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**NEWS**

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Surge in harassment of Indian reporters over coronavirus coverage

INDIA ASIA - PACIFIC PROTECTING JOURNALISTS

COVID19 IMPRISONED JUDICIAL HARASSMENT

Police patrol a street in Amritsar on 30 April during the nationwide lockdown (photo: Narinder Manu / AFP).



After logging an alarming total of 15 cases of police and judicial harassment of Indian journalists in the past four weeks, mainly in connection with their coronavirus coverage, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) calls on the supreme court to remind the governments of India's various territories of their constitutional duty to respect press freedom.

The latest of example of harassment of reporters covering the Covid-19 crisis was in Sitamarhi, a district in the northeastern state of Bihar, where the **local authorities filed a complaint on 20 May** (<https://en.baaghitv.com/case-filed-against-journalist-for-reporting-serious-disorder-at-the-quarantine-center/>) accusing freelancer **Gulshan Kumar Mitho** of disturbing public order.

Mitho simply reported the complaints of people who had been placed in a quarantine centre at a school in the village of Balaji Pur. He quoted them as saying they had not been given “proper food” for the last eight days and that they had been reduced to eating “dried gram [chickpeas].” By reporting this, Mitho violated the criminal code, the complaint said.

Two days before that, it was the chief minister of the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh **who brought a complaint** (<https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/05/16/uttar-pradesh-cases-against-journalist-coronavirus>) against **Ravindra Saxena**, a reporter for the *Today-24* news website, under the Disaster Management Act and Prevention of Atrocities Act **over a video report** (<https://thewire.in/media/up-fir-against-journalist-for-report-on-mismanagement-at-quarantine-centre>) in which people confined to a quarantine centre in Sitapur district said they were being given “rotten rice” to eat.

Eliminate the messenger

“Journalists should not be the collateral victims of negligent behaviour by authorities, who react by trying to silence the reporters who expose problems instead of trying to solve the problems,” said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF’s Asia-Pacific desk.

“The current surge in cases of judicial harassment of reporters in several Indian states testifies to a desire to eliminate the ‘messenger’ in order to suppress all troublesome reporting. We urge the supreme court to intervene to remind governments in the various Indian territories of their constitutional duty to respect freedom of the press.”

In the western state of Gujarat, **Dhaval Patel**, the editor of the *Face of Nation* news website, **was arrested on 11 May for sedition** (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/journalist-held-for-publishing-speculative-story-on-change-of-guard-in-gujarat/article31563046.ece>) under Section 124A of the penal code over an article four days earlier suggesting that India’s ruling BJP could replace Vijay Rupani as Gujarat chief minister because of disquiet about the surge in coronavirus cases in the state. His lawyer said Patel was held incommunicado for 72 hours before finally being taken before a judge and charged.

Going after sources

Indian Express reporter **Mahender Singh Manral was interrogated by the New Delhi police** ([https://twitter.com/svaradarajan/status/1260059633382801411](https://twitter.com/svaradarajan/status/1260059633382801411?s=20)) for three hours on 11 May **over an article** (<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tablighi-jamaat-saad-audio-clip-delhi-police-6400994/>) claiming that analysis of an audio recording used as grounds for arresting the head of the Islamist fundamentalist group Tablighi Jamaat had shown it was clearly doctored. In the allegedly doctored version used as evidence by the police, the Islamist leader seemed to tell his members to defy social distancing rules. **Police threats to prosecute Manral under Section 174 of the penal code** (<https://theprint.in/india/deeply-disturbing-that-criminal-laws-are-being-used-to-intimidate-journalists-editors->

guild/420316/), which carries a possible six-month prison sentence, were **widely interpreted in social media comments** (https://twitter.com/NH_India/status/1260557566893068293) as an attempt to get him to reveal his police sources and to intimidate all journalists.

Manish Pandey, a journalist with the Hindi-language TV news channel *News1 India*, was **questioned at length by police in Lucknow** (<https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/05/02/up-journalist-interrogated-by-police-for-story-on-low-quality-ppes>), the capital of Uttar Pradesh state, on 1 May about a story two weeks before reporting that medical professionals had complained about the quality of the personal protective equipment provided to hospitals and universities. Pandey said the police tried to pressure him into naming his sources.

