

## **PRESS FREEDOM IN INDIA: VIRTUOUS OR VULNERABLE?**

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**Abstract:** *Democracy is one of the best produces of human civilization and the space of democracy has been shrinking all over the world including India. As per the observation of various independent national and international bodies curtailing press freedom is one of the prominent outcomes in this milieu. The Press have been universally recognised as an embodiment of truth for the high ethical standards of objectivity. It is a pivotal actor in the process of promoting pluralism in a country.*

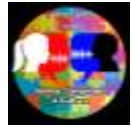
*India as a democracy has been going through relentless transformation since it adopted political emancipation in 1947. Paradoxically two strong notions came into the contemporary surface where freedom of press is being muzzled by agencies of establishment and on the other hand, press is also losing its integrity in a fiercely competitive open market system. In this context, the article will probe into the vulnerability and virtuous role of the press in contemporary India within the aspects of its social accountability, transparency, and intervention on its freedom on the part of the state and non-state actors.*

**Keyword:** *Press Freedom, Censorship, Sedition, Government, Social Responsibility, Reporters without Borders.*

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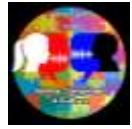
### **Introduction**

In England the innovation of print technology and subsequent publication of newspapers were considered as a mean of breach of peace in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Jogelkar 1). Hence England is contemplated as one of the most significant forerunners of press freedom. The country has experienced a long enduring struggle to protect the right to freedom of speech and expression



as well as freedom of press. John Milton's *Areopagitica: A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing to the Parliament of England* (1644) was emerged as 'immortal defence of free press' against the effort to censor the publication material related to Charles I in 1643 (An Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press 58). As an addition of three estates of British monarchy such as lords, church and commons, British parliamentarian Edmund Burke first proclaimed press as fourth estate in 1787 on the occasion of inauguration of Press Gallery in House of Commons to refer the intrinsic importance of press in constructing informed citizenry. Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press - based on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 1791 'First Amendment absolutists' were strongly vociferated for the idea of free press (Baran and Davis 100). Since late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century various Western capitalist countries including England, France, Germany, USA and so on started to howl for the civil and political rights of individuals including the right to freedom of speech & expression and freedom of press which was guided by the principle of enlightenment of liberalism. Conversely Soviet newspapers like *Spark*, *Pravda*, *Izvestia* instigated a new enthusiasm amid the working class based on Marxist-Leninist ideology. In socialist regime, the Bolshevik definition of press freedom was "For the workers' and peasants' government, freedom of the press means liberation of the press from capitalist oppression, and public ownership of paper mills and printing presses; equal right for public groups of a certain size (say, numbering 10,000) to a fair share of newsprint stocks and corresponding quantity of printers' labour" (qtd. in McNair 28).

Benedict Anderson in his influential book *Imagined Community* crucially marked the impact of unification with the rapid expansion of print-market and radical reformation in Europe at the 16<sup>th</sup> century in rise of national consciousness (Anderson 39). However, while western countries were playing the role of free press advocates in their own country at the same time, paradoxically the condition of press freedom in their colonies was dreadful. As a British colony India has witnessed severe violations of human rights including the right to freedom of speech and expression. Lenin remarked that "there is no end to the violence and plunder which is called British rule in India" (qtd. in Moitra 24). Since the battle of Plassey (1757) East India Company established Oligarchy with a purpose of carrying on 'colossal direct plunder' which consequentially wrecked the traditional Indian economic base (Dutt, 36). To maintain strong imperial control imposition of heavy censorship, forfeiture of newspaper's

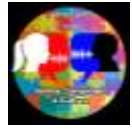


property, seizure of security deposit along with detention, arrest and jail of reporters, editors and publishers were quite usual and regular phenomena during the British Raj.

