

The Kashmiri conundrum: why is ‘the world’s largest democracy’ rated so poorly for press freedoms? (guest blog)

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As [voters go to the polls in Indian-administered Kashmir](#), freelance journalist **Mark Mistry** looks at how the Indian media’s treatment of the region’s fiercely disputed status, coupled with violations of press freedoms by the state’s security forces, has contributed to its poor reputation.



Kashmir elections: How well is this being reported?

A recent BBC World Service portrait of India’s press [reported](#) that ‘the business of news is killing the profession of journalism’. And in its annual audit of worldwide press freedoms, *Reporters without Borders* places India in the [lowest quartile](#) of its latest index. The organisation justifies its ranking of the world’s second most populous nation by [reporting](#) the restrictions placed on media and internet services in Kashmir following the execution of Mohamed Afzal Guru, hung for his alleged role in the 2001 Indian Parliament attacks.

Before we delve more deeply, a brief bit of background is necessary. Kashmir has remained disputed territory between India and Pakistan since Partition in 1947. Since then the countries fought have fought three conventional wars in 1947-48, 1965 and 1999, and came close to conflict again in 2002.

India maintains a military presence in Kashmir in the hundreds of thousands, with sensible estimates placing the true number in excess of half a million. The [CIA World Fact Book](#), says ‘Kashmir remains the site of the world’s largest and most militarized territorial dispute.’

Who cares?

That democratic norms are not extended to Kashmiris is, alas, nothing new. But, writing last year, Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze said that underreporting human rights violations by mainstream Indian media is dangerous for Indian democracy itself, particularly when ‘national security’ concerns ultimately result in self-censorship. In ‘An Uncertain Glory: India and its contradictions’, they wrote:

“The media may see it as ‘self discipline’ not to interfere with national security, but its resulting silence on matters of civil rights and democracy in some critical areas is a huge departure from the general vigour of the democratic process in India.” (pg 246)

Indeed, they go further, arguing that in the case of Kashmir, ‘the underlying issues call for open discussion and democratic engagement rather than silence’. Instead, painstaking investigations by civil rights campaigners, such as [Alleged Perpetrators](#) by the International People’s Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice in Indian-administered Kashmir, are left to languish as worthy reports known mainly to a few interested observers and local media. This particular report named no less than 500 members of the Indian security forces by analysing 214 separate cases of alleged human rights abuses.

A US State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices in India [noted](#) in February 2014:

“UN Special Rapporteur Christof Heyns released a report in April [2013] which stated that unmarked graves found in Jammu and Kashmir contained more than 2,943 bodies of victims of extrajudicial executions from 1990 to 2009. While the government expressed its intention to conduct investigations into unmarked graves, no investigation was initiated by year’s end.”

So the [confirmation](#) of unmarked graves of ‘[militants](#)’ killed by Indian security forces goes largely unreported by media and allowed to linger without proper investigation. There are notable exceptions. Muzamil Jameel, of the *Indian Express*, continues to report thorny issues relating to the overwhelming presence of Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir. Tehelka’s Riyaz Wani also distinguishes himself by his reports. There are others. Journalists have been targeted by both [Indian security forces](#) and [militants](#). Meanwhile, it’s worth recognising that those who plod the national security beat must deal with [entreaties from intelligence services](#) on each side of the dispute.

Does this affect what goes on in Kashmir?

Yes, to an extent. Kashmiri youths have long been identified as the main protagonists in actions against Indian security forces, whether stone pelting or, less frequently, crossing the Line of Control (the de facto border between India and Pakistan) to receive military training and return as *fidiyeen*. Thus to what extent media influences their political perceptions is an important question.

The Institute for Research on India and International Studies conducted ‘[A Perception Survey of Media Impact on the Kashmiri Youth](#)’ in 2011. Analysing the trial of the aforementioned Afzal Guru (in 2006), it says: “These results clearly show a direct and very strong co-relation [sic] between the source from which the youth hears and often verifies the news and, which in turn, influences their political perceptions.”

The study also says that media is ‘only one of the factors shaping their choices of actively participating in the social and political life of Kashmir’. Others, the study says, include:

- Personal life experiences
- Political and ideological leanings of the family and friends
- Peer pressure
- Career choices
- Exposure to the world beyond Kashmir through education/employment opportunities

What does it mean?

It would be wrong, inaccurate and alarmist to conclude that poor coverage of human rights abuses in Kashmir by mainstream Indian media has contributed directly to militancy in the troubled and disputed territory. What can be deduced is that the dearth of coverage of continuing violations of democratic norms in what is supposedly the world’s largest democracy has contributed to an environment where Kashmiris are be more receptive to anti-Indian sentiments.

Little attention has been paid to where Kashmiri media fits into this equation, and any serious study requires far greater space than this medium allows. However, conversations with Kashmiri journalists who have subsequently left their posts in Press Enclave, a cul-de-sac in downtown Srinagar where some papers have their offices, report dissatisfaction with the status quo as editors reliant on government advertising ensure their reporters’ copy does not

offend authorities too greatly.

Aside from the questionable quality of some sub-editing, an overuse of 'police sources' [in place of a named spokesman](#), or even from an official spokesman is irritating and lacks accountability. Furthermore, sub-editors at some papers [owe their day jobs](#) to the government – a conflict of interest so damning that it renders the very idea of journalism redundant.

Thus the conundrum remains. If Kashmiri media is itself compromised, what hope then for Indian media, [owned largely by rich men whose businesses benefit from political patronage](#)?

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