

5th Sat Paul Sahni Memorial lecture **“Landmarks in Journalism in J&K”**

Institutional Character, and professionalism imperative for press, says eminent journalist Mohd Sayed Malik

Eminent Journalist Mohammad Sayed Malik, former Executive Editor of Sunday Observer and Consulting Editor of Kashmir Times delivered 5th Sat Paul Sahni Memorial lecture on “Landmarks in Journalism in J&K” organized by the Jammu and Kashmir Regional Branch of IIPA on December 13, 2014.

Malik paying rich tributes to Sat Paul Sahni, described him as an institution, a perfectionist and thorough professional who had contributed to journalism of the state and rest of the country tremendously in the form of his political, electoral and war reports and analytical pieces for various publications at the national level.

He recalled his close association with late Sahni, whom he would address as “Sati ji” and said that the veteran journalist was senior to him and he (Malik) loved and respected him a lot.

“But it was not his seniority but his perfectionism in everything and my imperfection(ism) that made me feel uneasy whenever I saw him. We had many things which we shared in common. He would not miss even minor details, in individual relationships, in talking and listening to the people and it was this quality that would mark him out. He was so meticulous about his conduct, about his behavior. He would never get into an argument though he too had different positions on men and matters. However, he would never allow that to degenerate into personal differences,” Malik recalled describing the qualities of head and heart of Sahni.

He quoted another eminent journalist and parliamentarian Shamim Ahmed Shamim, who had beautifully described Sahni’s affable personality in his inimitable manner in personality in his popular Urdu daily “Aaina.”

“Though he (Sahni) is a newspaper correspondent (journalist) by profession however he stands out in the social spectrum with his affability, gentle behavior and etiquettes... His biggest asset is his dignified and very organized way of life (Jeeney Ka Salika)... very punctual, would never break his commitment... It seems while talking to him as if one is reading a book on etiquettes. Having an

affable persona, the persons close to him know him as a colorful personality. Mizaz Mein Khasi Rangeeni Hai.. Aourindi Hai... but with such an enviable perfect sense of balance that he seems to be a perfect gentleman..(Aadmi Sharif Maloom Hota Hai..),” Malik quoted Shamim describing enviable persona of Sahni amid laughter.

Malik in a powerful presentation on “Landmarks in Journalism in J&K” lamented that distorted evolution of journalism lack of institutional character and professionalism had muzzled influence and might of press in J&K. “However the pressmen, despite their peculiar problems, can arise and contribute to strengthen their institution, which in turn will have a spin off effect, stabilizing the situation which the state is confronting today,” he said and advised the young journalists to equip themselves mentally, academically and intellectually to increase their ambit of influence, without falling prey to any kind of bias.

Malik began on a lighter note saying that he was there to discuss milestone of journalism in J&K yet there were not many milestones left after floods in the valley from where he was coming. “I am sharing my personal views, observations and nobody needed to agree with that,” Malik, who described veteran journalists Om Saraf and Ved Bhasin as his “Gurus” set the tone for his thought provoking lecture at the very outset.

To begin with, we need to find out- what are milestone in journalism? These are delicate times. We are (bureaucrats and pressmen) on each other’s hit list so I will put across my viewpoint vis-à-vis evolution of press in J&K in general terms. The country became free including Kashmir in 1947. While in rest of the country, the press as an institution started gaining strength and vibrancy, we in J&K were caught in a set of circumstances which were very abnormal. War was going on at our borders; there was aggression because of that many things which ought to have occurred here did not take place. He stated tracking the history of press in J&K since 1947.

Malik said, “the first casualty, which continues even today, was that a style, tendency towards institutional functioning did not come to J&K, whether in terms of administration, any other sphere of governance or press. What is a norm outside J&K is not even an exception here. In 1947 certain curbs were put in place, whether necessary or not, they were prolonged and there was no scope for freedom of press in J&K. On that account there was no option before the pressmen but to subject

themselves to surrender. There was no press worth a name here as it existed in a free county.” Malik stated.

He said however something survived even in those adverse circumstances and in next 10 years an option came that the press men could not criticize helmsmen but “others” (not at the helm of affairs) and the this option entailed some benefits also.

That marked second phase and out of them came out some persons who had commitment and courage of conviction and they took out some space for carving out a road for press and established its credibility in the 50s and 60s, he said.

He noted with concern, “This happens even now that at times to project a false situation, you get people from outside who have superficial view about the ground situation here and they project the situation as peaceful, normal. Yet it never helps”. “Referring to the Holy relic agitation in mid sixties, he said after this agitation, the state witnessed political liberalization and the press, which had survived, then retained its soul by and large, which showed that some people did struggle, paid a price and that was a landmark.