Though all those constraints the press in British India played a glorious role to raise voice against imperial exploitation and also proliferated nationalism & social reform. In independent India the internal emergency of 1975-1977 tried to destroy the pluralist democratic structure of the country. Hence newspapers of India including mainstreams like The Statesman and The Indian Express evinced fearlessness against totalitarianism in the wide array of press freedom. In post 1991 liberalisation era Indian media started to change its face due to the fiercely competitive character of open market system. Recently in consecutive two years (2020 & 2021) India ranked 142 out of 180 countries in World Press Freedom Index (WPF) published by Paris based international NGO Reporters Without Borders (RSF). Since the rule of British monarchy to contemporary India the condition of press freedom is discussed in the article in the light of virtuousness and vulnerability.

### **Colonial Era**

Partha Chatterjee in an article titled *Whose Imagined Community?* discussed the impact of introduction of printing press in India by the patronage of East India Company and Christian missionaries at the end of the eighteenth century in light of Anderson's idea of 'Print Capitalism' (Chatterjee 224). The printing press was installed in Calcutta in the year 1779 by the Company and subsequently in the next year the first newspaper of India was published by James Augustus Hickey. *Bengal Gazette or Calcutta General Advertiser* initiated the glorious journey of Indian journalism but for the revelation of corrupt practices of company's officials and mainly personal attacks on Governor-General, chief justice etc., the first newspaper of India was seized in 1782 and Hickey had to face imprisonment and huge fine for the charge of libel. According to J Natarajan in the formative years of Indian press, censorship was first imposed on *Madras Gazette* in 1795 (Natarajan 7). After a few years another effort was taken by the fifth Governor-General of India Lord Wellesley in 1799 by implementing the *Censorship of Press Act*. The first press ordinance issued by the acting Governor-General of Company, John Adam in 1823 stated that all matters should be printed and published under licence from the Governor-General-in-Council with signature of Chief Secretary of the Government. Along with five other eminent Bengali personalities Raja Rammohun Roy's petition to the Supreme Court to protect his Persian newspaper *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* or *Mirror of Intelligence* from the obnoxious Adam's Gag referred as the '*Areopagitica* of Indian History'



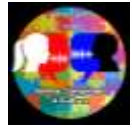
by Sophia Dobson Collet in the book *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Collet and Sarkar 101). Many historians claimed that the press ordinance of 1823 was essentially the predecessor of *Vernacular Press Act 1878* which was came forth to maintain rigid control over the language newspapers of India by the Viceroy of India Lord Lytton.

During the Company Raj first Law Commission of India (1833) under the headship of Thomas Macaulay recommended to formulate penal code for India. In the year 1860 Indian Penal Code (IPC) was adopted by the British Govt. including sections of 99 A, 99 G, 124 A, 505 for the punishment of seditious activities. Section 124 A stated that “whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards the Government established by law in India, shall be punished with transportation for life or any shorter term, to which fine may be added, or with imprisonment which may extend to three years, to which fine may be added, or with fine” (Sinha 2019).

In the next century the *Newspapers (Incitement to Offences) Act* of 1908, the *Press Act of 1910*, *Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act 1911*, the *Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1913*, finally draconian *Defence of India Act* in 1914, and *Indian Press (Emergency Powers) Act 1931* enacted to tighten the inflexible restrictions on the press during the war years (Barns 336). Following the British Official Secrets acts, *Indian Official Secrets Act 1923* was enacted to secure utmost secretive information in the interest of the state which invoked the much-debated issues of transparency vs state secret (“Transparency”). In spite of all this endeavour to curtail the freedom of press Nationalist leaders of India including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bipin Chandra Pal and many others used newspaper as an instrument of propagation of patriotism as well as public opinion formation against the British Govt. Hitherto, amidst all the stories of repression during the colonial rule few Englishmen like James Silk Buckingham, Lord Bentinck, Lord Ripon, Lord Duffrein, Sir Charles Metcalf etc. will be always remembered as the passionate defender of liberty of press in India.

