

Feb

2023



Killings, Detention & Harassment of Journalists

Journalists 2023 Report

Journalists

**Reporting Under Threat:
A Comprehensive Study of Journalist Safety in Kashmir**



By

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***REPORT ON SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA WORKERS WITH SPECIAL
FOCUS ON WOMEN JOURNALISTS ONLINE AND OFF LINE***

The current state of press freedom in Kashmir, and what are the tools used by Indian authorities to crack down on independent journalists?

An alarming deterioration of press freedom in Kashmir has significantly worsened since the Indian administration revoked the erstwhile state's special status in 2019. Indian authorities have resorted to intimidation, including arbitrary arrests, and instilling fear in Kashmir's journalist fraternity. The spate of detentions and arrests of journalists in Kashmir reveals the distressing pattern of the use of the law, including counter-terrorism and preventative detention law to target Kashmiri journalists.

According to the International Press Institute (IPI), the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) criminalizes any activity intended to 'cause disaffection against India', 'disrupt the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India' or incite individuals to bring about the cession or session of part of the territory of India. The law has often been used to silence critical journalists. An amendment to the law introduced in 2019 empowers the Indian administration to designate individuals and organizations as terrorists and puts the burden of proof on the accused to show they are not terrorists. Multiple rights groups including Amnesty International have criticized the UAPA over arbitrary provisions that have been widely used by the government as a tool to criminalize and stifle dissent. Under this law, authorities can arrest and conduct a search-and-seizure operation without a warrant if they suspect a person is associated with an unlawful group.

The Public Safety Act (PSA) is another tool used by Indian authorities to crack down on independent journalists. The PSA is an administrative detention law that allows for the preventative detention of any individual for up to two years without a warrant, trial or specific charges. A person is taken into custody under this law to prevent them from acting against 'the security of the state or the maintenance of the public order'. The detaining authority does not need to inform persons charged under the PSA of the reason for the arrest, and the detained person does not have the right to challenge the arrest or engage a lawyer to represent them. The PSA can be slapped on people who are already in police custody or who were just granted bail by a court. In 2018, the law was amended to allow detainees charged under the PSA to be transferred to jails outside the state and away from their families.

Almost a year after the revocation of the region's semi-autonomy, in May 2020, the Jammu and Kashmir Department of Information and Public Relations announced a new media policy that authorizes government officers to 'examine the content of the print, electronic and other forms of media for fake news, plagiarism, and unethical or anti-national activities' and mandates background checks for journalists.

In another effort to censor independent media, authorities placed travel restrictions on more than 40 people, including 22 journalists, barring them from traveling outside of India. The restrictions, known as 'look out notices', are not made public, those on the list remain unaware until they seek to travel abroad and are stopped at the airport. Multiple reports suggest that the government does not want journalists working for international organizations to share with the rest of the world what is happening in Kashmir.

The Jammu and Kashmir administration has also increased state surveillance and control of the media by issuing an order in August 2021 forcing 'unauthorized/unregistered' journalists to 'complete their registration or obtain approval' before they perform their jobs, and authorities can stop journalists who threaten public peace. According to The Kashmiriyat – a local online news portal, as many as 49 Kashmiri journalists experienced incidents of harassment, arrests, or intimidation in 2021 alone.

For now, Kashmir is inaccessible to foreign correspondents, unless they have been granted rare official approval, so most of the reporting in the region comes from local journalists facing raids, threats, interrogations, arbitrary arrests and harassment.

There have been several Kashmiri journalists who have been detained under the Public Safety Act (PSA) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in recent years.

1. Aasif Sultan: A journalist with the Kashmir Narrator, Sultan was detained under the PSA in August 2018 and later booked under the UAPA in November 2018 and is currently in detention.
2. Massrat Zahra: A freelance photojournalist, Zahra was detained under the UAPA in April 2020 for allegedly "glorifying terrorism" in her social media posts. She was released after several weeks in detention.

