

Inauguration of M.C. Varghese Memorial Lecture Series

(New Delhi – January 28, 2010)

Address by Hon'ble Sh. K.G. Balakrishnan, Chief Justice of India

Sh. Mohammed Hamid Ansari (Hon'ble Vice-President of India),

Sh. M.P. Veerendra Kumar, Mr. Sabu Varghese, Mr. Sajan Varghese,

And Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mr. M.C Varghese was one of the best known journalists in the history of Kerala. Besides being the founder of the Mangalam Group of Publications and editing the *Mathrubhoomi* newspaper, he supported many philanthropic activities in the sectors of education and healthcare.

Coming to the theme of this programme, there is no doubt that the expanding reach of newspapers, television, radio and the internet – has made the media a strong pillar of our collective life. At present, India is one of the few countries where the markets for the print media as well as the electronic and digital media have been continuously growing. As more and more Indians become literate and gain access to television and computers, there is also a commensurate responsibility on the news-media establishments to present accurate and balanced reports.

There is room for introspection because in recent years the increasing commercialization of the mass media has also

had some adverse effects on journalistic practices. When media establishments become preoccupied with the size of their readership or viewership, there is a greater likelihood of journalists resorting to intrusive newsgathering methods and editors approving content without verifying the relevant facts or explaining their proper background.

The tendency of resorting to undue sensationalism or reporting only one side's viewpoint is especially worrying, given the vital role of the mass media in a democratic set-up. In many ways the practice of journalism and politics in a free society is inherently interlinked. Without the free flow of information and opinions, individuals and groups cannot make the rationale choices that ultimately shape public policies. The essential components of politics – i.e. representation, legislation and administration – all depend on how information is exchanged between the citizens. Very often, some statements and actions come to gain meaning only on account of the publicity given to them.

While practices such as 'sting-operations' and high-decibel reporting may be justified in exceptional circumstances, they should not be resorted to as a matter of routine. Especially with regard to the legal system, there has been a raging debate about how unrestrained reporting often dilutes the 'right to fair trial' for accused persons in high-

profile cases. Some suggestions have been put forward to identify clear thresholds for restricting reporting on *sub judice* matters. However, these restrictions will carry meaning only if the journalists themselves are willing to exercise restraint.

There is also a need for the English-language media to look beyond its urban readership and give adequate coverage to issues that are important for the rural setting. In recent years, the rapid growth of some regional-language newspapers has mitigated the imbalance between urban and rural reporting to a certain extent, but more needs to be done on this front.

We must also bear in mind that in the coming years, journalism will no longer be the exclusive preserve of big media establishments. With the increasing penetration of computers and internet access, more and more ordinary citizens are writing about their experiences through websites and blogs. People are using their cellular phones as well as social networking websites to disseminate information in a much faster manner. This means that the editors of mainstream print and electronic media houses need to be on their toes since any misrepresentations or errors in reporting can be quickly pointed out by people at the ground-level. There is also greater scope for a multiplicity of views to be readily available to lay readers and viewers on any issue of

public interest. These changes are already taking place and are forcing media establishments to re-think their business models. We can only hope that this diversification of the public discourse will lead to a more informed citizenry.

With these words, I would like to thank the Mangalam Group of Publications for inviting to the inauguration of the M.C. Varghese Memorial Lecture Series.

***Thank You! ***