity to deliver Prof S. Bashirddin Memorial Lecture. Speaking in memory of my guru is a great privilege and pleasure.“We are talking about Indian media post NDTV, the oldest independent broadcaster owned till recently by Prannoy and Radhika Roys, and its Hindi version anchored by Ravish Kumar. With Adani taking over the NDTV, the compromise by the media in India with the powers that be is complete. With Adani himself in doldrums thanks to Hindenburg, what future holds for NDTV is anybody’s guess. For now NDTV has been publishing disclaimer saying that New Delhi Television is a subsidiary of AMG Media Networks Limited, an Adani Group Company.

People of the country have now to depend upon the banned BBC or some other foreign channel or newspapers for truth. There are still some newspapers such as The Indian Express, The Hindu, Dainik Bhaskar among the mainstream newspapers which have been struggling to be neutral and independent against heavy odds.“Ravish Kumar, the Magsaysay Award winner, was the face of NTDV for a quarter of a century. He is known for fearless journalism willing to take on anybody in power. He found fault with Narendra Modi government for stoking communal discord between the Hindus and Muslims. He also criticized the other media houses which have been supporting the Modi regime. He called the Godi media. After crony capitalist Gautam Adani became the largest shareholder of NDTV, Ravish had quit the channel since the business tycoon is considered very close to Narendra Modi. Since 2014 when Modi took over as prime minister, Adani’s wealth has gone up from $7 billion to $110 billion. That was before the Adani Group was called fraud by US short-seller Hindenburg Research. Adani’s business

empire, which counts the state-run Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and State Bank of India (SBI) among key investors, has lost more than $100 billion in value since the charges were made public recently. Let us hope he would recover and run his business on ethical lines.“The government ban on BBC’s episode on Prime Minister Narendra Modi is being examined by the Supreme Court, the only ray of hope for Indian democracy with all its limitations.“Look at the story of Siddique Kappan who walked out of Lucknow jail on 2 February 2023 after two and half years of imprisonment. ‘I struggled,’ he said to cameramen and his wife Raihana and teen son Muzammil who were waiting for him patiently outside the jail. Kappan, a Kerala journalist, and three others were arrested in October 2020 while they were going on reporting assignment to the Uttar Pradesh town of Hathras where a Dalit woman died allegedly after being raped. They were accused of trying to instigate violence over the death of the woman. Any number of attempts by the leaders of Kerala journalists association to persuade the authorities and to convince them that Kappan is a bonafide journalist did not help. During his stay in jail, his mother Khadijah died. Raihana told media, “I repeat that Kappan is a media person.” Muzammil’s two other siblings were waiting at home. Police alleged that Kappan had links with the now-banned Popular Front of India (PFI) and charged him under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and sections of the Indian Penal Code. “In September 2022, the Supreme Court granted him bail in connection with that case.

However, he continued to be in jail because of a money laundering case filed by the Enforcement Directorate. Nothing has so far been proved against Kappan. These developments are scarcely reported in the mainstream media. “Most of the so called mainstream newspapers are with the government at the centre or in states depending on the parties that sponsor them. Some newspapers owned by political parties are tilting toward or away from the BJP

dispensation depending on the relationship the party has with the ruling party at the centre. It is no more a discreet way of opposing or supporting a ruling party. People even in rural areas know which party is behind which newspaper. The dividing line between party and newspaper is blurred."Political parties owning newspapers is not a new phenomenon. The Communist parties have been running newspapers in states where they have reasonable presence. The Congress used to have National Herald. However, the newspapers owned by Communist parties have been on the fringe except, perhaps, in Kerala. But the media houses that have been there for decades without aligning to any political parties have become pro-establishment so much that the walkathon from Kanya Kumari to Kashmir by Rahul Gandhi, former president of the Congress party, was not given adequate coverage by the mainstream media. The organizers had to depend on social media for publicity. "There were occasions in past when the newspapers had taken a stand to oppose a certain political parties or oppose some. During 1955 elections in Andhra state, for instance, Andhra Prabha and Andhra Patrika, the only major Telugu newspapers at that time , went out of the way to attack the Communist party and its leaders thus supporting the Congress party. Narla Venkateswara Rao and Panditaradhyula Nageswara Rao, the editors of Andhra Prabha and Andhra Patrika respectively, went hammers and tongs tearing into Communist election campaign.