3. Fahad Shah was arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) for allegedly being involved in activities related to the proscribed terrorist organisation, in Feb 2022.
4. Hilal Mir was arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in 2021.
5. Peerzada Ashiq: A journalist with The Hindu, Ashiq was detained under the UAPA in 2019 for allegedly spreading "fake news" about the situation in Kashmir. He was released after several weeks in detention.
6. Ghulam Jeelani Qadri: A journalist with Daily Afaaq, Qadri was detained under the PSA in 2019 for allegedly having "links with militants." He was released after several months in detention.
7. Gowhar Geelani: A journalist and political commentator, Geelani was detained under the UAPA in August 2020 for his social media posts. detained under the UAPA in April 2021.
8. Peerzada Ummer: A journalist with Hindustan Times, Ummer was detained under the PSA in August 2019 for his reporting on the situation in Kashmir. He was released after several weeks in detention.
9. Anees Zargar was arrested under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) on April 10, 2020 allegedly in connection with the Delhi riots that occurred in February 2020.
10. Kamran Yousuf: A freelance photojournalist, Yousuf was detained under the PSA in September 2017 and later released. Later detained under the UAPA in September 2017 for his coverage of the unrest in Kashmir. He was released after several months in detention.
11. Qazi Shibli: A journalist and editor of news website The Kashmiriyat, Shibli detained under the PSA in July 2020 and later booked under the UAPA in August 2020. In 2020, his sister, a student journalist, was also summoned by the police for questioning.
12. Mudasir Ahmad: A journalist with the Kashmir Reader, Ahmad was detained under the PSA in May 2020 for his social media posts. He was released after several weeks in detention.

13. Tahir Hussain: A journalist with Greater Kashmir, Hussain was detained under the PSA in July 2016 for his reporting on the situation in Kashmir. He was released after several months in detention.
14. Ishfaq Tantry: A journalist with Kashmir News Service, Tantry was detained under the PSA in September 2018 for his reporting on the situation in Kashmir. He was released after several months in detention. He was re-arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in October 2020
15. Mohammad Amin Kamloo: A journalist with the Urdu daily Nawa-i-Jang, Kamloo was detained under the PSA in September 2019 for his coverage of the situation in Kashmir. He was released after several months in detention.
16. Mushtaq Ahmad: A journalist with the daily newspaper Kashmir Images, Ahmad was detained under the PSA in July 2019 for his reporting on the situation in Kashmir. He was released after several months in detention.
17. Muzamil Mattoo: A journalist with Rising Kashmir, Mattoo was detained under the PSA in August 2016 for his reporting on the situation in Kashmir. He was released after several months in detention.
18. In September 2020, Journalist Auqib Javeed was summoned to the Cyber Police Station where he was questioned and mistreated for allegedly writing a ‘misleading and factually incorrect’ story. A year later, in September 2021 Jammu and Kashmir police simultaneously raided the residences of four Kashmiri journalists, Showkat Motta, Azhar Qadri, Abbas Shah and Hilal Mir, seizing documents and electronic devices. The journalists were questioned and detained for days at local police stations.
19. In October 2021 the NIA raided photojournalist Manan Gulzar Dar’s residence and arrested him for allegedly working with terrorist organizations under the UAPA. This was part of a series of about 130 raids conducted by the NIA in Jammu and Kashmir during four months in 2021. That same month, in the span of one week, five journalists were summoned and detained by the police and investigative agencies, including Salman Shah, editor of the Kashmiriyat; Sajad Gul, a freelance journalist; Suhail Dar, a freelance journalist who had previously detained under the UAPA in 2020; Mukhtar Zahoor, a stringer with the BBC; and Majid Hyderi, a freelance journalist.

20. Geeta Seshu, the co-founder of the FreeSpeechCollective, asserted while speaking to IPI asserted that, “the latest pattern of issuing summons and interrogating not just the journalists, but also members of their families, conducting raids on their residential premises or the work-places of family members, is an attempt to intimidate their near and dear ones and rob the journalists of their emotional and social support.”
21. In January 2022, a group of pro-government journalists took over the Kashmir Press Club (KPC), and it was subsequently shut down by authorities. The surprising overthrow of the KPC, the largest body of independent reporters in the region known for its critical reporting and for defending press freedom, highlights the rapid erosion of press freedom in Kashmir.
22. On December 6, 2023, Indian authorities arrested a Kashmiri journalist from the Islamabad district of Jammu and Kashmir in connection with a 2017. Khalid Gul is one of the several journalists whose residence was raided by Indian police in December, as part of India’s systematic crackdown on journalists and press freedom in the valley. After a day under detention, Gul was later granted bail by a local court.

The summoning and interrogations of journalists have created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Journalists who are summoned and questioned for their reports or their social media posts are told that they are ‘under surveillance’. Since 2019, even the families of journalists have been summoned and questioned.

