

Brutal Silencing of Journalists in India

Dibyajyoti Sarma | Jul 10, 2015

The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (Wan-Ifra) and the World Editors Forum have condemned the vicious murders of two journalists in India and have called on the Indian authorities to act swiftly to bring the perpetrators to justice. PrintWeek India's Dibyajyoti Sarma makes sense of the voices in print which are being silenced.

Not just another killing

Akshay Singh is no more. He died under mysterious circumstances in Madhya Pradesh, where he was doing his duty as a journalist following the alleged scam in the Madhya Pradesh Professional Examination Board (MPPEB) or Vyapam. On Saturday, he visited Meghnagar in Jhabua to talk to the family members of scam-accused Namrata Damor, who too was found dead in Ujjain in 2012. An employee with The India Today Group, Akshay Singh, was working with *Aaj Tak* as a special correspondent since December 2013.

This would be sad news in itself, in a democracy, where freedom of speech is a Constitutional Right and journalism is often said to be the fourth pillar of its very existence, the other three being the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. But Singh's death is not a lone case, to be mourned and martyred, like the French and the world at large did after the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in Paris in January 2015. This is perhaps the reason why there has not been a massive outcry in the case. In India, journalists often die while on duty and nobody seems to be bothered about it.

Death by numbers

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a New York-based independent, non-profit organisation that promotes press freedom worldwide, 35 journalists have been killed in India since 1992. These are the numbers in which the motive of the murder was confirmed. In CPJ terminology, this means that the organisation is reasonably certain that a journalist was murdered in direct reprisal for his or her work. This is not all.

The website also includes 23 journalists, the motive of whose death is not yet confirmed by CPJ. It also lists the names of three media workers killed in 2007, all of whom were working for the Tamil daily *Dinakaran*.

This takes the number to an astonishing 61 people, which is a huge number and should be a matter of shame for a democracy.

If you thought the deaths are a recent threat, there is more.

During the Punjab insurgency in the 1980s, journalists of newspapers such as *Punjab Kesari*, *Jag Bani* and *Hind Samachar* were targeted by terrorists. In 1984, the editor of the *Hind Samachar* group, Ramesh Chandra, was shot dead. Journalists and editors from other newspapers were gunned down.

The same thing happened in Assam at the height of the ULFA movement. Parag Kumar Das, a radical journalist and a human right activist was gunned down on 17 May 1996, when he had gone to fetch his son from school.

The signs are clear.

The pillars of democracy are cracking and democracy itself is in danger.

The 7 January 2015 attack on the offices of French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* threw up questions about freedom of expression, and its limits, into the spotlight. The

tragedy sparked global debate about whether some expressive content should be censored and if so, to what end.

In India, it seems, everything against 'the power that be' is censored, by force if needs be. And dead bodies continue to pile up.

Bodies in flame

On 22 June 2015, Sandeep Kothari, a 40-year-old journalist from Madhya Pradesh was allegedly murdered by three persons involved in illegal mining, who kidnapped him and set him ablaze, apparently over his refusal to withdraw a court case. The burnt body of Kothari, who was abducted from Katangi tehsil in Balaghat district two days back, was found dumped in a farm at Butibori area in Nagpur.

Kothari was abducted on 19 June night when he was headed towards Umri village with his friend on his bike. His bike was hit by a four-wheeler and its occupants bundled him inside the vehicle and fled before beating up Kothari's friend Rahandle who was riding pillion.

Kothari worked for the Hindi-language newspaper *Nai Duniya* and was a freelance contributor to a number of publications. Known for his investigations into the activities of the 'mining mafia', he had filed a variety of applications for sensitive government information under the Right to Information Act. His journalistic work had reportedly antagonised a number of people inside and outside of the state government, and Kothari had faced a barrage of criminal complaints.

On 1 June 2015, Jagendra Singh, who was working with the Hindi media for the past 15 years, was allegedly set on fire by "local policemen and goons" under the directions of Uttar Pradesh minister of dairy development, Ramamurthy Varma in Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh. He died from the burn injuries on 8 June. State police reportedly allowed a story to circulate that Singh had committed suicide, while a witness who had confirmed Singh was in fact set ablaze subsequently changed her testimony following his death.

According to local media reports, the journalist had exposed land grabbing, illegal mining operations and sexual assault on women in Shahjahanpur, and had said evidence pointed to involvement of the minister, local police officials, and criminal gangs. The attackers who poured kerosene oil over him and burned him reportedly said they were teaching him "an extreme lesson".