### **Post-independence Era**

After the World War II numerous countries became free from imperial rule in Asian and African continent. In India political emancipation was achieved in 1947 and the first Prime Minister of India Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru believed press freedom as an essential practice of democracy. Nehru was closely associated with *National Herald* since 1938 which played

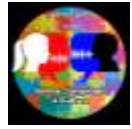


pivotal role in freedom struggle. *Problems of partition, communal disturbances, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, border conflict with Pakistan, communist insurgency appeared as a crucial challenge at the inception stage of independent India (Jogelkar 46). On the other hand, the commercialisation of press was started by the consolidation of ownership in the hand of big business houses like Dalmia-Jain group, Goenka, Birla and so on.*

### **Constitutional Provisions**

*When India attained freedom at the same year, Hutchins Commission submitted its report in USA on freedom of press which centrally focused on social responsibility of press. After the long history of colonial exploitation, in post 1947 phase policy makers of India perceived the inevitability of socially accountable press in reconstruction of nation. The first cabinet minister of Ministry of Law & Justice, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, drafted the Constitution of India which came into effect in 1950 with the article 19 (1) (a) – the guarantee of right to freedom of speech and expression for every Indian citizen as a fundamental right. Indian Constitution explicitly did not guarantee the right to freedom of press. Hence Dr. Ambedkar himself; B.N. Rau, Advisor of Constituent Assembly and apex court of India in many cases explained press freedom as an indispensable part of right to freedom of speech and expression. Nevertheless, freedom of speech and expression was not absolute as few reasonable restrictions such as decency or morality, contempt of court, defamation, security of the State were incorporated in article 19 (2) considering the notion of social responsibility. Next year in The Constitution (First Amendment) Act 1951 added three more restrictions such as friendly relations with foreign state, public order and incitement to an offence. Later in the year 1963 sovereignty and integrity of India was also included as reasonable restriction in article 19 (2).*

*In the year 1951, two significant professional bodies of Indian journalism, All India Newspaper Editors' Conference (AINEC) and Indian Federation of Working Journalists (IFWJ) robustly criticised the revision of the article 19 (2) and The Press (Objectionable Matter) Act 1951. After the independence almost immediately Press Laws Enquiry Committee submitted its report in 1948 after an elaborate introspection of existing press laws in India but Govt. did not take any appropriate measure which was another aspect of dissatisfaction with the Govt. Home Minister Chakravarti Rajagopalachari tried to resolve the dispute between Govt. and press to maintain cordial relationship and finally Govt. of*

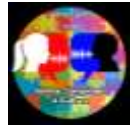


*India agreed to the demand of IFWJ to form press commission in India. The Royal Commission on Press was formed in Britain in 1947 and as a colonial legacy India followed the same path in 1952. Both first (1952-1954) and second press commission (1980-1982) formed with stalwarts of different arenas decisively emphasised the role of press in a democracy as a constructive critique of the Govt.*

### ***Emergency Era (1975-1977)***

*In independent India censorship was imposed during Indo-Pak border conflict (1947-1948 & 1965), Operation Polo in Hyderabad (1948), Indo-China border conflict (1962), Bangladesh Liberation War (1971). Therefore, prior to Indira Gandhi's tenure (1966-1977) India never witnessed large-scale concentrated effort to suppress the press by means of heavy censorship. D.K. Barooah, the president of Indian National Congress during 1975-1977, coined a controversial slogan 'India is Indira and Indira is India' a week before the emergency declared, signified the infinite power of Indira Gandhi (Paul 207). Internal emergency was imposed by the order of the President of India, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed based on the article 352 of constitution in 1975. In the introductory chapter of the book *In the Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency* Historian Bipan Chandra penned the declaration as "The step sent shock waves across the nation ... dark night of long-term dictatorship has descended on the country" (Chandra 1). Internal emergency "... abolished the Press Council, merged the major news agencies into one agency, modified advertisement policy, withdrew housing facilities to journalists, and warned foreign correspondents of deportation if they failed to follow the rules of censorship" (Aikat 38). *White Paper on Misuse of Mass Media during the Internal Emergency* revealed that total of 253 journalists and editors arrested (among which 170 were arrested under MISA – Maintenance of Internal Security Act & DISIR - Defence and Internal Security of India Rules); the entry into India was banned for 27 foreign correspondents and accreditation was withdrawn of 51 Indian journalists (Bhargava 53). Public Service Broadcaster of the country All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan became the propaganda machine of Government.*