Afraid for their safety and at risk of losing their main source of income, many newspapers and journalists are reportedly turning to self-censorship, staying away from controversial stories and writing anonymously. Financial pressure, surveillance and harassment by authorities have created a chilling effect on press freedom in Kashmir.

The hostile atmosphere in Kashmir has forced local journalists to leave the Valley. Those reporters who stay say they are not able to write stories out of fear of repression and have not been paid for months.

Online harassment of female Journalists

Online harassment is a menace that arises from societal oppressive power structures, including prejudices based on race, religion, and gender. In 2016, The Guardian looked at reader comments

on its own website and discovered that, regardless of the topic of the piece, articles published by women journalists garnered more abuse and dismissive trolling than those written by men. Globally, the study discovered that nearly three-quarters of the female journalists polled had dealt with online aggression at some point in their careers.

The condition for Indian women journalists is generally dire. Gender-based violence, such as sexual harassment, psychological abuse, internet teasing, death threats, and other forms of abuse, is a problem for women journalists. 12 countries worldwide, including India, have been alleged for allowing journalists to be killed and the perpetrators to walk free. These 12 countries have accounted for 81% of journalist homicides in the last 10 years where no one has been held accountable, according to CPJ annual report in 2021.

According to a 2018 survey by the International Centre for Journalists, nearly two-thirds of female journalists said they had experienced online harassment, with one in five saying the harassment had led them to consider leaving the profession.

A 2020 survey by the International Women's Media Foundation found that 85% of female journalists had experienced online harassment, with nearly a third saying the harassment had led them to avoid certain stories or topics.

In 2018, a report by the Network of Women in Media, India found that female journalists in Jammu and Kashmir faced "harassment, trolling, and gender-based abuse" on social media platforms. The report cited examples of female journalists being threatened, insulted, and even sexually harassed online.

In 2019, a survey of female journalists in Jammu and Kashmir by the Free Press Kashmir news website found that nearly two-thirds of respondents had experienced online harassment, with 82% saying they had received threats or abuse on social media.

A recent UNESCO-funded report published by the New York-based International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) asserts that nearly 75% of women journalists who were part of a global survey that included India said they had been targeted by online violence attacks, and 20% said they had experienced physical attacks as a consequence. The group, which worked on the studies in collaboration with the 'Forbidden Stories' project that has also just released its investigation into the killing of Bangalore-based journalist Gauri Lankesh in 2017, has profiled Indian columnist

Rana Ayyub among a number of journalists, and has alleged that groups affiliated to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were responsible for the attacks and harassment.

‘Today, an army of trolls evidently aligned with the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP threatens female Muslim journalists, Rana Ayyub in particular at scale; on a daily basis,’ the ICFJ report said. ‘The abuse routinely feature threats of death and rape. They are disinformation-laced, and they display characteristics of orchestration. They are also deeply misogynistic and redolent of religious bigotry,’ the case study released publicly on Feb 14, 2023.

Indian administration led by BJP’s Narendra Modi launched a crackdown on Kashmiri journalists post revocation of the region’s special status that has been condemned by media watchdogs worldwide. Reporters without Borders (RSF), a French NGO, in its report on 5 August 2020, a year after the abrogation of Article 370, called on the Indian government to immediately change its policy or go down in history as a regime that deprived the region’s eight million inhabitants of reliable news and information at the height of a pandemic. ‘Working has been hell for journalists in Kashmir for the past year (2019),’ said Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF’s Asia-Pacific desk. Earlier, in 2017, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in its report on Kashmir documented, ‘Kashmir’s Media in Peril: A Situation Report’ highlighted the challenges of living and reporting in Kashmir and balancing pressures from all sides: the government, the government forces, the militants and the Kashmiri public. The report laid emphasis on the vulnerability of Kashmiri journalists, particularly women journalists, reporters living and working in remote areas and photojournalists working at the frontline.

Online bullying and abuse tactics, physical assaults, threats against family members, and death threats are just a few of the many forms of violence that women journalists in Kashmir experience.

Despite growing tensions in the valley, young female journalists are determined to work on the frontline. Kashmiri women have also been successful racking up several international accolades and awards for their coverage. Being women journalists in Kashmir is challenging in and of itself, but they continue to work amid the harassment, intimidation, and summons by police and intelligence agencies. The threat of such summons for journalists in Kashmir has made many families more conscious about the safety of their female members and, therefore, more reluctant to allow them to work as journalists.

