



SCRIBES NEWS

A JOURNAL OF PRACTITIONERS OF JOURNALISM

Vol. 9 No. 11 Pages: 32

JANUARY, 2026

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Fearless
Frank
Free

Fig leaf No More



cts of persecution by the Jammu and Kashmir police against journalists in the Centrally administered Union Territory have reached another low. The police have been implementing various measures of oppression against local press persons and media houses since 2019, resulting in one of the most restrictive environments for journalists in the country. But targeting mainstream media persons with an aim to intimidate them into self-censorship is new to the Valley.

Recently, several journalists, including news correspondents for *The Indian Express*, *The Hindu* and *Hindustan Times*, were orally summoned by the J&K police, and they were pressured to sign bonds to the effect that they would not undertake any activity to "disturb the peace". This is nothing but an open threat to the media to toe the line of the establishment, signifying a stage where the government thinks it is no more necessary to have even the fig leaf of pretence.

Since the revocation of Article 370 in August 2019, which bestowed special status upon Jammu and Kashmir, and the redrawing of the state into two Union Territories, local media and media persons have been made subject to intense and systematic pressure by resorting to harassment, surveillance and legal intimidation. The result has been an all-pervading atmosphere of fear where press freedom took a direct hit.

Scores of journalists have been arrested or detained, with many charged under stringent anti-terror laws like the UAPA and the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA). Independent media outlets were targeted, and they faced office closures, raids, and the blocking of their websites and social media accounts. Under a new policy since 2020, the J&K authorities have been given broad powers to determine "fake news", "anti-national" and "unethical content", leading to forced self-censorship.

Six years after the reading down of Article 370, Jammu and Kashmir is nowhere near normalcy. The policies pursued by the Modi government have been alienating the Kashmiris fur-

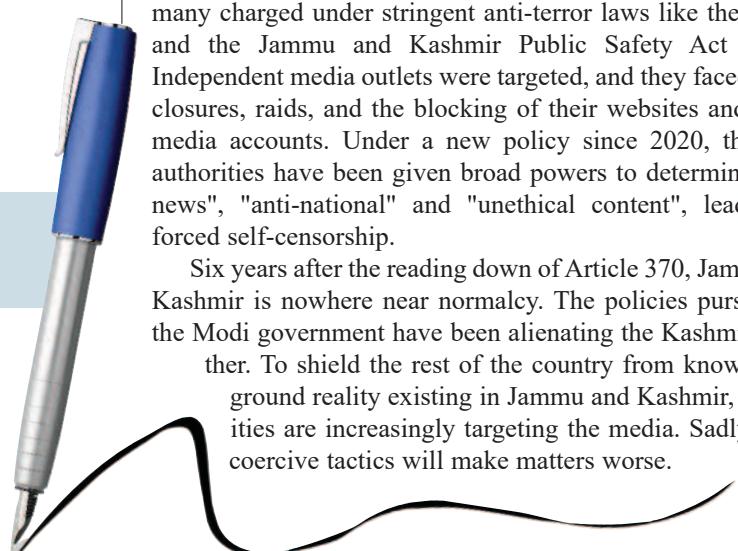
ther. To shield the rest of the country from knowing the ground reality existing in Jammu and Kashmir, authorities are increasingly targeting the media. Sadly, these coercive tactics will make matters worse.

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*“Journalism
can never be silent:
that is its greatest
virtue and its
greatest fault.”*

— **HENRY ANATOLE
GRUNWALD**, *American
journalist and diplo-
mat.*



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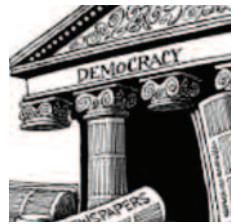
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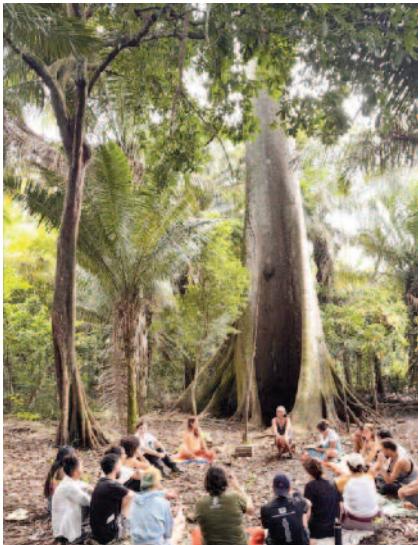
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Members of the media fraternity stage a protest in Mathura over remarks against journalists.

Mathura Journalists Stage Protest against Preacher Aniruddhacharya over Remarks Against Media

Deep resentment prevails among the journalist community over the indecent, insulting and undignified remarks made by preacher Aniruddhacharya against the media and journalists during a recent public discourse. The preacher's use of terms such as "Manthara" and "Dhritarashtra" to refer to the media was termed a grave insult to the entire media fraternity and unacceptable under any circumstances.

In this regard, on Thursday morning, hundreds of journalists from the district, under the joint auspices of the Uttar Pradesh Working Journalist Union (UPWJU), took out a procession to the District Magistrate's office. Holding placards and raising slogans such as "Aniruddhacharya Murdabad" and

"Patrakar Ekta Jindabad", they protested against the preacher.

A memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh through the District Magistrate of Mathura, apprising him of the incident and demanding appropriate and strict action against the preacher to prevent a recurrence of such undignified statements in the future.

Speaking on the occasion, Narendra Bhardwaj, District President of the Uttar Pradesh Working Journalist Union, said that the media is the fourth pillar of democracy and such remarks are not only against decorum but also an insult to democratic values. He warned that if Aniruddhacharya failed to issue an apology, a statewide agitation would be launched.

The journalist community made it clear that there would be no compromise on the dignity and respect of journalism and expressed hope that the administration would take the matter seriously and initiate prompt action.

District Magistrate Chandraprakash Singh said that freedom of expression does not give anyone the right to make indecent remarks. He assured that the memorandum would be considered sympathetically and that appropriate action would be taken.

Those who submitted the memorandum included UPWJU Mathura unit District President Narendra Bhardwaj, Secretary General Ramesh Chand, Pawan Navratna, Ajay Sharma, Kishan Chaturvedi, Vineet Mishra, Dr Vijay Vidyarthi and others. ☐



IJU Secretary General Balwinder Singh Jammu seated with senior members of the State Working Journalists Union Chhattisgarh.

National seminar of State Working Journalists Union held in Raipur



Sudhir Azad Tamboli,

*General Secretary,
Chhattisgarh Working
Journalists Union*



national seminar organised by the State Working Journalists Union, Chhattisgarh, was held in the state capital on Saturday, December 6, focusing on the changing landscape, challenges and concerns facing journalism. Senior journalists, union representatives and media professionals from across the country and the state participated in the deliberations, describing the event as an important platform for dialogue and introspection. Senior journalist Rajesh

Badal, the keynote speaker at the seminar, said that in the era of digital transformation, the core values of journalism, including truth, impartiality and public service, must remain intact. He pointed out that increasing risks in field reporting, lack of resources and growing professional pressures posed serious challenges to journalists.

Balwinder Singh Jammu, Secretary General of the Indian Journalists Union, attended the event as a special guest. Addressing the gathering, he said that the protection of journalists' rights, safety and dignity was possible only through organisational unity. He also urged journalists to remain alert



Participating members of the seminar, which focused on challenges facing journalism and was organised by the State Working Journalists Union Chhattisgarh.

and united in view of recent changes in the Data Protection Act and the new labour laws.

During the programme, the union announced the Baburao Vishnu Paradkar Award for 2025. The award will be conferred on Mohammad Irshad Khan, a grassroots journalist working in Bhopalpatnam in Bijapur district of the Bastar division. The organisation cited his fearless, people-oriented and impartial journalism under challenging conditions as the reason for the honour.

The event also saw the participation of patron members of the reception committee formed for the state conference, including senior journalists Diwakar Muktibodh, Asif Iqbal, Girish Pankaj, Gokul Soni, Shashi Parganiha, Shakuntala Tarar, Sameer Dewan, Dr Sukhnandan Singh Dhruv Nandan, Rahul Sinha, Amit Bagh, Sardar Lavinder Pal Singhota, Shivshankar Pandey, Kashiv, Vineeta Halder and other noted journalists.

The third state conference of the union was held alongside the seminar, during which a new state executive committee was constituted. The elections were conducted under the supervision of senior journalist Ghanshyam Gupta, State Election



Officer, and under the guidance of Secretary General Balwinder Singh Jammu.

