

Launch of the Certificate Programme in Applied Journalism (CAJ)

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Special address by N. Ram

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I am pleased to join you all at this formal inauguration of the Certificate Programme in Applied Journalism, which is open to graduates drawn from various disciplines.

You have come here to be educated, trained, and upskilled in applied journalism over a six-month period, which means you have plenty to learn and do in a relatively short time. This programme has been conceptualised and structured in alignment with one of the key policy goals of the Government of Tamil Nadu, India's top-performing State overall, which is led by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin. The progressive policy goals are to build and enhance vocational or practical skills and help develop capabilities among young people that are relevant and valuable to society, that can be put to ready use in the workplace, and that can widen social opportunity. These can include skills in specialized areas, such as writing skills, editing skills, production skills, presentational skills, design skills, skills in rapidly developing technology fields, and so on.

You have come to the right place, my alma mater. Over the decades, Loyola College has been renowned for academic excellence but equally for opening its gates and doors wide and providing opportunity for young people drawn from various sections of society. This encompasses a policy of affirmative action in favour of the socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged. The fact that this CAJ programme is being conducted by the Loyola College in partnership with the Tamil Nadu Skill Development Corporation gives the programme a special and widespread appeal. I learnt that there were 571 applications for the 100 places on offer and that the selection

process was rigorous, involving written tests and interviews. This augurs well for the new programme, although the gender balance, 75 men to 25 women, could be better.

Gabriel García Márquez, the Nobel Prize-winning writer who started as a journalist and remained engaged with journalism and journalism education all his life, had a clear view of what a journalism education programme should look like. In a lecture titled “Journalism: The Best Job in the World,” delivered in Los Angeles in 1996, Marquez put forward the view that the education and training of young journalists must focus strongly on developing professional skills. The programmes must, he said, “rest on three central pillars: the priority of aptitudes and vocations; the certainty that investigation is not a professional speciality but that all journalism should, by definition, be investigative, and the awareness that ethics are not an occasional condition but should always accompany journalism like the buzz accompanies the blowfly.”

The state of the news media and the state of journalism might be closely related but they are at their heart two different things. Everyone knows that the economics, ecosystem, and ways of the media have been disrupted in the most profound sense in the digital age, by the technological transformations and by the emergence and impact of the social media as a game-changing behemoth. The Covid-19 pandemic, with its lockdowns and work-from-home protocols, accelerated this process, creating new opportunities and challenges.

Historically speaking, the digital age took its time to arrive in our country. For well over a decade, India lagged behind several developing countries, notably China, in internet use and broadband development. This led to a general attitude of complacency and denial in mainstream media organisations towards what was coming. But that situation has changed. The digital age is truly upon us. And the Indian media landscape is being transformed by the same forces and trends that operate elsewhere. This means the same vital challenges must be faced, although the time scale and effects might be somewhat different.

The established media, newspapers, television, and radio across India are engaged in scaling up, diversifying, and enhancing their digital operations. Then there are the digitally native, young journalistic ventures doing interesting things, as of now mostly on a modest scale.

Our press, the printed newspaper and magazine sector, is over two centuries old. Its strengths have largely been shaped by its historical experience and by its association with the freedom struggle and with movements for social emancipation, reform, and amelioration. The long struggle for independence; the sharp ideological and political divides; controversies and battles over social reform; radical and revolutionary aspirations and movements; compromising as well as fighting tendencies; and the competition between self-serving and public service visions of journalism – these have all found reflection in the character and performance of the Indian press over the long term.

There is still considerable diversity in the Indian newsroom, whether we are speaking about newspapers, television, radio, or the new media. Pluralism in the Indian media can be said to reflect the vast regional, linguistic, socio-economic, and cultural heterogeneity of the subcontinent. A positive factor for our news media is that over the past quarter-century, their social representativeness has broadened. There has been a rapid feminization of the newsroom. Alongside this, the composition of the journalistic workforce has become more inclusive in socio-economic and regional terms. However, the number of Dalit journalists in the mainstream news media continues to be insignificant.

The digital age, with its dizzying speed of technological transformations and the new ways people, especially young women and men, consume media products, has disrupted the media field. It has brought about deep changes in the ways of doing journalism. But does this imply that the elements of journalism, its conceptual frame, and its values have been rendered obsolete by these technology-led transformations? I don't believe so.

The intrinsic relevance and value of journalism as a democratic craft remains. It is a method, however imperfect, of 'capturing the world of events and ideas as they occur'. Journalism in the serious sense is, as Marquez emphasized, a professional pursuit.

A conceptual framework for journalism

The long-term Indian press experience, set in a broader framework, suggests two valuable central functions that the country's best newspapers have performed in modern and contemporary times. These functions may be termed (a) the *credible-informational* and (b) the *critical-analytical-investigative*. An accompanying condition – which evolves over time, typically as an outcome of a democratic or working people's struggle – is that the political system gives newspapers free or relatively free rein, and a public culture of valuing these functions develops. Performed over time, the two central functions working together build *trust* in the press, or more accurately, in individual newspapers.

