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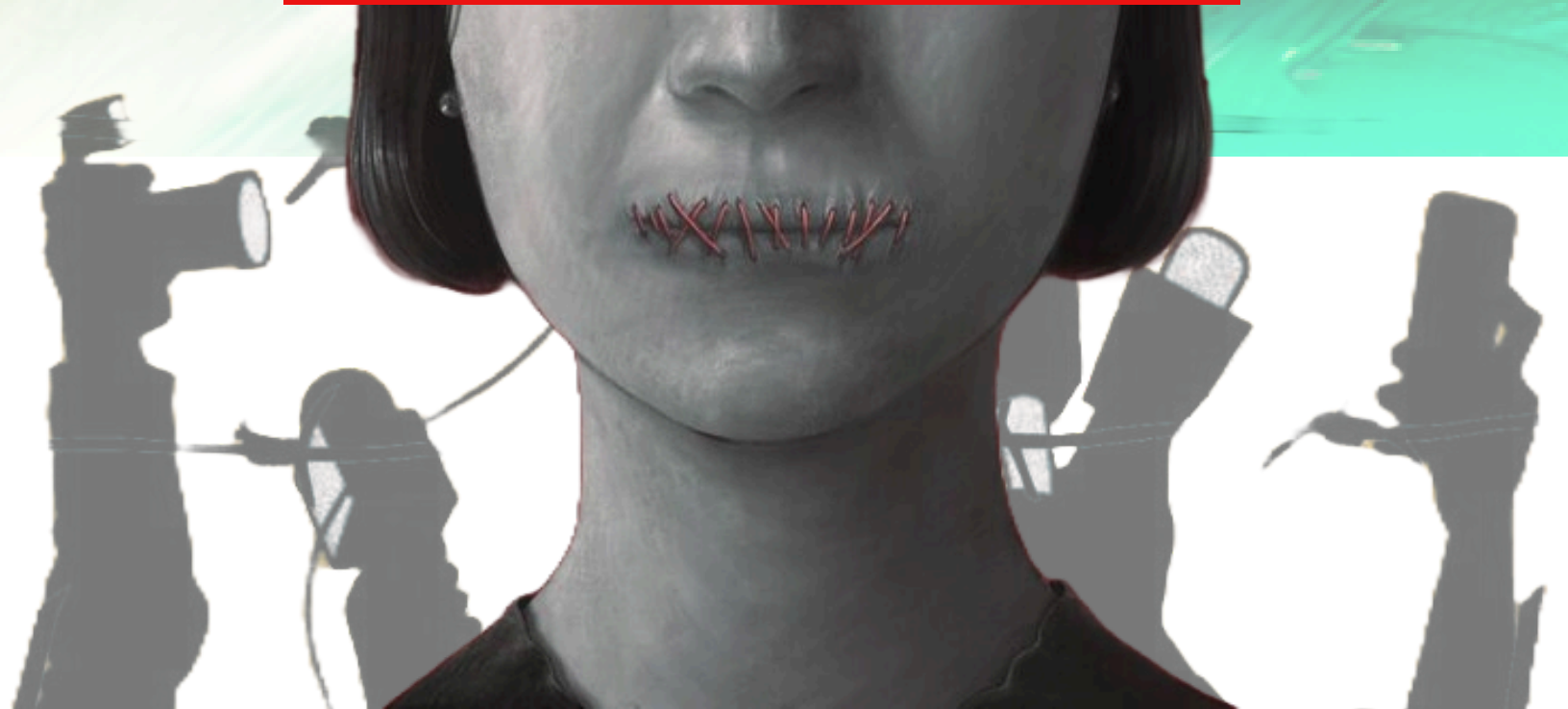




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AN INITIATIVE UNDER



Azaad आवाज़ aims to tackle an erosion of empathy in our society. This monthly magazine (Patrika) aims to focus on the marginalized sections whose voices are often muted in the cacophony of flashy mainstream media discourse. When referring to marginalization, this platform does not aim to restrict itself to the traditional focus on social aggregates like caste and race alone but aspires to include a discussion on class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Azaad आवाज़ sculpted as a digital media station focuses on issues that debilitate the “deliberately silenced”, drawing no boundaries and aspires to evolve and voice the needs of those silenced.

DRIVING JOURNALISM TO THE EDGE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF CENSORSHIP

India's ranking in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has slipped to 161 out of 180 countries, according to the latest report released by global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The Press Club of India (PCI) and the Indian Women Press Corps (IWPC) have highlighted a significant increase in assaults on press freedoms. The Indian media scene mirrors the vastness and diversity of the country itself, with over 100,000 newspapers (including 36,000 weeklies) and 380 television news channels. With such a vast media base, India is currently facing the challenge of maintaining a delicate equilibrium between media regulation and the essential right to freedom of expression.

The ongoing struggle between these two pillars has ignited numerous discussions, prompting important inquiries into the integrity of journalism and the freedom of communication. Recent events have brought this delicate balance into sharp focus. One such occurrence was the enforcement of stringent regulations outlined in the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules of 2021. The vague definitions of terms like "unlawful content" raise concerns about arbitrary content removals and potential restrictions on "free speech." Over 85% of social media and internet intermediaries fear that the stringent

compliance requirements of the new IT Rules of 2021 could adversely affect the ease of conducting business in India.

During the initial weeks of April, this year, YouTube took down the channel of the digital Hindi news platform "Bolta Hindustan," boasting nearly three lakh subscribers. According to a few reports, YouTube's refusal to provide specific reasons for the suspension, suggests it was done at the behest of the Indian government. As the country approaches general elections, wherein the role of media is sanctimonious in disseminating authentic news, state-led crackdowns have intensified. "Bolta Hindustan" is not an isolated case; in February, this year, digital outlet Article 19 India received communication from Meta stating that its Facebook page had been "restricted."

Between the beginning of 2021 and October 2022, Indian authorities reportedly blocked 104 YouTube channels and 45 videos under the provisions of the Information Technology (IT) Act. In 2023, social media platforms were instructed to block a BBC documentary pertaining to the 2002 Gujrat riots. Under the guise of "sovereignty and integrity" the state often invokes regulatory tools like these to

cancel and push back on news that is at odds with its narrative of an incident.

The state's crackdown on media is not something new that India is witnessing. The country does not have a spotless history of free speech. In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a twenty-month emergency, suspending constitutional rights, censoring the press, and imprisoning journalists. Instances of violence against journalists in smaller towns and rural areas have also been common. However, the current challenges facing the journalism industry represent an unprecedented level of pressure from various sources.

The recent misuse of the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) to arrest and mute journalists has sparked widespread concern. "Detaining" reporters for their alleged involvement in reporting or endorsing narratives perceived as "contrary" to the state's interests has ignited discussions about the diminishing space for dissenting viewpoints and investigative journalism. This increasing number of journalists facing charges under draconian laws is indicative of the precarious state of freedom of speech in India. Since 2010 there have been 16 instances of journalists being charged under the UAPA in the country. When the UAPA is wielded against journalists striving to investigate and report on various issues, it serves to criminalize their legitimate activities and label them as "terrorists."

“Between the beginning of 2021 and October 2022, Indian authorities reportedly blocked 104 YouTube channels and 45 videos under the provisions of the Information Technology (IT) Act.”