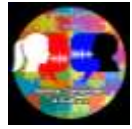
*International media including *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, *The Guardian* denounced the autocratic rule of Prime Minister Gandhi for deprivation of liberty of Indian citizens. When emergency was declared opposition leaders, activists from all over the India were arrested for so called internal disturbances. *The Indian Express*, *The Statesman* with small independent publications like *Freedom First*, *Himmat*, *Opinion*, *Thuglaq* and various other*



vernacular publications formed crescendo by simultaneous fearless protest against press censorship without any fallacy. Chakraborty & Bhattacharya in their book *News Behind Newspapers: A Study of Indian Press* mentioned that on the first day of emergency power supply was cut off in *The Indian Express* and *The Statesman's* Delhi office. There are innumerable ruthless instances of curtailment of democratic rights but finally under the leadership of prolific socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan, Indian National Congress lost its power in sixth general election of 1977 and Indira Gandhi herself defeated from the Rae Bareli constituency of Uttar Pradesh. As a consequence, first non-congress Govt. was formed in centre by Janata Party under the prime minister ship of Morarji Desai. Janata Party Govt. took valiant efforts to restore the freedom of press in India by the formation of three vital committees such as Das Committee on the misuse of mass media during emergency period; Verghese Committee on the autonomy of All India Radio & Doordarshan; Kuldip Nayar Committee on restructuring the existing news agency Samachar (Singh 43).

### **LPG**

Government adopted economic reform measures promoted liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation in India after 1991. Specifically, there had been a rapid expansion of privately owned electronic media which positively generated huge transformation of print media to be technologically upgraded, adopting professional outlook, and behaving sensitively considering the market forces. Contemporary press followed the diversity of language, management set up, topics, and news contents (Ray 10). Media consumption increased to a great extent in the post-liberalisation period. Also, in the case of print media, there was a trend of higher circulation opening the prospects of garnering more advertising revenue. Emergence of big media houses and subsequent corporatisation of media looked for commercial enterprises to gain huge revenue. It led to the monopolisation of print media threatening the survival of small and medium regional newspapers which faced acute financial crisis due to rapid spread of big media houses in localised and regional press. This instance of excessive commercialisation created convergence of press both horizontal and vertical. This very structure and concentrated ownership patterns led to the devaluation of the office of the editor leading to a big blow upon editorial freedom in the organisational policy formation and induced various corruption and malpractices like distortion of the facts, publishing paid news, and sensationalization of news, etc. Herman and Chomsky in their phenomenal book "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media"



categorically said that these constraints are extremely powerful and inbuilt in the system in such an inherent way that ‘alternative bases of news choices are hardly imaginable’ (62).

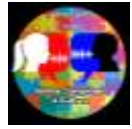
### *Contemporary India*

William Blackstone, eminent advocate of freedom of press in eighteenth-century Britain in his “Commentaries” in 1769 exclusively propagated the idea of free press. The Blackstonian concept of press freedom spoke for the balance between press freedoms and concerned legal bindings to retain the equilibrium at the level of State administration, individual human rights and wider social norms (Blackstone 150-153).

In the contemporary situation of India, several black holes emerged from both the sides of the governmental authority and the press at large. Political scenario of the country has been always a decisive factor in the extent of freedom enjoyed by the Indian press since its advent in the country continuing even after independence. On the other hand, the press is being alleged with various malpractices like corruption, paid news syndromes, fake news, media trials, unethical practices of string operations, etc. Political infiltration into the sphere of Indian media production becomes an indispensable feature. In recent times various allegations of severe repression of the press like in case of revocation of special status of Jammu & Kashmir, amendment of Citizenship Act and NRC, Covid-19 pandemic, farmers’ protest have been raised. The freedom of the press is vastly muzzled through various legal measures like imposing charges of sedition and subsequent imprisonment, placing criminal charges under *Official Secrets Act*, *National Security Act*, *National Investigation Agency (NIA)*, *Unlawful Activities Prevention Act*, other various sections of *Criminal Procedure Code* of India all over the country. Government intervention in the reconstitution of the self-regulatory bodies like PCI, Central Press Accreditation Committee (CPAC) was seemingly biased and termed as “veiled censorship” (“Indian Diversity” IFJ 41).