The other side, that of the Communists, was spearheaded by Moturi Hanumanta Rao, Chandram and others. Maha Kavi Sri Sri was on their side. It was the only time when the Communist party appeared to have an upper hand. Ultimately, the Communists lost the elections and the Congress retained power. The decision to oppose the Communist party was taken by the editors - Narla and Panditaradhula - and not by the owners, Ramnath Goenka and Sivalenka Shambhu Prasad. Those were the days when policy

decisions were taken largely by the editors. “Exactly the opposite is true today. The owners of the newspapers are calling all the shots and the editors are reduced to mere heads of the editorial departments. Earlier the editor used to spearhead the whole activity in the newspaper. Today the owner meets the heads of the department collectively or individually. The policy decisions are taken by the owner with or without consulting the editor who is asked to implement it the decisions. There are owners who plan the day’s stories and directly interact with the reporters to discuss the angularities. The newspapers have a separate policy for individual political party. Some parties are not spared at all. Some parties are patronized and some others are treated somewhat gently. It depends on a party’s position vis-à-vis the party supported by the newspaper. The truth is lost in the bargain. Even if one reads all the newspapers distributed, he or she may not know the truth. A news developed that appears as a banner in one newspaper is not found at all in another newspaper. It all depends on the political interest of the concerned newspapers. “In this regard, the less said about Telugu media, the better.

Political leaders in undivided Andhra Pradesh earlier, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh today, name the newspapers and TV channels that are opposed to them. They are part of the political discourse. Some are reduced to pamphlets. Earlier Congress leader Rajasekhar Reddy used to castigate Eenadu and Andhra Jyothy publicly by naming and shaming them. Today the politicians in Andhra Pradesh talk in terms of Yellow media (newspapers and TV channels supporting the TDP whose main colour is yellow) and blue media (newspapers and TV channels backing YSRCP whose colour is blue).“India, otherwise, has a flourishing media environment. It has around 20 crore homes with TV sets having direct to home satellite and cable services. About 900 private TV channels are there. Half of them are news channels. Doordarshan, a public

service, with multiple services in English and Indian languages has crores of viewers across the country. Over The Top (OTT) platforms have huge following. There are single-person You-Tube channels making social media the largest and most effective medium of communication with all its problems. All India Radio provides news to most of the people in the country. There are FM channels entertaining the people. "There are 84 crore internet users in the country meaning about 60 percent of the population. We are the second largest internet users in the world after China. Smart phone is in the hands of lower income people and it has revolutionized the communication taking it to the rural areas in big way. As an advertisement line says, Sara Dunia Mutti Me – the whole world in your palm. Social media has been growing by leaps and bounds thanks to mobile phones."As far as print medium is concerned there are about 1700 titles which make the news market very crowded. The bulging middleclass help the newspapers to increase the circulation. Before Covid-19 had hit newspaper market, the total circulation of the newspapers in India was about 40 crores of copies. "The intimidation and violence against reporters and other journalist has been on the rise in the country. Reporters Without Borders (RSB) have commented that the vernacular press faced violence more than the English language press.

Governments use security reasons, defamation suits, anti-hate speech legislation and Unlawful Activities Prevention Act to tame the journalists. "As a result, the media became pliant over the Modi years. In November 2016 when Modi abruptly recalled 86 percent of the country's currency in the name of fighting corruption many influential media outlets failed to ask crucial questions. By buying the government line, journalists helped spreading the incorrect perception that phony economics could fix huge problems. As a result of demonitisation, India's growth rate dropped for several quarters. The BJP leaders still describe it as a great step by Modi

while the Opposition calls it a blunder. “Indian media in general helped the government in creating hype for the surgical strikes. When the Indian defence pilots struck at Balkot town in Pakistan in response to a suicide attack on Indian soldiers, our media published and broadcasted whatever given out by the government unquestioningly in a jingoistic manner. It said a large number of militants of Jaish-e-Mohammad were killed in surgical strike. Weeks later, the foreign media have tried to prove our version wrong with the help of visual evidence. But the message had sunk in Indians who believe even today that many militants were killed in the surgical strikes conducted by Indian military.

