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Title: India and the World Press Freedom Index: A Critical Examination of Media Freedom in the World's Largest Democracy

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Abstract

This paper examines the state of press freedom in India and evaluates the extent to which political influence, corporate ownership, regulatory weaknesses, and economic pressures have affected the ability of the Indian press to perform its constitutional role as the Fourth Estate. Although freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India, concerns regarding media independence, journalist safety, concentrated media ownership, misuse of legal provisions, and increasing economic dependence on government and corporate advertising have intensified in recent years. The study analyses India's performance in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), highlighting the country's declining ranking and the factors contributing to this trend. It further explores the relationship between press freedom and democratic governance, emphasizing the role of an independent media in ensuring transparency, accountability, and informed public participation. Through an examination of legal frameworks, media ownership structures, regulatory institutions, and contemporary challenges such as misinformation and journalist harassment, the paper identifies key obstacles to media independence in India. Finally, it proposes legal and policy reforms aimed at strengthening press freedom, improving journalist protection, enhancing regulatory effectiveness, and preserving the democratic function of the press. The paper argues that safeguarding media independence is essential for maintaining constitutional democracy, protecting citizens' right to information, and ensuring effective accountability of public institutions.

1. Introduction

Freedom of the press has long been recognized as an essential condition for the functioning of a democratic society. A free press acts as a watchdog over governmental power, exposes corruption, informs citizens, and facilitates public debate. Without an independent media, democratic institutions risk becoming opaque and unaccountable.

Recently, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) released the 2026 World Press Freedom Index, highlighting a sharp global decline in press freedom. The report noted that press freedom scores fell in 100 out of 180 countries and territories, while the global average score reached its lowest level in 25 years. *'With a rise in violence against journalists, highly concentrated media ownership, and outlets with increasingly overt political alignment, press freedom is in crisis in 'the world's largest democracy',' says RSF.*

In India, freedom of speech and expression is guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India. Although the Constitution does not explicitly mention “freedom of the press,” the Supreme Court has consistently interpreted Article 19(1)(a) as encompassing press freedom. Landmark judgments such as *Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras* and *Indian Express Newspapers v. Union of India* established that a free press is indispensable to democracy. Journalism has traditionally been regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy, entrusted with the responsibility of providing citizens with accurate, unbiased, and verified information. However, in recent years, concerns have been raised regarding the independence of certain sections of the Indian media, with critics arguing that some outlets appear to align closely with or favor the policies and narratives of the central government.

Despite these constitutional protections, concerns regarding media independence, journalist safety, legal harassment, and political influence have intensified in recent years. These concerns are reflected in India's performance in the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF). India ranked 151st out of 180 countries in 2025 and declined to 157th in 2026, placing it among countries facing serious challenges to press freedom.

This paper seeks to answer few central questions:

1. Why it is important to have a press freedom?
2. What is the World Press Freedom Index and how is it calculated?
3. Why has India's ranking remained relatively low?

4. To what extent do political influence, corporate ownership, regulatory weaknesses, and economic pressures contribute to the failure of the Indian press in fulfilling its constitutional role as the Fourth Estate?
5. How do political affiliations of media owners affect news content?
6. What legal and policy reforms can strengthen press freedom in India?

Media Landscape: The media landscape is abundant in this country of 1.4 billion inhabitants and 210 million homes with TV sets. India has nearly 900 privately owned TV channels, half of which are dedicated to news. *Doordarshan*, the public TV broadcaster, operates in 23 languages and reaches millions of viewers. Around 140,000 publications are published in more than 20 languages, including some 20,000 daily newspapers. Their combined circulation totals more than 390 million copies. However, online news, particularly on social media, is favoured by a younger population and has overtaken print media as the main source of news. Radio news broadcasting remains a state monopoly, with the national public broadcaster *All India Radio (AIR)*, which, together with *Doordarshan*, is part of the public broadcasting group *Prasar Bharati*.

