

## India's 15th Press Council without journo-members !



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It may be amazing but true, that the largest democracy on Earth continues waiting for a fully functioning government-sponsored media watchdog for more than a year now. Press Council of India (PCI), a quasi-judicial body, which was initiated to safeguard and nurture the freedom of press in the country, remains almost a non-functioning entity as the term of PCI's 14th council expired on 5 October 2024. Since then various initiatives to constitute the statutory 15th council to carry forward its prescribed activities confronted different hurdles. Currently the PCI has its chairperson and secretary along with only five members representing Rajya Sabha, University Grants Commission, Bar Council of India and Sahitya Akademi. Otherwise it should have 28 members, where 13 individuals representing the professional journalists out of whom 6 need to be editors of newspapers and 7 working journalists. Another 6 members represent the management of newspapers (including the owners), 2 each taken from the big, medium and small newspapers, whereas 1 member represents the news agencies.

An official communiqué was made by this writer on 3 December requesting information about the term of PCI chairperson Justice Ranjana Prakash Desai (who took charge on 17 June 2022) and how many members are being appointed to the 15th council till date, but it resulted in nothing (not even a courtesy response mail). But according to the PCI website (<https://www.presscouncil.nic.in/CurrentMemberPCI.aspx>), except the chairperson and secretary (Shubha Gupta), the PCI currently have five functioning members, who assumed charges on 20 December 2024 with the three-year term. They include Rajya Sabha lawmakers Sudhanshu Trivedi and Brij Lal along with Ashwini K. Mohapatra (University Grants Commission), Manan Kumar Mishra (Bar Council of India) and K. Sreenivasarao (Sahitya Akademi).

Months back, Union information & broadcasting minister Ashwini Vaishnaw admitted that the constitution process of the 15th press council was progressing, but the initiative to fill up the seats for media professionals remains under sub-judice. The minister also added that Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla had already nominated three members (Sambit Patra, Naresh Mhaske and Kali Charan Munda) for the 15th council. It's understood that the chairperson's term is also expiring on 16 December 2025. Before it expires, a hurried initiative has been taken to constitute the 15th council but with no representative from the fraternity of working journalists and editors. Probably a meeting is called on 13 December to pave ways for the first sitting of the new council. Questions will definitely remain how a press council without working journalists and editors can function (or should its name be changed erasing the word press itself)?

For records, the PCI is an autonomous body, which was initially set up in 1966 under the Press Council Act 1965 and later re-established in 1979 following the Press Council Act 1978 with a primary objective to ensure press freedom and also improve the standards of newspapers and news agencies in the populous country. The billion plus nation today nurtures nearly 100,000 publications (endorsed by the Registrar of Newspapers for India) in various frequencies and languages including English. It also supports nearly 400 satellite news channels along with thousands of portals, whatsapp channels and other digital outlets. The revenues collected (from both selling and advertisements) by Indian newspapers, periodicals including magazines continue shrinking after the Covid-19 pandemic as the other media outlets started dominating the financial market space. However, many print observers believe that the traditional media will slowly recover its abrupt loss. Resurgence in readership is expected as 'digital fatigue drives consumers' will soon turn back to traditional media for reliable information. They argue that the print media outlets will increase the number of readers almost twice by 2030.

Earlier, a number of media bodies opposed a change in the PCI guidelines to pick up members from various press clubs instead of the national union of working journalists. They argue that the press clubs are mandated usually for recreational activities and their coverage areas normally stick to a particular region, city or town. Press clubs often give memberships to non-working journalists (like academicians, writers, film personalities and also diplomats) to enhance their influences. Moreover, the press club/press guild/ media club cannot have an all India body with representatives from various parts of the vast country. On the other hand, the recognized journalist-unions are usually represented by members from different parts of India. Indian Journalists Union and All India Working News Cameramen's Association have already approached the court seeking justice for the media professionals.

Moreover, the PCI can only overview the functioning of newspapers, periodicals and news agencies. It enjoys limited power for enforcing the guidelines by penalizing news outlets as well their editors and working journalists for violation of established guidelines. But still it can receive complaints against a particular newspaper/news agency or an editor/working journalist against their professional misconduct deteriorating the standard of journalistic behaviours for adjudications. The PCI also enjoys the authority to make observations if conducts of a government are found inappropriate while ensuring freedom of the press across the country. Another demand to bring all the news channels, radio and digital platforms under its jurisdiction deserves due attention from the I&B ministry. So time has arrived for reactivating and enhancing the council so that it can address the ongoing crisis in front of the media fraternity.

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