Even the families of journalists are not safe. On 6 July, again in UP, in Barabanki, mother of a journalist was set ablaze allegedly by two policemen after she refused to "bribe" them to free her husband.

Lifeline of an unequal society

The frequency with which these incidents are occurring is not just alarming; it also puts a question mark on the future of Indian mainstream journalism, which is already under pressure from not just politicians but also from giant media corporations, who are, overtly and covertly, infiltrating the Indian media scene, thereby deciding what kind of news should be made available to the public.

While the broadcast media is putting up 'circuses' all around, fighting for TRP, the print media seems to be more concerned about the advertisers, and thus, 'the power that be', since government agencies are the biggest advertisers for any newspaper.

What is happening today, 40 years after the Emergency in 1975-77, is nothing short of ironic. As we remember the momentous event 40 years ago, when democracy was under threat, we remember the heroes who fought back any which way they could, doing everything they could, to protect Freedom of Speech.

Narrating her experience of working in the English weekly *Himmat*, during the Emergency, Kalpana Sharma writes in the news portal *Scroll.in*, “The next 20 months were a roller-coaster ride, but one that formed us as journalists. The principal lesson we learned was that freedom of the press is not a luxury that the rulers bestow on you: it is a lifeline in an unequal society like ours. Without it, the poor would become invisible because it would deprive them of their basic right to be heard as citizens in a democracy.” Forty years on, this ‘lifeline in an unequal society like ours’ is under severe threat, with no viable solution in sight.

World’s press condemns killings

The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (Wan-Ifra) and the World Editors Forum have condemned the murders of the two journalists and have called on the Indian authorities to act swiftly to bring the perpetrators to justice. Wan-Ifra has written to the authorities in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh to demand thorough investigations into the killings of Jogendra Singh and Sandeep Kothari, and to call for better protections for press freedom and the safety of journalists.

“We urge you to hand over the investigation to an independent team and to ensure the state government takes harsh actions as prescribed under law against those found to be responsible for [Jogendra] Singh’s murder, even – and especially – if the killers occupy high positions in the government,” said Wan-Ifra in a letter addressed to the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. “There is also an urgent need for you, as the leader of the government of the most populous state in India, to send a strong message that there will be zero tolerance for those who intimidate and attack journalists.” [The letter can be read here: <http://www.wan-ifra.org/articles/2015/07/07/protest-campaign-india-uttar-pradesh-3-july-2015>.]. Addressing the chief minister of Madhya Pradesh, regarding the murder of Sandeep Kothari, Wan-Ifra called for a thorough and impartial investigation to determine the circumstances surrounding his death.

Bringing up the bodies

Akshay Singh, Sandeep Kothari and Jagendra Singh are not alone. There are others. **Rajesh Mishra** worked for *Media Raj*, a weekly based in Rewa, about 550km northeast of the state capital, Bhopal. He had received anonymous phone threats after writing reports about the alleged mismanagement of a number of regional schools owned by Rajneesh Banerjee, the publisher of another Rewa-based newspaper, *Vindhya Bharat*. Mishra had gone to a tea stand with *Vindhya Bharat* editor Anil Tripathi, at Tripathi’s invitation, and while there he was beaten over the head by two unidentified persons who quickly ran off. He was immediately hospitalised and was then transferred to a hospital in Jabalpur, where he died the next day, on 1 March 2012.

Sai Reddy, 51, a reporter for the Hindi newspaper *Deshbandhu* was beaten and stabbed by assailants on 6 December 2013, as he left a market in Basaguda village in Bijapur district in Chhattisgarh. He sustained severe head and neck injuries, and died as he was being transported to a local hospital. Reddy possessed a deep understanding of local issues and problems, and was considered a veteran journalist by his colleagues. He covered local issues such as health, education, water supply, food distribution, and corruption, and often criticised the government, Maoist insurgents, security forces, and local police.

On 7 September 2013, unidentified assailants fatally shot **Rajesh Verma**, a part-time stringer for the news channel IBN 7, in the chest, while he was covering

confrontations between Hindus and Muslims in Muzaffarnagar, UP. Verma was working for the station for about five years.

Rakesh Sharma, 50, a senior reporter for the Hindi daily *Aaj*, was shot by unidentified assailants on a motorcycle in the Bakewar town of the Etawah district of Uttar Pradesh on 23 Aug 2013. Sharma had left his home after receiving a call from an unknown number. Local journalists said they believed Sharma had been targeted by a local gambling mafia for a critical report he had published on illegal gambling operations.