2. Importance of Press Freedom

Press freedom refers to the ability of journalists and media organizations to gather, produce, and disseminate information without undue interference from the state, corporations, political groups, or other powerful actors. It includes freedom from censorship, intimidation, violence, arbitrary detention, and economic coercion. “A free press is essential for democracy, accountability, and an informed society, serving as a watchdog and a conduit of truth.”

i. Ensuring an Informed Citizenry

The press functions as a watchdog over government, corporations, and powerful individuals, often referred to as the Fourth Estate. Investigative journalism uncovers corruption, abuses of power, and inefficiencies, compelling leaders to act ethically and transparently. Historical examples include the Watergate scandal, which exposed political misconduct, and global investigations like the Panama Papers, revealing financial improprieties. This oversight ensures that power is not concentrated unchecked, maintaining societal balance and justice

ii. Democratic Significance

Press freedom performs several democratic functions, such as: Informational Function, Accountability Function, Deliberative Function, Rights-Protective Function.

Internationally, press freedom is recognized under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

iii. Accountability and Oversight

The press functions as a watchdog over government, corporations, and powerful individuals, often referred to as the Fourth Estate. Investigative journalism uncovers corruption, abuses of power, and inefficiencies, compelling leaders to act ethically and transparently. Historical examples include the Watergate scandal, which exposed political misconduct, and global investigations like the Panama Papers, revealing financial improprieties. This oversight ensures that power is not concentrated unchecked, maintaining societal balance and justice.

3. The World Press Freedom Index

The Index measures the ability of journalists to work freely and independently without political pressure, censorship or violence.

The RSF notes the role of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party behind the crisis of press freedom in India, saying

With a rise in violence against journalists, highly concentrated media ownership, and outlets with increasingly overt political alignment, press freedom is in crisis in “the world’s largest democracy,” ruled since 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and embodiment of the Hindu nationalist right.

i. Origin and Purpose

The World Press Freedom Index is published annually by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Paris-based international non-governmental organization established in 1985. The Index aims to compare the level of press freedom across countries and identify threats to journalism worldwide.

ii. What is it?

Published every year since 2002 by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the World Press Freedom Index is an important advocacy tool based on the principle of emulation between states. Because it is well known, its influence over governments is growing. Many heads of state and government fear its annual publication. 2002 Year of the first edition of the ranking, The Index is a point of

reference that is quoted by media throughout the world and is used by diplomats and international entities such as the United Nations and the World Bank.

iii. **What does it measure?**

The Index ranks 180 countries and regions according to the level of freedom available to journalists. It is a snapshot of the media freedom situation based on an evaluation of pluralism, independence of the media, quality of legislative framework and safety of journalists in each country and region. It does not rank public policies even if governments obviously have a major impact on their country's ranking. Nor is it an indicator of the quality of journalism in each country or region.

iv. **Methodology**

RSF evaluates countries using a combination of qualitative surveys and quantitative data. The methodology assesses five indicators: political, economic, legal, sociocultural, and safety.

- **Political context**

India's media has fallen into an "unofficial state of emergency" since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014 and engineered a spectacular rapprochement between his party, the BJP, and the big families dominating the media. Reliance Industries group's magnate Mukesh Ambani, a close friend of the prime minister, owns more than 70 media outlets that are followed by at least 800 million Indians. The NDTV channel's acquisition at the end of 2022 by Gautam Adani, a tycoon who is also close to Modi, signalled the end of pluralism in the mainstream media. Recent years have also seen the rise of "Godi media" (a play on Modi's name and the word for "lapdogs") – media outlets that mix populism and pro-BJP propaganda. Through pressure and influence, the Indian model of a pluralist press is being called into question. The prime minister does not hold press conferences, grants interviews only to journalists and YouTubers who cover him in a favourable light and is highly critical of those who do not show allegiance. Indian journalists are subjected to harassment campaigns by BJP-backed trolls.