As per the election results, Dilip Kumar Sahu was elected as National Executive Member of the Indian Journalists Union. P.C. Rath was elected State President, while Sudhir Azad Tamboli was chosen as General Secretary. The Vice Presidents are Renu Nandi, Krishna Goswami and Ajit Kumar Sharma. Shubham Verma was elected Treasurer and Syed Salma as Deputy Treasurer. Ruma Sengupta and Santosh Rajput were elected Joint Secretaries. Rakesh Shiv Dutta was appointed State Organisation Secretary and Jaydas Manikpuri as

State Media In-charge.

The elected executive members include Virendra Kumar Sharma (Raipur), Ghanshyam Gupta (Raipur), Shivshankar Pandey (Raipur), Mohammad Shah (Dhamtari), Sanjay Chandel (Bilaspur), Jitendra Sahu (Dhamtari) and Harimohan Tiwari (Raipur).

Officials from the Raipur district unit also actively participated in the conference. The programme was conducted by Raipur District President Rahul Sinha.

The seminar concluded with the adoption of resolutions aimed at strengthening journalism, reinforcing organisational unity and outlining future courses of action. ☐

X Restricts all Users From Editing Explicit Images Using Grok after Global Backlash

The move follows regulatory pressure from several countries.

Social media platform X on Thursday said that it has restricted all users from editing images of "real persons in revealing clothing" using its artificial intelligence chatbot Grok.

The decision came after the tool drew condemnation for creating non-consensual sexually explicit photos. Grok had allowed requests by users to digitally manipulate photos of persons - mostly women - by undressing them and sexualising their images without their consent. It had been creating thousands of such images every hour, Bloomberg reported.

On January 9, Grok began allowing only paying subscribers to use its image generation and editing features.

In a statement posted on X on Thursday, the company said that the new restriction applies to all users, including paid subscribers. This added "an extra layer of protection by helping to ensure that individuals who attempt to abuse the Grok account to violate the law or our policies can be held accountable", the platform added.

X also said that it has begun "geoblocking" the ability of all users to generate images of real persons in



"bikini, underwear and similar attire" using the Grok account.

The move comes amid regulatory pressure from governments in several countries.

On Wednesday, California Governor Gavin Newsom and Attorney General Rob Bonta said that they were seeking answers from X owner Elon Musk after he said he was unaware of any instances of "naked underage images" generated by Grok, Reuters reported. The United Kingdom government had on January 9 asked media regulator Ofcom to use its powers, including an effective ban, against the social media platform in connection with the unlawful images Grok was creating.

On January 8, the European Union ordered X to retain all internal documents relating to Grok till the

end of the year while the bloc ensures compliance with its digital rules. The Indian government had on January 2 directed X to remove sexually explicit content generated by Grok.

The Union Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology told the platform to "undertake a comprehensive technical, procedural and governance-level review" of the chatbot to ensure that it does not generate content that contains nudity or sexually explicit material. In the letter to X's chief compliance officer in India, the Union government said that users were misusing Grok to create fake accounts to generate and share obscene photos and videos of women with the intent of denigrating them.

Hosting or publishing obscene and sexually explicit content, including through AI-enabled tools, is invasive of bodily privacy and attracts serious penal consequences, the government had said.

On January 3, amid criticism, Musk said that "anyone using Grok to make illegal content will suffer the same consequences as if they upload illegal content".

—Courtesy *Scroll.in*

'NO CAVALRY IS COMING'

How Investigative Journalism Must Rethink Money, Metrics and Survival



oney is leaving journalism faster than new models can replace it - and "no cavalry is coming." That warning, delivered without euphemism, cast a somber tone on the "Exploring Traditional and New Business Models" session at the 14th Global Investigative Journalism Conference (GIJC25) in Malaysia.

In the wide ranging discussion, panelists Christoph Plate, Gina Chua, Martha M. Steffens, Ryan Powell, and moderator Brant Houston pushed back against the idea that sustainability will emerge from the next shiny revenue fix. Instead, they argued that survival now depends on discipline: understanding audiences beyond clicks, measuring impact in ways funders and communities can recognize, managing costs with the same rigor applied to reporting, and treating journalism not only as a public service but also as a business.

The conversation reflected a broader shift now playing out across investigative newsrooms worldwide. As philan-

thropic funding tightens, legal and security costs climb, and new technologies reshape how audiences encounter information, long-held assumptions about independence, scale, and impact are being reassessed. Rather than offering a single solution, this GIJC25 panel discussion surfaced a set of unresolved questions about what investigative journalism can sustainably support - and what it may need to leave behind.

Measuring Impact Beyond Clicks

"In order to get funds, whether you are being funded by philanthropies or particular nonprofit foundations or individualized, you need to be able to measure your impact."

For Steffens, metrics are no longer a bureaucratic afterthought but a central pillar of investigative sustainability. A former newspaper editor and now an endowed chair in business and financial Journalism at the University of Missouri, Steffens said journalists must understand how their work translates into demonstrable impact - especially when seeking funding.

"In order to get funds, whether you are being funded by philanthropies or particular nonprofit foundations or individualized, you need to be able to

measure your impact," Steffens said.

She pointed to practical examples from US newsrooms that have redefined how impact is shown. The Post and Courier, in South Carolina, uses a heat map to display the geographic reach of its investigations, allowing readers to click on specific locations and see related reporting. The visual tool, she said, has not only fueled tip lines but also attracted financial support tied directly to those tips.

The Seattle Times has taken a different approach, successfully raising more than US\$1.2 million from individual donors, as per Steffens, while anonymizing contributors so investigative reporters do not know who funds their work. "How they show impact there is how they've changed things within the city of Seattle and the state of Washington as well," Steffens explained.

Nonprofit outlets are also experimenting with civic engagement as a metric. The Texas Tribune, for instance, uses a civic action survey to track how readers move from interest to activities such as contacting officials or voting.

Steffens said the outlet's goal is to push impact "towards that direction."

For collaborative journalism, measuring reach can be more complex. The 19th, a non-profit newsroom focused on gender equity, developed its own internal metrics to track not only readership but also sharing and social media engagement. "It's not just viewing, but taking some sort of action," Steffens noted.

She also highlighted how repurposing investigations can open new revenue streams. Reveal, a California-based investigative organization, doubled podcast sponsorships by adapting its reporting for audio.

Emotional connection, Steffens argued, remains one of the most powerful drivers of engagement and funding. She cited ProPublica's Lost Mothers Project, which asked readers to submit cases of maternal deaths in childbirth. The initiative generated thousands of tips, deepened reader attachment, and later evolved into the Pulitzer Prize-winning Life of the Mother project.

"It's not only an attachment to this idea, but it was an incredibly powerful metric for individual donations," she said.

**Rethinking
Arrogance, Money
and the Newsroom
Economy**

Christopher Plate, director of the media program South East Europe at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, urged journalists to

confront a different obstacle: professional arrogance.

Reflecting on his career as a correspondent and editor, Plate said journalists once kept a deliberate distance from advertising and business departments because they didn't see the connection between their work and the newsroom. "This arrogance was extremely, extremely unhealthy," he said.

Plate challenged the idea that investigative journalism can exist independently of the broader newsroom ecosystem. Large-scale investigations such as the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers, he noted, were financed by established, profitable media houses capable of sustaining months of research and data mining.

"Investigative journalism by itself, in itself, cannot survive on its own," he emphasized.

He also warned against an overreliance on philanthropy and donor-funded investi-



gations. "Investigations that are entirely financed by philanthropy are not necessarily independent," Plate said, adding that journalists must think seriously about economics.

For freelancers and early-career reporters, Plate recommended spending time in newsrooms to understand editorial and financial decision-making. He also encouraged media organizations to diversify income through training programs, public events, book publishing, and other services.

"Don't be too dependent on one source of income," he said. "It is the economy."

Plate emphasized humility toward audiences as well. Journalism, he said, is not about vanity but service - and service must also be financially viable. "Shed your ego, shed your vanity and work on the journalism that serves the communities," he said.

AI, Audiences and the Uncomfortable Math of the Future

Ryan Powell, head of innovation and media business at the International Press Institute, approached sustainability from a systems perspective, focusing on revenue experiments and audience strategy. Powell described IPI's recent survey work conducted with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), which examined revenue experiments across 30 newsrooms.

Among the most common approaches were newsletters, memberships, crowdsourcing, consulting, paid content, and selling databases. But Powell cautioned against adopting popular solutions without assessing whether they fit a newsroom's specific market. "It's really important to take a step back before you jump in headfirst to a particularly often prescribed solution," he said.

Powell proposed viewing investigative journalism as a value chain made up of distinct units - from managing whistleblowers and filing freedom of information requests to verification and narrative construction. Understanding those units, he said, helps identify where monetization might be possible.

First-party data emerged as a critical asset. Newsletter signups, email lists, donation records, and event registrations, Powell said, give newsrooms control in an era dominated by third-party platforms and volatile algorithms. He cited work with Recorder, a Romania-based investigative video outlet that gener-

explained.

