To Whom Is the Press Responsible?

The Press Council of India should examine its mandate and objectives.

Two episodes concerning the Indian media in the recent past bring to mind why it is important that the press not only has its ear to the ground, but maintains its close connection to the people on the ground. After all, it is the opinion of the people (primarily expressed through elections, but also other fora) that is the basis of a democratic government. As such, the media is required to maintain a critical distance from authorities and government control so as to ensure that its voice is heard without constraints from them. In the past week, the police in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh filed a case of criminal conspiracy against a journalist for showing children in a primary school being served roti with salt as their mid-day meal. Before that, the chairperson of the Press Council of India (PCI), a retired judge, moved to intervene in a case in the Supreme Court filed by a journalist in Kashmir over the curbs on communication in Jammu and Kashmir.

In both cases, the irony was obvious and disturbing. In the first, the focus was on going after the messenger rather than dealing with the issue he exposed. In the second, the body set up to espouse media freedom was asking to speak in favour of curbing it, going against its normative mandate and the very purpose of its existence.

The PCI's existence is based on the idea that in a democratic society the press needs to be free and responsible at the same time. There can be no doubt that freedom must be exercised responsibly. But, the question that arises here is: To whom is the press responsible in the ultimate analysis? The obvious answer is that it is responsible to the people of the country. It is interesting to note that one of the reasons cited for setting up the PCI is that "control by Government or official authorities may prove destructive" for press freedom and it is best therefore to let peers of the profession assisted by laypersons to regulate it through a properly structured, representative, and impartial machinery. The PCI through the decades has been intermittently criticised for being a "toothless" body, though its role in a number of cases has also been appreciated and even praised. These examples, as media observers have pointed out, include its unstinting support of the press in Punjab during the early 1990s when the state was witnessing a great deal of militancy. During the Ayodhya temple agitation, too, it pulled up newspapers for coverage involving bias in favour of one community that lead to communal polarisation.

The PCI chairperson justified his application for intervention on grounds of national interest and integrity. The petition before the Supreme Court by the *Kashmir Times* executive editor asks that the government be directed to lift the curbs on communication and on mobility of journalists, imposed in Kashmir since 5 August. These restrictions have led to a "virtual blackout" and have disabled the media, and are violating the people's right to know about the decisions that will affect them, it says. And, herein lies the crux of the issue. Is not national interest based on the people being provided with information that will help them make up their minds and opinions on a particular issue? How else are voters supposed to arrive at decisions? It is clear by now that ground-level information on what is happening in the Kashmir Valley has not been available from the Indian media.

It must also be noted here that the Indian press has had a long and glorious history extending from even before the 1857 war of independence. Its trajectory is replete, especially from the end of the 19th century and through the independence movement, with acts of great heroism, risk-taking and selflessness. Many of these journalists, who were also social reformers and freedom fighters, poured what little material resources they had in bringing out publications in various languages, including in English, even as they anticipated and suffered the brutal punitive measures of the British government.

It is heartening that various individual journalists and media organisations have publicly condemned the move of the chairperson of the PCI. The media also reported that certain members of this body were not consulted prior to the application being moved before the Court. The media must demand that an explanation be placed not just before the journalist community, but also the public.

A media that is allowed to report freely performs two important tasks. It informs people to decide on issues of governance and provides a platform for airing of grievances and suggestions, especially for those who feel their voices are weak or unheard. Surely, these are crucial factors in the service of national integrity?