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“Paid News”:

How corruption in the Indian media undermines democracy

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The late Shri Prabhash Joshi’s last speech on “paid news”

One of India’s most renowned journalists, the late Shri Prabhash Joshi was a crusader against “paid news”. He approached the Press Council of India and the Election Commission of India on his own and urged these two bodies to do their best to curb such malpractices. In one of his last public speeches before he expired on November 5, 2009, at a seminar organised by the Foundation for Media Professionals in New Delhi on October 28, 2009, he named some of the politicians who had either refused to pay money or those who had complained to him about publications charging money for carrying news stories.

Among the several politicians who had spoken to him on paid news, Shri Joshi referred to Shri Atul Kumar Anjaan of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and said: “Shri Atul Anjaan of the Communist Party of India would often start his speech by drawing a parallel between a marriage celebration and an election campaign. He would say that when a marriage takes place, those who build *pandals* and tents, decorators and food caterers, quote higher than normal rates for their services. On specific days, when marriages take place, these service providers increase their rates taking advantage of the rise in demand and shortfall in supply. Newspaper owners acted in an identical manner when they demanded money from candidates in exchange for publishing news about them just before elections.”

On that occasion, he made a scathing attack on sections of the media that had masqueraded advertisements as political news in the run-up to the general elections. He sharply criticized particular media organizations for entering into covert agreements with candidates of political parties and accepting illegal money from them for publicizing their activities and/or putting down their rivals. Such practices undermined and compromised the very basis of the role that an independent media is expected to play in a democracy. He listed various instances of impropriety followed by journalists and media organizations in Hindi-speaking states before the 2009 general elections. Barring a few, most newspapers in these states entered into deals with candidates of various political

parties contesting in the general elections whereby they offered publicity packages to specific candidates and/or political parties to which they belonged for money.

“Packages” had been formulated by various media groups and the newspaper offering the “package” would publish no news whatsoever about the individual candidate and/or his or her party if the candidate/party did not accept the package. Shri Joshi mentioned accounts of various political leaders who had complained to him regarding the widespread practice of paid news in media houses in the states. He mentioned in particular about the cases narrated to him by Shri Lalji Tandon, Member of Parliament from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh (UP), belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); Shri Mohan Singh of the Samajwadi Party, who fought the election from Deoria in UP; Shri Harmohan Dhawan, who was a Union Minister in the government headed by former Prime Minister, the late Shri Chandra Shekhar; and Haryana Chief Minister, shri Bhupinder Singh Hooda.

Here are translated excerpts from his speech delivered in Hindi:

“Most of the newspaper owners and a few editors as well believe that their brand of journalism is head and shoulders above public scrutiny. It seems some of them also believe that readers have, somewhere along the way, forfeited their rights to question the integrity of the press...the media primarily draws its freedom and independence from the fact that its readers are free citizens of this country. The notion of freedom of the press follows thereafter. And if newspapers or media organizations violate the rights of the citizens of India, the right of freedom of expression could be withdrawn from them.

“During the 2009 general elections, I visited all the Hindi-speaking states ... most newspapers in these states entered into deals with candidates of various political parties contesting in the general elections whereby they offered publicity packages to specific candidates and/or political parties to which they belonged in lieu of money. A package generally comprised rates (sometimes, in column centimetres) for coverage of the political activities and campaign speeches of the candidate, printing an interview with the candidate or even to launch a tirade against a particular opponent or opponents of the concerned candidate. Rate cards were prepared and given to candidates together with a warning that the newspaper offering the package would publish no news whatsoever about the individual candidate and/or his or her party if the candidate/party did not accept the package.

“I have been hearing about Shri A.K. Roy, former Member of Parliament from Dhanbad in Jharkhand, for a long time. In the last election that he contested, not even a single newspaper cared to publish a line about him. Shri A.K. Roy represents the workers and labourers of that area. His inability (or unwillingness) to pay the huge sums of money demanded by newspapers for providing publicity is understandable.

“Take another example, namely, that of Shri Lalji Tandon, who helped Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee get elected each time from Lucknow. He said that there was not a single newspaper in Lucknow that had not tried to strike a deal with him. In the last election, a

Lucknow-based newspaper asked him to pay a certain amount for getting news about himself published. A shocked Shri Tandon asked the newspaper owners as to why money was being demanded from him despite the fact that he had been in public service for a long time. The newspaper owners replied that no news would be published about him unless he paid money. Even newspapers that had accepted favours from him in the past refused to publish any news about him unless he paid them. Eventually Shri Lalji Tandon decided against paying money and went ahead with his decision to contest the elections without accepting any publicity package from any newspaper.

“During his election campaign, Shri Lalji Tandon would tell the public gathered at his political rallies to ignore what was written in those newspapers to which he had refused to pay any money. He said he would rather want those listening to him to read other newspapers. In the same election, an opponent of Lalji Tandon bought three packages: one that would ensure that negative news was published about him; another package for doing the same against Smt Rita Bahuguna Joshi, Uttar Pradesh Congress party chief; and the third package was for his own publicity. He paid the newspaper a sum of Rs one crore for carrying positive reports about him in the hope that it would ensure his victory. When Shri Lalji Tandon was declared the winner in the Lok Sabha elections, he again exhorted the public in his rallies to avoid reading certain newspapers and pointed out that despite the negative coverage given to him, he had still been able to win the elections. He is the same Shri Lalji Tandon, who had earlier ensured that a prominent newspaper owner was able to obtain a seat in the Rajya Sabha.

