

Extracts of the address by Shri M. Venkaiah Naidu, Hon'ble Vice President of India at the 3rd Justice J.S. Verma Memorial Lecture on "Freedom & Responsibility of Media in the evolving media space", in New Delhi on October 1, 2018

- * * * * *

“It is a singular honour for me to deliver the 3rd Justice J.S. Verma Memorial Lecture on ‘Freedom & Responsibility of Media in the evolving media space’. I am thankful to the organizers for having invited me to share my views with all of you.

As all of you here are aware, Justice Verma was a highly respected legal luminary, who had served as Chief Justice of India and the Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission with utmost distinction.

He was a firm believer in protecting fundamental rights, ensuring social justice and empowerment of women. Justice Verma was a man of great erudition and his knowledge and wisdom were tempered with high ethical and moral values. Above all, he was an outstanding humanist.

The digital media provides news by the minute in a “fastest finger first” mode, with alerts and flashes on smart phones. In this milieu, with media houses scrambling to flash news alerts to an ever-widening base of users, the freedom and responsibility of the media acquire far greater significance than ever before.

In the present digital era when millions are using social media platforms, journalists will have to be extra careful in checking the veracity of information and guard against ‘fake news’, disinformation and misinformation.

Vested interests and mischievous elements will always try to spread false stories. In the recent past, we have been witness to the unfortunate incidents of lynchings due to false information on social media.

In today’s times, the cardinal principles of journalism such as truth, objectivity, accuracy, credibility, fairness, impartiality, humanity and accountability seem to have taken a back seat with news purveyors themselves assuming the role of gate-keepers. Most news channels are obsessed with lending primacy to their points of view.

The disturbing trend of mixing news with views has become the new normal.

Of course, some sections of the media have become propagandists of a particular ideology and reduced broadsheet journalism to pamphleteering. In such a scenario, freedom and responsibility cannot be considered as inseparable. They are as inter-dependent on each other as a TV channel is on an OB Van or a newspaper on newsprint.

Tolerance, acceptance and assimilation of diverse viewpoints have been the hallmark of Indian civilization.

The freedom of media is not absolute and is circumscribed by certain reasonable restrictions relating to security of State, public order, decency or morality, defamation and contempt of court and sovereignty and integrity of India.

Every Indian citizen has a responsibility in protecting the sovereignty and integrity of the country.

The media, particularly the Television medium, should not promote programmes or serials which seek to justify superstitions or promote irrational beliefs. I feel that there should be also be some check on sponsored health programmes, which make exaggerated claims on benefits of health products.

The media should act as a bridge between the Government and people. It ought to ensure that justice is not denied to the people, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized sections of society.

It should give equal importance to all regions of the country and all segments of society. Often, we see excessive focus on political developments and on events closer to the Capital and major metropolitan cities. This must change. The media must focus on development and welfare.

At the risk of sounding didactic, let me add that the Media must enlighten people on their rights as only an informed citizenry can provide the best checks and balances in a democracy. The media should also act as an instrument of reformation in the transformation of India into a leading economic power in the coming decades. Finally, I would like to reiterate that MEDIA should function as 'Means of Empowerment for Development through Informed Actions'.

Thank you. Jaihind!"