After the commencement of nationwide lockdown on 25<sup>th</sup> march, 2020 many journalists have been charged with the allegation of sedition, and summoned to the police station for reporting of Govt’ s inefficiency in the handling of pandemic both at the national and state levels. The Government broadly repressed news coverage by means of prosecuting journalists at incoherence with official information in their coverage of Covid 19 pandemic despite the refusal of the Supreme Court of India to interfere with the free discussion on the pandemic on 31<sup>st</sup> March. International Press Institute (IPI) held Indian Government accountable for violating press freedom by adopting various repressive measures to restrict media from

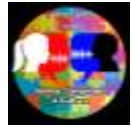




reporting critically about the government handling of the pandemic with 84 reported cases of violation among which 56 journalists were charged or arrested and 23 faced verbal and physical assaults ("Over 600 " IPI). According to the NCRB Crime in India (CII) report 796 cases under UAPA and 73 cases under Sedition were registered in 2020. From 2014 to 2020, the cases registered under UAPA, and Sedition together amounted to nearly 15% of all the cases registered under 'offences against the State'. An average of 986 cases under UAPA & 57 under Sedition registered annually since 2014 (Pavithra). In 2020, Press Council of India, a state-owned self-regulatory body had been incessantly vocal against government authorities' censorship on mass media (Vaidik et al. 1201). The said institution in an open letter to all the political parties of the country expressed grave concern at the introduction of a "lottery system" to restrict the entry of journalists in the winter session of the parliament held last month. The letter said that this system is much against the spirit of parliamentary democracy of the country (Kuchay).

At the revocation of Jammu & Kashmir's special constitutional status, availability of the internet had been completely cut off for a very long period and all the journalistic articles had been passing through the Govt. surveillance from the media facilitation centre of Srinagar. Since 1990 at least 21 journalists in Kashmir valley have been killed for their work, making the journalists of the region most vulnerable in the country in terms of assassination of journalists alone while country wise the number of murdered journalists is more than 120 over 25 years, with 95 percent of cases "still languishing in the labyrinths of pending court cases" ("Indian Diversity" IFJ 42-43). In '2021 ROUND-UP' report of Reporters without Borders, India holds third place with Yemen in the ranking of deadliest countries for the media (17). Several times journalists of foreign press have been restricted from entering the valley. In 2019 after Pulwama suicide attack State government advertisements were stopped to three leading newspapers, *Greater Kashmir*, *Kashmir Reader* and *Kashmir Uzma* without any official order in advance and in the same year the central government also banned advertising revenue flow for a certain time period to three highly circulated English language dailies namely *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, and *The Telegraph* for their critical reporting ("Indian Diversity" IFJ 45; Withnall).

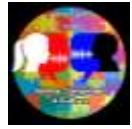
In 2019 the central govt. restricted the press coverage of protests over Citizenship Amendment Act in the name of retaining law and order of the country. It stated that some of the CAA demonstrations as the "promotion of anti-national attitudes" (Chaudhary). The journalists are often facing hostility for their fearless reporting. A large number of journalists



are being booked, arrested or assaulted for reporting on farmers' protests. Eight eminent journalists were booked under charges of sedition, criminal conspiracy and promoting enmity for their reporting on farmers' protest in January, 2021. Human Rights Watch (HRW) condemned their arrest while referring to it as a prosecution of the journalists reporting on the events on the part of the Indian authorities (Curtis, 16).

In recent years, the Indian government has also given forewarning to the foreign newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Washington Post*, *Time Magazine*, *The Economist*, *BBC*, and *Huffington Post*, etc. for portraying the image of the country negatively (Aurora). Central government appointed an Index Monitoring Cell (IMC) in May, 2020. The committee in its draft report submitted in December 3, 2020 categorically opined that low ranking in press freedom is the result of "western bias" as it is not in the line of ground reality. Veteran journalist, P. Sainath, one of the members of the committee in a different note raised serious allegations against the committee over neglecting key issues of concern in press freedom in recent years throughout the country. His note also conveyed concerns over the arbitrary sacking under the intimidation by government agencies, retrenchment, forced 'voluntary' resignations initiated by the media houses under the ploy of Covid-19 pandemic (Santha).