“Similarly, Shri Mohan Singh of the Samajwadi Party who fought the election from Deoria in Uttar Pradesh, was asked to purchase a publicity package if he wanted news about himself to be published. When nothing was eventually published about him, he openly asked questions as to why he should be paying any money to the same newspaper owner to have news about himself to be published when the owner of the newspaper did not have to pay a single paisa to get elected to the Rajya Sabha.

“Shri Harmohan Dhawan, who was a minister in the government of former Prime Minister, the late Shri Chandra Shekhar, contested the general elections of 2009 on a Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) ticket from Chandigarh. Normally, BSP candidates spend large amounts of money in contesting elections, but Shri Dhawan refused to part with any money that was asked of him by newspaper owners. In a diary, he has written down the names of all those newspapers that demanded money from him. While addressing several press conferences as well as public rallies, he urged people not to believe what newspapers wrote because owners of these publications were corrupt.

“The most interesting episode concerns the Haryana Chief Minister, Shri Bhupinder Singh Hooda. He once chanced upon a newspaper that was carrying on its front page, a detailed report of one of his meetings that had taken place three days earlier. Together with the report that had been printed in a box, a big picture of the Chief Minister had been published. A surprised Shri Hooda then called the newspaper’s office to know the reason why this report had been published after a delay of three days. The owner of the newspaper then said he would make necessary enquiries and get back to him. The owner

then called Shri Hooda and told him that what had been published was not a report, but an advertisement. An angry Shri Hooda asked the newspaper owner as to why he had published such an advertisement on the front page. The newspaper owner informed him that they did provide such services for a fee. Shri Hooda then told the owner to publish an advertisement in the following day's edition that would state: 'This newspaper lies and takes money to print news'. Petrified over the Chief Minister's terse and unexpected reaction, the newspaper owner thereafter provided free publicity to Hooda's son.

"Every newspaper has made a calculation as to how much it would lose financially if it ever invited the ire of a chief minister. Some time ago I had been to Patna and happened to meet a newspaper owner during my visit there. He asked me to persuade (Bihar Chief Minister) Shri Nitish Kumar to help him by placing state government advertisements in his newspaper that had incurred a loss of Rs 73 lakh that month.

"A friend of mine who had gone to campaign for a candidate in Maharashtra reported that this particular candidate had spent Rs 18 crore during the election. Friends, I recount these stories not merely for the sake of it, but because I had been a witness to some of these conversations...I understand that these days particular candidates spend between Rs 1 crore and Rs 2 crore on payments to the media during elections. Each candidate hires on an average, two employees to write news stories about him which are printed without editing and sought to be passed off as independent editorial content.

"... I would like to conclude my speech with a suggestion that a law needs to be enacted, whereby, if one publishes an article after being paid a certain sum of money, it needs to be mentioned very clearly along with the article that the content has been paid for and therefore, happens to be an advertisement. Newspaper owners generally put forth an argument that what they bring out are products. But then they conveniently forget to mention the contents of their products. For example, every medicine that one buys carries information about its contents as well as its manufacturing, packaging and expiry dates. The day newspapers start giving out details of the sponsor of an editorial or a report, they would realise it is impossible carry on with the kind of fraud that is being perpetrated on readers. Secondly, before elections, the Election Commission should consider every political news story as an advertisement and should calculate the cost that must have been incurred by the candidate to publish the advertisement. This amount should then be added to the official expenditure of the candidate and if the candidate is found to have exceeded the expenditure limits specified by the Election Commission, he should be disqualified from contesting the elections. This would help break the nexus that exists between politics and many sections of the media."

Before he made this speech, Shri Joshi wrote a series of articles in various newspapers and magazines highlighting many of the instances already enumerated. For instance, on May 10, 2009, he wrote in *Jansatta* that on April 15, the Varanasi edition of *Hindustan* newspaper had published on its front page three articles praising a particular candidate named Tulsi Singh Rajput. These were the first lead story, the second lead article and a third article at the bottom of the page. In addition, three photographs of Shri Rajput, including one spread over three columns, were printed on the same page. The following

day's edition of the *Hindustan* carried a clarification that what had been published the previous day was an advertisement. The clarification added that the fact that the earlier "news" reports were advertisements should have been stated as such as this was the newspaper's stated editorial policy.

Besides writing articles, Shri Joshi repeatedly urged all right-thinking individuals to protest against the "paid news" phenomenon and carry out a campaign against such malpractices. Shri Joshi has passed away but many people, including several journalists, have been inspired by the ideals he stood for and have taken the campaign forward. As Shri Joshi and others have pointed out, the phenomenon of "paid news" vitiates the election process simply because the money spent is not audited and violates the mandatory guidelines relating to election expenses laid down in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, that is meant to be enforced by the Election Commission of India.