If Powell emphasized structure, Gina Chua brought urgency. executive director of the Tow-Knight Center for Journalism Futures and executive editor at large at Semafor, Chua told the room that investigative journalism faces a stark financial reality. "There is not enough money," she said. "The cavalry is not coming."

Costs, she noted, are rising due to security needs, lawsuits, inflation, and technology, while major sources of philanthropic funding - including USAID - have declined. Simply doing good work, she said, will not fill the gap.

"We have to spend more time thinking about efficiency, thinking about consolidation, thinking about what we stop doing," Chua said.

She also warned that journalism is on the brink of a major technological shift driven by generative AI. While large language models struggle with factual accuracy, she said, their ability to handle language is already transforming how people consume information.

"People are coming regardless of how accurate it is or not, because it is a better UI," Chua said.

Her advice to investigative outlets was pragmatic: compete on product, not nostalgia. "We can't simply tell people... you should eat our broccoli," she said.

Chua argued that journalists must stop seeing themselves solely as content creators and instead as service providers who deeply understand their audiences. That cultural shift, she said, may determine whether investigative journalism remains relevant - even if it increasingly becomes, as she put it, a "luxury good." ☐

— Courtesy: Global Investigative Journalism Network



*"We have to
spend more time
thinking about
efficiency, thinking
about consolidation,
thinking about what
we stop doing,"*
— Gina Chua

ates about €1.3 million (US\$1 million) annually, largely through small donations enabled by a tax allocation system.

What made the model sustainable, Powell said, was not just donations but data. Building a customer relationship management system allowed the newsroom to understand donor behavior and respond when payments failed or lapsed.

"Any newsroom around the world ... is able to put together this whole project and ultimately reach and build a sustainable model," he

How Journalists Can Stay Safe Covering Protests

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rotests in America have been fairly constant in the past year. Per the Crowd Counting Consortium, the number rose from 4,588 in 2017 (Trump's first year in office) to 10,700 in 2025 (the President's first year of his second term). From No Kings marches to protests against ICE, Americans have taken to the streets to voice their opposition to the administration's policies.

That's kept journalists busy and, in some cases, put them in danger.

Recently, I talked to Joel Simon, director of the Journalism Protection Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and former executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists about the challenge of doing our jobs in risky environments. Here's a lightly edited transcript of our conversation - plus bonus advice from working journalists about how to stay safe during protests.

How is today's climate for journalists covering protests different from years' past?

At the beginning of my career around the late 1980s, there was some massive protest in Mexico City. There must have been several hundred thousand people there. I was in the back, and I was trying to hear what was happening on the stage, so I introduced myself as a freelance journalist. I think I was writing for Pacific News Service, which is something that nobody had heard of in Mexico and very few people had heard of in the U.S., but the protesters still pushed me to the stage because they wanted me there.

This was how they responded to jour-

nalists because the whole reason you have a protest is to use the media to bring your demands or concerns to a national or global audience, and that is what kept journalists safe.

The risk environment changed when protesters' perception of the value of having journalists there changed. We saw this internationally in places like Brazil and Turkey. Journalists covering those protests were attacked by the protesters who felt their perspective wasn't being fairly presented by the media, and that they had other channels of communicating. Plus, the consequences of having a journalist injured by law enforcement at a protest were just not that great.

"Who's a journalist and who's not? I don't know. I don't know these people anyway, and some of them are documenting

At the same time, the same dynamic has played out in the U.S., and that has dovetailed with a couple of other things. First, especially in local communities, a lot of journalists used to have relationships with law enforcement. This was good and bad. It was bad in the sense that some of the

coverage reflected the perspective of law enforcement rather than the communities. But from a practical view, if you're covering a protest and the cops know you and you know the cops, it's a give and take. But those relationships have broken down as local media have declined.

How has the rise of citizen-journalists affected law enforcement's treatment of reporters on the scene?

Then you have more people who are

engaging in journalism in more informal ways. They don't necessarily have a press badge and aren't attached to a specific media outlet; they're out there with their phones. The police think, "Who's a journalist and who's not? I don't know. I don't know these people anyway, and some of them are documenting the protests in very aggressive ways."

This is happening now in Minneapolis, but the social justice protests that erupted nationwide following the murder of George Floyd were targeting law enforcement. And so, law enforcement felt scrutinized and had a very confrontational posture towards journalists.

During those protests, hundreds of journalists across the country faced some sort of repressive action. Hundreds more suffered physical violence. That dynamic has accelerated, and basically every time we have protests now there's some incident involving journalists. So it's become infinitely more dangerous and difficult to cover protests.

Given that hostile environment, what practical advice do you offer journalists?

You have to prepare. You can call it a risk assessment, but it's really pre-reporting. Understand who's there, what they're protesting, what their dynamics are likely to be, what the posture of law enforcement is going to be. Do you have the contact information of whoever's organizing it? Do you have some sort of law enforcement contact?

Ideally you're out there as part of a team or with a colleague or buddy. Do you have an emergency plan? Do you know what to do if you're arrested? Do you know a little bit about your rights? Have you done an analysis of what protective gear you might need and do you know how to



use it? Do you have a good relationship with an editor who knows where you are and some basic plan if there's an issue?

Have you thought about your information security? What if your phone is confiscated? We often tell people to deactivate facial recognition because if law enforcement gets access to your phone, you don't want them to hold the phone up to your face and access your information.

There are so many comprehensive checklists of how to cover protests safely, but my message here is to take even a half hour to really understand the environment in which you're going to be working and take the necessary precautions. If you do that, it increases your safety exponentially.

Do you have any suggestions on how to approach the reporting part of covering protests?

You should have, at a minimum, a basic understanding of your rights and what to do if you encounter law enforcement, particularly how to de-escalate and how to communicate.

If you're focused on antagonizing the police rather than documenting what's happening, you're veering into the realm of activism. You really need to ensure that you're able to

do your work. If you're arrested, you're not going to get the story.

You might think about where you can position yourself so you can observe and not be in the middle. Do you have a way of retreating if something that you're reporting on escalates?

And again, having a team really increases your safety because when you're immersed in the reporting process, you may lose your situational awareness. So with a team, you could take turns - one person is observing and understanding what's happening and making sure that the environment remains manageable [for the person who's reporting].

Why is it important for journalists to keep covering protests, despite the risks?

Protests are, in the context of the United States, the living embodiment of the First Amendment. The rights to peaceably assemble, to petition the government for redress and for the press to operate freely all intercept and reinforce one another during a protest. Those rights allow democracy to function, and every one of them is under tremendous pressure and threatened in some fundamental way. ☐

—Courtesy Ahcj



Indian Police Summon Journalists in Kashmir over Routine Reporting

The Committee to Protect Journalists on Wednesday called for authorities in the Indian-administered territory of Jammu and Kashmir to immediately end the harassment and intimidation of journalists, after at least two Kashmir-based correspondents for national media outlets were summoned by police in connection with their reporting.

"Using police powers to summon journalists over their legitimate reporting is part of a pattern of intimidation against the media in Jammu and Kashmir," said CPJ Asia-Pacific Program Coordinator Kunal Majumder. "Authorities must cease their harassment and ensure that journalists are not subjected to arbitrary police action for doing their jobs." On January 14, Bashaarat Masood, an assistant editor with The Indian Express, was called to the Cyber Police Station in the city of Srinagar for questioning about a report he wrote on reaction to a police exercise seeking information

about the region's mosques and their management, according to multiple news reports.

Officers then took Masood to a district magistrate and asked him to sign a bond stating he would not repeat his "mistake," without specifying any legal violation. Masood refused to do so and was asked to report back to the police station daily over the next four days.

Under India's criminal procedure framework, now called the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, police can seek a preventive bond from individuals to "keep the peace" or maintain "good behavior," even in the absence of a criminal charge.

On January 19, a Srinagar-based correspondent for the Hindustan Times, Ashiq Hussain, was also summoned by police in connection with his reporting, according to news reports. Hussain did not comply with the summons, citing a lack of clarity from police about the basis for the questioning. Srinagar's Cyber Police Station did not immediately respond to CPJ's emailed request seeking

comment.

The Indian Journalists Union (IJU) strongly condemned the action of the police authorities in Jammu and Kashmir for summoning journalists over routine and lawful reporting. IJU President K. Sreenivas Reddy and Secretary General Balwinder Singh Jammu said that summoning journalists for their professional work without any credible basis was unacceptable in a democratic society. "Journalists cannot be treated as suspects for performing their duty of informing the public. This reflects a disturbing attempt to create fear and enforce self-censorship among media persons," they said, adding that the repeated targeting of journalists in Kashmir is a matter of grave concern. The IJU demanded that the authorities immediately stop harassment of journalists, withdraw all unjustified summons, and ensure a free, safe and conducive environment for journalists to carry out their professional duties without fear or pressure.