“Modi government had also changed the growth data. The parameters have been changed and the media did not question the foul exercise. Even the letter written by more than hundred economists questioning the data jugglery was not given proper coverage.“Modi has not answered any questions from media as the prime minister. He did not address a single media conference in his tenure as prime minister so far. Whatever he wants to say is said in ‘Man ki Baath’ or in public meetings. Modi also abandoned the practice of taking the journalists with him during foreign trips. As far as Modi is concerned, journalists are not important. He can, he thinks, communicate to the people over the heads of media platforms. Important journalists are either patronized or targeted.“Protecting journalists is part of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to which India is a signatory. In 2021 at least four journalists were murdered while six were detained on anti-state charges. With 293 journalists were jailed in 2021, India had most number of journalists murdered because of their work. Independent media is a hallmark of democracy. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) releases index report every year to show which country is placed where according to freedom of press index. India is ranked 150th out of 180 countries in its latest report. According

to RSF, India is one of the five most dangerous countries for journalists in the world. The order is Mexico, Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan and India. According to UNESCO observatory, nearly 45 journalists were killed in India in dozen years between 2010 and 2022. The Global Impunity Index prepared by CJI places India in twelfth rank. Impunity Index is based on the murders committed and the freedom enjoyed by the murderers because of inefficient or indifferent governments and judicial systems. During Covid nightmare India stayed in the top in terms of cases filed against journalists who risked their lives to cover Covid cases and medical care. For a nation dubbed as world's biggest democracy this is certainly not a good narrative."The biggest blot on media freedom in India came during Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi on 25 June 1975. The infamous era saw thousands of journalists arrested for questioning the government. Publications such as Janata, Himmat, Frontier, Sadhana went out of circulation. Bold newspapers like The Indian Express and The Statesman left empty space in the editorial column as a sign of protest against Emergency regulations which brought heavy censorship. I have had the fortune of working in Indian Express Group in Bengaluru at the time of Emergency. I used to do reporting while working at the desk because Andhra Prabha did not have separate reports. I used to accompany Subba Rao, chief of bureau, Indian Express, when he went to the jail to meet Advani, Madhu Dandavate and others.

It was the best time in my life as a journalist fighting against Emergency regime. Arun Shourie, who later became editor of Indian Express, used to direct the operations. "While first amendment to the American Constitution was aimed at giving more freedom to the press, the first amendment to Indian Constitution was meant to regulate the press. The first amendment to the American constitution grants its journalists freedom of speech and expression. Under no circumstances can government in the United

States prosecute an individual for holding an opinion. Ironically, the First Amendment in India had exactly the polar opposite effect. It was brought in to curb the right to free speech of its citizens. The first amendment was moved by none other than the most liberal prime minister India can boast of, Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1951. As per clause 2 of article 19, the amendment imposed "reasonable restrictions" on press freedom. The unpopular Press (Objectionable Matter) Act, 1951 was passed by Parliament in order to regulate the press in the manner Nehru had thought fit. According to a report published by The New York Times on the 17th of May, 1951, Nehru was steadfast in his commitment towards curbing free speech. Nehru claimed that the First Amendment was necessitated by the "vulgarity, indecency and falsehood" that the press was supposedly indulging in. In his view, it was, therefore, necessary to empower the State to crack down on newspapers to ensure that the "main purposes of the Constitution are not defeated.""There is no guarantee of press freedom in the Constitution. It was not explicitly mentioned in Article 19 (1) which talks about freedom of speech and expression.

According to Bhimrao Ambedkar, Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, freedom of press need not have to be separately mentioned as a fundamental right as the press was not a separate entity and was entitled to be treated just like any other citizen with fundamental rights. So the fundamental right of the press to freedom of expression would be the same as the fundamental right of a citizen."So much so, the press of a country is as free as its people. Since it is the people who decide which paper to buy and read and the circulation of the papers depends on the perception of the readers, it is for the readers to decide which newspaper sells more. The people get the government they deserve because it is the people who elect their representatives every five years and the representatives in turn from the government. The quality of the