From mid sixties, one could talk as how press in J&K developed, he said. “But the tragedy was as it was growing, with improvement in technology, increase in readership, proper attention was not paid towards professionalism. Reality is that it (professionalism) as such did not grow. For that we would have to go back to distorted evolution of journalism in J&K. Although in mid sixties, the press got breathing space, there came a stage when the pressmen had to look inward and give an institutional character to their functioning. Unfortunately that did not happen and it has not happened till now,” he said.

He cited the example of year 2008, when an ugly situation developed across the two regions and the press by and large instead of taking a lead fell in line. “Sanity had to be resorted so someone needed to pay the price and stand up. Media (in both the regions) failed in its responsibility. Failure of media in Valley became evident yet again in time of elections. Those, advocating that the elections should not have been held, are now busy coming out with ‘excuses’ as to why it happened (overwhelming turnout). But the fault lies that they were out of touch with the pulse of people. One can also feel the rural urban bias in the contemporary press reporting. Rather than analyzing the trend, they write derogatory terms about those who vote, he said.

He stated that another example was reporting on floods, “army came and took part in rescue operation. 5 Lakh people had been rescued and that could not be possible through private efforts only. Local press would not give them coverage but they projected it equally wrong. They thought that the army had come to conquer Kashmir.” He observed.

The interpretation given by media from outside the state was not professional. Instead the army men, themselves, including Lt. Gen Hooda, Lt Gen Saha, and Air Commodore put the things in right perspective. While Air Commodore replying to a query sought to play down incidents of stone pelting saying, “Look a person is stranded for five days in the floods in a helpless condition, waiting with his children for help and throws stones; can you expect him to behave in a rational manner?” Lt Gen Hooda gave right reply to a query, whether mistrust will go away with army assistance during floods, when he said, “Accumulated mistrust cannot be washed away with floods. Our effort is entirely humanitarian.” This did not get reflected in the local press until Delhi press came and took the wrong side. Again the question arises, why is the disconnect ? This is the question which we must ask,” Malik emphasized.

He observed that there was shift towards business of journalism instead of creating an environment of professionalism. Malik stated that the well qualified young journalists taught in prestigious varsities lagged behind the veterans in term of level of information.

“In Kashmir, journalists and even the government servants are obsessed with the term Article 370. They will write reams and reams on it yet have no clarity on the subject. The problem is that we have forgotten basics of our profession, professionalism has come down and business of journalism has come up. Secondly, there are no incentives for pressmen who excel to encourage them. New breed of journalists have no zest to prove themselves. Deficiencies may be during our times, we came out of dark period, our thinking evolved out of great labour pain. There’s world of difference how the press functions here and how it works outside,” he stated while citing his personal example and the example of another veteran scribe Om Saraf

He said that it was a dazzling experience for him when he, being reluctant to go out, was literally dragged out by his boss to move out of the state to work. He noted that it was the work environment which made all the difference. “At present the resources are available in the varsities

where the young pressmen are taught, avenues are available. Saraf even that time had developed professionalism in journalism which is not imparted to the journalists now,” he said. Mentioning his interaction with some army gatherings, Malik pointed out that the press was hostile in Kashmir vis-à-vis army because person to person level interaction was not there that could happen in an institutional set up. He observed that press in J&K, which is highly politicized, needed to go for self-correction.

Malik said that the young journalists should equip themselves mentally, academically and intellectually to increase their ambit of influence while immunizing politically while reporting. He added that the profession would have evolved in a far better manner if it would have cared for in house grooming for its practitioners.

He stated that the trend was not restricted to press only even the bureaucracy and judiciary too could not escape biases creeping in their functioning. Citing examples of regional and religious divide which cropped up in legislature/executive while an organization was floated by a body of All India Services officers and in judiciary also, (may be accidental, co-incident) when anti-defection law was brought by Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah in 1977 and Mian Bashir challenged the act of his unseating under this Act. “The judiciary came out with split verdict, by accident or by design, but it happened. So this trend was not restricted to press only. Institutional building is very important for strengthening of press. Press can take initiatives as it took in case when Public Safety Act was brought by Sheikh Abdullah with very stringent measures. We stood up, we got support from Jammu as well and from outside the state. We are able to get the provisions watered down. That could be a milestone as we could bring breathing space for other too,” Malik said.

“Unless some rectification takes place, these distortions will continue. The voice of press, the influence of press, the might of press continue to be poorer as compared to our counterparts in rest of the country. Despite our peculiar problems, the pressmen can arise and contribute to strengthen their institution, which in turn will have a spin off effect, stabilizing the situation which the state is confronting today,” he said while concluding the lecture.