—Courtesy Cpj

'MADURO IS COUNTRY'S ONLY PRESIDENT'



TV news media turns to Rambo theatrics

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**Shaukat H.
Mohammed**

The writer is a senior journalist based at Hyderabad

ust as millions were waking up to massive hangovers after long days of partying to welcome in the new year, they woke up on 3 January to see the US President, Donald J. Trump, take on the figurative role of John J. Rambo to abduct and spirit away Nicolas Maduro, the duly-elected (in a disputed election, no doubt, but let that not detain ushere) president of the sovereign republic of Venezuela, and his wife, for a multitude of alleged misdemeanours. Maduro was soon arraigned in a court in New York City and was charged with a host of misdemeanours, to which he pleaded "not guilty". Maduro's wife, too, was similarly charged.

The TV news media in India went all guns blazing, pun intended, to portray the kidnap of a sitting head of state by a foreign power as something heroic. Lurid graphics were used to

highlight the precision of the US military's "surgical strike" on Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. The media forgot to mention that the snatch operation in Caracas was patently illegal under international law. It also neglected to mention that an unknown number of Venezuelan soldiers were killed in the operation that was not part of an official declaration of war on Venezuela by the US Congress, as required by the US Constitution.

Instead, the media went on and on about the success of the operation, and the 'aapada mein avsar' (opportunity in adversity) that the takeover of Venezuela by the US provided to Indian companies like Reliance Industries of Mukesh

Ambani, because Venezuela is sitting on proven oil reserves of 303 billion barrels of crude oil. Reliance's refinery in Jamnagar, Gujarat, is configured to refine the heavy Venezuelan crude. The media was



positing that Reliance could get lucrative oil exploration and production contracts in Venezuela.

The media's reportage of the operation in Venezuela was a piece of the Indian government's generic statement on the kidnapping of Maduro and his wife. The official MEA statement did not even name the US, except to express "concern" about the development.

The media was equally biased about India exiting the Chabahar port project in Iran, after ponying up USD 125 million to Iran as part of its contribution to the port which would have opened a trade route to Central Asia and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan.

India exited the project after Trump threatened to impose sanctions on any country, including India, if they continued to trade with Iran. For India, already belabouring under 50% tariffs imposed by the US, including the 25% tariff for the purchase of Russian oil, another tariff would have dealt a mortal blow to whatever is left of India's exports to the US.

For those who came in late, Reliance Industries was the principal beneficiary of the purchase of Russian oil, because it refined the Urals crude and sold the refined products at market rates to Europe and other markets, booking windfall gains. This time around, though, following Trump's threat on additional tariffs, Reliance rushed to issue a statement to the effect that it had stopped the purchase of Russian oil.

The payment of USD 125 million to Iran with nothing to show for it was spun by the media as a "masterstroke" in the "honouring of its commitments overseas", rather than the quiet surrender to threats from over-



seas. With the exit from Chabahar, India has lost its critical suppliers of oil, starting with Iran, and followed by Venezuela and Russia. Not surprisingly, there was no "debate" about the loss of three critical suppliers of oil to India, only the spinning of each loss as a "masterstroke" in international diplomacy. When it found the time from counting and repeating each supposed "masterstrokes", the media used tame language to report on the death of at least 10 people after drinking contaminated piped water in the city of Indore, MP.

To be sure, a reporter from NDTV confronted Kailash Vijayvargiya, one of the legislators from Indore and powerful MP cabinet minister, asked him to explain how contaminated water was supplied to citizens.

But Vijayvargiya dismissed the question out of hand, and also used the word 'ghanta' to describe the question, to which the reporter, Anurag Dwary, objected. The confrontation went viral, but then it was quietly deleted from NDTV's social media platforms, indicating that it had succumbed to pressure from the corridors of power in Bhopal or New

Delhi. The TV news media appeared to have discovered its mojo in January, with Arnab Goswami, that dependable megaphone for the BJP, airing at least two stories critical of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh. The first about Rakesh 'Golu' Shukla, a legislator from Indore, who, Arnab claimed, blew up Rs 70 lakh setting off fireworks on his son's wedding day. He thundered on TV, demanding answers from Shukla and his bosses in the MP government.

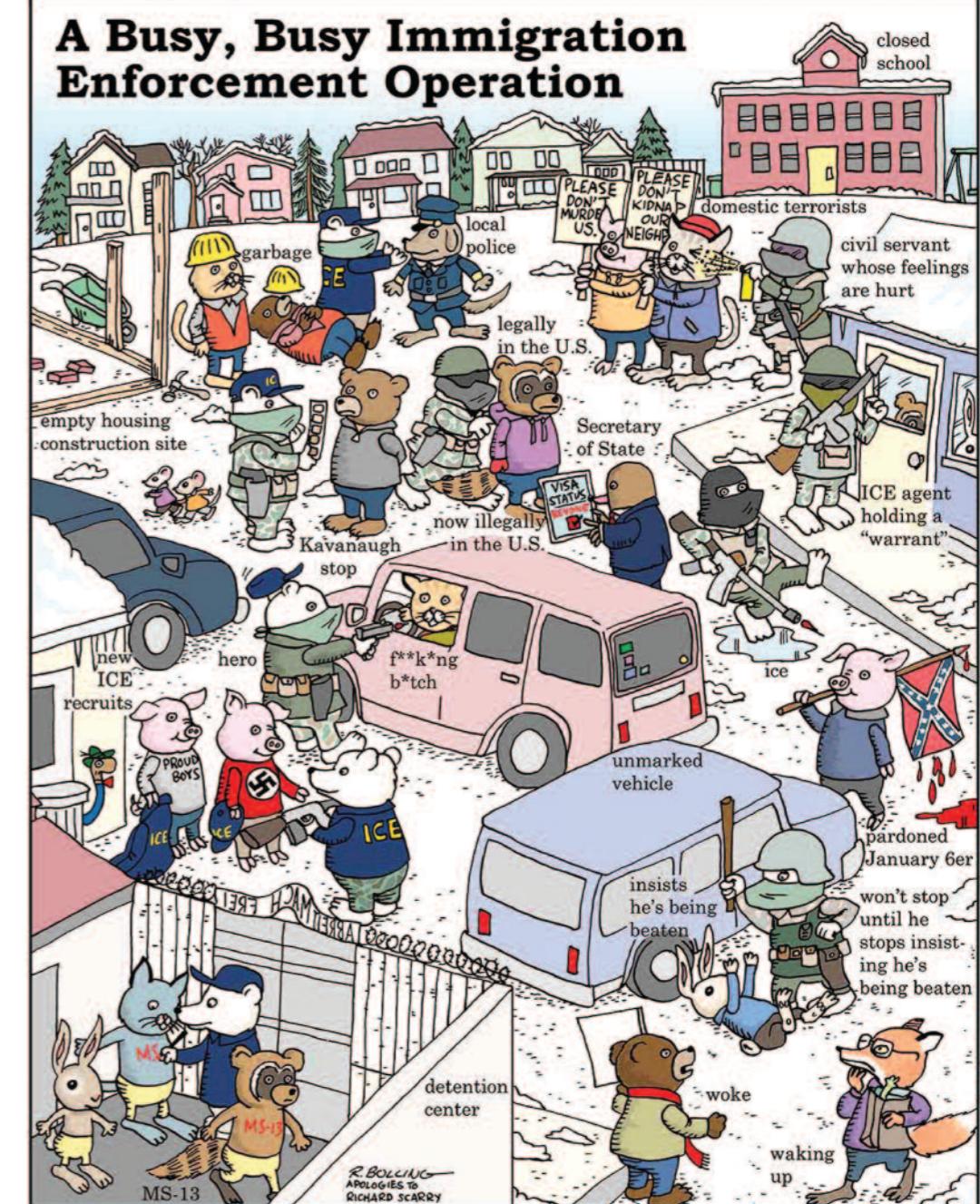
The second story was about the deaths in Indore. Arnab again, going against the grain, demanded answers from the government. But the highlight of his coverage of the Indore tragedy was his indirect attack on Sudhir Chaudhary, an anchor on DD, the public broadcaster. In a broadside against Chaudhary, without naming him, Arnab dared the anchor to do the type of stories he was doing on Indore.

Before viewers could get back to watching him on TV for doing stories that impacted their lives, Arnab was back to doing stories about the "Muslim question" in India. He sure knows which side his bread is buttered on. □



CARTOONS OF THE MONTH

by
Ruben
Bolling



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VOTE MANIPULATION: AI and Doubtful Media in India

F

amous advocate Prashant Bhushan says, "A lot of people believe that vote manipulation accounts for the landslide win of the NDA in Bihar. While there was vote manipulation, it would not account for more than 3 per cent of the vote."

As claimed by the Election Commission of India, the strong technical safeguards in electronic voting machines and elaborate administrative safeguards, procedures and security put in place by the ECI ensure that elections are transparent, free and fair. How does one answer this strong suspicion?

