

# As freedom shrinks, it's hard times for investigative journalism

In October last year, a young journalist came to meet me when I was in New Delhi for the presentation of the annual PII-ICRC Awards. She was a former winner of the award, an outstanding journalist. For a series of stories she had done for a national magazine, focusing on the trafficking of children from Assam to Gujarat and Punjab to 'Hinduise' them as it were, she was vilified, threatened and mercilessly trolled. Her character was questioned, obscene pictures sent every day to her email account, and a case filed against her in Guwahati for inciting communal hatred. She had covered child trafficking for ten years; her stories had the desired impact with many children benefiting.

In this case, she had spoken to all 'stakeholders' connected with the story. Instead of countering her reports with fact and reason, those in the dock resorted to the use of force, threats and other vile means. Several other journalists in India are facing similar ire from groups and outfits who fancy themselves as custodians of our nationhood and national pride and consider dissent of any sort as akin to sedition. Do violence and such loutish behaviour have a place in the practice of Hinduism?

A study commissioned by The Hoot finds that there have been 54 attacks on journalists and 25 cases of threatening them in the past 16 months. Seven journalists were killed, but "reasonable evidence of their journalism being the motive for the murder is available only in one case", says Geetha Seshu writing about the 'silencing of journalists' for the website. The attacks are not just from vigilante groups. "The

data with The Hoot shows that lawmakers and law-enforcers are the prime culprits in the attacks and threats on the media," Seshu points out. Overall, the situation seems quite frightening. And not only in India.

Agence France-Presse reports that press freedom has hit the lowest point in 13 years, threatened by US President Donald Trump's media bashing and restrictions pursued by both democratic and authoritarian governments. The report cites US-based Freedom House, a human rights organisation, as saying that only 13 per cent of people worldwide enjoy a 'free press'. The Freedom House survey highlights growing concerns over efforts by governments around the world to clamp down on media and dissent.

"Political leaders and other partisan forces in many democracies -- including the United States, Poland, the Philippines, and South Africa -- attacked the credibility of independent media and fact-based journalism, rejecting the traditional watchdog role of the press in free societies," says Jennifer Dunham, who headed the research. Significantly, the report mentions press rights are being eroded by the efforts of politicians in democratic states to shape news coverage and delegitimise media outlets.

However, many countries fare far better than Mexico. Azam Ahmed reporting from Mexico's Tierra Blanca for the *New York Times*, says Mexico is one of the worst countries in the world to be a journalist today, Afghanistan and Somalia being the other two. At least 104 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2000, while 25 others have disappeared and are

presumed dead. Last year, 11 Mexican journalists were killed, the country's highest tally this century. Ahmed writes that after nearly a decade of growing violence against the media, the press has adapted by severely cutting back on what it reports and that self-censorship is not only common, it is often the standard.

*Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age* is a new global study produced by WAN-IFRA for UNESCO that examines the growing risks confronting forms of journalism dependent upon confidential sources and whistleblowers. It finds that the legal frameworks that support protection of journalistic sources at international, regional and country levels are under significant strain – a development that is seen to represent a direct challenge to the established universal human rights of freedom of expression and privacy, and one that especially constitutes a threat to the sustainability of investigative journalism.

The study, authored by former World Editors Forum/ WAN-IFRA Research fellow Julie Posetti, covers 121 UNESCO Member States and represents a global benchmarking of journalistic source protection in the Digital Age. It will be launched on World Press Freedom Day (May 3rd) in Jakarta.

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