A female journalist Masrat Zahra, whose work has appeared in The Washington Post, Al Jazeera and The Quint, was booked under the UAPA in April 2020 for posting her work on her social media accounts a year ago. The authorities accused her of “uploading anti-national posts with criminal intention to induce the youth and promote offence against public tranquility”. The journalists in Kashmir see these killings, arrests, detentions and registering cases against them as an attempt to silence the journalist community in Kashmir into submission.

Sanna Irshad Mattoo: a Kashmiri photojournalist and Pulitzer Prize winner, was prevented from boarding a flight to the United States by Indian immigration authorities. Despite having a valid visa and ticket, Mattoo was denied boarding at New Delhi's airport due to alleged "security reasons."



Sanna Irshad Mattoo
@mattoosanna

...

I was on my way to receive the Pulitzer award ([@Pulitzerprizes](#)) in New York but I was stopped at immigration at Delhi airport and barred from traveling internationally despite holding a valid US visa and ticket.



Bulli Bai, Sulli Deals, and Female Kashmiri Journalists

‘Bulli’, ‘Sulli’, and ‘Bulli Bai’ are slurs used against Muslim women, commonly by Hindu nationalists in India. Bulli Bai and Sulli Deals campaigns listed India’s Muslim women for ‘auction’ online over an app. The app, now taken down, displayed photographs of more than 100

Muslim women, including prominent actress Shabana Azmi, wife of a sitting judge of Delhi High Court, multiple journalists, activists and politicians were displayed on the app for auction as "Bulli Bai" of the day. At least seven Muslim women who were targeted by the app told VICE World News that they fear for their lives, especially since their personal data led to more online sexual abuse.

Quratulain Rehbar, a Kashmiri journalist, who had reported on the Sulli deals 2021, said it felt disgusting to be named in the app a year later. On January 1, 2022, Quratulain Rehbar, a journalist from Kashmir, woke up to see herself listed for an "online auction". Her photograph was sourced without her permission and uploaded on an app for "sale". Trolling and online abuse on social media is not new to Rehbar and other Kashmiri journalists like her who often have to face a polarised and hostile environment online despite being prominent in their own fields. The incidents, however, have had an impact on their social media usage as well.

Another journalist from Kashmir, Ruwa Shah said that her friend from Kashmir called her and informed her she was on the list. In a conversation with TRT, Ruwa said “I thought trolling is common to Kashmiris. We suffer so much in our real life that we don’t give too much attention to the trolling. But after "Bulli Deals" controversy, I have realised it is depressing and shocking and also threatening.”

The app listed over 100 women, many of whom were known for their vocal stance on social media platforms regarding the rights of Muslims in India. Notable female Kashmiri and Indian Muslim women including journalists auctioned on the app are Fatima Khan, Arshi Qureshi, Zeba Warsi, Hasiba Amin, Ismat Ara, Fatima Zohra Khan (lawyer), Sayema, and Hida Beg, Geeta Seshu, Sadaf Jafar, Priyanka Chaturvedi, Khalida Parveen, Afreen Fatima.



Quratulain Rehbar ✓

@ainulrhbr · [Follow](#)



Thanks for all the support and messages. If you really care about this issue you must not remain silent because it's not about Indian women or pakistani women. It's about muslim women who are being targetted and it's a clear Islamophobia!

[#SulliDeals](#)

2:05 PM · Jan 2, 2022



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562



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Rana Ayyub ✓

@RanaAyyub · [Follow](#)



They call our existence, our reportage, our opinions as insignificant but unleash all their favourite anchors, prime time shows, twitter trends, right wing ecosystem, propaganda websites and leaders to defend themselves against a journalist. Must confess it is very flattering.