On April 20, 2020, the Jammu and Kashmir Police initiated legal proceedings against Masrat Zahra, a photojournalist from Kashmir, under the UAPA. Zahra, aged 26, is a resilient journalist who has confronted the challenges of a patriarchal society and the difficult circumstances encountered by journalists in Kashmir to deliver impactful stories for various international publications, including 'The Washington Post' and 'Al Jazeera.' Nevertheless, the police declined to acknowledge her as a journalist, referring to her instead as a 'Facebook user' in their official statement. It's evident from the case of Masrat Zahra that how standard journalistic practices, whether they involve reporting facts unfavourable to the government or scrutinizing the Kashmir issue through the lens of urging a prompt political resolution, could readily run afoul of these broad provisions.

In connection with press freedom, both institutional and journalistic censorship are an unending concern to the print and broadcast media around the world. Recently, a peculiar challenge has emerged in the form of self-censorship, largely stemming from the extensive connections media outlets have established with corporate entities harbouring vested interests, as well as the financial investments made by politicians in media assets, leading to compromises on integrity, authenticity, and freedom. In December 2022, billionaire Gautam Adani, acquired NDTV, long considered one of the last and most prominent independent voices in mainstream Indian television. Over the past five years, media outlets in India, spanning television, print, and online platforms, have increasingly adopted the concept of self-censorship. News articles have vanished from websites, while TV channels have opted to omit interviews or stories conducted by their reporters. NDTV was revealed to have practised “internal censorship” during the United Progressive Alliance regime. Furthermore, the entertainment channel Star Plus opted not to broadcast a “comedy act” that parodied Prime Minister Modi. Since May 2014, the occurrence of the “404 error” page on media websites has become more frequent.

The repercussions of these restrictive policies of the government extend beyond India's borders. Several Overseas Citizens of India journalists residing in other countries have opted against

travelling to India to cover the upcoming elections. In interviews conducted by RSF, three journalists mentioned concerns over the lengthy accreditation process, the likelihood of “rejection, the requirement to furnish a work contract, and the necessity to provide the Indian embassy with a detailed outline of their planned reporting activities in India.” Additionally, they expressed apprehension about the possibility of being “banned” from returning to their countries of origin. In light of the current situation, the future of media appears bleak. There's a growing concern that restrictions on the dissemination of information will intensify in the foreseeable future. Moreover, there's an increasing likelihood of journalists and writers facing detainment and legal actions under the pretext of inciting dissatisfaction towards the nation.

Thus, it's imperative to recognize that press freedom should not be manipulated as an agenda aligned with any particular ideology as it serves as a cornerstone of democracy. The press constitutes a vital component of the country and deserves respect and freedom from all corners of the political spectrum.

In this edition of Azaad Awaaz, the aim is to unravel and confront the current status of press freedom in India amidst the state crackdown on media houses and increased censorship through various legislative

frameworks. It will delve into the wider ramifications of these constraints on journalists' freedom of expression, as well as the effects on their families, peers, and the consumers of journalism—the citizens of India. Additionally, by shedding light on the often-overlooked issue of gender-based censorship, this edition will conclude by highlighting the lived realities of journalists who have worked in conflict-ridden areas amid increasing repression.

The *Awaaz in Focus* segment meticulously examines the repercussions of The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). It aims to explore how this legislation, alongside other statutes such as the Telecommunication Act and Broadcast Services (Regulation) Bills, has contributed to the criminalization and suppression of voices not only within the journalism industry but also across various online and OTT platforms in India. For this, the team talks to **Sarah Zia**, a professor at the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication (JSJC).

The **special segment** of *Awaaz in Focus* delves into the multifaceted challenges of journalism in India, particularly concerning censorship and media literacy. The key concerns highlighted in this include biased news dissemination, the impact of social media on information authenticity, and the evolving patterns of censorship both from external sources and within the media itself. The interview emphasises the

“press freedom should not be manipulated as an agenda aligned with any particular ideology as it serves as a cornerstone of democracy.”

importance of holding power accountable, with recommended strategies provided for journalists to navigate censorship challenges while advocating for balanced reporting. For this special segment, the team is in conversation with **Surekha Deepak**, a professor and assistant dean at the Indian Institute of Journalism and News Media (IIJNM).

For *Vichaar*, we are in conversation with **Mr Raqib Hameed Naik**, a Kashmiri journalist and the founder of Hindutva Watch. The conversation revolves around the lived experiences of the speaker while working as a journalist in Kashmir. It explores how the honest reporting of journalists has subjected them to persistent harassment and scrutiny from authorities, impacting not only their own safety but also that of their loved ones. The discussion also narrates the current landscape of journalism and the systemic change that has occurred in the reporting of news over the years, attributable to the growing majoritarian government in India.

The *Nazariya* piece delves into the pervasive issue of gender-based censorship within India's media landscape. It highlights how women's voices are systematically silenced, reflecting deeper societal biases and institutional barriers. The piece advocates for more inclusive media practices, empowering women journalists, and holding institutions accountable for promoting gender equality. Ultimately, it emphasizes the importance of fostering an environment that celebrates diversity and respects marginalized voices to combat institutional censorship effectively.

The *Talkpoint* segment, in conversation with **Mr Abhishek Saha**, a journalist and author of the book 'No Land's People,' discusses the experiences of the speaker having worked as a journalist in conflict-ridden areas of Kashmir and Assam. The different forms of direct and indirect censorship tools of the state to hush the voices of free media were touched upon. Furthermore, the conversation tries to unpack both the visible and concealed consequences of stifling dissent in a democratic society, shedding light on the broader implications for freedom of speech and press in the country.

BEYOND THE HEADLINES: UNRAVELING THE EFFECTS OF CENSORSHIP IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

IN CONVERSATION WITH SARAH ZIA



PROF. SARAH ZIA

Professor, O.P Jindal Global
University



[ACCESS THE INTERVIEW HERE](#)

Q1. The number of journalists charged under draconian laws is an indication of the perilous state of free speech in India. From 2010 to 2023, the country had 16 journalists charged under The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA). Given the significant number of journalists charged under the UAPA in India since 2010, what criteria delineate a 'terrorist act' under UAPA in India, and how might journalistic activities potentially intersect with this definition? In other words, where is the line between legitimate reporting and actions that could be perceived as attempting to disrupt state order and peace, thus falling under the UAPA?

If you look at UAPA, it's effectively an Act designed to prevent or punish terror activities. That is a very simple way of feeding it.

It by itself directly has no link to journalism, media, censorship, or freedom of speech and expression. All of those that you would normally associate with concerns around the media. However, as you have pointed out, the UAPA is being used a lot these days against journalists. Hence, it becomes essential to look at the link on how UAPA is being extended in its reading to be applied to journalists. So, 2-3 things if you will notice are common.

Let's begin by addressing the legal implications of the situation before delving into the content reported by these journalists. Two key provisions, Section 17 and Section 18

of the UAPA are consistently being invoked in these instances.

Section 17 pertains to the punishment for raising funds for terror activities. Notably, it doesn't necessitate proving that the accused utilized the funds for a terror act. Merely the intention or attempt at fundraising can lead to trouble. Section 18, on the other hand, considers any act preparatory to the commission of a terror act as grounds for accusation. Both sections are broad and sweeping, lacking specificity.