This entire electoral process is completely questionable, says the opposition Congress. "The Bihar result is unbelievable for us; no political party in India's history has managed a 90 per cent strike rate. The 2025 Bihar election result, where the Congress managed a barely 10 per cent strike rate by winning six out of the 61 seats it contested, is its second-worst performance since 2010, when it had won only four seats."

We are celebrating National Press Day on November 16 to commemorate the establishment of the Press Council of India in 1966. This day serves as a reminder to uphold the standards of journalism, free from external influences. Whether our journalists are fearless in their speech or expression?



**Dr. Madabhushi
Sridhar Acharyulu**

*Professor, School of
Law, Mahindra
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Then there is World Press Freedom Day on May 3, established by the United Nations to commemorate the 1991 Windhoek Declaration. It calls for a free, independent and pluralistic press and highlights the need to protect fundamental freedoms under SDG 16.10.

Similarly, we have another day. January 29 marks Indian Newspaper Day, a moment to reflect on the profound role of newspapers. Can we celebrate today in today's "democratic" India?

Now, the ultimate challenge for India is to leverage AI's potential for democratic empowerment and access to information while simultaneously building a robust, transparent and rights-respecting framework that mitigates the risks of censorship, manipulation and the financial weakening of independent media. The core principles of a free press must be actively protected

in this new age of synthetic content. The statement "truth alone triumphs", known as *Satyameva Jayate*, is now critically challenged.

The Deepfakes Analysis Unit investigated a widely circulated video featuring Rahul Gandhi and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman allegedly endorsing a government-backed financial platform purportedly associated with Elon Musk and "Quantum AI". Upon thorough analysis, the unit concluded that the video was fabricated and constituted a deliberate misuse of artificial intelligence to mislead the public.

AI-generated prompt

The recent blunder by Pakistan's leading English daily, Dawn, where an AI-generated prompt was accidentally published in a print story, serves as a stark global illustration of the new ethical risks. The inclusion of the line, "If you want, I can also create an even snappier front-page style version," revealed a human editorial oversight, exposing the paper's undisclosed use of AI tools.

This incident underscores the immediate necessity for media organisations to establish and enforce strict, transparent AI ethics policies to protect their credibility.

Where even educated people purchase and sell votes, it becomes a competition between two AI-generated "products". The rise of generative artificial intelligence has placed the Indian media at a critical crossroads, presenting a fundamental tension between technological opportunity and democratic integrity. Article 19(1)(a) guarantees freedom of speech and expression. Is digital freedom of the press under threat?

Indian newsrooms use machine learning for social media monitoring and large-scale data analysis. These tools should be used for positive

gains in combating misinformation, such as AI-powered platforms like Google's Fact Check Explorer. Another positive gain is that AI-driven video and text summarisation tools enable journalists to deliver content more efficiently across digital and social media platforms, addressing India's growing demand for vernacular and mobile-first news, as noted by Dr. Nivash Jeevanandam.



The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression has highlighted that AI offers the potential to enhance freedom of expression by democratising access to information and empowering global communication, while also introducing new risks. The UN Global Digital Compact emphasises the need to address technology-amplified harms while protecting privacy and freedom of expression. AI is transforming the fundamental right to seek, impart and receive information, as well as the journalistic profession.

New journalism challenge

The proliferation of artificial intelligence is fundamentally reshaping journalism and posing acute challenges. It raises concerns about the impact of AI on editorial integrity, employment and the authenticity of

information disseminated to the public. Can we protect the core principles of a free, independent and pluralistic media, which remain vital?

AI's immediate threat: Electoral manipulation

The most immediate and profound impact of AI has been its use in election manipulation, most recently demonstrated during the Bihar Assembly elections in 2025.

The polls witnessed a surge in AI-generated reels, avatars and fabricated audio clips of political figures. This went beyond simple propaganda to include controversial deepfake incidents, including reported AI-generated videos involving the Prime Minister's late mother, intended to incite outrage and discredit opponents.

The Election Commission of India was compelled to issue an advisory mandating political parties to ensure clear labelling of synthetic content. This intervention highlights the escalating necessity for regulatory bodies to respond when AI-driven disinformation threatens democratic processes.

AI also brings risks of increased online hate speech, surveillance and censorship. Critics argue that excessive state control through mandatory labelling and takedown powers may itself create a chilling effect on free expression.

It is not merely an issue of press freedom but a serious apprehension for democracy. Prashant Bhushan's concern is real. He stated that it becomes virtually impossible to defeat a combination of money and control over the Election Commission and the media, especially when public funds are allegedly used to influence voters. However, strong suspicion cannot replace truth. ☒

A Living Tradition of Muslim Women's Leadership and Ethical Journalism



t a time when journalism is increasingly shaped by market pressure and sensationalism, sustaining a print magazine for twenty-five years is no ordinary achievement. Published from the coastal city of Mangaluru in Karnataka, Anupama has completed its silver jubilee as a magazine that has steadily built its identity as a serious and principled voice.

Reaching this milestone is not merely a measure of longevity. It reflects a consistent editorial commitment aimed at strengthening social values, women's well-being, and ethical awareness among Kannada-speaking readers. Over the past two and a half decades, Anupama has demonstrated that journalism grounded in integrity and professional responsibility can thrive—even under intense ideological and commercial pressure.

Women's Leadership and Institutional Continuity

One of Anupama's most distinctive features



Anupama's Chief Editor, Shehnaz M (second from right), along with her editorial team, presented the Silver Jubilee edition of the Kannada language monthly magazine, Anupama, to Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in Bengaluru recently.

is that it has been entirely conceived, edited and managed by women from its very beginning. Led by Muslim women associated with Jamaat-e-Islami Hind Karnataka, the magazine has, for 25 years, offered a rare example of sustained women's leadership in the Kannada media space.

In an environment where media decisions are often driven by commercial priorities, Anupama has consistently focused on themes such as family life, education, social justice, mental health, child care, and marital relationships. These subjects have been handled with seriousness and balance, avoiding sensationalism. As a result, the magazine has earned credibility and a loyal readership, particularly among educated women.

Social Dialogue and Reducing Cultural Distance

According to media circles, in a diverse society like Karnataka—where misunderstandings about Muslims and their cultural identity are not uncommon—Anupama has played the role of a “quiet bridge.” Through its writings, the magazine has presented values such as peace, tolerance, justice, and human service within a broader social context, helping reduce intellectual and cultural distance.

By emphasising shared human ethics prevalent in Karnataka's social life, Anupama has contributed to an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding among people of different faiths. Sensitive issues such as women's rights, family life, and personal choices have been discussed in a modern, balanced and accessible manner.

This approach has helped these themes emerge not as points of conflict, but as part of a dignified and positive way of life.

This editorial approach has influenced public perception in a constructive way and has opened new spaces for meaningful social dialogue in a multi-religious society. Today, Anupama's readership extends across different social groups in Karnataka, with notable acceptance among educated women. At the same time, there remains scope to expand its reach among wider sections of society.

Public and Institutional Recognition

When Anupama's Chief Editor, Shehnaz M, along with her editorial team, met the Chief Minister and presented the Silver Jubilee edition, the moment was seen as a sign of the magazine's broader social acceptance. On the occasion, Siddaramaiah noted that Muslim women's presence in journalism remains limited, making Anupama's sustained journey all the more commendable. Media observers viewed the meeting not merely as a formal gesture, but as recognition of the magazine's editorial credibility at the state level.

Recognition Beyond the Organisation

The magazine's long and consistent journey has also been acknowledged by senior voices in the media world. Veteran journalist Ms Vijayalakshmi Shibaroor, Editor of the *Vijaya Times*, published in Kannada language, described the continuation of a women's magazine for 25 years as an achievement of rare perseverance in today's difficult media environment. She observed that Anupama has consistently brought women's



Anupama's Chief Editor, Shehnaz M, presenting a copy of the magazine's Silver Jubilee edition to Jamaat-e-Islami Hind Karnataka Amir-e-Halqa Mohammed Saad Belgami.

pain, joy, and aspirations into the social mainstream, while remaining firm on facts, ethical clarity, and professional responsibility.

Organisational Support and Editorial Space

At the release of the Silver Jubilee edition, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind President Syed Sadatullah Husaini described Anupama as an example of the coming together of faith, ethics, and social responsibility. He noted that when women's leadership is guided by intellectual clarity and social awareness, it leaves a lasting impact on society.

Similarly, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind Karnataka Amir-e-Halqa Mohammed Saad Belgami appreciated the magazine's professional discipline and ethical strength, describing it as an important chapter in the organisation's broader social engagement.