On the other side of the coin, in numerous instances Indian media including the press also has succumbed its integrity to a large scale in the changing economic scenario of the country after the economic reform of 1991 leading to nexus between capitalism, commercialisation and power politics. Chomsky explained that according to the "propaganda model" proposed by Edward Herman and him in 1989 "the media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly" (26-27). Simultaneously paid news syndrome, media trial, and unscrupulous practices of sting operation as a means of investigative journalism became grave issues of concern for public agenda, judiciary, and self-regulatory bodies of press like Press Council of India (PCI) in contemporary media scenarios. Franklin et al. proposed the 'lapdog media' model of journalism which rigorously promotes the agenda of socio-political elite and perpetuates exploitation and social inequalities (130). TRP manipulation scam of 2020 concerning the alleged inflation of viewership ratings by some TV news channels is a visible instance of this kind of malpractices devoid of ethical norms of journalism (Mukhopadhyay).



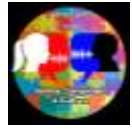
According to Patnaik declining media power in safeguarding humane values and uttering concern for the marginalised and the suffering are results of 'the process of ascendancy of international financial capital over the economy, which the media, paradoxically, with a few honourable exceptions, have avidly supported' (qtd. in Ram 1304; Patnaik). In a way Indian press is going through multifarious circumstances aroused from inbuilt pressures of capitalism, corporatisation, and consumerism of globally run market economy, power politics, politically biased ideology, immense repressive measures of the state both at the national and state level, and incessant threat situation from other non-state actors of the country while press freedom is decidedly violated in the very process.

### **Conclusion**

In this period of crisis where on the one hand press freedom is outlandishly repressed by the various agencies of the establishment, profit oriented open break-neck market economy, actors of corporatisation, threats from highly partisan politics, indiscriminate use of colonial laws in the context of reckless nationalism, integrity of media is also being questioned for malpractices like media trial, paid news syndrome, string operation by unethical means, neglecting marginalised issues, arbitrary retrenchment by the media houses, etc. To retain pluralism and spirit of democracy the press must stand upon its moral values with an acute humaneness towards the ethnic culture of the country.

The ever-rising strong criminal cases, allegations of sedition, murder and life-threatening attacks against journalists over the last few years show the strong demeanour of the Indian press to retain its freedom of speech and expression despite integral pressures from concentrated ownership, monopolised organisational set up, acute commercialisation, and subsequent overpowering politicised ideology. The actors from all the layer of democracy should become a part of consensus building to retain freedom of the press by incessantly campaigning for progressive reform, introducing social accountability, promoting transparency, along with effective governance and regulation on the part of the media and also for repealing the colonial laws restricting media freedom, providing punitive power upon the self-regulatory media bodies to promote strong regulatory mechanism, nurturing institute of excellence and other independent bodies for promoting democratic values of the country.

Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana remarked that Sec. 124 A of IPC is being misused by the authorities to trample down citizens' fundamental right of free speech and liberty (Rajagopal). Despite the denial of crucifixion of press freedom in India avidly following the



line of running establishment, Index Monitoring Cell's recommendations like decriminalisation of defamation, review of colonial laws impacting press freedom in India, consent of PCI be made mandatory for filing an FIR against a media person, time bound investigation and filing of chargesheet by police authorities be made compulsory, and implementation of the recommendation of the Majthia Wage Board show some ray of light into this dark horizon of strangled press freedom. In the absence of efforts of transforming the press into a propaganda machine of Government and corporates, in nutshell by powerful elites, it could flourish by playing a constructive role through maintaining high ethical standards of journalism and could leave a pivotal impact in inclusive development and in raising voice for the voiceless in this country. Independent and socially accountable press playing role of a fourth estate could retain the democratic values of a country as Nobel laureate journalist Maria Ressa prudently said "We need to help independent journalism survive, first by giving greater protection to journalists and standing up against states which target journalists" in the platform of Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo ("Nobel Peace").

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