Additionally, Section 153 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which deals with causing enmity between groups through spoken or written words, is also being employed against journalists. Moving on to specific cases, the recent arrest of Prabir Purkayastha is a pertinent example. He's been charged with raising funds for anti-national activities under Sections 17 and 18. Another instance involves Masrat Zahra, a journalist in Kashmir, who posted an image of a crowded rally. Though the copyright belonged to a Western photography agency, she faced an FIR, likely under Section 153 of the IPC. Similarly, Gowhar Geelani, another Kashmiri journalist, was charged under UAPA for a tweet.

The case of Shahina K.K. in 2010 highlights how journalists reporting on police misconduct can also fall under the ambit of UAPA. However, Siddique Kapan's case diverges as he was charged while en route to work, not directly

involved in journalistic reporting. These examples underscore a critical point: UAPA charges against journalists often stem not from the specifics of their actions but from a perceived threat to those in power. This suggests that UAPA is wielded more as an intimidation tactic than a tool to address specific offences. Unlike laws such as the Official Secrets Act, which directly pertain to journalistic activities, UAPA's application suggests an assertion that journalists are engaging in terrorist activities.

Moreover, the draconian nature of UAPA compounds the challenges faced by journalists, who must navigate dangerous territories and engage with sources that may be deemed inappropriate by society. Ultimately, a journalist must bear witness to events, even if they expose wrongdoing. Holding journalists accountable for their reporting undermines this essential function of the press.

As we delve further into the discussion, it's crucial to examine the punitive measures associated with UAPA and how they impact journalism as a whole. For now, this is how I would like to open the discussion.

Q.2 In light of the adage that 'bail is the rule and jail is the exception' in criminal cases, the UAPA Act seems to upend this principle notably through Section 43D(5), which effectively makes jail the norm and bail the rarity. This punitive

approach has led cases to linger for years if not decades. Late tribal rights activist, Stan Swamy challenged this provision in the Bombay High Court, contending that it infringes upon the fundamental right to life and liberty. How does the UAPA's strict bail policy, which often leads to prolonged detention without bail, affect the justice system and the rights of the accused? Additionally, how does this impact journalists reporting on these cases? Has it resulted in self-censorship among journalists or news organizations in India?

Much has been said about the legal complexities surrounding the UAPA, but as a journalist, I want to highlight the practical implications I've observed. Journalists, often lacking deep legal literacy, find themselves facing UAPA charges seemingly out of the blue, instead of receiving the usual byline for their work. This trend isn't limited to journalists; civil society activists also face similar targeting under UAPA.

The process of dealing with UAPA charges presents significant challenges. Many individuals charged under UAPA spend prolonged periods as undertrials without bail or progressing to trial, primarily due to the critical component of the charge sheet. The custody of individuals can be extended for up to 180 days before the filing of the charge sheet, a significant period without evidence examination. The Supreme Court's stance on bail further

“ Many individuals charged under UAPA spend prolonged periods as undertrials without bail or progressing to trial, primarily due to the critical component of the charge sheet. ”

complicates matters, presuming the charge sheet to be *prima facie* true until proven otherwise, hindering bail until evidence examination, a time-consuming process. In the 2019 judgment of the case *NIA v Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali*, the Supreme Court held that once the prosecution places the charge sheet, it will be assumed to be *prima facie* true. Consequently, the burden shifts to the defence to prove it false, necessitating thorough evidence examination, a time-consuming process.

This legal framework inherently disadvantages those accused under UAPA, as seeking bail becomes challenging. Authorities, confident in their case, exploit this structure, often prioritizing the filing of charge sheets over opposing bail, as obtaining bail under UAPA is not easily attainable. Facing charges under UAPA raises questions about self-censorship among journalists. Unlike defamation, where

newsrooms have established guidelines, but discussions about protecting journalists from UAPA charges are often absent. The subtle nature of censorship emerges from the fear of intimidation tactics employed by authorities, rather than a direct response to UAPA charges. Additionally, efforts to combat misinformation face challenges in audience reception, highlighting broader societal distrust in journalism.

However, attributing self-censorship solely to UAPA overlooks the larger environment of pressure and fear faced by newsrooms. Deep-rooted suspicion towards journalists, coupled with legal and political pressures, contributes to a tense atmosphere triggering self-censorship. While UAPA poses a significant threat, it's part of a broader spectrum of challenges faced by journalists and newsrooms. Furthermore, the selective application of UAPA against journalists highlights its discriminatory use to suppress dissent. Those charged under UAPA are often labelled dissenters against government policies, reinforcing the notion that explicit dissent is problematic. This realization contributes to a nuanced approach to censorship within newsrooms, shaped by the dynamic interplay of power dynamics and societal shifts.

In navigating these challenges, journalism responds to the changing landscape, adapting editorial decisions to reflect shifting power dynamics. For instance, in election years,

newsrooms adjust coverage to accommodate opposition voices, highlighting the issue-specific nature of self-censorship. Overall, while UAPA poses a significant threat, understanding its role within the broader context of journalistic challenges is essential in addressing issues of censorship and protecting press freedom.

Q.3 The Supreme Court granted bail to journalist Siddique Kappan after spending two years in jail. He was arrested while he was on his way to Hathras to report on a Dalit girl who was allegedly raped & killed. UP Police had registered a case against him under UAPA. Given the potential for misuse or abuse of the UAPA to target journalists critical of the government or reporting on sensitive issues, what legal mechanisms exist for holding authorities accountable for wrongful prosecution or harassment of journalists?

Upon reflecting on our discussion, it strikes me that much of the application of UAPA isn't solely about the nature of the work being done, but rather the perceived threat individuals pose to the government's agenda. Take the case of Siddique Kapan, for instance. Despite being a journalist with limited reach, his assignment was to report the Hathras gang rape case that led to him being charged under UAPA. This suggests more about the anxieties of the charging authorities than the specifics of his

work. Considering this, it raises questions about what legal mechanisms newsrooms can employ to address such situations. As you mentioned, UAPA is stringent, and seeking bail isn't straightforward. Media advocacy emerges as a potential avenue, with organizations like the Press Club of India and the Committee to Protect Journalists playing significant roles. However, some organizations may feel powerless to advocate due to the legal complexities involved.

While advocacy efforts highlight the link between UAPA charges and press freedom, the legal recourse for individuals charged under UAPA remains limited. Despite this, media organizations are actively engaging in advocacy efforts to address the broader implications of such charges on freedom of speech and expression, as well as the right to livelihood and liberty. Thus, while there may be limited legal options, advocacy serves as a crucial tool in raising awareness and challenging the impact of UAPA on journalistic activities and rights.

Q.4 But what recommendations would you offer to ensure that journalists are not wrongfully prosecuted under laws like UAPA? What steps should be taken to safeguard journalistic freedom and protect journalists from unwarranted legal actions?

To address the challenges posed by laws like

“Some organizations may feel powerless to advocate due to the legal complexities involved.”

UAPA against journalists, several measures need to be considered. Firstly, there's an urgent need to simplify legal reporting and make it more accessible to regular audiences. Over the past decade, there has been progress in legal journalism, with more resources available, but further efforts are required to enhance public awareness about UAPA and its implications for journalism.

Moreover, within the journalism fraternity, there's a need to increase awareness about legal repercussions. Many journalists may lack comprehensive understanding in this regard due to their primary focus on reporting rather than legal matters. Initiatives like the Internet Freedom Foundation's free legal clinic for journalists can provide invaluable pro bono advice to navigate potential legal issues.