- **Legal framework**

Freedom of the press is not mentioned as such in the Constitution, but it is protected by the right to freedom of expression. However, governments have

never shied away from using colonial-era laws, such as those relating to sedition, defamation and anti-state activities, to suppress the media. Anti-terrorism laws are increasingly used against journalists. The main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, and other regional parties have also used legal provisions against journalists for intimidation purposes and as retaliation. Modi has introduced several new laws that give the government extraordinary power to control the media, censor news and silence critics, including the 2023 Telecommunications Act, the 2023 Information Technology Amendment Rules, and the 2023 Digital Personal Data Protection Act.

- **Economic context**

India's media are primarily funded by advertising revenue, the main source of which is the government, under Narendra Modi, billions of dollars of public funds have been spent on advertising. Both central and state governments put pressure on the media to censor their content, through this funding, on which many small media outlets depend. While, on the one hand, the government has tightened its grip on both state and privately owned media, media ownership has become heavily concentrated in the hands of a few conglomerates that are mostly allied with the government, as evidenced by the Adani group's power grab. This multinational conglomerate led by Gautam Adani, a close ally of Modi with interests in port development, energy and mining, took control of NDTV, one of the last bastions of critical journalism, through a hostile takeover.

- **Sociocultural context**

The great diversity of Indian society is not reflected enough in the media landscape. The journalism profession, especially in managerial positions, remains the prerogative of Hindu men from upper castes – a bias that has repercussions on the angles and subjects of articles and reports. For example, on major evening talk shows, women make up less than 15% of the guests. Hindu nationalist ideology has become a dominant force, shaping current affairs, framing political debate and restricting the space in which dissenting or minority voices can be heard. Most TV media outlets, particularly in Hindi, devote a significant portion of their airtime to religious news, sometimes openly advocating hatred of Muslims. The Indian landscape also has examples

of the opposite, such as the Khabar Lahariya outlet, composed entirely of women journalists from rural areas, and ethnic or religious minorities.

- **Safety**

With an average of two to three journalists killed due to their work every year, India is one of the world's most dangerous countries for media professionals. Journalists who are critical of the government are routinely subjected to online harassment, intimidation, threats and physical attacks, as well as criminal prosecutions and arbitrary arrests. They can be victims of violence, from police officers and political activists, as well as criminal groups and corrupt local officials. Proponents of Hindutva, the nationalist ideology of the Hindu far right, call for popular revenge against critics branded as "traitors" and "anti-national". Terrifying, coordinated campaigns of hatred and calls for murder are conducted on social media, campaigns especially violent when they target women journalists, whose personal data is divulged. The situation is also very worrisome for journalists covering environmental topics or news in Kashmir, where reporters are often harassed by police and paramilitaries, with some being subjected to so-called "provisional" detention for several years.

v. Global Trends

Countries such as Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Netherlands consistently occupy the top positions due to strong institutional protections and high levels of journalist safety. At the bottom of the Index are countries such as Eritrea, North Korea, and China, where media is heavily controlled by the state.

4. India's Performance in the Index

- India ranked 157th out of 180 countries, falling six places from 151st in 2025. RSF cited: Violence against journalists, Concentrated media ownership, Political pressure, Misuse of national security laws, as key reasons for India's poor ranking.
- India's rank has fallen from 140 in 2014 to 159 amongst 180 countries on the Press Freedom Index 2024.
- India's overall score on the Press Freedom Index further decreased from 40.34 in 2014 to 31.28 in 2024. This effectively translates to a press freedom level of 31%.

- As quoted in the Press Freedom Report in 2022, "The Indian media landscape is like India itself – huge and densely populated – and has more than 100,000 newspapers (including 36,000 weeklies) and 380 TV news channels. But the abundance of media outlets conceals tendencies toward the concentration of ownership, with only a handful of sprawling media companies at the national level. Four dailies share three-quarters of the readership in Hindi, the country's leading language.

