

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY - BEST IAS COACHING IN CHENNAI

12/24, Muthurangan Muthali St, West Tambaram, Chennai - 600045

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A warning shot for committing the 'crime' of journalism

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

A warning shot

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

"Show me the man and I'll show you the crime," was the boast attributed to Joseph Stalin's ruthless secret police chief, Lavrenty Berta, i.e., he could fabricate a case against anyone, even the innocent. Taking a leaf from the Bolshevik's book, a political establishment that feasts on the excesses of 1975 has mastered the art of plausible



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deniability. Every attack on press freedom is painted as anything but: it is about money-laundering (NewsClick, NDTV); it is about income-tax evasion (BBC, Dainik Bhaskar); it is about national security (MediaOne); it is about glorifying terrorism (Fahad Shah); it is about disrupting peace (Siddique Kappan). At least Indira Gandhi had the courage to formally declare an Emergency – and the censors sat alongside journalists in the newsroom, not the Prime Minister's office.

L'affaire NewsClick is a particularly egregious case – even M/s Thomson & Thompson wouldn't find it funny. A mighty state going after a news operation that began in a basement. The police landing up without a copy of the FIR or a list of the offences committed. Seizing the phones and laptops of the "suspects" despite every court saying 'don't'. A case of economic offence turning into a conspiracy to undermine the republic. And the 73-year-old founder of the portal being arrested under a law made for terrorists. So many questions can be asked, but just one is enough: exactly whose activity is "unlawful" here, the second estate's, or the fourth?

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

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

"In furtherance of this conspiracy to disrupt

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

Contempt bordering on hatred

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

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

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



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Aligning higher education with the United Nations SDGs +

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 goals with 169 targets that all 193 UN member states have agreed to try to achieve by 2030. SDGs are a matter of urgency, and actions by all countries, both developed and developing, to end poverty and other socio-economic and environmental problems should align with strategies that improve the standard of life and education, reduce inequality, and harness economic growth.

Though it has been eight years since the inception of these goals, the SDGs Report 2023 flagged slow progress and painted a grim picture due to the prolonged effects of COVID-19, impacts of the climate crisis, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and a weak global economy. The lack of progress towards the goals is a universal experience, but it has been more pronounced in the Least Developed Countries. India, despite having managed the crises of the global economy and relatively succeeded in overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic, has suffered a setback in achieving these goals.

NEP 2020 and SDGs

Yet, recent actions and policies indicate that India is committed towards realising SDGs. SDG4 pertains to access to quality education. It is a prerequisite for the achievement of other goals. India, with a long-standing history of equitable and inclusive education, has accelerated efforts to ensure the achievement of SDGs through various reforms. Among them, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 should be given credit to a great extent.

NEP 2020 has been prepared in tune with



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Educational institutions have to rethink their approach so that it is in tune with the NEP which will be crucial in realising the 2030 deadline for SDGs

most of the SDGs. Though NEP 2020 calls for changes at all levels of education, priority should be accorded to higher education as it accelerates social mobility, empowers people through creativity and critical thinking, and grants them employment skills.

According to data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), people with a higher education degree are more employable and earn an average of 54% more than those who only have completed senior secondary education. A university-inclusive education, thus, better protects people against poverty (SDG1), prevents them from hunger (SDG2), supports them for good health and well-being (SDG3), promotes gender equality (SDG5), provides them decent work, which in turn drives economic growth (SDG 8), and reduces inequalities (SDG10).

Universities should strengthen the research-teaching nexus in university education. That way, students will become direct beneficiaries of the knowledge generated from research. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary systems of education produce multitiered people who can pursue research, and find innovative solutions to global challenges such as affordable and clean energy (SDG7), sustainable cities and communities (SDG11), climate change and global warming (SDG13), as well as studying their impact on an economy and the earth.

Sustainable development is possible only if we radically change the way we produce and consume (SDG12). Innovative solutions and start-ups (SDG 9) must be developed in collaboration with private companies. Introducing Value-Based Education (VBE) will

help citizens become responsible towards self, society, and the planet and help our nation achieve "Life on Land" (SDG15).

Suggestions and concluding remarks

NEP 2020 demands that Indian higher education be committed to mapping its day-to-day operations with SDGs. Ranking universities according to the achievement of SDGs is a welcome move, but is still inadequate to meet the SDG deadline.

To accelerate the progress towards achieving the 2030 agenda, stakeholders of higher education should be educated and oriented so that none of their activities leave any SDG behind. The 56,205 higher educational institutions and universities in India should work together.

Universities should come out reinvigorated and play a part in the education, innovation, culture, and civic life of their local communities.

Community health, energy-saving measures, efficient resource allocation, waste reduction, development of local skills, as well as the sharing of services, infrastructure, and facilities with other universities or external partners should become a culture in universities.

It is high time that universities adopted sustainability as a mantra and incorporated SDGs into their institutional strategies, both in daily administration and in teaching and research. It has been realised that higher education cannot work in isolation; rather it must be directly integrated with socio-economic development where each activity and transaction has meaningful and multiple impacts on SDGs. Every citizen must feel that the universities contribute directly to their well-being and nation-building.

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