Furthermore, there's a necessity to foster unity among journalists to collectively respond to challenges facing the media fraternity. Despite the divisive factors, journalists need to unite and advocate for press freedom and protection against unjust legal actions. Drawing from historical examples such as the emergency period, civil society groups were able to band

together to protest draconian laws, highlighting the power of collective action.

Additionally, media organizations should play a proactive role in supporting journalists facing legal challenges. While independent journalists may lack institutional backing, those affiliated with media outlets should receive support in case of UAPA charges. Media organizations, with their resources and influence, should establish internal mechanisms to assist journalists charged under such laws.

In essence, while legal countermeasures may be limited, advocacy efforts, increased awareness, unity within the journalism fraternity, and institutional support from media organizations can collectively work towards safeguarding journalists' rights and press freedom in the face of legal threats like UAPA.

Q.5 A few weeks ago, when railway aspirants protested in Patna, the government told YouTube to remove all videos of the protest and to stop the virality of the video. Section 20 of the Telecommunication Act of 2023 grants the government expanded authority to suspend online messages or topics during public emergencies, potentially reshaping online communication and expression for an extended period. Although aimed at safeguarding national sovereignty, this section lacks

clarity on defining what constitutes a threat. It grants the central government full discretion to decide what warrants suspension. Do you believe this power is arbitrary or exemplary?

Firstly, it's crucial to recognize the detrimental impact of broad-based internet shutdowns, not just on the economy but also on individuals' lives and livelihoods. The internet is no longer merely a tool for communication; it's integral to earning a livelihood and accessing essential services. Shutdowns disrupt people's lives in profound ways that are challenging to quantify. Research by organizations like the Internet Freedom Foundation and SFLC- Software Freedom Law Centre, India highlights the adverse effects of shutdowns on local economies, such as in Kashmir, where prolonged shutdowns have had significant economic repercussions.

While internet shutdowns may be justified from a security standpoint in certain sensitive situations, their arbitrary use raises concerns.

While shutting down the internet may be aimed at curbing the spread of misinformation, it cannot be the sole solution. There must be accompanying legal measures to address those spreading misinformation or inciting social unrest online. Failing to take such actions renders internet shutdowns ineffective in tackling the root cause of the problem. Furthermore, the Supreme Court has provided strict guidelines on when internet shutdowns

are permissible, emphasizing that they should be a last resort. However, in practice, many shutdowns violate these guidelines, indicating a lack of adherence to regulatory frameworks. This inconsistency undermines the rule of law and exacerbates the negative consequences of shutdowns.

Transitioning to the impact of internet shutdowns on journalists, it's essential to recognize that the internet plays a pivotal role in their work. Journalists rely on the internet for real-time reporting, communication with newsrooms, and ensuring their safety in volatile situations. Shutdowns deprive journalists of these essential tools, hindering their ability to report accurately and compromising their safety. Instances where journalists are unable to reach out to their newsrooms during crises underscore the critical nature of uninterrupted internet access for their work.

In response to shutdowns, journalists have adopted alternative communication methods, such as messaging apps that operate without the internet. However, these solutions have limitations and may not always be effective, particularly in emergencies or when covering events in remote locations.

Q.6 As we've observed a surge in independent media journalists like Bharkha Dutt, Anubha Bhonsle, etc establishing their presence on online platforms, it's clear that they've been able

to thrive by offering uncensored content, which often wasn't feasible in mainstream media due to potential threats faced by on-screen journalists. However, with the recent introduction of three new legislative acts by the Union government – including the Telecommunications Act of 2023, the draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill of 2023, and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act of 2023 – there's growing concern about the government gaining extraordinary powers over digital news media, independent journalists, and commentators.

My question is, could you elaborate on the potential consequences of these acts for digital content creators, journalists, and citizens who wish to engage in meaningful discourse and hold authorities accountable?

I will not get into the specifics of the act. But if you look at the broader reading of these three Acts, it becomes evident that the three Acts in question aim to categorize all online content under a singular classification of "content." This sweeping categorization encompasses a vast array of entities, ranging from OTT platforms such as Netflix to individual YouTube channels run by personalities like Ravish Kumar, Dhruv Rathee, or Beer Biceps. Despite the stark

Despite the stark differences in content, approach, and audience, these entities appear to fall under the same regulatory framework, posing significant challenges to their autonomy and diversity.

The rise of online news and general information content was noted as a prominent trend, particularly excluding content related to lifestyle influencers or travel. This trend encompasses a wide spectrum of creators, including traditional media outlets such as the Times of India's YouTube channel, as well as independent newscasters like Barkha Dutt and Ravish Kumar. Dhruv Rathee's channel serves as another example, straddling the boundary between reporting, explaining complex issues, and fact-checking.

However, the danger lies in oversimplification. While superficially labelled as anti-government dissenters, Ravish Kumar and Dhruv Rathee exhibit significant differences in their roles and approaches. Ravish Kumar predominantly engages in reporting and producing field stories, while Dhruv Rathee serves as a fact-checker and explainer. It's crucial to recognize and appreciate these nuances, yet the legislation appears to overlook them, potentially oversimplifying complex realities and treating disparate entities as homogenous. The proposed draft broadcast act further exacerbates these concerns. Its definition of "program" underscores the expansive scope of content it seeks to regulate,

including everything from in-depth news stories to casual memes shared online. This broad interpretation casts a wide net, potentially subjecting a diverse array of content creators to the same legal scrutiny, regardless of their intentions or impact.

This broad-brush approach is deeply concerning. While regulatory frameworks are undoubtedly necessary, they should reflect the unique challenges and responsibilities inherent in each medium. The attempt to subject OTT platforms and news outlets to similar regulations overlooks the distinct nature of their content, operations, and impact on society. Two specific aspects of the proposed legislation raise significant alarm. Firstly, the establishment of a Content Evaluation Committee poses considerable logistical challenges and risks narrowing down criteria, potentially leading to the suppression of dissenting voices or alternative perspectives. Secondly, the proposed Broadcast Advisory Council, with a significant representation from the government, raises concerns about impartiality and the potential for undue influence on content regulation. In essence, these Acts threaten to undermine democratic values by centralizing regulatory control and stifling the plurality of voices and perspectives in the digital realm. Moreover, they pose practical challenges given the sheer volume and diversity of online content and platforms. It's imperative to consider the

implications for both content creators and audiences alike. As users increasingly rely on the internet as a primary source of information, any restrictions on content creation could significantly impede their access to diverse perspectives, critical information, and ultimately, the democratic process itself.

Q.7 Over the course of several years, journalism bodies and unions have actively advocated for journalist rights, with collective efforts such as submitting charters of demands to parliamentarians and participating in protests against legislation deemed detrimental to the current journalism landscape in India. Considering the specific challenges posed to independent journalism in the country, can you elaborate on the current status of resistance efforts by these bodies, and assess whether these efforts are deemed adequate in safeguarding the rights of journalists and preserving press freedom?

The issue of press freedom within the journalism community is multifaceted and reflects broader societal dynamics. At its core lies a stark division between corporate-owned media entities and independent journalists or content creators. Corporate media conglomerates, driven by commercial interests, often prioritize revenue targets over journalistic integrity or press freedom. This prioritization is evident in the dominance of marketing and revenue departments within newsrooms, which wield

“The erosion of press freedom is not solely a result of external regulatory measures but also reflects societal attitudes towards journalism.”

significant influence over editorial decisions. However, audiences may not fully comprehend the extent to which these commercial pressures compromise journalistic autonomy and integrity, as their focus tends to be on consuming news rather than understanding the behind-the-scenes dynamics.

