

**FREEDOM OF THE PRESS**  
**OR**  
**THE RIGHTS OF THE PRESS**  
**OR**  
**SHOULD PRESS BE REALLY FREE?**  
**OR**  
**A FREE PRESS– THE BACKBONE OF DEMOCRACY**  
**OR**  
**JOURNALISM IN INDIA**

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Essay No. 01

“I would rather have a free Press, with all the dangers that may result from a wrong use of that freedom, than a suppressed or strangled Press.”  
– J.L. Nehru

“Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I shall not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. –Jefferson

Freedom of the Press is the very foundation of and an essential condition for a successful Democracy. It is the backbone of Democracy. In India, the freedom of the Press has been guaranteed by the Constitution. The Press is supposed to be an active link between the government and the people in a democratic country. It investigates official lapses and makes the facts public. It is, in fact, a watch-dog of democracy. It keeps the government on its toes by exposing its various misdoings and acts as a true mirror of public opinion.

The people in a democratic country have a right to know things and this right is a part of the Fundamental Right of Freedom of Speech and Expression. Hence it is the duty of the Press to keep the people informed,

educated and alert. The freedom of the Press does not, however, mean freedom to distort facts, freedom to blackmail people or freedom to indulge in character assassination or cheap sensationalism. The Press is meant to educate public opinion; it is not meant to incite people to senseless violence. The press is not an enemy of the government; it is supposed to help government efforts in creating a healthy climate in society. The press is not there to add to the people's problems and spell misery and dissatisfaction; it has to work to promote the common weal. The Press has to know its responsibilities. It has to ensure that its writings conform to the national objectives and do not run counter to them.

The Press in India, has by and large, been enjoying complete and unfettered freedom. But, at times, it seems that the Press does not play its part in a responsible manner. The freedom enjoyed by the Press is grossly misused. At times, a section of the Press is clearly committed to a line of thought and refuses to look at things objectively. It looks at things through the tinged glasses of prejudice and indulges in mudslinging and baseless criticism. Not only that, some papers openly promote communal hatred and create unnecessary tensions through baseless news and biased views.

There are some important power groups who start their own papers. These people have either enough money to buy those papers, periodicals and magazines or have their cells in the government to bag a big chunk of hefty advertisements and mint money. They create a permanent nexus with a particular group or party and go on toeing their line in their papers. They have no scruples or qualms of conscience to do their real duty. Their only duty is to serve their masters and misguide public thought. The government must evolve some mechanism to check all this and make the press accountable to the country in some way.

No one can argue or claim that the freedom of speech and expression is an absolute and unfettered right. No government worth the name can permit irresponsible writings, yellow journalism or slander. The Press should rise to the occasion and assure the government and the people that it would always act as the responsible and enlightened Fourth Estate and would refrain from misusing the freedom granted to it. The Press in India has always been playing a responsible role. In the pre-independence days, it was only the National Press that inculcated a spirit of freedom and sacrifice amongst the masses. It refused to be cowed down by the British threats. The Press must, once again, try to live up to its reputation and try to maintain its noble traditions. It must act as a watchdog to keep a vigilant eye on the government. Men in power are sometimes likely to run amuck and trample the rights of the have-nots, under their feet. The press must, in such situations, expose the guilty to the full without fear or

favour. A vigilant, fearless and responsible Press is an important pillar of strength in a democratic set up. The Press must not, therefore, fail in its duty. The government should also not misuse its powers to scuttle the growth of the Press. Self-restraint and self-discipline alone can contribute to the growth of a healthy Democracy in any country.

Essay No. 02

### **Freedom of the Press**

Thomas Jefferson, America's second President, who drafted his country's Constitution, aptly said that "our liberty depends on the freedom of the Press, and that cannot be limited without being lost". The Press, which seeks to entertain as well as educate, informs the readers about global and local happenings, and interprets the same for the common good. Indeed, it is one of the most important institutions in an open society and is a forum that reaches out to a very large number of people.

Raja Ram Mohun Roy was one of the earliest champions of the freedom of the Press in India. Like John Milton, he, too, championed the concept of freedom in writing. In his words, "Where no freedom of the Press existed, and grievances consequently remained unrepresentable and underdressed, innumerable revolutions have taken place in all parts of the globe, or if prevented by the armed force of the Government, the people continued ready for insurrection."

In our Constitution, Right to Freedom (Art. 19-22) is a vital part of the Fundamental Rights enshrined therein. And there is no other way of expressing oneself than through the written word, i.e., the Press. A free Press is, therefore, an essential instrument for ensuring openness in society, as also for reforming it. In a society where overwhelming millions are mute, the access to a forum that reaches them must be viewed as a trust to be operated on their behalf and for their larger good.

The written word is only one of the instruments of change. It has only a limited effect in such a society as ours. Nevertheless, it serves as an important source of information to different sections of the people and has far-reaching effect on government policies and plans.

In our country, too, attempts have been made from time to time to control the Press. The first Indian newspaper, Hickey's Bengal Gazette of 1781 was banned by Warren Hastings, and government censorship of Indian papers continued to be quite strict till 1835 when Lord Metcalfe liberated the Indian Press. State interference with the Press did not, however, disappear altogether. During the days of the Partition of Bengal and national movement, the British imposed severe

restrictions on the Press. Even after Independence strict censorship was imposed by the Government during the emergency days of 1975-77. The worst form of control of the Press was found in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Dr. Gobbels completely muzzled the Press in Germany. The same thing happened in Italy. In Russia, too, the Press is not free, although the Russian paper, Pravda, is said to have the largest circulation in the world. In dictatorship, the Press is slave of the government. Journalist and editors write to order. Hence, the Press does not, and cannot discharge its primary functions, viz., mirroring public opinion.

The press enjoys freedom in a democracy. In England, for instance, the Press has enjoyed a very large measure of freedom and the British have, therefore, attained a very high level of journalism. The USA, however, extends the greatest freedom to the Press. Their freedom of the Press is guaranteed under their Constitution. Under our Constitution, this freedom is implicit in the "freedom of speech and expression" granted to every citizen as one of the fundamental rights.

Now the question arises: "Can the Press be completely free?" Not even the greatest democrat would say an unqualified 'Yes' in answer. Liberty of thought may be complete, but the liberty of expressing that thought, is bound to be subject to some restrictions. There would obviously be chaos in the world if everybody were allowed to say or publish what he thought and felt; Sacred subjects like God, religious opinion or personal reputation are beyond the sphere of criticism. Freedom of discussion cannot obviously be allowed to degenerate into freedom of abuse. Every country punishes blasphemy and personal liberty.

Freedom of the Press is sacred privilege, but it requires great tact and patience to exercise it properly. Man is generally governed by passions and prejudices, and newspapers are not independent organs of public opinion. They are usually party papers or are owned or controlled by big business magnate, combines and other interests. They must necessarily echo "their master's voice". They must shape and present news and views only in accordance with the policy of the party or interests concerned, and at their dictation. This advocacy of parties and groups involves great dangers. Unhealthy rivalry and bitter controversies often spring up among papers representing conflicting points of view. Truth is colored and distorted and the word is made to appear the better reason.

Freedom of the Press, like all other freedoms, carries with its certain obligations. Publication of correct news is one of them. Avoidance of mischievous or malafide criticism of the government, and of abusive and obscene writing is another. The idea is that liberty should not degenerate into license.