Chapter 2
Shooting the Messenger, Slowly, but Surely:
A Review of Imminent Threats to Freedom of Media and Journalistic Integrity in India

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ABSTRACT

India ranks 140th among 180 countries worldwide in the World Press Freedom Index (WPFI), according to the 2019 report by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). In 2018, India was 138th in the same index and 136th in 2016. For the media of the world’s largest democracy, this is disconcerting. The slide in the country’s press freedom ranking is indicative of a complex and hostile social, political, and economic environment pushing at the boundaries of media that is struggling to perform independently as the fourth estate. This chapter takes a critical look at imminent threats to freedom of speech and expression faced by the Indian media in the contemporary situation. The first objective of the chapter is to identify diverse threats to the Indian media, specifically journalism. The second objective is to trace both immediate as well as distal factors that breed hostility towards the media, with a focus on press laws and constitutional provisions in India.

INTRODUCTION

On September 5, 2017, while returning home from work, as Gauri Lankesh, editor-publisher of a Bangalore-based, regional language weekly newspaper, Gauri Lankesh Patrika, stepped on her doorstep, she met the deadly fate she had been dreading for a while. Three unidentified men riddled her body with seven bullets, piercing through her head, neck and chest, leaving her dead on the spot. The 55-year-old Lankesh, a journalist-activist, who was popular among the Dalit rights activists and several Left-wing groups, was an outspoken critic of the caste-based social stratification system in India. Lankesh was re-
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garded as a fearless proponent of human rights and a vehement opponent of the recent rise of nationalism in India. Obituaries penned by her friends and sympathizers described her as incorrigibly argumentative and bold. She was an influential political organizer and mobilizer, who had taken several socially and politically marginalized voices under her wings.

Lankesh’s murder is the most high-profile, cold-blooded, murder of a journalist in India in a long time (BBC, 2017). Considering her stature and contribution to journalism, she was honored with the prestigious Anna Politkovskaya Award posthumously (The Hindu, 2017). Following Lankesh’s murder, a chill pervaded in the country’s newsrooms stirring speculation that many other journalists and activists were on the assailants’ target list. The prime accused in her murder, Parashuram Waghmore, admitted to killing Lankesh to save his religion. He also confessed to having never read Lankesh’s work. He claimed that he had learned from sources that it was blatantly against Hindutva, an ideology Waghmore passionately followed.

The World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) by Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) puts India at 140 among 180 countries. The ranking is an indicator of a complex undercurrent that is a combination of social, economic and political factors. The WPFI index, similar to the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) index, defines press freedom in a multidimensional sense. The WPFI uses a survey methodology to evaluate the perception of press freedom within legal, political, institutional and professional environments. To compute the rankings, the index assesses physical and psychological threats and attacks, perceived as well as real, among local and foreign press workers, media activists and other related non-governmental agencies in the country (Becker, Vlad, & Nusser, 2007). While the index is pinned on how threats to press freedom and journalistic safety are perceived, it has been established that journalists’ perception of political and economic threats is fairly concurrent with the real indicators of political freedom and ownership structures in a society (Hanitzsch & Mellado, 2011). According to statistics compiled by the Free Speech Hub for India, by the Indian media watchdog foundation, The Hoot, in the year 2017, three journalists were killed for their journalistic work, 46 were attacked for their reporting, 27 were detained, arrested or had cases registered against them, while 12 were threatened for their journalistic work (The Hoot, 2018). The report claims that the social and political environment in India has steadily grown worse for journalism and journalists since 2017. According to Committee to Project Journalists (CPJ), five journalists were killed in 2018. This warrants a critical look at the events that have occurred in the past to study their implications on the freedom of the press, journalist safety and journalistic integrity in the present and the future.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This chapter is based on an analysis of documents/texts that are related to press freedom and journalist safety in India. Data includes official public statements of The Editors Guild of India (EGI) issued since 2016 expressing its concerns; reports of global and national media watchdogs; and news coverage in Indian and international media. The aim of the document review is to screen the presence of threats to journalism and press freedom as articulated and perceived by the press and its stakeholders, and to critically analyze them by identifying probable causal factors within the Indian context. The chapter includes a concise background of the Constitutional and legal provisions related to freedom of the press in India, as well as lack of other protection mechanisms thereof. In presenting a background of the legal provisions and their political usage, the chapter aims to establish the concept of state capture as its