Conversely, independent journalists and content creators operate outside the confines of corporate structures, driven by a commitment to journalistic principles. However, their motivations and challenges differ markedly from those within corporate media. While corporate journalists may grapple with editorial interference and commercial pressures, independent creators face uncertainties associated with financial sustainability and audience engagement. Despite these differences, both groups share a common interest in defending press freedom and navigating regulatory challenges. The erosion of press freedom is not solely a result of external regulatory measures but also reflects societal attitudes towards journalism.

Audience apathy and disengagement contribute to the sidelining of journalistic values and the normalization of media manipulation. Many consumers passively consume news without critically evaluating sources or considering the implications of media regulation. In an era dominated by algorithmic content curation, audiences must exercise vigilance and discernment to counteract the influence of digital platforms on their information consumption habits.

Efforts to safeguard press freedom require collaboration and support from multiple stakeholders, including media organizations, regulatory bodies, and civil society. Organizations can play a crucial role in advocating for legal protections and providing resources to journalists facing legal challenges. However, meaningful progress also hinges on fostering a culture of media literacy and civic responsibility among audiences. Without active engagement and support from consumers, initiatives aimed at protecting press freedom may fall short of their objectives.

Furthermore, addressing the complexities of media regulation and democratic governance demands a nuanced understanding of the interplay between institutional power dynamics and societal values. Press freedom is not an isolated issue but a reflection of broader democratic principles and norms. Therefore, efforts to uphold press freedom must be accompanied by initiatives aimed at

strengthening democratic institutions and promoting civic participation. It may seem like an unpopular opinion, but I want to put this thought here.

Q.8 How can we effectively raise awareness among audiences about the realities of journalism in today's world and the challenges journalists face? What strategies can be employed to ensure that the public is informed about the role of journalists and the issues they encounter? What recommendations would you suggest for fostering greater alertness and understanding among audiences regarding the state of journalism and the experiences of journalists?

Certainly, one effective approach to enhancing awareness among audiences about the challenges journalists face and the nature of journalism today is to promote critical media literacy skills. For instance, when receiving a WhatsApp forward or any news link, it's crucial to examine the source and content critically. Sometimes, misinformation spreads through platforms that mimic legitimate media organizations, using URLs similar to established news outlets. Hence, it's essential to scrutinize the source, check the masthead, and verify the authenticity of the information before accepting it as factual. In many cases, false information circulated on social media platforms appears to be real news due to its

resemblance to legitimate reporting. However, the timestamps on articles may reveal that the information is outdated or no longer relevant. Additionally, considering the authorship of the piece and whether it aligns with credible reporting standards can help discern the validity of the content. Moreover, distinguishing between real news and satire is crucial, as satirical content may be misconstrued as factual, leading to misinformation.

Furthermore, developing a habit of consuming information mindfully rather than hastily can significantly improve media literacy. By taking the time to analyze the context, intent, and potential biases behind the information,

individuals can better discern the credibility of news sources. This includes considering factors such as why the information was shared, who stands to benefit from its dissemination, and whether it serves a particular agenda.

By fostering critical media literacy skills, individuals can navigate the complex landscape of online information more effectively, reducing the spread of misinformation and enhancing their understanding of journalistic practices. Through small but essential steps like verifying sources, checking timestamps, and discerning satire from real news, audiences can contribute to a more informed and responsible media ecosystem.

NAVIGATING CENSORSHIP: THE NEED FOR MEDIA LITERACY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN INDIAN JOURNALISM

IN CONVERSATION WITH SUREKHA DEEPAK



PROF. SUREKHA DEEPAK
Professor, IJNM



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Q1. As a journalism professor specializing in media literacy, could you share some insights into the common concerns or worries expressed by students or journalists in your training sessions, regarding the journalism industry today?

So, if we look at what we have in the media, I think one of the main concerns that come up, especially in the workshop and with students, is to do with the availability of news itself because a lot of them get news that's already coming with a certain bias. And I think the question is, where can you then access unbiased news? That's something that is a cause of concern for many. It's also, I think, based on where people access news, and a lot of young people and a lot of people now get their news from social media.

And let's say non-traditional media. So, given that, it's difficult to know if everything they are consuming is authentic or factual.

When you're talking about how you consume news, it's also easier to believe what you get on, you know, a forward that's come from your friend or a trusted source, right? So it's somehow more difficult to bring in a bit of critical thinking into that equation when you already trust the source who's sending you this information.

Q2. Have you observed any evolving trends or patterns in censorship practices within the Indian media

industry? If so, how do you address these developments?

Coming to your next question about the patterns of censorship in Indian media, it's very closely linked, especially with the mainstream media, to ownership. The question of who owns the media and where does this censorship come from is crucial. I believe it's a combination of external censorship as well as self-censorship. In the media landscape, it's not just about what they cover, but also what they choose not to cover. Oftentimes, news is omitted, and this in itself speaks volumes. When I'm seeking data, even something as basic as development indices, what was once readily available now requires extensive searching.

I think the idea of censorship is also emerging from within the media itself. There's a hesitancy to question or raise issues about media ownership. Who owns the media organization they're working in? This reluctance to delve into such matters contributes to a sense of censorship. Additionally, there's a lack of investment in investigative journalism and in-depth storytelling within media outlets. The absence of coverage of significant issues from the past can be seen as a form of censorship.

It's not just about what's being covered but also what's being left out. Moreover, there's interference from the State, as evidenced by instances where media houses are targeted with

the enforcement directorate (ED) raids. These actions represent an indirect form of censorship from the government.

I think there's also a crucial aspect to consider, about the internet being a major source of news. When internet services are banned, it leaves people with no access to information whatsoever. This trend is particularly alarming in India, where we've experienced prolonged internet bans, especially in troubled regions. It's essentially a blackout, and it raises serious concerns about censorship. How can people access any information at all in such circumstances?

Q3. What strategies do you recommend to aspiring as well as working journalists and media professionals in India to navigate censorship challenges while still fulfilling their role in informing the public and holding power to account?

Well, that's one of the main things, isn't it? What journalism is supposed to do is to hold power accountable. It's easy to say, "Do your job well and you'll get published," but we've seen instances where media houses have had to take down stories because they offended somebody or someone didn't like what was being reported. But again, I'd like to highlight that the Internet is a double-edged sword, right? It affords a lot of freedom as well.

The Internet offers a platform for diverse voices and perspectives. So, if you're seeking places where you can have balanced stories published, I would recommend looking for independent news organizations or pursuing freelance work. It may be easier said than done, but there are still ways of getting your stories out there, even within the mainstream. It's about finding that balance and seeing how you can still push boundaries while navigating the constraints of the media landscape.

There's hope with the growing number of online media houses. Take for instance The News Minute in the South, and organizations in Kerala, or platforms like The Wire and Scroll. These outlets are producing stories without the same level of internal censorship that traditional media may have. It suggests that there are avenues where stories can still be published and make a difference. It's important to recognize and support these platforms that prioritize transparency and objective reporting.

“ It's about finding that balance and seeing how you can still push boundaries while navigating the constraints of the media landscape. ”

Q4. Finally, looking ahead, what do you envision as the future of journalism in India amidst ongoing concerns about censorship and the need for media literacy? How can educators, practitioners, and society at large work together to address these challenges? Also, what role does an academic institution play in this regard?