3:39 PM · Feb 22, 2022



3.2K



Reply



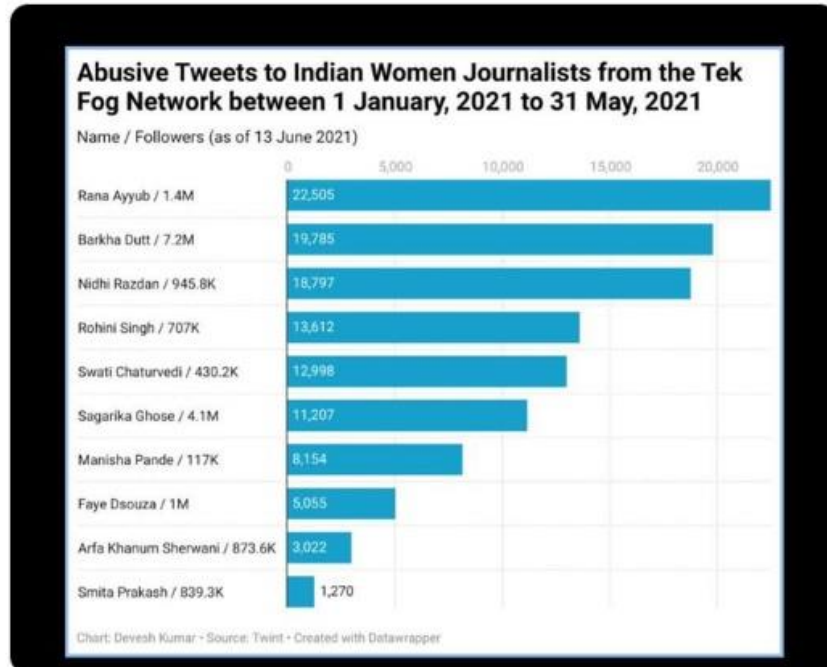
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Arfa Khanum Sherwani ✓
@khanumarfa · Follow



From online auctioning to a million abuses, it is infuriating to be on every single list of people (specially women) being abused, harassed and attacked. It's time people of India stood up and said women journalists shouldn't face this for doing their job and speaking the truth.



7:16 PM · Jan 9, 2022



♥ 2.3K 💬 Reply ↗ Share



Nabiya Khan | نبيه خان
@NabiyaKhan11 · Follow



I have been trying to gather some strength to write something about #BulliDeals. Just when I thought I had left the trauma of #SulliDeals behind me, it came to haunt us(me along with more than 112 Muslims Women) again with an updated version, as a new year present. 1/6

3:17 PM · Jan 2, 2022



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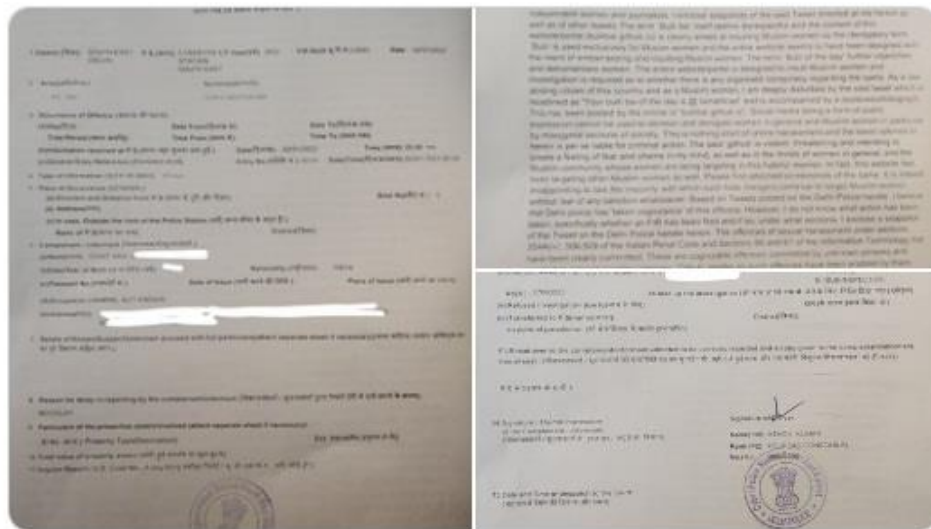


Ismat Ara 
@IsmatAraa · Follow



UPDATE: An FIR has been registered by Cyber Police (South East Delhi) on the basis of my complaint with IPC sections 153A (Promoting enmity on grounds of religion etc), 153B (Imputations prejudicial to national-integration), 354A & 509 for sexual harassment.

#BulliDeals



3:22 PM · Jan 2, 2022



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Sayema 
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There are many Muslim names, including mine, in the obnoxious #BulliDeals, same as #SulliDeals. Even Najeeb's mother has not been spared. It's a reflection on India's broken justice system, a dilapidated law n order arrangement. Are we becoming the most unsafe country for women?

6:02 PM · Jan 1, 2022



 8.4K  Reply  Share