Six journalists arrested in a single state

At least six journalists were arrested in the last week of April in the northwestern state of Himachal Pradesh for their coverage of the coronavirus lockdown's impact. **According to the *Newslaundry* website**

(<https://www.newslaundry.com/2020/05/12/himachal-pradesh-journalists-face-firs-harassment-for-reporting-on-government-failures>), they included *Divya Himachal* reporter **Om Sharma**, who was the subject of five complaints over a video showing migrant workers protesting because they had received no food aid.

Five complaints were also brought against **Ashwani Saini**, a video reporter for the *Mandi Live* Facebook page and stringer for the *Dainik Jagran* newspaper, over his coronavirus coverage, while police in the

town of Nalagarh brought three complaints against **Jagat Bains**, who works for the regional TV channel *News18 Himachal*, for questioning the town's pandemic measures.

Two charges were brought against **Vishal Anand**, a reporter in the town of Dalhousie who freelances for various national TV channels, over a photo about Covid-19 management in the nearby town of Gandhi Chowk. A complaint was filed against **Gauri Shankar**, a *Dainik Bhaskar* reporter based in the district of Kullu, for reporting that migrant workers in his district were starving as a result of the lockdown. And **Somdiv Sharma**, a reporter for *Punjab Kesari* in Manali, a town in the lower Himalayas, was briefly arrested by the local police for reporting municipal neglect in the execution of quarantine measures.

Jailed for a tweet

Another journalist was arrested the same week at the other end of the country, in the remote southeastern Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It was **Zubair Ahmed**, the editor of *The Light of Andaman* weekly, who was **arrested on several charges over a single tweet (<https://thewire.in/media/andaman-journalist-arrested-for-tweet-accused-of-spreading-false-information>)** questioning a decision to quarantine an entire family because one of its members phoned a relative who had tested positive to Covid-19. Although the facts reported in his tweet were confirmed by the archipelago's main daily, the *Andaman Chronicle*, Ahmed is still charged with spreading false information.

While coronavirus coverage has prompted most of the cases of harassment in recent weeks, three journalists have been subjected to intimidation by the security forces in connection with other matters.

One was **Manash Jyoti Baruah**, a journalist based in Guwahati, the capital of the northeastern state of Assam who now works for the *Mirror of Assam* news site. He was **summoned to “answer a few questions”** (<https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/nia-summons-tv-journalist-in-assam-for-questioning-related-to-anti-cao-protests-837647.html>) at the regional office of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), India’s counter-terrorism police, in the Guwahati suburb of Sonapur on 15 May. He was interrogated about his coverage for the *News18-Northeast Assam* TV channel of protests against the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act that was adopted last December at the Hindu nationalist government’s behest.

“Vicious propaganda”

Abhilash Padachery, a young freelance journalist, **was questioned by the NIA** (<https://english.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2020/05/03/nabs-three-youths-with-maoist-links.html>) in the southeastern state of Kerala for two days, on 1 and 2 May, on suspicion of links with Maoist circles, which he repeatedly denied. NIA agents also subjected his mobile phone and laptop to close examination, violating the principle of the confidentiality of journalists’ sources.

In Mumbai, the capital of the western state of Maharashtra, state police brought a charge of “vicious propaganda” against *Republic TV* editor and pro-Hindu nationalist right commentator **Arnab Goswami** on 4 May because of his aggressive comments about the police in a TV debate. Goswami had also accused the police of taking insufficient action **after two individuals attacked him and his wife** (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/arnab-goswami-alleges-attack-by-two-men/article31412125.ece>) by throwing ink at their car on 22 April. *The Wire* news site **reported**

that two suspects were arrested

(<https://thewire.in/media/arnab-goswami-sonia-gandhi-hate-speech>) and then released on bail on 27 April.

India is ranked 142nd out of 180 countries and territories in **RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index** (<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>), two places lower than in 2019.