Ethics Over Expediency

Anupama's identity is closely tied to its ethical choices. Despite financial challenges, the magazine has consis-

tently refused advertisements related to tobacco, alcohol, cigarettes, and other products it considers socially harmful. In a media climate where revenue pressures often shape editorial decisions, this stance is widely seen as a clear ethical position.

A Continuing Journey

After completing 25 years, Anupama is not at an endpoint, but at the beginning of a new phase. Its journey raises important questions: Can serious and ethical journalism survive without noise and spectacle? Can women-led editorial spaces build sustainable institutions in today's media environment?

According to media analysts, magazines like Anupama keep these questions alive by offering a value-based alternative to commercial media culture. The magazine's journey so far offers a quiet but confident response—and the years ahead will determine how that response continues to take shape.

—Courtesy India Tomorrow



'Forest Journalists' are Reimagining How Stories From the Amazon are Told

W

hen U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres held his only interview just before the UN climate summit, or COP30, in Belém, Brazil, he stressed the role of native communities in protecting nature and fighting climate change.

"The voice of Indigenous communities is an essential component of COP," Guterres said, "and should inspire the measures that are indispensable if we want to avoid a climate catastrophe."

Wajã Xipai, 19, is one of those voices and an author of the interview with Guterres. He's part of a new generation of storytellers training with the Amazon-focused outlet Sumaúma to combine western journalism ethics with Indigenous narrative traditions to rewrite the story of the rainforest.

He told LatAm Journalism Review (LJR) that he was lost thinking about what to ask. What could he, a teenage Indigenous journalist, ask such an influential figure?

Then it hit him: the questions should come from within, an Indigenous person from the Xipai people, born and raised in a village in the Amazon forest.

That perspective led Wajã, alongside Jon Watts, a veteran environmental reporter for The Guardian and co-founder of Sumaúma, into the interview with Guterres.

Xipai's first question came from the perspective that Indigenous people from

the Amazon are paying the price for "global greed," while at the same time, the region was hosting its first COP.

Xipai asked Guterres how he would persuade leaders at the summit in the city of Belém to address the imbalance in which communities that protect the rainforest suffer violence and death, while distant countries benefit from the destruction of their territories?

According to the UN, this was the secretary-general's first-ever exclusive interview with an Indigenous journalist from the Amazon.

"There is a big difference between the way I ask, the way I talk to people, and the questions I asked Guterres, and those asked by any other white journalist that comes from centers of power and the centers of money, like the United States or London," Xipai later told LJR. "It would be completely different."

Watts was pleasantly surprised with the questions and the results of the interview.

"He [Guterres] was being addressed with questions that I imagine he's never previously had to consider," Watts told LJR. They were "questions that get to the fundamentals of why the world is the way it is and how it could be different."

This interview and coverage of the COP30 comes at the three-year anniversary of Sumaúma, a trilingual journal-

Leonardo Coelho

ism project founded by five journalists - three Brazilian, one British and one Peruvian.

Sumaúma's journalists have aimed to amplify the voices of the Amazon region and "Amazonize" the world, especially since the Amazon has been, for decades, a tough place for local voices to emerge with truly local stories that avoid cliches and stereotypes.

Sumaúma co-founder Eliane Brum told LJR in 2022 that one of their focuses was to develop a co-training program where journalists from legacy media could teach their practices and collaborate with people from the rainforest to combine it with Indigenous ways of telling their stories.

"We want to create another type of journalism," she told LJR. "And these people that will train us and that we will also train will make up the newsroom."

That core idea was the basis for the program Mycelium, in which Xipai is one of 23 "forest journalists" to have participated since 2023. The first group included 14 people from the Xingu basin, and a second group in 2025 included 9 from the entire Amazonian basin, which covers 8 states, 1.93 million square miles, three biomes and more than half of the Indigenous people in Brazil.

Xipai quickly enrolled after he first started in media projects related to documentaries at the Sakamena Network of the Xipai Youth. He said he rapidly understood that the co-training was for real: the mentors from legacy media outlets were open to exchange with the trainees and vice-versa. Tiago Rogero, a Brazil correspondent for The Guardian, participated. He had created the massively popular Querino Project, a series of podcasts and feature stories that offer an Afro-centric look at



Brazil's history. He called Mycelium a "revolutionary idea," especially considering that Brazilian journalism is mostly done by white, sometimes wealthy, people from the Southeast.

"Mixing the responsibility of quality journalism with their unique perspectives is groundbreaking," Rogero told LJR. "I know it's cliche when someone comes back from an experience like that saying they learned more than they taught. But I feel that's how it was."

"Should I do journalism the way I think it should be done, as I learned from the elders of my people, or should I simply try to do this kind of journalism, which is bureaucratic journalism, in another language (a non-Indigenous language)? I remember being very confused about this," he said. "During the process, I came to understand that it's not possible, there's no way I can abandon the way I tell the story to adopt the way non-Indigenous people tell stories".

For Xipai, the story that best demonstrates his worldview is "For the Moth and I, mere survival is not enough." Combining reporting and personal storytelling, he recalls how he moved to Altamira, the city in the middle of the forest that "persecutes trees," and identifies with a moth through a completely different worldview that puts all beings on the same level.

"This is really beautiful," Watts said. "It's constantly surprising the kind of stories they come up with and their willingness to mix different kinds of media, different ways of storytelling."

"My entire trajectory is present in the work I developed during Mycelium and later, as a reporter for Sumaúma," he told LJR. "The program gave me the tools to dissolve the boundaries between the art I like to do and journalism".

"I always let myself be guided by what I hear. I really like the theme of memory, and the words I hear drive my stories," Soll said. "I always start from the idea that the people who will help me tell the story will be that community, those people I listened to, their memories, their ways of describing their world."

For Watts, the western journalism tradition dictates that the reporter needs to focus on facts without being imaginative. Creativity was almost a bad word, he said.

"You need to find the facts, but when it comes to telling the story in a persuasive way, it's kind of useful to think outside the box in how you present information, how you present the facts," he said. "And I love the way the Mycelium program hasn't really been tied down by western journalistic conventions. So they're kind of free to experiment and to break boundaries and to cross over from one genre to another." ☒

Farewell to a deadly year for scribes

India's north-east evades journo-killing

W



Nava Thakuria

he year 2025 concludes with the track record of being another deadly year for journalists after 2024 since the beginning of the century, where India lost six journalists to assailants, even though its north-eastern region, once reported as a troubled zone, maintained no-journo murder for nearly a decade. Globally, 165 media professionals were killed in 31 countries, whereas 2024 witnessed 179 journo casualties. By region, the Middle East leads with 87 deaths, ahead of Latin America with 27, Asia with 23, Africa with 16, Europe with 10 and the United States with two. According to the Geneva-based global media safety and rights body Press Emblem Campaign (PEC), at least 60 journalists were killed in the Gaza Strip, almost all of them victims of Israeli strikes. Since the start of hostilities triggered by Hamas on 7 October 2023, at least 221 Palestinian media workers have been killed in Gaza, including 81 in 2023 and 80 in 2024. The

war between Ukraine and Russia has resulted in the deaths of nine journalists, who were killed by either

Ukrainian or Russian fire, it added.

"The increasing use of undetectable, ultra-fast drones poses a new and serious threat to war reporters on both sides. Access to victims is even more restricted," lamented PEC president Blaise Lempen. Among the countries most affected, the PEC deplored the deaths of 15 media workers in Yemen, including 13 in an Israeli attack on September 10. Faced with violence from drug traffickers, Mexico remains a country with one of the highest numbers of victims, with nine murders in 2025. The situation in Sudan has also worsened due to ongoing fighting, with at least eight deaths among Sudanese media personnel. The PEC counted six victims in India, five in Ecuador, five in Pakistan and five in Bangladesh, four in Iran, targeted by an Israeli attack in Tehran, and four in the Philippines. In Peru, four journalists were murdered. There were also three victims in Syria. Afghanistan, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Iraq, Lebanon, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and the United States lost two scribes each last year.

India lost six media professionals to assailants last year, compared to four media casualties in 2024, including Mukesh Chandrakar (stringer to NDTV from Bastar, Chhattisgarh), Raghavendra Vajpayee (Dainik Jagaran from Imalia Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh), Sahadev Dey (Republic Andaman, from Diglipur, Andaman Islands), Dharmendra Singh Chauhan (Fast



News India, Gurugram, Haryana), Naresh Kumar (Times Odia, Bhubaneswar, Odisha) and Rajeev Pratap Singh (Delhi Uttarakhand Live, Joshiyara, Uttarakhand), along with the suspected murder of Pankaj Mishra, a freelance journalist based in Dehradun.

