A journalist’s life is not easy.
Whose is?
Nobody’s! True, but others do not have to be judged all the time, as a journalist has to and especially a young journalist.

Who likes bosses?
Nobody! True, but a reporter has not one but several of them. There is that very dicey character called ‘Senior Colleague’. Not quite a boss but somewhat of a sister in law, the proverbial Nanad, whose experience outweighs her status, whose brain is sharp, temper sharper. Invariably cactus-tongued, she is the first person a young journalist has to be aware of, wary of. She is the kind of person to who a young journalist would say ‘Bachchu mein bhi kabhi Senior Colleague’ banungi!’. 

A journalist’s life is not easy.

Then there is the Chief Reporter. Ever on the lookout for the Reporter’s missing out on some obscure fact, something another rival newspaper has caught and written about. How the Chief Reporter finds the time to spread out all the newspapers in the morning and check if his junior has caught or missed something. It is of course always a missed-out tale. And then there is hell to pay. ‘Don’t you compare notes?’, ‘Couldn’t you have asked what the others would be highlighting?’

A journalist’s life is never easy.

The there is the News Editor. Ever on the lookout for scoops, for ‘getting there first’, for ‘saying it first’, this formidable figure ought to belong to the Intelligence Bureau. How he networks is not even funny. He has the phone numbers of MLAs, MPs, Ministers, judges stored on his mobile. And with ‘Hello sir, how are you….Rang just like that…Yes, it has been a long time…You keeping well, Sir?…How is Parliament going?….Shame how the opposition obstructs the House…Taxpayer’s money going waste…What Sir?….Oh no….nothing to ask….Simply like that….We are not always on the prowl…You know that, Sir….Sometimes we can give you information rather than get it…Yes….By the way, sir…I heard from a friend whose cousin is a khalasi in Raj Bhavan that chairs are being arranged in the Durbar Hall for what looks
like a swearing in ceremony….Yes…right now….Sir…Sir ?  Hullo…Hullo…God the man has scooted….must be on his way to the Raj Bhavan….’

That News Editor….is a real spook….how can a reporter keep pace ?

A journalist’s life is not easy.

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And then the Bureau Chief…A veritable Nerd if ever there was one. Now she wants ‘real life’ stories…A newspaper or a channel is not a vendor of news, it is a bender of views…What an atrocious pun ! And yet you have to seem amazed at the wit, the wisdom, the rhyme. ‘How true, ma’am, how true…And then you have to listen to ‘Now what about some in-depth stories…Why don’t you find out why Arvind Kejriwal’s popularity is what it is….Can you do a different kind of story…Interview respondents vertically….Yes, vertically….by which I men not ten people of the same class but ten people of different strata and try to actually plot the dividing line….head-down….At which point does the Kejriwal factor start….At which income level does ‘Uff…he is so irritating’ turn into ‘Vah…neta ho to aisa ho….’ Do that story…

Can a journalist’s life ever be easy ?

A reporter or a correspondent has to know big shot people sufficiently as to get news from them, but not more than for then she will be regarded as biased. Worse, that she is actually that big shot’s something. A reporter may shake hands with a big-ticket politico but not pat his back, may smile at a big ticket tycoon but not keep eye-contact with him beyond the smile’s shelf-life. Sometime’s the reporter has to suppress a smile as when the big ticket wants to say of a bigger ticket that she knows him inside out, but actually says ‘I know him upside down’. You cannot smile at someone’s gaffe. Not in front of that person, anyway.

And then there are issues of conscience. If in your minds, you have some causes that you hold dear you are torn, like a paper shredder tears. You cannot feel something passionately and report it matter-of-factly. You cannot in fact feel too much for then you become a person, a human being whereas you are meant to be studying human beings and reporting on them.