The future of journalism is very closely linked to the future of democracy in the country. The role of the media and what lies ahead are incredibly connected. If we're talking about holding power accountable, whether it's the government or any other entity, if we don't have a media that's able to act as a watchdog, then we're fundamentally questioning the functioning of democracy itself. It's imperative that we have a strong and vibrant media landscape in the country. Despite various challenges, it's crucial to continue the efforts of good journalism and to keep it going. Numerous indices highlight the importance of maintaining a robust journalistic environment.

Next, I think your question was related to media literacy and what educators can do. I believe that as media educators, it's important to separate media literacy from journalism because they serve slightly different purposes. When it comes to journalism itself, there's a need to understand the standards as

to what constitutes a good story, and the importance of impartiality, fairness, balance, and verification. If aspiring journalists don't grasp these best practices, it's challenging to regain trust in society. So, for journalists or those aspiring to be journalists, knowing the standards is crucial. If you're aware of them and happen to stray, there's hope for improvement. However, if you're unaware and produce one-sided stories, it poses a greater problem. Thus, sticking to the basics of journalism is essential to avoid biases and uphold journalistic integrity.

When it comes to media literacy, it is crucial for not just those producing stories but also those consuming them. Whether you're accessing media through WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, or any other platform, everyone needs to be media literate. Especially during events like elections when there's a surge in dubious and fake news, some of which is intentionally misleading. Everyone needs to pause, think critically, and assess what they're consuming and forwarding. It's a two-sided issue, and that's what makes it so crucial. There's a challenge because sometimes we may sense that something is off or not right about a piece of information, but there's a reluctance to engage in the thinking process needed to figure out what it is. Many people simply forward content without critically evaluating it, contributing to the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. This is a significant problem. Therefore, it's vital that everyone, not

“ We must be critical thinkers when it comes to accepting information.”

just journalists or those in newsrooms become media-literate. Now coming to academic institutions, I believe this awareness of media literacy should be instilled at all levels, starting from schools. We need to educate individuals about the ability to question and not believe everything they encounter. In today's world, where AI can generate images and videos, it's even more imperative to exercise discernment. We must be critical thinkers when it comes to accepting information. Media academic institutions have a crucial role to play in promoting this awareness and fostering critical thinking skills among individuals.

RAQIB HAMEED NAIK ON STATE CENSORSHIP OF THE PRESS



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RAQIB HAMEED NAIK
*Journalist, Founder of Hindutva
Watch & India Hate Lab*

Free press is an essential part of any democracy. Without free reporting by the press, democracy cannot thrive in any state. Journalists in a country uphold the free press but who directs what is reporting is often beyond their control. The consumption of news and information by the general public is often influenced by governmental authorities. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in news moderation and surveillance by the state. The state has adopted measures to curtail false news or any reporting which might instigate communal violence and ruckus. But the lines of this form of surveillance have been very hard to differentiate as reasonable or unjustifiable. Due to this, journalists have been suffering to report truthfully, with the concern that it might lead to persecution by the state, jeopardising their safety and privacy. Journalists have also recently been ruthlessly booked under UAPA in a

prejudicial manner in an attempt to silence them and stop their abilities to report. In this edition of Vichaar, the conversation was with Mr Raqib Hameed Naik, a multimedia journalist and founder of Hindutva Watch. His work focuses on political conflict, human rights, religious minorities, refugees, press freedom, the environment, and Hindu nationalism.

We began the discussion by looking at how the state's perpetual attempt to censor journalists has led to a generalized narrative amongst the consumers of the news, that is, the general public. Journalism is a space where the influence of the consumers of news significantly shapes the process and content of news reporting. However, before the direct interaction between journalists and their audience, there exists a significant

intermediary that exerts considerable influence: ‘the state.’ The state’s role in journalism has been to curtail certain facts and news for the larger ‘safety’ of society. Mr Raqib states how the current majoritarian government over the past few years has had a large impact on the availability of news and reporting for consumers. The source of news and consumption of news has been highly impacted by the intermediary role that the government has presumed to take up. We discussed how major media houses in India have also been impacted by the gripping regulations of the state. Over the past few years, major mass media outlets that are the source of news for most of the country have had a shift in their news narrative due to ‘obvious’ state interventions.

Mr. Raqib leaves a comparative note on the shift of journalistic work. He talks about how there was once a time when journalism and reporting were independent and free, fast-forward to the current times, mass media outlets have formed an ‘oligarch’ which sets its narrative through the current government. The discussion then shifted towards how journalists and their loved ones are impacted by continuous censorship surveillance. Several journalists have been impacted by the state’s attempt to control news by subjecting them to draconian laws. Mr Raqib draws out his personal experience on how the state has banned access to two of his initiatives, the Hindutva Watch and the India Hate Lab. He talks about the continuous persecution he received when he was reporting from Kashmir

and even today his family receives threats.

The discussion also outlined how in conflict-prone areas such as Kashmir, journalists are much more heavily persecuted under the UAPA without substantial evidence. This often results in their reluctance to continue reporting. Additionally, due to the slow and stagnant nature of persecution proceedings, many of these journalists are eventually found innocent and acquitted after decades of legal battles. This inherently demotivates them to report and therefore indirectly is used to silence journalists who criticize the state. The charges of UAPA and other similar laws on journalists have also been religiously discriminatory. Mr Naik drew experiences of Muslim journalists in Kashmir who were falsely booked under these laws as a prejudicial attempt to silence them.

Finally, the discussion centred around the biggest stakeholders of journalism and media reporting, the public itself. The role of the public is equally important to safeguard the independence of media, if citizens fail to speak out and protect journalists from state violence, how can the state be held accountable? Mr Naik posits that the public can be the deciding factor as to the faith of free press and speech for the country going forward. Without raising objections, state actions may perpetually be perceived as ‘acceptable behaviour.’

BREAKING THE SILENCE: UNVEILING GENDER-BASED CENSORSHIP IN INDIA'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE



Introduction:

Throughout India's media landscape, women's voices shape public debate and uphold democratic principles. The institutional censorship of women, however, lies beneath the surface. According to a 2015 report, only 19% of news experts and 37% of reporters were women. There are entrenched systemic issues within the media that have led to the silencing of women's voices. This act does not simply reflect isolated incidents or individual prejudices. It reflects systemic issues deeply embedded within the industry. Despite progress toward gender equality, women still encounter obstacles that prevent them from participating fully in media spheres. Institutional norms and societal expectations relegate women to the margins of public discourse due to these barriers.

Besides limiting freedom of expression, censorship reinforces patriarchal structures and perpetuates gender disparities. This article examines how societal norms, institutional biases, and gender-based censorship intersect to cause challenges for women in the Indian media. Using a discerning perspective, it will analyse the implications of stifling women's voices and advocate for more inclusive and equitable media.

Gender-Based Censorship: A Systemic Issue:

The issues of gender-based censorship in Indian media are rooted in historical inequalities and patriarchal norms. It is common for women journalists, writers, and public figures to be silenced within news companies.

There are many forms of censorship, including subtle bias in editorial decisions and overt discrimination. The patriarchal nature of Indian society permeates all aspects of life, including the media industry. Men's opinions are relegated to stereotypical roles for women. As a result of this systemic bias, not only are diverse views limited, but also existing power structures prioritising male dominance, reinforced.