On the other hand, India's immediate neighbour Pakistan, which witnessed the murder of 12 media persons in 2024, recorded the killing of AD Shar (Hum News, Khairpur, Sindh), Abdul Latif (Daily Intekhab/Aaj News, Awaran, Balochistan), Syed Mohammed Shah (Ab-Tak TV, Jacobabad, Sindh), Imtiaz Mir (Metro One News, Karachi, Sindh) and Tufail Rind (Royal News, Ghotki, Sindh) last year. Another neighbour Bangladesh, which reported the murder of seven media workers in 2024 due to relentless political unrest, recorded the killing of Assaduzzaman Tuhin (Dainik Pratidiner Kagoj, Gazipur), Bibhuranjan Sarkar (Ajker Patrika, Munshiganj), Wahed-uz-Zaman Bulu (Dainik Ajker Kagoj, Dhaka), Khandahar Shah Alam (Dainik Matrijagat, Dhaka) and Imdadul Haque Milon (Bartaman Somoy, Shalua) in 2025.

The Philippines, with only one casualty in 2024, lost four journalists, namely Juan Johny Dayang (Philippine Graphic Magazine, Aklan), Erwin Labitad Segovia (Radio WOW FM, Bislig City), Noel Bellen Samar (DWTZ, Guinabatan) and Gerry Campos (Barangay Sta. Cruz, Surigao del Sur) last year. Afghanistan lost two scribes, namely Abdul Ghafoor Abid (Paktia National Radio Television, Khost) and Abdul Zahir Safi (state-run media outlet, Kabul) last year, even though it had no journo casualty in



According to the Geneva-based global media safety and rights body Press Emblem Campaign (PEC), at least 60 journalists were killed in the Gaza Strip.

2024. Nepal, which recorded one journo murder in 2024 due to a pro-monarchy uprising, repeated the index with the killing of Suresh Rajak (Avenues TV, Kathmandu) in 2025. Myanmar, which lost three scribes in 2024, Cambodia, which lost one, and Indonesia, which lost one, along with Bhutan, Tibet, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, however evaded any media casualty last year.

It is remarkable that the alienated

north-eastern region, which lost over 30 editors, reporters and correspondents to assailants within three decades till 2017, bid farewell to another year with no journo casualty. The region, supporting over 60 million people, witnessed the assassinations of two journalists, Shantanu Bhowmik and Sudip Datta Bhaumik, in Tripura for the last time. The tiny state witnessed the murders of three media workers, Sujit Bhattacharya, Ranjit Chowdhury and Balaram Ghosh, in 2013. They were stabbed to death together inside a Bengali newspaper office in Agartala. In the previous year, Assam and Manipur witnessed the murder of journalists, Raihanul Nayum at Dhubri and Dwijamani Nanao Singh at Imphal, for the last time. Prior to that, Assam witnessed the homicide of over 25 media professionals, including Anil Mazumdar in 2009, Jagajit Saikia in 2008, Parag Kr Das in 1996 and Kamala Saikia in 1991, since 1987. □

'OTHER SKIES, OTHER STORIES':

Sara Rai's stories are Born from Astute Understanding of the Everyday



ther Skies, Other Stories is a collection of 20 short stories written by Sara Rai. These short stories were originally written in Hindi, translated by Ira Pande and the author herself. In the author's note, Rai begins by mentioning that the stories in this collection have been written over three decades and ponders whether "this explains why they have no unifying thread."

As one reads through the book, the unifying thread becomes quite obvious - the fact that Rai's stories are born out of an astute understanding of the everyday. What's more is that this understanding does not come off as analytical or distanced throughout her various narratives. Whether you meet Nabila for the first time, or see Bari Dadi's flustered face in "Mortar and Pestle" or observe ants in "Atacama", Rai grounds her readers amongst these characters and the readers

become a part of the story Rai writes.

Inviting the reader

By situating the readers within the story, Rai breaks the fourth wall. Her compelling descriptions of the world she weaves ensure that the readers feel surrounded by it, rather than being mere spectators of the story. For instance,

Manya Anveshi

Rai guides the reader's gaze to what they might otherwise miss - and how to listen for the voices that never quite arrive



BOOK REVIEW

when the readers are introduced to Nabila or the gardener at Khusrao Bagh, it is not an immediate occurrence despite carrying the disconnectedness of a collection.

The beginnings are nebulous and abrupt, as all stories go; however, readers are slowly settled into the world around them through the narrator's observations about the things that surround the characters - the bagh for the gardener, and Mehta uncle and aunty for Nabila. These observations are themselves very captivating - they are not difficult to imagine, yet the texture of the description feels almost as if the reader is seeing it for the first time.

For example, in "Nabila", when the narrator describes the ripple made in the water by those frogs, it creates an image in the head that is borrowed from a pre-existing experience of the reader but reproduced in an entirely new context. Similarly, one can really see the gardens of Khusrao Bag, or the way leaves resemble butterflies in "Catching Butterflies".

Through such immersive writing, Rai creates aesthetically rich stories of characters that appear to exist on the margins of society. These stories end abruptly: "We dropped the photo on the floor and ran outside" (in "Mortar and Pestle") or "In watching the grasshopper, we forgot that Nabila had gone away" (in "Nabila"). The narrator's distraction is abrupt, often resulting in a sense of dissatisfaction in the reader. But this feeling is a testament to a belief that the story goes on, despite the departure of the narrator.

Reconciliation with loss

In "Mortar and Pestle", the narrator attempts to recall their memories of long-deceased Bari Dadi after being reminded of her through an old



Sara Rai.

hamam dasta (mortar and pestle). The hamam dasta, in this story, is a catalyst for the past and the present. But the intrigue of this story lies in the constant reaching but never arriving at the identity of Bari Dadi. By the end of the story, all that the readers know about her is from the narrator's observation of those who have a relationship with her. Through these people, the narrator attempts to imagine who Bari Dadi might be, and fails.

Bari Dadi's identity remains unclear till the very end. Rai's narrator says, "But who was Bari Dadi? Did she have a name? Pratima? Pratima. I tried to match the face with her name but failed", as if to conclude that the only way the narrator could have been sure of her identity was if he could get her own account of the story. But Bari Dadi is long gone; therefore, her identity remains a mystery. In admitting this failure, the narrator declares that the attempt to know her is inconclusive.

The narrator's doubts about Bari Dadi echo within the readers. All the interactions mentioned in the story become inadmissible to the inquiry

of who she is. In this backdrop of other characters characterising Bari Dadi, she herself remains silent. Perhaps, this silence is what Rai was drawing our attention to. Since we don't have access to her own account, the narrator depends on their memories of her, as do the readers. The act of narration, which is rooted in this lack, then defines Bari Dadi.

Rai's stories of Nabila and Bari Dadi ask questions that female writers often ask today: What do different forms of narration do to an identity? And what happens to those who remain unrecorded or only partially seen? Rai offers no easy answers. Instead, she traces the edges of lives that rarely enter dominant narratives, allowing their silences to speak as loudly as their actions. In doing so, Other Skies, Other Stories becomes a compelling reminder that the everyday is full of stories we notice only when a writer like Rai guides our gaze to what we might otherwise miss - and how to listen for the voices that never quite arrive.

Walks a Fine Line Between History and Hesitation



T

Nikkhil Advani's show is sincere but shies away from openly mentioning what is very much present in our books.

Tatsam Mukherjee

he bar isn't particularly high for historicals in Hindi cinema over the last two decades, after *Lagaan* (2001). Ashutosh Gowariker's film might have been among the last few mainstream efforts to depict British imperialism beyond a two-dimensional lens. In recent years, Shoojit Sircar's *Sardar Udham* comes to mind as a rare exception, offering a considered portrait of even the most brutish servants of the Crown, exploring their individual convictions.

Nikkhil Advani's *Freedom at Midnight* is vast in its scope, based on the 1975 book of the same name by Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins. Yet, it needs only basic diligence to ensure a fairly compelling series. The events in the year leading up to Independence in 1947, and its immediate aftermath in 1948, are riveting in themselves, featuring sensational characters all colliding with one another. And yet, there are other challenges staring

Advani in the face. There is no way to tell the story of India's independence without dwelling on the Partition, the sectarian violence it triggered, and the assassination of Gandhi - all of which is equivalent to kicking a hornet's nest in today's times.

In its first season, after showcasing the infighting within the Indian freedom struggle - primarily between the Congress and the Muslim League - the second season begins with Partition becoming a reality. A bureaucratic nightmare in its own right, the series picks up steam as both sides haggle over cities based on demography and industrial prosperity. On one side are Nehru (Sidhant Gupta) and Sardar Patel (Rajendra Chawla), with Jinnah (Arif Zakaria) on the other. Though not playing an administrative role, Gandhi (Chirag Vohra) remains a crucial force outside the government, acting as the conscience of Nehru, Sardar Patel, and society at large.