And then this business of team-work. A writer writes, a musician sings, a businessman makes his pile. But a journalist has to be a team-person. There is the lensman to be adjusted to. Te lensman is terrific but he is also terrifically opinionated. Your story is going to be about X speaker, but the camera is hooked on Y because for some reason Y is more interesting to the shutter. And then the driver of the van. That entity is perpetually hungry and ‘gone for a snack’ or perpetually in the obscure part of a building called ‘Conveniences’, and that is when you want to dash back to the office to file your scoop of story.
How can a journalist’s life be easy?

It is not.

You have to report without sounding like a voyeur or spook. You have to write well, without sounding like a novelist.

You have to dress casually, for informality is quite nice in a reporter but you cannot dress too casually if you are reporting an event in some posh venue for you do not want to seem slatternly. Your clothes should not look dry-cleaned or starched but they should look crumpled or ironed by a five-rupee piece istri-wala either. Your shoes should not squeak or shine like a new Bata pair but they should not look their age either.

You have to be accurate but not pernickety, readable but not facile, brief but not clipped, comprehensive but not cross the word-limit for there is that News Editor’s blue pencil waiting to paint your copy indigo.

If the lecturer being reported on is a bore, the whole world can go to sleep listening, but you have to remain attentive, alert.

If the lecturer is saying something worthwhile and manages to be moving, everyone can be teary-eyed but yours must stay dry.

If the lecturer is funny, all can laugh but you must not allow anything beyond a simper.

If you are an editorial writer, you have to carry hyper-tension medicines in your purse for within minutes of an editor’s deciding, you have to write those 500 words that must sound like a philosopher, a statesman, an Ambedkar on human Rights, a Nehru on foreign policy, a Patel on internal security, a Rajagopalachari on democratic dissent, a Sorabjee on capital punishment, a Teesta Setalvad on minority rights, a Sunita Narain on illegal mining, an R K Pachauri on climate change, a Jairam Ramesh on partitioning a state with both feeling they have won, a Mani Shankar Aiyar on the perils of that simple beverage, tea.

And you have to know your laws on defamation. You have to criticise but not cut, rebuke but without insulting, admonish but not sound like you are Kiran Bedi. You have to be polite but not seem obsequious.

In other words you have to be anything, everything, now and always, except be yourself.

You have to be this, and keep the izzat of the Fourth Estate in tact.
You have to do all this and then get home feeling good about yourself – not easy!

More, you have to feel that what you are working with is not the passing moment but the human mind.

You are dealing with views, opinions, evaluations and so you have to not just right but spot-on.

You have to be found right not just the next morning at the Desk but five, ten years later at the bar of opinion.

Your stories for tomorrow can well be your contribution to making a better world, a more humane world.

You have to know and practice the maxim ‘comment if free, but facts are sacred’.

All this is difficult but most important.

Journalists are witnesses, their calling is a witnessing. They are not witnesses for the prosecution or for the accused. They are witnesses to Witnessing. See it as it is, say it as it is - that has to be the journalist’s guide.

Journalists must guard their independence fiercely.

This award comes from within the family.

And is to be embraced.

Not all awards do.

Prizes and recognition, the Padma awards and assignments abroad should not be anywhere er a journalist’s goal.

Stay off from and be uninfluenced by the following:

1. Official jaunts. Journalists should not be on planes carrying VVIPs on visits abroad. Newspapers should send them independently so that they can report independently.

2. Pre-event briefings and post-event gatherings organized by hosts. Meet up with them, interview them. Be hosts, always, not guests. Personal hospitality is of course a different matter.
3. Any breathless report that is offered as a scoop. Distrust those intuitively.

4. All on-stage flattery and off-stage nicenesses. I do not know why organizers of events thanks ‘Friends from the media’. They hope by that flattering unction they would get three extra lines, one extra inch and perhaps even a picture in the paper. They are invariably proved wrong.

5. Corners in corridors where whisper is spread (apart from betel juice). Rumour is poison, gossip virus.

It has been a privilege to join all of you here in honouring the memory of Seema Nazareth. Nay her life continue to be an inspiration to generations of journalists.