On 20 August 2013, two unidentified gunmen on motorcycles shot **Narendra Dabholkar**, a journalist and a vocal anti-superstition activist, in Pune, while he was taking an early-morning walk. The gunmen fled the scene. Dabholkar died from injuries sustained to his neck and back. Dabholkar, the editor of Marathi weekly *Sadhana*, promoted scientific thought and covered topics including caste, politics, and religion. Over the years, Dabholkar had angered many Indians with his lectures and writings, which propagated rationalism and scientific thinking. Dabholkar had also spent several years writing in support of a legislation to ban fraudulent and exploitative superstitious practices. A few days before his murder, the Maharashtra state government said it would introduce a controversial anti-superstition bill.

Imposing silence

A recent report, titled *‘Imposing Silence: The Use of India’s Laws to Suppress Free Speech’*, a joint research project by the International Human Rights Program (IHRP) at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Law, PEN Canada and PEN International, calls the reality of the situation ‘Charlie Hebdo in India’.

This is not far from the truth. The report argues: “In India, today, it is surprisingly easy to silence people with whom you disagree. An overlapping network of vague, overbroad laws and a corrupt and inefficient justice system have given rise to an environment in which speech can quickly be censored. Legislative overreach and problems with the police, courts and judiciary reinforce one another, creating cumbersome, complicated and time-consuming legal processes that deter many citizens from exercising their right to free expression. The resulting chill silences many who might otherwise have spoken out, often those with marginal voices, or critics of incumbent politicians. This is a shameful state of affairs for the world’s largest democracy.”

Press Council of India wants law

As Akshay Singh’s death rocks the media, the Press Council of India (PCI) has demanded a legislation that will make physical assaults or intimidation through words or gestures, a cognizable offence with stringent punishment. It has also recommended serious attacks against journalists should be referred to CBI for investigation and be tried by special courts that will conduct day-to-day hearings to ensure speedy trials. The council has also sought welfare measures like compensation for death and injury in the line of work.

These recommendations are part of a report prepared by a PCI sub-committee on safety of journalists, which has been adopted by the council. PCI chairman Justice (retd) Chandramauli Kumar Prasad said that 3 November should be proclaimed as the ‘National Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists’.

The PCI will now take up matters related to attack on electronic journalists and not just those belonging to the print media as was done earlier.

The sub-committee including K Amarnath and Rajiv Ranjan Nag suggested that all

cases of attacks on journalists should be probed by a special task force under the supervision of PCI or court and investigation be completed within one month. If a journalist is murdered, the case should be referred to CBI or any other national level investigative agency and investigation completed within three months.

The committee also recommends that in case a journalist is killed, Rs 10 lakh should be paid by the state government to family members while there should be a compensation of Rs 5 lakh in case of grievous injuries. It suggested that medical expenses of the injured journalist may be paid by state government and news organisation should treat them on duty during this period.

[See below list of journalists killed since 1992 compiled by the Committee for Protection of Journalists]

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**JOURNALISTS KILLED SINCE 1992 AND
35 JOURNALISTS / MOTIVE CONFIRMED**