➤ **Ranking Trends**

Year	India's Rank
2019	140
2020	142
2021	142
2022	150
2023	161
2024	159
2025	151
2026	157

➤ **Comparison with Neighbouring Countries**

Country	Rank (2026)
India	157
Nepal	87
Sri Lanka	134
Bhutan	150
Bangladesh	152
Pakistan	153
China	178
Afghanistan	175

➤ **Top Countries**

Rank (2026)	Country
1	Norway
2	Netherlands
3	Estonia
4	Denmark
5	Sweden
6	Finland
7	Ireland
8	Switzerland

5. Causes of the Decline of the Indian Press

The failure of the Indian press to fully perform its constitutional role as the Fourth Estate can be attributed to a combination of political influence, corporate ownership, regulatory weaknesses, and economic pressures. These factors often undermine the media's ability to act independently, hold power accountable, and provide citizens with accurate and unbiased information.

- a. **Political influence** is a significant concern, as governments may exert direct or indirect pressure on media organizations through legal actions, regulatory measures, restrictions on access to information, or the allocation of government advertising. Such pressures can encourage self-censorship and discourage critical reporting.
- b. **Corporate ownership and media concentration** also affect editorial independence. Many major media outlets are owned by large business conglomerates with interests in sectors dependent on government policies and licenses. This ownership structure may create conflicts of interest and influence news coverage in ways that prioritize commercial interests over public interest.
- c. **Regulatory weaknesses** further contribute to the problem. Institutions responsible for media oversight often lack sufficient enforcement powers or independence. While bodies such as the Press Council of India play an important role in promoting ethical journalism, their recommendations are generally advisory rather than binding, limiting their effectiveness in ensuring accountability.
- d. **Economic pressures** have intensified with the growth of digital media and declining traditional revenue streams. Dependence on advertising revenue, competition for audience attention, and the demand for rapid news production can encourage

sensationalism, reduce investment in investigative journalism, and compromise editorial quality.

- e. **Fake News and Hate Speech:** Media practices such as paid news, advertorials, and the proliferation of fake news undermine the credibility of the media and erode its ability to report impartially. (i) Hate speech targeting journalists is frequently disseminated and amplified on social networks, posing a direct threat to their safety and well-being. (ii) For instance, in *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala* (1986) SC held that the right to speak includes the right to be silent or to utter no words.

f. RSF's Comments

- i. **RSF's comments on the political context of press freedom in India:** The Indian press used to be seen as fairly progressive but things changed radically in the mid-2010s, when Narendra Modi became prime minister and engineered a rapprochement between BJP and the big families dominating the media. The prime example is undoubtedly the Reliance Industries group led by Mukesh Ambani, now a personal friend of Modi's, who owns more than 70 media outlets that are followed by at least 800 million Indians. Very early on, Modi took a critical stance vis-à-vis journalists, seeing them as "intermediaries" polluting the direct relationship between himself and his supporters. Indian journalists who are too critical of the government are subjected to all-out harassment and attack campaigns by Modi devotees known as 'bhakts'.
- ii. **RSF's comments on the economic context of press freedom in India:** The Indian press is a colossus with feet of clay. The media outlets largely depend on advertising contracts with local and regional governments. At the national level, the central government has seen that it can exploit this to impose its own narrative, and is now spending more than 130 billion rupees a year on ads in the print and online media. Recent years have also seen the rise of "Godi media"—media outlets such as Times Now and Republic TV mix populism and pro-BJP propaganda.
- iii. **RSF's comments on the legislative/legal context of press freedom in India:** Indian law is protective in theory but charges of defamation, sedition, contempt of court and endangering national security are increasingly used against journalists critical of the government, who are branded as "anti-national." Journalists who try to cover anti-government strikes and protests are often arrested and sometimes detained arbitrarily.