The 2022 controversy surrounding Bulli Bai Sull demonstrates India's gender-based censorship. According to an article by the Voice of America, Arshi Qureshi was "auctioned" on the Bulli Bai app, which offered Muslim women and girls "for sale." However, the app was shut down after widespread condemnation and intimidation. Online trolling against her did not die down. "I am often abused on social media if I put up a tweet or post criticising the ruling regime," Qureshi told VOA. Following this event, the UN-appointed independent rights experts urged Indian authorities to stop systematic harassment against Rana Ayyub, a prominent Indian Muslim journalist. The statement said, "Relentless misogynistic and sectarian attacks online against her must be investigated by the Indian authorities and the judicial harassment against her brought to an end at once." As a result of her consistent reporting on women's rights, government accountability, and the situation of religious minorities in India, Ayyub was targeted.

Women who spoke out against political oppression were targeted and oppressed because of their gender. In addition to undermining free speech, this blatant suppression of dissent highlights the deep-rooted inequalities in the media industry. Bulli Bai sUlli silenced women who challenged the status quo - not because their opinions or messages were valid, but because they were women. Systemic biases and discriminatory practices target and silence women in the media.

An example of digital violence occurred during COVID. According to the Organization of American States, "Online gender abuse increased by as much as 38%. Mostly in the form of non-consensual distribution of intimate images and acts of sextortion, cyber aggression and harassment, online sexual violence and so on". Cases with systematic cybercrime attacks on females during COVID-19 were one of a kind at the time. It happened during a time when media consumption was solely only done through active digital media and directly impacted these women to self-censor themselves.

Institutional Biases and Barriers:

Women make up the largest community of individuals consuming content online in today's age, making them a key demographic for this industry. Even though studies suggest that women are well-represented in the

entertainment and media industries, most countries are working towards ensuring gender parity. This has proved that women face a more hostile working environment than their male counterparts and face a glass ceiling. Institutional biases and barriers contribute to women's challenges. A lack of representation as a result of this glass ceiling contributes to the perpetuation of this cycle of inequality, with the marginalisation of women's voices.

Apart from this, it is not uncommon for women journalists to face discrimination, gendered hate speech, rape, sexual assault and even death. These journalists are "subject to attacks just because they are journalists", according to the UN expert on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Irene Khan. Being the first woman to hold this mandate, she noted, "While both male and female journalists have exposure to violence, attacks on the women are gender-based and highly sexualised online and offline," These attacks on women, especially minorities and individuals who identify as queer, can be viewed as a means of intimidating them and driving them out of the sphere of journalism altogether.

Building on the idea of the injustice faced by women, The #MeToo movement was founded by Tarana Burke, an African American activist, in 2006. The movement gained momentum in October 2017 when allegations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein surfaced

“These attacks on women, especially minorities and individuals who identify as queer, can be viewed as a means of intimidating them and driving them out of the sphere of journalism altogether.”

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Following this, a large number of survivors of sexual abuse and harassment shared their #MeToo stories in solidarity on social media. This moment, for India in particular, helped surface the extent to which sexual harassment was prevalent in the media industry. It made individuals question how a culture of silence and complicity perpetuates these toxic cycles. In 2009, Journalist Padma Priya D had allegedly undergone sexual harassment despite her attempts at verbally asking the accused to stop. When she spoke to her Chief, they asked her "why she wanted to make it a bigger deal than it was". Another example is an allegation made against a former editor at India Today for sexual harassment, who refused to release the victim's work if she didn't respond.

State Crackdown on Dissent:

As discussed in the earlier portions, the frightening impact of this type of censorship stifles the freedom of the press.

It also hinders women from fulfilling professional aspirations or contributing meaningfully to public discourse. Another widely spoken-about incident is Deepika Padukone's visit to JNU. She faced backlash for supporting two injured students by a swarm of masked groups of individuals who flooded the campus. The two assailants were allegedly part of student groups that were close to the ruling party, the BJP. JNU's Director said, "Deepika has managed to negate that fear and give courage to many others who were probably waiting for someone else to take the lead.". Tapsee Pannu also had a complaint lodged against her by Eklavya Singh Gaur, convener of Hind Rakshak Sangathan and son of BJO MLA Malini Gau. He alleged that her necklace, which featured carvings of the Hindi Goddess Lakshmi was spreading 'obscenity' and was an insult to Hindu deities.

Attempts to silence Padukone and Pannu are symptomatic of a larger pattern of gender-based censorship and discrimination that extends into journalism. In Indian society, women are scrutinised and vilified for engaging in political discourse or voicing opinions deemed controversial. The prevalence of a double standard, where it's acceptable for male public figures to express their political or so-called controversial opinions freely in public, without the fear of condemnation or scrutiny. While women have to undergo criticism and struggle with attempts to silence

“ The fight against censorship in journalism cannot be separated from the broader challenge for gender equality and inclusivity in Indian society. ”

then, this further perpetuates this cycle of unrealistic societal standards. This biased behaviour underscores the ubiquitous nature of gender-based discrimination that persists in multitudes in Indian society, particularly in the entertainment industry. ginalisation of women. These behaviours reinforce the notion women's voices or opinions are less deserving of respect than a man. It goes on to contribute to the toxic culture of silencing and marginalisation of women.

Regardless of their fame and influence, these women were subject to criticism and vehement trolling. They conform to these ideals of what is acceptable and what isn't and steer clear from what is considered “political” or “controversial”. The fight against censorship in journalism cannot be separated from the broader challenge for gender equality and inclusivity in Indian society. The examples mentioned above are symbolic of a larger scheme of gender-based censorship and discrimination in India. We must reconstruct

preexisting patriarchal norms and work to create a more inclusive society for all individuals.

Empowering Women in the Media:

Despite the struggles faced by women journalists, the zeal and courage with which they face the myriad of challenges they encounter are a great source of inspiration and hope for a better future.

Such as journalist Palki Sharma Upadhaya, who was the first-ever Dalit woman to broadcast her views on air or Neetu Singh, an independent local reporter. Neetu Singh gained recognition because of her work on sanitation and children's health in Mesahar Basti in Chitrasenpur Village. In an interview, Neetu Singh said, "This is why I do what I do. It is how I covered the elections this year. The real job of journalists is to make the voices and needs of the unheard reach the masses, not to hold loudspeakers to politicians who already have their own."

Combatting institutional censorship of women in media is a task that will require concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders. According to Luba Kassosa, of The Guardian, "There are three key barriers to inclusion of women in news leadership: underrepresentation, the prevalent soft vs hard news assignment gender bias and the perceived lack of sufficient support for women's career progression."

Media organisations must incorporate diversity in their hiring practices and create safe workplace environments. A quote by Meghan Markle captures the essence of this well, "Women Don't Need To Find A Voice, They Need To Be Encouraged To Use It."

Holding media institutions and policymakers accountable for ensuring inclusivity helps create safe working environments for women. Raising awareness about empowering women through civil society organisations and the public can be helpful. It can also help shape public discourse by ensuring those who try to silence them are accountable.

Conclusion:

The issue of institutional censorship in India poses a challenge to the basic principles of democracy and human rights, and cannot simply be viewed as a women's issue. Oppressing the voices of half of one's nation's population compromises the essence of the freedom of speech which is the basic foundation upon which a democracy is built. According to journalist Irene Khan, "Gender justice requires the creation of an enabling environment in which women can exercise their agency."

Stifling women's voices hinders their fundamental right to participate equally in society. It also deprives society of its valuable inputs and perspectives.

