Introduction of Mr. Shekhar Gupta by Mr. Bharat Doshi on the occasion of the Seventeenth Lalit Doshi Memorial Lecture on 4th August 2011

Good evening friends,

It is my privilege and honour to introduce the Editor-In-Chief of Indian Express, Mr. Shekhar Gupta today on this occasion of the 17th Lalit Doshi Memorial Lecture. When some of the Trustees interacted earlier this year to decide as to what should be the topic or the theme, there was a consensus that as the speaker for the seventeenth Lalit Doshi Memorial Lecture, we should invite a journalist with high credibility and unimpeachable integrity. What was amazing was that without any prompting or discussion the first name that came on the table was that of Mr. Shekhar Gupta. I must also mention here that when we approached Mr. Shekhar Gupta to deliver this lecture, he very gracefully and very readily accepted. Sir, the Trustees of the Lalit Doshi Memorial Foundation are grateful to you.

As per my past practice, I do not intend to read out Mr.Gupta's detailed or abridged or short biography – the short one is included in the invitation card. However, I do want to share some lesser known stories and some insights – some discovered by me on the net, and some conveyed to me by common friends.

While surfing on the net I was very amused to read the story, how Mr. Gupta a student of biology wandered in to the field of journalism. As the story goes, he had gone to the office of Punjab University with which his college was affiliated to, to get the spelling of his name corrected on the mark sheet. The error was, his name was spelt SHEIKHAR, with an additional 'i'. Humble as he is, he wanted the extra 'i' removed and while in the process, waiting in the University office, he spotted a little notice on admission test for Journalism Course. He just filled the form, sat for the test and got selected. A providential signal beckoned him to join his destined field. As a result India got an outstanding journalist.

When I look back on Mr. Gupta's career, which commenced in 1977, he was just twenty then, I must say that he is the only journalist I can think of who has covered almost all major Indian and international stories since early 1980s. He has reported on the Assam agitation, the Punjab crisis, the Kashmir trouble and the Sri Lankan war. In 1989, he went to cities in Eastern Europe, and covered the gradual breaking down of the Soviet Union. Again in June 1989, he was in

Hong Kong to do a story, and suddenly Tiananmen happened, and he covered that, too. In mid 1990s, seven years before the 9/11 attack in the U.S., he travelled across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Germany, U.S. and U.K. to report extensively on the threat from Pan-national fundamentalism including the links with Osama Bin Laden. During this phase there has not been any major story in India or in the region which did not have his fingerprint on it.

A friend who had worked with Mr. Gupta many years ago shared his experience on the softer side of Mr. Gupta and said that he was struck by Mr. Gupta's generosity. As he shone brilliantly while he was a young reporter, he was very willing to give opportunities to other young reporters, and in particular, championed them with editors who may have been reluctant to pursue certain stories because they seemed difficult or expensive.

Another friend very aptly described how Mr. Gupta does not stop at the question 'what', but goes further to ask 'why' and 'what next'. The same friend commented on Mr. Gupta's ability to remain emotionally equidistant from different aspects of an issue and I can think of no better example than the recent emotional outburst against corruption and the demand for civil society's role and role of eminent personalities in the context of the Lok Pal bill. It was during such a moment in time when the mood of the public was of anger that Mr. Gupta provided an objective perspective almost single handedly by enlightening his readers through his regular column “National Interest” raising a red flag as to how democratic principles were being sacrificed. We all know how difficult it is to take a different view when there is a tidal wave of public opinion, but Mr. Gupta showed with his pen how fair, fearless and professional, he is.

It is very interesting that when Mr. Gupta and I discussed and exchanged emails on the topic for today, Mr. Gupta chose “The Fourth Estate: A Watchdog or A Hound?” How apt and appropriate it is in today's context when some believe that the media today has become the accuser, the prosecutor and the judge. Who better than Mr. Gupta to enlighten us on this topic? Sir, we look forward to your lecture later this evening on “The Fourth Estate: A Watchdog or A Hound?”

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