- iv. **RSF's comments on the sociocultural context of press freedom in India:** The enormous diversity of Indian society is barely reflected in the mainstream media. For the most part, only Hindu men from upper castes hold senior positions in journalism or are media executives – a bias that is reflected in media content. Most TV media outlets, particularly in Hindi, devote a significant portion of their airtime to religious news, sometimes openly advocating hatred of Muslims.
- v. **RSF's comments on the security/safety context of press freedom in India:** With an average of three or four journalists killed in connection with their work every year, India is one of the world's most dangerous countries for the media. Journalists are exposed to all kinds of physical violence including police violence, ambushes by political activists, and deadly reprisals by criminal groups or corrupt local officials.
- g. There are several reports that reveal the truth behind fake news and the real harm it causes.
 - i. 214% rise in misinformation during the COVID 19 pandemic with India accounting for 1 in 6 fake news pieces globally,
 - ii. According to the report of *UNESCO-Ipsos survey* over 85% of urban Indians report encountering online hate speech, with 64% blaming social media,
 - iii. According to *News Checker report* 38% of fake news originates from verified pages, while 70% spreads through at least one verified handle,
 - iv. Deepfakes influenced the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, reinforcing biases and swaying voter sentiment.
 - v. During Operation Sindoor, several national news television channels were criticized for broadcasting unverified and misleading information, raising concerns about journalistic responsibility and accuracy.
 - vi. The year 2023 was a busy one for the fake news industry - it led us fact-checkers at BOOM to write over a 1,000 fact-checks across three different languages. A closer look at our work revealed that 77 unique fact-checks were on false reporting, or misreporting, by news channels, news websites and wire agencies between January 1 to December 31, 2023.

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6. Political influence over media in India

Political influence is a significant concern, as governments may exert direct or indirect pressure on media organizations through legal actions, regulatory measures, restrictions on

access to information, or the allocation of government advertising. Such pressures can encourage self-censorship and discourage critical reporting. India's media has fallen into an "unofficial state of emergency" since Narendra Modi came to power in 2014 and engineered a spectacular rapprochement between his party, the BJP, and the big families dominating the media. Reliance Industries group's magnate Mukesh Ambani, a close friend of the prime minister, owns more than 70 media outlets that are followed by at least 800 million Indians. The NDTV channel's acquisition at the end of 2022 by Gautam Adani, a tycoon who is also close to Modi, signalled the end of pluralism in the mainstream media. Recent years have also seen the rise of "Godi media" (a play on Modi's name and the word for "lapdogs") – media outlets that mix populism and pro-BJP propaganda. Through pressure and influence, the Indian model of a pluralist press is being called into question. The prime minister does not hold press conferences, grants interviews only to journalists and YouTubers who cover him in a favourable light, and is highly critical of those who do not show allegiance. Indian journalists are subjected to harassment campaigns by BJP-backed trolls.

Reports of the journalist killed in India while reporting of government scam:

- The gruesome murder of Indian journalist Mukesh Chandrakar has shone a spotlight on the dangers of reporting from some of the country's most volatile regions. Chandrakar's body was found last week in a septic tank in a compound owned by a contractor he had implicated in a story about corruption in Chhattisgarh state. Police have arrested the contractor and two others in connection with the 33-year-old's murder.
- The Committee to Protect Journalists calls on Indian authorities to maintain full transparency in their investigation into the killing of journalist Raghvendra Bajpai, who was shot dead March 8 in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, and determine whether the journalist was targeted in connection with his work.
- Journalist Raghvendra Vajpayee Murdered for Exposing Government Scam and Corruption, Media Workers Protest.

7. Recommendations for Strengthening Press Freedom

To strengthen press freedom in India, several recommendations can be made:

i. **Implementing Committee's Recommendations:**

- Justice J.S. Verma Committee (2012), the Press Council of India, and the National Human Rights Commission have recommended adopting legal and ethics training for journalists, fostering transparency and accountability within media institutions, and ensuring the protection of constitutional guarantees of press freedom via legal measures and international cooperation.

ii. Strong Legal Framework:

- India has a robust legal framework in the form of Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and expression.
- However, there is a need to strengthen laws and regulations to protect journalists from harassment, intimidation, and violence. In 2017, the Supreme Court upheld the importance of free speech and the press, stating that freedom of speech and expression is the "quintessential instrument" to attain truth.

iii. Independent Media Regulatory Bodies:

