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Why I admire Justice Katju



P.N. Vasanti

I am privileged to have met more than a couple of Press Council Chiefs and many other scholars, visionaries and leaders in my 20 years of work in the media sector. But in all, Justice Katju stands out as a unique personality who is not afraid of saying what he believes in. Those who have read his articles or heard his speeches know that he is very well read and often quotes Voltaire and Russo and never forgets to mention the proactive role of media and such thinkers in Europe. He has been quoted to say many things including statements such as “media has a great role to play in this transitional period through which India is passing.” or “media is not an ordinary business which deals with commodities; it deals with ideas, which should be used to benefit people and not harm them.”

Actually, what he says does have some substance, but it is not new. Many others including couple of presidents, chief justices and even the prime minister have voiced similar opinion regarding the need for media to be socially responsive along with their business interests. Similarly, Justice Katju’s argument for an independent regulator also holds many supporters and has been discussed a number of times within and outside the Parliament and courts. He is able to voice the opinions that popular media seems to obscure. Proactively, he has taken up the cause of journalist safety and sent show cause notices to a couple of chief ministers for attacks on journalists in their states. He was also very vocal against the recent arrest of a cartoonist on case of sedition.

However, the respected former judge has much controversy surrounding his bold statements, mostly not on what he is saying but on how he delivers it. His accusatory and sweeping judgments on the media, and the society in general, gets everybody perturbed. His brusque speeches and writings do provokes reactions. The Broadcast Editors’ Association has publicly condemned his “irresponsible and negative comments” against the media and media professionals. The National Broadcasters Association has also sent a letter to the prime minister regarding views expressed by Justice Katju on various matters relating to the media.

For me, the most notable contribution Justice Katju has made is in challenging and aggravating the current harmony that the government and media currently seem to share. He plays a critical role as a solid yet notorious front to an amicable minister. His emotional rhetoric counters research-based facts and figures provided by the industry. His recent efforts towards reformatting the Press Council of India into the new and more authoritative Media Council has disputed the self-regulation hegemony of the media industry. Some have started comparing Justice Katju to T.N. Seshan, the former election commissioner who was admired for initiating reforms to streamline the election process. Thw parallel may be too extreme at this moment as the comparison ends with their similarity to provoke their respective constituencies – journalists in case of Justice Katju and politicians in the case of Seshan.

Justice Katju is yet to invoke his powers to bring about any change in the organisation he heads - The Press Council of India. Originally constituted in 1966 as an autonomous, statutory, quasi-judicial body, the organisation was initiated to self regulate the print media. Since then, it regularly addresses

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Illustration: Arun Ramkumar

the complaints received about the print media. However, today, it is popularly called the “toothless tiger”, which indicates its lack of power or influence on most media houses. In one television interview where I shared the panel with Justice Katju, I asked him pointblank what initiatives he had, as PCI chair, taken to address the issues he raised: paid news, lack of accountability of media owners, patriotic duty of all citizens (including media) to promote scientific temper and combat backward ideas such as communalism and superstition. Other than his landmark judgments whilst a judge and

the repetition of his monologues, he had little much to respond. Of course, he was quick to retort how powerful the media was in our country and the difficulty he faced in getting his views across.

If Justice Katju thinks that media owners are too powerful for him or PCI to tackle, there are other challenges that can be taken up to make media more responsible. Organisations such as the Centre for Media Studies have given in writing concrete actions that can be taken up on a priority basis. Some of these include strengthening the local and regional press for current media ecosystem dynamics and quality issues in journalism

education or schools. In the one-year tenure that Justice Katju has been the Press Council chair, he has made enough noise to be in the limelight and hog precious publicity. As he himself points out, our country is passing through a transitional period. The question is whether his intervention will be sufficient to create any action or change in the process. ■