government is directly proportional to the quality of the people's representatives elected by the citizens. Similarly, the people get the newspapers they deserve since they decide which newspaper gets what levels of circulation which decides the quantum of advertisement revenue and health of the newspapers. ""It is not for me a political problem but a moral problem," Nehru said before opining that it had become "impossible to distinguish what is true and what is false." This ambivalence is more true in the present times than the times in which Nehru lived. Earlier, the journalists used to decide whether to publish an item or not depending on its utility to the people. The only litmus test was whether it would serve the people well or not. Now the times have changed and serving the political parties has become utmost important. Serving the people was forgotten long ago when the MBAs entered the profession."During the days when I entered journalism in 1973, fifty years ago, we were taught by Prof Bashiruddin and Kusumanchi Satya Subrahmanya, my first editor in Andhra Prabha, to gauge the utility of an item by the good it can do to the poor, the exploited and the discriminated. This has been the credo of my life in journalism. However, the executives who did a course of Master of Business Administration, started telling the Editorial Department to cater to the readers. 'Know your readers' is the main theme of their discourse. They ask the editorial department to cater to the readers and not to bother about the non-readers who are mostly poor, downtrodden and the underprivileged. As a result, news about hunger, destitute, exploitation and discrimination have gradually disappeared from the newspapers.

News about starvation deaths, suicide by famers have become out of fashion. Fashion parades, beauty contests, man-woman relationships have become the sought after content. "In 1970s political leaders hesitated to be seen in the company of businessmen. After 1996 elections, the businessmen themselves became politicians

and the nexus between politician and businessmen got firmed up. In regional languages, there are media owners who had other business interests and community interest which they served without much ado. After the elections were made prohibitively expensive, businessmen only have a chance to contest and the elected representative of the people have to make money through his or her office or business. When Rajya Sabha seats were sold away to businessmen by leaders of regional political parties, the true politicians who are wedded to the cause of service of the people had been sidelined. The businessmen who themselves became politicians or who can command a number of ministers and scores of MPs have started buying media. The top journalists were weary of being seen in the company of politician or businessmen. When businessman had become politician and he started owning media, where does the poor journalist go? The journalist, who needs a salary to look after his family, slowly compromised and became part of the establishment.

Those journalists who are articulate about global economy, economic reforms and who are close to top politicians and businessmen have become successful in their professional lives. Some became awfully rich."Ashok Jain used to leave the editorial matters to Girialal Jain who proclaimed that he is the second most powerful person in the country only after Indira Gandhi. Post Ashok Jain and Girilal Jain, the equation between the owners and editors had undergone a lot of change. Ahosk Jain's son Sameer Jain saw the editors like any other head of department. He made the circulation head participate in the meetings of the editorial department. The circulation man used to tell the editorial people what would sell most. Thus journalism became business more than public service. Then the time had come when top business houses buy newspapers and TV news channels. In 2011, the Indian Parliament passed the Cable Television Networks (Regulation)

Amendment Bill which made "digitalization of cable television across the country mandatory and it has to complete in three years." The Bill paved the way for corporate control of media since the largest cable service providers were already owned by broadcasting companies."In 2012, Reliance headed by Mukhesh Ambani, the eighth richest man in the world, invested in the heavily debt-ridden Network 18 media group. He also bought Ramoji Rao's ETV language platform network except Telugu. The result was the creation of India's largest media conglomerate which included bouquet of general news and business channels in English, Hindi and several regional languages. In 2014, Reliance took over Network 18 completely in a hostile takeover. Rajdeep Sardesai, the Editor-in-Chief of the flagship channel, resigned. In his farewell e-mail, he said, "Editorial independence and integrity have been articles of faith (with him) in 26 years in journalism and may be I am too old now to change."

"Zee media Corporation, another influential TV news network, is part of the conglomerate Essel Group, which is led by Subhash Chandra, a former member of Rajya Sabha. His candidature was supported by Narendra Modi and BJP. "Odisha TV is owned by the family of Baijayant Panda who is the BJP'snational vice president and spokesperson of the party. News Live, one of the most popular TV channels in the northeast is owned by Riniki Bhuyan Sarma, wife of the BJP Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma. AP chief minister Jagan Mohan Reddy owns Sakshi media group while Telagnana Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao is the owner of Namaste Telangana group of media. "Then came Adani to takeover NDTV. This has completed the process of Godi media as Ravish Kumar puts it. Ravish has coined the word Godi to indicate the unholy mix of news, money and politics. Godi means lap. Ravish means those journalists who are playing to the tune of political establishment are their lapdogs. That was how the name Godi Media