OTT REVIEW

Season two of *Freedom at Midnight* is an example of stodgy prestige television, featuring humongous sets, heavy-duty prosthetic make-up, and impersonations of people we've read about extensively. Peter Morgan's *The Crown* comes to mind as a show in a similar bracket - telling the story of British monarchy, Queen Elizabeth, after her ascendancy to the throne, and how it affects the relationships around her. Advani's show doesn't quite have the insight on its subjects like Morgan does, allowing him to mine the gaps between their indoor and outdoor personalities. However, there are plotlines in the second season, which do a great job of reflecting India's more recent skirmishes.

I was particularly moved by the backstory of Madan Pahwa (a scene-stealing Anurag Thakur) - disowned by his own father after partition, projecting his hate against another father (of the nation), for Gandhi's dogged empathy for Muslims. Madan becomes a weapon in the hands of Hindu fundamentalists - making an attempt on Gandhi's life. Thakur, who broke out as an actor in last year's *Black Warrant*, hijacks our senses as both a victim and a perpetrator. I enjoyed how gracefully Advani depicts the clash of egos - between Nehru and Patel, considering both were ferociously principled, ethical; but Nehru was too much of an idealist, to continue making way for Patel's pragmatism. Both Gupta and Chawla enact Nehru and Patel as bickering family members - too familiar with each other's blindspots, while also fiercely protective of each other against an outsider's badmouthing.

I was touched by how Advani reclaims Gandhi's non-violence, which has been mocked for its obsolescence in recent times. *Freedom at*



Freedom At Midnight 2 is streaming on Sony LIV.

Midnight depicts two instances of Gandhi's fast-unto-death; the first to stop Hindu-Muslim riots taking place in Calcutta and Punjab after the partition, and the second one to protest the polarisation in the refugee camps. Showcasing how Gandhi shrewdly used what has been described by Arundhati Roy as 'political theatre' to make even the sternest ones among us to introspect about our choices, is a radical way to fight social biases. I wondered how citizens of today would respond to Gandhi's fast-unto-deaths with our smartphones to distract us. It does a great job of foregrounding Gandhi's tactics to get his way - bringing back values of trust and empathy for our 'enemies', which appear medicinal for our present discourse.

The sore point here remains the characterisation of Pakistani politicians - Jinnah has all the personality of an angry poster, while Liaquat Ali Khan (Rajesh Kumar) has all the depth of an obedient cardboard cut-out. Most scenes of the riots tend to show faceless Muslim perpetrators and Hindus/Sikhs as the victims, while the one to put away one's weapons to convince Gandhi to end his fast is a Hindu character (played by Abhishek Banerjee). These might seem like minor creative decisions, which hint at something more cyni-

cal. It also shies away from mentioning the RSS - instead choosing to characterise it as a 'Bapu ke khilaaf bolne waale sanstha (an organisation which speaks against Bapu)', or naming Nathuram Godse (Gandhi's assassin) - again instead only hinting at him through his initials (NVK or Nathuram Vinayak Godse) on a recovered white vest by law enforcement officials.

These might be the occasional manoeuvres showrunners have to employ to not alienate a part of the audience, but it goes against the grain of Advani's otherwise well-intentioned, and largely sincere series. This season makes a compelling case for India's secular values, and the circular nature of communal tensions and its sheer inanity. However, by walking on eggshells for facts that are clearly stated in our history books, Advani's show briefly betrays itself. If things come to a point where history books are rewritten, Advani's show won't do a good job of identifying Gandhi's assailant - or the ideology fuelling his act. Season two of *Freedom at Midnight* reminds us how fragile India was in 1947 - but also how fragile our comfort with historical truth remains today.

FROM GAZA TO PUNJAB

Press Freedom in Peril



s per reports of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the killing of journalists in 2025 reflects grave and ongoing challenges to the profession worldwide. According to IFJ documentation, 58 per cent of media workers killed were victims of the ongoing Gaza war and conflicts in Lebanon, with 56 deaths reported in Gaza out of 74 recorded across the Middle East and the Arab world.

In the Asia-Pacific region, impunity, draconian legislation and censorship have continued to fuel intimidation and incarceration of journalists, resulting in 15 recorded deaths. India recorded the highest death toll in the region, with four journalists killed in the line of duty. The IFJ also found that the Asia-Pacific continues to have the largest number of imprisoned media workers globally.

The report highlights not only the professional hazards faced by journalists but also how the region is becoming increasingly intolerant of independent media. While the targeting of journalists in war zones, as seen in Gaza, has become more visible, the suppression of independent journalism, once associated mainly with dictatorships and non-democratic regimes, is now evident even in democratic countries.

In India, independent journalism is facing severe pressure, as a growing number of journalists are jailed or face criminal cases. The Aam Aadmi Party, which rose to power with significant media support and was born out of the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement, is now accused of attempting to control the media and showing intolerance towards independent journalism, particularly in Punjab.

Recently, a news report and social media posts regarding the alleged misuse of an official helicopter linked to the Punjab Chief Minister led to the registration of an FIR. The case was filed at the Cyber Crime Police Station in Ludhiana against 10 journalists and an RTI activist, including journalist Mandeep Makkar of Punjabi Jagran, Maninder Sidhu of Lok Awaz TV, freelance journalist Mintu Gursaria, RTI activist Manik Goyal, and others.

The FIR pertains to news reports and social media posts alleging misuse of a Punjab government helicopter during the Chief Minister's absence while he was on a foreign tour. It was registered under Sections 353(1) and 353(2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, dealing with the spread of false information causing public mischief or promoting hatred, and Section 61(2) relating to criminal conspiracy. Police claimed the content created an impression that the helicopter associated with the Chief Minister was engaged in unauthorised or suspicious activities. The Punjab and Haryana High Court has stayed the probe, granted interim relief to journalists, and issued notice to the Punjab government.

Last year, the National Human Rights Commission issued a notice following the assault of a journalist by two police officers in Batala, Gurdaspur district. A video of the incident showed the journalist lying motionless as the officers walked away. The officers were later suspended after the footage went viral. Earlier, several Punjab journalists faced police raids and other government actions, including bans on social media accounts, during a security crackdown on a pro-Khalistan leader.

More recently, Punjab Kesari, one of the state's leading newspapers, alleged a targeted witch-hunt by the Punjab government. In a letter to the Chief Minister and Governor, the group claimed that raids and regulatory actions against its publications and associated businesses were aimed at intimidating the press. The newspaper stated that all government advertisements to the group were stopped from November 2025 and alleged a sustained campaign against members of the Chopra family and their businesses.

Freedom of the media is essential to any democracy, and attacks on journalists weaken its foundations. Governments that come to power with media support must not adopt non-democratic methods to control it. Journalists must stand united against all attacks on press freedom. ☐

THE LAST PAGE



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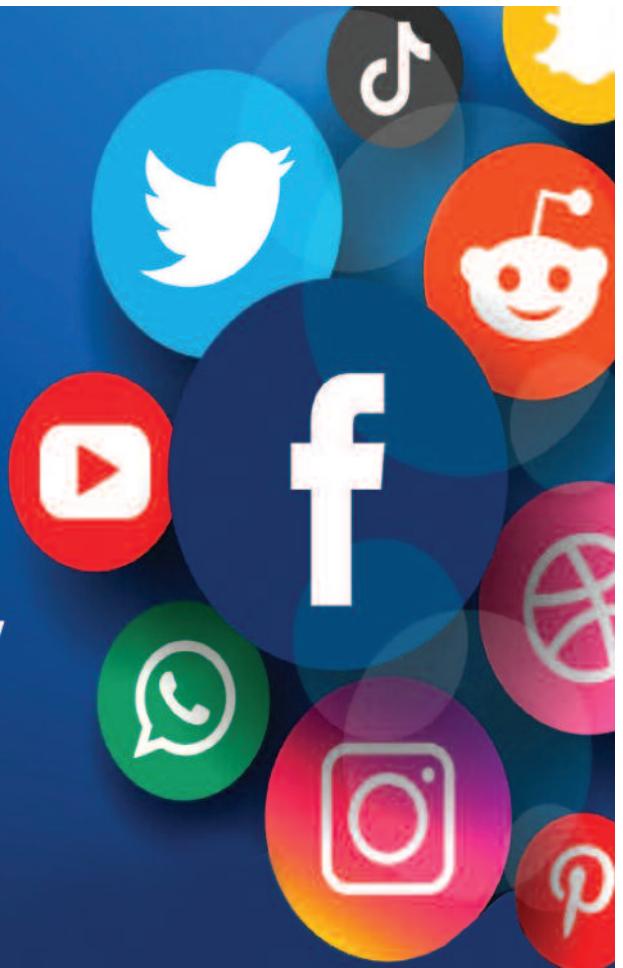
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Contact: scribesnews@gmail.com,
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Date of Publication 4th January 2026, Date of Posting 6th & 7th January

RNI No: TELENG/2017/72414 TITLE CODE: TELENG00034

The more social media we have, the more we think we are connecting, yet we are really disconnecting from each other.

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