Having alternative and more perspectives is essential for making well-informed decisions for the community. To change these toxic cycles, all citizens need to stand in solidarity with women journalists, public figures, influencers, writers and so on, whose unwavering determination is a great source of inspiration for everyone. Creating an environment that celebrates diversity and respects marginalised voices is imperative when fostering social change. Working together to promote gender equality and dismantle institutional censorship, creating inclusive spaces is a very achievable goal.

“There are three key barriers to inclusion of women in news leadership: underrepresentation, the prevalent soft vs hard news assignment gender bias and the perceived lack of sufficient support for women’s career progression.”

**WRITTEN BY:
SAMPADA AGGARWAL**

JOURNALISM IN THE FACE OF CONFLICT

◀ IN CONVERSATION WITH ABHISHEK SAHA ▶



ABHISHEK SAHA
JOURNALIST AND AUTHOR

Q1. To begin with, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your work?

I'm Abhishek Saha. I have been a journalist for the better part of my working life. I studied at the Asian College of Journalism. From there, I joined the Hindustan Times. After briefly working for the newspaper on the desk in New Delhi, I was posted at its Srinagar bureau. From the latter part of 2015 to mid-2018, I covered Kashmir for the Hindustan Times. Post that from mid-2018 to mid-2021, I covered the Northeastern region for The Indian Express and then I decided to take a break from journalism. In early 2021, my book "No Land's People" was published.

I am currently doing my PhD at the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford. My DPhil project looks at citizenship questions in India, the role of paperwork, and how people's document plays a crucial role in answering questions related to Indian citizenship. As a Kashmir correspondent from 2015 to 2018, I witnessed and reported on the prolonged period of unrest, particularly the intense violence and curfews in 2016. My reportage predominantly revolved around themes of insurgency, counterinsurgency operations by the state, alleged human rights violations, and political developments. I also wrote on Kashmir's

handicraft industry, arts and culture, and sports. Transitioning to my role as the Indian Express correspondent in the Northeast, I reported extensively on identity politics and complications in the processes of ascertaining citizenship in Assam; militancy and ethnic clashes; and local governments, politics, and infrastructural development in the region.

Q2. Since your work has majorly been in conflict-ridden regions such as Assam and Kashmir, could you elaborate on how the censorship tools of government like the UAPA, the IT rules, etc impact a journalist's ability to report on real-life stories? Additionally, does the application of these censorship tools differ in conflict-prone areas compared to non-conflicted regions?

As a journalist reporting from conflict areas, I faced several challenges. For instance, during the 2016 unrest in Kashmir, accessing accurate information and verifying facts on the ground were some of the biggest challenges I faced. I had to ensure that I did not rely solely on what the state was saying — official statements and government press releases — and instead verified the information myself by speaking to multiple sources and, wherever possible, visiting the spot. However, I haven't faced a situation where I was being censored by the imposition of a certain law. Of course, there are journalists I know who have been slapped with several kinds of charges.

Q3 You start your book, 'No Land's People,' with the story of your grandmother. This shows how the issue of NRC is also very personal to you. Considering recent events such as the passage of the CAA, nationwide NRC updates, and instances of "bulldozer justice," what forms of direct and indirect censorship do journalists encounter across various platforms, particularly during periods of conflict and protests? Have you faced any such challenges while reporting from Assam and Kashmir? Additionally, did you employ any form of self-censorship while writing your book?

During a conflict, it is the job of the journalist to keep digging for stories of humanitarian crises and excesses by the state, if any. When the reporter gets a piece of information, they have to go to the ground, chase that information, and then 'confirm' that information. There are always multiple sides to a story and it is good journalistic practice to talk to as many relevant people as possible, gather the granular details and then write the report. Asking the state for their version of events can strengthen the narrative and possibly help the journalist and their organisation avoid any future accusations from the state. But one probably should acknowledge that you have to get

the state's version of the episode or perhaps get an official confirmation, but you cannot solely rely on that version of events.

Also, it's very important how you substantiate what you are saying. If you are saying that the death toll in a certain incident is X, then from whom have you got the confirmation that it is X? Who is giving you that information? Especially in today's day and age of rampant misinformation, fake news and fake alarmist interpretations of events, it's very important how you substantiate your information, where you are getting the information from, and who you are quoting. Is it an anonymous source or is it someone on the record? If it's an anonymous source, then does your editor know who you spoke to? Also, if you are quoting from a report or official document that you have accessed, will you make it accessible to your readers — or not?

In conflicts, the state might actively promote its version of events through press releases and statements. At that juncture, it becomes very important for a reporter who is on the ground, posted at a particular place to go to that village, go to that town, talk to that community, go to the spot of the incidents, go to the spot of the violence, talk to eyewitnesses, if present, depending on the nature of the incident. The reporter must do the leg work. As the old adage goes, “When 'A' says it's raining outside and 'B' says it's not, it's the journalist's responsibility to open the window and ascertain the truth.” And, of course, there can be censorship at the editorial level. There might be situations where a reporter gets a story, pitches it, and the bosses say that they are not interested or the paper is not interested. Editorial policies of different media houses and how they see a particular conflict could be one whole separate conversation.

The bottom line is that there could be various levels of censorship that a reporter on the ground might have to face. As far as the book is concerned, there is no self-censorship. I wrote whatever I had to.

Q4 (I): Why is the focus of media houses less on conflicted regions? Does that have anything to do with censorship?

I slightly disagree with the question. I don't think the mainstream media focuses 'less' on conflicts. But the question is what kind of 'focus' does it have? Is it asking the right questions? Is it telling the stories that desperately need to be told? Or is the coverage driven by some kind of propaganda?

Q4 (II): Do you think any intersectional identity of a journalist pertaining to their religion, caste, class or political alignments have any bearing on the extent or chances of being censored by the state?

The intersection between the identity of a reporter and the issues that they are covering is a very interesting question. I began my book with my grandmother's story. In Kashmir, I was a total outsider, but in the Northeast, I was not. I was born and raised in Assam. I belong to a family that at some point bore the brunt of a citizenship determination exercise. So how did that shape my reportage on the NRC and the book? I believe that personal experiences can add depth and nuance to the stories being covered. It gives the reporter a ringside view of what's happening up close. It's important to have a great editor who is able to incorporate personal experiences while maintaining checks and balances. This enriches the story.

Q5. Does the brunt of the state fall majorly on small/regional independent media houses trying to bring to the fore the lived realities of those marginalised as compared to famous/legacy media houses?

Yes, I agree with that to a considerable extent. But having said that, let me mention that the other day the Chief Minister of Assam issued a legal notice to The Indian Express, a well-known legacy media house, because of a story they published. The story investigated the fate of corruption cases against leaders who were earlier in other parties and then joined the BJP. So that's where you stand. If you see the kind of work that most of the television channels that Ravish Kumar calls 'Godi media,' are doing, I don't think there is any question of state censorship on them. These channels are cheerleaders of the current dispensation and do not ask any critical questions or bring to light something where the state needs improvement. If a small group of independent media houses are the ones asking the government difficult questions on politics and governance, obviously they are more likely to face censorship.

Q6. Finally, what measures do you believe are necessary to safeguard press freedom and combat state censorship of free media, for journalists working in conflict-prone regions?

I think access to good legal aid can be a great help in such a situation. There are a large number of courageous journalists today who are doing incredible work. They are investigating and asking difficult questions. They are an inspiration for youngsters thinking of entering this profession.

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