

# A WARNING SHOT FOR COMMITTING THE 'CRIME' OF JOURNALISM

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A protest in Bengaluru against the arrest of *NewsClick* founder and editor-in-chief Prabir Purkayastha and Amit Chakravarty, the firm's human resources head, under the UAPA. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

In an interview to the BBC shortly after the Gujarat pogrom of 2002, Chief Minister Narendra Modi was asked: "When you look back, do you think there is anything you should have done differently?" [His response](#) was clear and unvarnished: "Yes, one area where I was very weak, and that was how to handle the media." Both the question and the answer were contained in the BBC documentary that was [barred from being aired in India](#) in 2023. The raids that followed on the BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai following the broadcast of the documentary elsewhere in the world showed that Mr. Modi had learnt his lessons well in nine years as Prime Minister.

If a global giant could be so brazenly smothered by the 'Mother of Democracy' strutting around in her G20 baubles, the fate that has befallen tiny *NewsClick* should not surprise too many. After securing the co-option, cooperation, and capitulation of vast chunks of big media, an image-obsessed government is turning the screws on the bit players. A piece of legislation here to shackle; an early-morning knock there to scare. As the general elections of 2024 loom, preceded by the semi-finals in five States, it is a warning shot to the few who are still committing the unpardonable crime of journalism in the "land of Buddha and Gandhi".

"Show me the man and I'll show you the crime," was the boast attributed to Joseph Stalin's ruthless secret police chief, Lavrentiy Beria, i.e., he could fabricate a case against anyone, even the innocent. Taking a leaf from the Bolshevik's book, a political establishment that feasts on the excesses of 1975 has mastered the art of plausible deniability. Every attack on press freedom is painted as anything but: it is about money-laundering (*NewsClick*, NDTV); it is about income-tax evasion (BBC, *Dainik Bhaskar*); it is about national security (MediaOne); it is about glorifying terrorism (Fahad Shah); it is about disrupting peace (Siddique Kappan). At least Indira Gandhi had the courage to formally declare an Emergency — and the censors sat alongside journalists in the newsroom, not the Prime Minister's office.

Editorial | [Undeclared Emergency: On the arrests and actions in \*NewsClick\* case](#)

[L'affaire \*NewsClick\*](#) is a particularly egregious case — even M/s Thomson & Thompson wouldn't

find it funny. A mighty state going after a news operation that began in a basement. The police landing up without a copy of the FIR or a list of the offences committed. Seizing the phones and laptops of the “suspects” despite every court saying ‘don’t’. A case of economic offence turning into a conspiracy to undermine the republic. And the 76-year-old founder of the portal being arrested under a law made for terrorists. So many questions can be asked, but just one is enough: exactly whose activity is “unlawful” here, the second estate’s, or the fourth?

“If anyone has committed anything wrong, agencies are free to carry out investigations against them under set guidelines,” were the gratuitous words of the Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur. But when the “suspects” are questioned about the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the Delhi riots that followed, or the farmers’ agitation on the farm laws, it reveals a perverse mindset which is so used to unfiltered propaganda that it sees ear-to-the-ground journalism not as a public service, but as an avoidable hindrance. And it ticks all the boxes of media capture — harassment, intimidation, vendetta, vilification.

When Indira Gandhi routinely invoked the “foreign hand” to brush away her every failing, India was literate enough to guffaw at it. But in Bharat, when the state accuses a website of “Chinese links” and peddling Chinese propaganda, the WhatsApp University admins cannot find the smarts to ask, what is illegal about it, even if true? If the custodians of the world’s fourth largest economy think that its journalists do not have the intellectual wherewithal to empathise with peasants and pensioners, women and workers, the poor and the marginalised, Dalits and the disenfranchised, without the Renminbi lining their pockets, it shows that Inspector Clouseau didn’t click on the news headlines.

“In furtherance of this conspiracy to disrupt the sovereignty of India and to cause disaffection against India, large amount of funds were routed from China in a camouflaged manner and paid news were intentionally peddled criticising domestic policies, development projects of India and promoting, projecting and defending policies and programmes of the Chinese government,” reads the comical FIR, with scant understanding of what “paid news” is, oblivious of the Reserve Bank of India-mandated 26% limit on foreign funding of digital platforms, and mocking the 49 crore that Chinese companies donated after COVID-19, including to the PM CARES fund, no less.

This investigation by insinuation, by weaponising every arm of the state, can be read as a sign of creeping political nervousness, but that would be too charitable a view given the stellar record vis-a-vis the media since 2014. When the White House press corps can be disdainfully kept waiting in a van while the U.S. President is bumping fists in the Prime Minister’s residence, or when a BJP-ruled government with blood on its hand can be blithely allowed to proceed against the Editors Guild of India for ferreting out the facts in Manipur, it points to a systemic contempt for the news media bordering on pathological hatred. But, for public consumption, every June the tweets should read: “We must not forget that dark period of Emergency. Censorship was so stringent that nothing could be published without approval.”

The bottomless thirst for approval and approbation — and the limitless allergy for scrutiny and criticism — that the retrofitted witch-hunt against *NewsClick* highlights, offers a useful chance for a hypnotised citizenry to pause and ponder: why is a government, which spends thousands of crores to promote itself through the media, so intent to crush the outliers, bringing disrepute in the eyes of the world? And why is a government which periodically issues (self-attested) certificates of India’s growing prowess so uninterested in improving its ranking on the World Press Freedom index, where it now stands below Taliban-run Afghanistan, at 161 out of 180 countries? (In 2014, it was at 140; in 2022, it was at 150.)

The answer to those questions explains why a sledgehammer was taken to swat a fly. When a BJP minister in Uttar Pradesh tweeted that journalism began during the time of 'Mahabharata', a film-maker replied tartly: "And ended in 2014".

***Krishna Prasad is former Editor-in-Chief, Outlook, and former member, Press Council of India***

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