came into being. “This is not a problem unique to India. It is a global phenomenon. In the US 90 percent of the media is owned by six corporate companies – Comeast, News Corp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner and CBS. Narisetty Raju, son of journalist Narisetty Innaih, a noted Telugu journalist, worked as director of News Corp in New York. They live in the US. According to Forbes, 16 billionaires own most of the newspapers including New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post. Same is the case with UK, the mother of modern democracy. Three corporate giants – News UK, Daily Mail Group and Reach own 9o percent of UK media.“The social media remains defiant and also anarchic. When the mainstream media failed the scrutiny, it is social media that gained people’s confidence with all its problems of scandalizing, reckless reportage and irresponsible journalism. “The governments have been very tough with journalists. Most of the times the charges such as money laundering made against Muslim journalists such as Rana Ayyub and Kappan are never proved. The journalists, like rights activists like Vara Vara Rao or Prof. Saibaba, are jailed without assigning any reason. Filing charge sheet is delayed for months and years. As former union home minister P. Chidambaram famously said, the process itself is punishment. The most unsympathetic government is in UP. About 50 journalists have been intensely questioned by police. After special autonomous status was removed by annulling Article 370 of the Constitution in Kashmir, the authorities have been extremely tough with journalist with 35 scribes being interrogated. My friend who was the correspondent of The Hindu and who was running his own newspaper ‘Rising Kashmir’ as its editor, Sujat Bukhari, was gunned down by terrorists in broad day light.

He was of great help when I organized a round table conference in Srinagar to discuss Kashmir issue in 2010. Authorities have been using draconian laws against the journalists including Jammu & Kashmir Public Safety Act. It allows the police to detain anyone

without evidence."In February 2021, union government published the Information Technology Rules which imperil freedom of expression and the right to privacy. These rules empower the government to summarily compel the removal of online content without any judicial oversight."We cannot forget Gauri Lankesh who was killed at her residence in Bengaluru by religious bigots on 5 September 2017. She was working as editor of Lankesh Patrika, a weekly started by her father P. Lankesh. She was fired at four times by a helmet wearing man killing her on the spot. Nobody in top position, including the prime minister, cared to express sorrow or sympathy at the brutal killing of an outspoken left-leaning journalist. "Pegasus reports said about 40 journalists were in the list of those who were put under surveillance." The "search and seize" raid conducted on 31 October 2022 by the Crime Branch of the Delhi police at the offices of The Wire and the homes of its three founding editors, Siddharth Varadarajan, M. K. Venu, and Sidharth Bhatia and two other colleagues marks a new low for media freedom in India. The action was based on the complaint made by Amit Malviya, the BJP leader who is heading the technology (social media) department."It is not only the BJP and the union government that are to be blamed for the sorry state of affairs although they have to share the burden primarily.

The local satraps who attack the Centre for denying freedom to media and for resorting to strong-arm methods are no angels themselves when it comes to handling their detractors. Strong leaders who are the chiefs of the regional parties and also chief ministers such as Mamata Banerjee are no less autocratic in dealing with criticism of their parties or governments. The BJP chief ministers such as Yogi Adityanath of UP and Himanta Biswa Sarma of Assam are also ruthless in dealing with media.""This sharp decline in Press freedom represents a dangerous state of affairs. The condition of the media in India is more often attributed to the

vulnerabilities of Indian democracy and the attitude of the political leadership. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has pointed out three important factors -politically controlled media, the safety of journalists, and the concentration of media ownership - behind the downward spiral of press freedom in India. However, such a sharp decline in press freedom has failed to create any public discourse, leave alone public outcry. The silence on the part of the civil society on the lack of media freedom has compromised the role of media in Indian democracy. Political parties, the academia, social activists, media enterprises, journalists unions themselves have not been protesting against the lack of protection to the media persons and absence of media freedom."Right to dissent should be central to India's media freedom as rightly highlighted by accomplished journalist Palagummi Sainath. Affiliation of the mainstream media with political parties, vested interests and their inability to be independent are the biggest challenges faced by the media in India. There is no public resentment at the political bias displayed by media.

The indifference on the part of the civil society institutions is rather frightening. If democracy were to survive in the country, the civil society must wake up, shed its indifference and take up the responsibility to restore media freedom thus empowering the citizens and reviving the democratic spirit. "Jawaharlal Nehru, whether one likes it or not, was a great prime minister and builder of modern India. Tolerating criticism was his virtue. He said in his speech at the Newspaper Editors Conference on 3 December 1950, "I would rather have a completely free Press with all the dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed Press.""Establishing plurality in ownership, better legal network, proactive governments and alert and responsive civil society can stop the media from falling further down. We need to revive the spirit of freedom and inquiry which Prof. Bashiruddin always encouraged.

Thank you.