There are also valuable derivatives of the two central, twinned functions. The first derivative is the agency of the press in *public education*. A second is serving as a *critical forum* for analysis, disputation, and comment, in which different opinions and ideas are freely discussed, debated, and have it out. A third derivative is *agenda building*. Socially conscious media can trigger agenda-building processes to help produce democratic and progressive outcomes; and this they can do best when an authentic public opinion and a congenial context of attitude, feeling, and critical democratic values and practice exist.

A third function of the news media is the *pastime* or *entertainment* function. At its worst, it seeks to purvey escapist entertainment, celebrity worship, vapid talk shows, scandal, and even voyeurism at the expense of everything else. But it can be something different: engaging, entertaining, delving into life's small pleasures, covering hobbies and recreation, mixing in humour and satire, lightening solemn, heavy, ponderous journalism, and in general serving the 'pleasure principle' as the French use that term. This is also a principle cherished and celebrated in Tamil Nadu's great civilizational heritage, our ancient Sangam poetry.

For brevity and clarity, journalism's core tasks, which are relevant today more than ever, can be summarised: (1) verification, (2) sense-making, (3) bearing witness, and (4) investigation. This involves, first and foremost, reporting truthfully what happens on the ground – 'journalism on the street', as a friend and colleague put it to me. In this six-month programme, you will learn and practise this. But you will also learn that journalism, while being a professional pursuit, is not value neutral. It is premised on such principles as truth-telling, freedom and independence, fairness and justice, humaneness, and working in the public interest, for the social good.

But if you look at the current state of journalism in India, you will also need to do a reality check. The democratic functions and values of journalism have come under pressure and, from time to time, they have come under threat and assault. Some of this has to do with the economics of the news media in the digital age but as significant is the challenge our democratic craft faces from authoritarian rulers. These are challenges that everyone entering the field of professional journalism must prepare to face.

There is yet another challenge to professional journalism, or 'curated journalism' as it is sometimes called. This is the challenge of disinformation, especially online disinformation. India faces the problems, risks, and threats posed by disinformation as much as any other major country in the world. A starting point in understanding and meeting the challenge is that we must make a clear and actionable differentiation between *disinformation*, which is deliberate and motivated, and *misinformation*, which is not intentional and is, typically, a result of reporting or editorial failure. Both can cause harm, even significant harm (for example in the case of misinformation, serious harm to an individual's or an institution's reputation).

But it is disinformation scaled up on the search, messaging, and social media platforms operated by the technology companies that presents the major challenges and threats to democracy and, in charged socio-political settings, to human life and

welfare as well. In India, Internet use has taken off and there has been a tremendous growth in the number of users of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Google, Twitter, and so on. (You can look up the numbers.)

Disinformation has been perceived to be a clear and present threat to democracy and the electoral process. Orchestrated disinformation seems to be a major political resource for political parties of the Right, chauvinistic groups, semi-fascistic elements, and in general the practitioners of hate, especially communal hate, for political gain. The Election Commission of India, a constitutionally provisioned body, has acknowledged the risks and the threat of election-related disinformation (including hate speech and 'fake polls') but its response has mostly been ineffective, and quite often it has been one-sided, selective, and discriminatory.

Toxic disinformation, manufactured by communal elements and transmitted on messaging apps, chiefly WhatsApp, has directly led to lynchings of Muslims (on the false and communally charged accusation of 'cow slaughter') and innocent women and poor and vulnerable individuals (on the completely baseless suspicion and charge of 'child lifting'). These cases have been extensively reported in the Indian news media.

There is a third major harm disinformation poses to India – the toxic harm caused to the reputation of prominent intellectuals and other public figures by manufactured falsehood, slander, and demonstrably absurd accusations posted on social media platforms and messaged widely. The authors and spreaders of disinformation have targeted women journalists in a vile and appalling way and have apparently got away with it for the most part.

In policy and practical terms, the response to the challenges posed by disinformation and misinformation must be different. Misinformation in the news sphere (typically reporting or copy-editing mistakes that surface from time to time) needs to be tackled

through corrective and preventive editorial policies, a professional verification culture within the news organisation, on-the-job journalistic training, and self-regulatory mechanisms such as a full-time internal news ombudsperson, by whatever name called, and meaningful codes of practice.

Fortunately, among major Indian States, Tamil Nadu offers significant advantages to the news media and to those who want to do serious, professional, and ethical journalism. Not that there are no negative factors, or that there are no rogue elements, or no one works in the State to spread hate in society. But the political, social, and cultural circumstances, the literary resurgence drawing in new voices, and the professional media climate are, in combination, more favourable to the practice of independent, ethical, trustworthy journalism than in other States.

The message I give you is this: Update your knowledge and develop and sharpen your skills, including your reporting, writing, editing, and presentational skills for the different forms of the media. Take full advantage of this applied journalism programme to learn new digital, multi-platform skills that are in demand in professional media organizations and can be readily applied in the field and in the newsroom. Focus on developing and enhancing your professional capabilities. Do as much 'journalism on the street' as the programme, with its demanding timetable, enables you to do. Embrace new technology without fetishizing it. Stand up for your profession, for the elements of journalism as a democratic craft. Stand up for journalism's basic purpose and values. Protect its independence as best as you can.
