



Harsha Vardhan

Mr. Harsha Vardhan is a Senior English Journalist. He did Post-Graduate Diploma in Journalism from Cleaver Hume Ltd., S. Kensington, London. He has worked with The Hindustan Times, Times of India, United News of India, The Statesman, Financial Express and Convergence Plus as Senior Editorial Post. He was also English Executive Editor of Inkworld for several years. He also taught Journalism at Bhartiya Vidhya Bhawan, New Delhi and was a Guest Faculty at IIMC, New Delhi.

The Fourth Estate in 21st Century

In May 1789, Louis XVI summoned to Versailles a full meeting of the 'Estates General'. The first Estate consisted of three hundred nobles.

The Second Estate, three hundred clergy. The Third Estate, six hundred commoners.

Some years later, after the French Revolution, Edmund Burke, looking up at the Press Gallery of the House of Commons, said, "Yonder sits the Fourth Estate, and they are more important than them all."

I don't know how the Fourth Estate behaved and performed its role at that time but its contemporariness now is no secret to anyone. Reality is always seen differently by different persons. All grey-haired have always been seen talking of the good old days criticising the degradation of the contemporaries. I heard lot many tales of the good old days in the sixties and seventies from my seniors at that time as also 'not up to the mark' approach to the profession of most of my contemporaries. I see most of my contemporaries now repeating the same role.

It is a fact, generally observed, that every generation criticises the next one forgetting that every generation is an improvement on the previous one—that has been the one most important factor of human progress so far. But progress has been on both sides - positive as well as negative. Progress is generally measured by terms of positivity only. But what about degradation touching new depths of fall? Is not that also a progress of a different type? If the Oxford Dictionary cites the example of 'positive philosophy', it

also does of 'positive nuisance'. Therefore, there is no sense in being a positivist like Auguste Comte recognising only the traditional positive facts. Let's peep into the past and x-ray some of the happenings then.

I remember the lunch break in *The Statesman* editorial one day in the mid-eighties when discussion occurred amongst those who had not gone out over falling standards of morals in journalism. Present were some legends of *The Statesman* - the then Editor S. Sahay, News Editor R. N. Sharma, Chief Sub-Editors Ramanna and Krishnamurthy and Senior Sub-Editors M.V. Singh and myself. The discussion was as cozy as the winter drawing-room talk around a heater. All were stunned when suddenly M.V. Singh blurted: "What nonsense. There are no morals in journalism left today. We all have become journalistic prostitutes - whosoever pays us more, we sleep with him." It was too disgusting and undignified a statement in *The Statesman* editorial then because those were the days when words like 'rape' and 'prostitute' were banned.

Ironically, about fifteen years later a similar statement was made by *The Tribune* on February 16, 2003. Vir Sanghvi wrote in his Counterpoint in *Sunday Hindustan Times*: "My guess is that you would think that I was a cheap crook, a journalistic whore, the sort of hack whose pen could be bought by the highest bidder".

Vir Sanghvi had joined the state of the media debate going on in *Hindustan Times* then kicked off by Aron Purie by writing in his Letter from the Editor-in-Chief in India