Jagendra Singh, Freelance on 8 June 2015, in Shahjahanpur, UP
MVN Shankar, Andhra Prabha on 26 November 2014, in Andhra Pradesh
Tarun Kumar Acharya, Kanak TV, Sambad on 27 May 2014, in Odisha
Sai Reddy, Deshbandhu on 6 December 2013, in Bijapur, Karnataka
Rajesh Verma, IBN 7 on 7 September 2013, in Muzaffarnagar, UP
Narendra Dabholkar, Sadhana on 20 August 2013, in Pune, Maharashtra
Dwijamani Singh, Prime News on December 23, 2012, in Imphal, Manipur
Rajesh Mishra, Media Raj on 1 March 2012, in Rewa, Madhya Pradesh
Vijay Pratap Singh, Indian Express on 20 July 2010, in Allahabad, UP
Vikas Ranjan, Hindustan on 25 November 2008, in Rosera, Bihar
Javed Ahmed Mir, Channel 9 on 13 August 2008, in Srinagar, J&K
Ashok Sodhi, Daily Excelsior on 11 May 2008, in Samba, J&K
Mohammed Muslimuddin, Asomiya Pratidin on 1 April 2008, in Barpukhuri, Assam
Prahlad Goala, Asomiya Khabar on 6 January 2006, in Golaghat, Assam
Asiya Jeelani, Freelance on 20 April 2004, in Kashmir, J&K
Veeraboina Yadagiri, Andhra Prabha on 21 February 2004, in Medak, Telangana
Parvaz Mohammed Sultan, News and Feature Alliance on 21 January 2003, in Srinagar, J&K
Ram Chander Chaterpatti, Poora Sach on 21 November 2002, in Sirsa, Haryana
Moolchand Yadav, Freelance on 30 July 2001, in Jhansi, UP
Pradeep Bhatia, The Hindustan Times on 10 August 2000, in Srinagar, J&K
S Gangadhara Raju, Eenadu Television (E-TV) on 19 November 1997, in Hyderabad, Telangana
S Krishna, Eenadu Television (E-TV) on 19 November 1997, in Hyderabad, Telangana
G Raja Sekhar, Eenadu Television (E-TV) on 10 November 1997, in Hyderabad, Telangana
Jagadish Babu, Eenadu Television (E-TV) on 19 November 1997, in Hyderabad, Telangana
P Srinivas Rao, Eenadu Television (E-TV) on 19 November 1997, in Hyderabad, Telangana
Saidan Shafi, Doordarshan TV on 16 March 1997, in Srinagar, J&K
Altaf Ahmed Faktoo, Doordarshan TV on 1 January 1997, in Srinagar, J&K
Parag Kumar Das, Asomiya Pratidin on 17 May 1996, in Guwahati, Assam
Ghulam Rasool Sheikh, Rehnuma-e-Kashmir and Saffron Times on 10 April 1996, in Kashmir, J&K
Mushtaq Ali, Agence France-Presse and Asian News International on 10 September 1995, in Srinagar, J&K
Ghulam Muhammad Lone, Freelancer on 29 August 1994, in Kangan, J&K
Dinesh Pathak, Sandesh on 22 May 1993, in Baroda, Gujarat
Bhola Nath Masoom, Hind Samachar on 31 January 1993, in Rajpura, Punjab
ML Manchanda, All India Radio on 18 May 1992, in Patiala, Punjab
Ram Singh Biling, Azdi Awaz, Daily Ajit on 3 January 1992, in Jalandhar, Punjab
Rakesh Sharma, Aaj on 23 August 2013, in Etawah, MP
Jitendra Singh, Prabhat Khabhar on 27 April 2013, in Jharkhand
Nemi Chand Jain, Freelance on 12 February 2013, in Chhatisgarh
Chaitali Santra, Freelance on 26 September 2012, in South Baksara, Bihar
Chandrika Rai, Navbharat and The Hitavada on 18 February 2012, in Umaria, MP
Jyotirmoy Dey, Midday on 11 June 2011, in Powai, India
Umesh Rajput, Nai Dunia on 22 February 2011, in Raipur, Chhattisgarh
Hem Chandra Pandey (Hemant Pandey), Freelance on 2 July 2010, in Andhra Pradesh
Jagjit Saikia, Amar Asom on 20 November 2008, in Kokrajhar, Assam
Arun Narayan Dekate, Tarun Bharat on 10 June 2006, in Nagpur, Maharashtra
Dilip Mohapatra, Aji Kagoj on 8 November 2004, in Bhagirathipur, Odisha
Parmanand Goyal, Punjab Kesari on 18 September 2003, in Kaithal, Punjab
Indra Mohan Hakasam, Amar Assam on 24 June 2003, in Goalpara, Assam
Yambem Meghajit Singh, Northeast Vision on 13 October 2002, in Manipur
Paritosh Pandey, Jansatta Express on 14 April 2002, in Lucknow, UP
Thounaojam Brajamani Singh, Manipur News on 20 August 2000, in Imphal, Manipur
V Selvaraj, Nakkeeran on 31 July 2000, in Perambalur, Tamil Nadu
Adhir Rai, Freelancer on 18 March 2000, in Deoghar, Jharkhand
NA Lalruhlu, Shan on 10 October 1999, in Manipur
Irfan Hussain, Outlook on 13 March 1999, in New Delhi
Shivani Bhatnagar, Indian Express on 23 January 1999, in New Delhi
Bakshi Tirath Singh, Hind Samachar on 27 February 1992, in Dhuri, Punjab

(Table Courtesy: Committee to Protect Journalists/ <https://www.cpj.org/>.)