- Establishing independent and autonomous regulatory bodies to oversee the functioning of the media can help ensure fair and unbiased reporting.
- Ensuring transparent appointment processes for their members, providing adequate resources and funding, and fostering public trust in their ability to regulate the media impartially.

iv. Protection for Whistleblowers and Journalists:

- Enacting laws and mechanisms to protect whistleblowers and journalists who expose wrongdoings or report on sensitive issues can encourage fearless reporting.
- For example, the Whistleblowers Protection Act, of 2014, provides a legal framework to protect whistleblowers in the public sector.

v. Addressing Online Threats and Fake News:

- With the increasing use of digital media, it is essential to address online threats such as cyber harassment, trolling, and misinformation campaigns targeting journalists.
- In 2022, the News Broadcasters & Digital Association (NBDA) launched a campaign to combat online harassment and abuse of journalists, particularly women journalists and fake news.

vi. Media Literacy and Training:

- Media literacy and ethics training programme for journalists to tackle ethical dissonance in journalism, promoting transparency and accountability within media

organisations, and safeguarding constitutional guarantees of press freedom through legal protections.

8. Press Freedom and Democracy

Political scientists often view press freedom as both a component and an indicator of democratic health. Restrictions on journalism can weaken electoral accountability, reduce transparency, and limit citizens' ability to evaluate government performance. For a democracy as large and diverse as India, a plural and independent media is particularly important because it connects different regions, languages, and social groups within a common public sphere. The linkage between media and democracy is also vital and cannot be separated. It acts as one of the key tools of enlightening the community, identifying the activities of the state and ensuring transparency in elections. This becomes an important role in the Indian heterogeneous political environment since the country is linguistically, culturally, and socially plural. Media does not only publicize facts concerning decisions taken by governments and policy incentives, but it also offers forums of questioning. Political parties take advantage of the news channels, print media, and, to an increasingly larger extent, digital media to gain the vital platform in expressing their ideological views. Media is taken to be a part and parcel of the strategy of a party during any form of electoral campaign, as a vehicle to increase the intensity of the message and to know the mood of the people. Such exposure in media promotes informed views of the citizens towards candidates, their reforms and incumbency performance and in that way, fairer election choices are facilitated. Besides, once governmental or oppositional organizations have nothing to say about certain points, the media often becomes the vital intermediary, revealing the holes in the policies and the maintenance of the watching eye. Democratic system presupposes that the key advantage is the freedom of the media. In the event that the press so falls to the pressure, the channel of information so far correct and by the same token, the sanctity of continued democratic process may be jeopardized. Therefore, it is crucial that independence, neutrality, and disclosure of the media is practiced continuously in order to meet its democratic art.

9. Conclusion

Press freedom remains one of the most important pillars of a democratic society and an essential component of constitutional governance in India. While the Constitution protects freedom of speech and expression, the practical realities facing the Indian press reveal significant challenges that limit its ability to function as an independent watchdog. The

analysis demonstrates that political influence, concentration of media ownership, inadequate regulatory mechanisms, economic dependence on advertising revenue, and growing threats to journalist safety have collectively weakened the autonomy of sections of the Indian media.

India's declining position in the World Press Freedom Index reflects broader concerns regarding media pluralism, editorial independence, legal intimidation, and the increasing vulnerability of journalists to harassment and violence. The concentration of ownership among a few powerful corporate groups, coupled with close relationships between political and economic elites, raises concerns about conflicts of interest and reduced diversity of viewpoints. At the same time, the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and sensationalism has further undermined public trust in the media.

To address these challenges, meaningful legal and policy reforms are necessary. Strengthening protections for journalists, ensuring the independence of regulatory institutions, promoting transparency in media ownership, reducing economic dependence on government advertising, and enhancing media ethics and literacy can contribute to a more independent and accountable press. Ultimately, the health of India's democracy depends upon the existence of a free, pluralistic, and fearless media capable of holding power accountable and safeguarding the public's right to information. Only through robust institutional protections and a renewed commitment to journalistic independence can the Indian press effectively fulfil its constitutional role as the Fourth Estate.

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