

Human rights, self-censorship and regulation: Shakuntala Banaji on the media under Modi (Part 1)

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Following Modi's visit to Canada last month, **Christian Ledwell** spoke to **Shakuntala Banaji** about journalism and the media in India one year into the Modi government. In part one of the interview, they discuss the climate for critical journalists in India and media regulation. Click [here](#) to read part two.

This article forms part of our [Modi's Government 1 Year On](#) series.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's three-day, three-city visit to Canada in April marked the first time a sitting head of India's government has visited Canada in 42 years. Many celebrated Modi's visit as an opportunity to close economic, cultural, and other bilateral ties between India and Canada. But while the visit was an important opportunity to recognise the Indian diaspora in Canada, it also drew protests from those voicing concerns about minority rights in India since PM Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was elected to power last year. A demonstration in Vancouver against Modi's record on human rights resulted in the [arrest of protester Moninder Singh](#), a youth leader of the B.C. Sikh Gurdwara Council.



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Prime Minister Modi's critics also argue that he governs for the wealthiest citizens alone. Notably, journalist P. Sainath's [chief criticism](#) has been that Modi has ignored the plight of rural Indians, a claim that is spoken to by the tragic [suicides by over 600 farmers](#) in the past three months alone in the western state of Maharashtra, often due to immense burdens of debt.

To get perspective on these issues, I spoke to Dr. Shakuntala Banaji who has [written about Modi's use of media](#) and appeared as part of the panel [Gujarat: Human Rights Violations, Impunity and the Indian General Elections](#) ahead of the BJP's being elected to power in 2014.

2002 killings in Indian mainstream media today

“There is less and less serious discussion of the events of 2002 on electronic media,” says Banaji. “The atmosphere, I feel, has been created through the pressuring and removal of high profile journalists from mainstream channels.”

Examples include journalists Rajdeep Sardesai and Sagarika Ghose, both of whom published critical coverage of Modi’s administration and later [resigned from CNN-IBN](#). While deputy editor of CNN-IBN, Ghose reportedly [received instructions](#) not to be critical of Modi’s government.

“Much more investigation would have to be undertaken before linking this to the current administration, but anyone who has been seen as being very critical of the BJP in the past or their role in the [2002 Gujarat] pogrom is not long-destined for a powerful position in the media – or that at least is the feeling amongst journalists in mainstream English language papers who are now self-censoring,” says Banaji.

She explains that the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, its aftermath, and the displacement of Muslim families in Gujarat are reported on by the mainstream Indian media primarily “when one of the aspects related to an ongoing court case comes up and people allow themselves to write stories about it. [These reports] are very factual, related to pronouncements by judges and lawyers. Recently, there has been open persecution of two or three of quite high profile activists who have been trying to pursue the remaining court cases of people who lost family members during 2002,” such as activist Teesta Setalvad, a member of the group Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) pursuing legal recourse for victims of the 2002 killings who is currently being tried for allegations of misappropriation of funds.

PM Modi recently [made statements](#) urging the judiciary not to fear “five-star activists,” saying: “The judiciary is not as fearless today as it used to be ten years back. Are five-star activists not driving the judiciary? Are they not attempting to do so? Judges fear what the reaction of five-star activists would be when they render justice as per law and as per Constitution.”

Banaji comments: “If the Prime Minister himself is speaking against people who are being persecuted in relation to their activism in relation to Gujarat in 2002, you can imagine that the media too are in fear. There is an atmosphere in which everything that has happened has been legitimised, other views have been silenced — there’s a hole there, a space, an absence.”

Regulating mainstream media

Banaji argues that greater and more carefully debated media regulation in India is necessary to prevent those in power both at state and national level from asserting an unethical degree of influence over the narratives that are being reported. Like many nations including the UK, US, and Australia, India is currently grappling with the challenges of media regulation, and she suggests three key reforms that are necessary.

Banaji says, “The first thing that needs to happen is that there needs to be a regulation which prevents [the government and various political interests, or members of their families] from owning any kind of stake in media houses, or influencing or exerting undue influence over particular media houses; and this would include a return to the separation between editors and owners, with editorial independence and journalistic independence guaranteed in law.”

“The second type of initiative would be some form of regulatory body largely reflective of the wider population of India. Having a strong regulatory body who is trained in understanding issues of ethics, libel, media influence, and independent so able to resist political pressure, is essential. And having a body which has remit over both electronic and print media is absolutely crucial — not just leaving these news houses and media businesses to self-regulate.”

“The third reform of course is linked to having a regulator, and that is having penalties and giving the regulator some power, particularly to prosecute and to proceed with cases where there is obvious flouting of regulations.”

However, as is also the case with other nations attempting to introduce media regulation that punishes unfair reporting and prevents the coercion of journalists, Banaji fears that those who support media regulation in India have a difficult task ahead of them, not only because the need for regulation is often talked about when in fact what is being practiced is politically motivated censorship.

“Are we close to getting there? Absolutely not,” she says. “We are—India is—going in the opposite direction. There is some small indication that many journalists themselves are upset at the way in which they are being gagged or shut out of discussion about substantive political decisions, but this does not extend to calls for regulation.”

Click [here](#) to read part two of Christian’s interview with Dr Banaji.

A version of this article originally appeared 1 May on [Christian’s personal blog](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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