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## *The Suffocation of Democracy in India*

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[Article Body:]

On December 18 and 19, 141 members of the two houses of India's Parliament were [suspended](#), as of December 19, by the Speaker of the lower house, Om Birla. Each of these members belongs to the parties that oppose the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The government [said](#) that these elected members were suspended for "unruly behavior." The opposition had shaped itself into the INDIA bloc, which included almost every party not affiliated with the BJP. They responded to this action by calling it the "murder of democracy" and [alleging](#) that the BJP

government has installed an “extreme level of dictatorship” in India. This act comes after a range of attempts to undermine India’s elected opposition.

Meanwhile, on December 18, the popular Indian news website Newslick [announced](#) that India’s Income Tax (IT) department “has virtually frozen our accounts.” Newslick can no longer make payments to its employees, which means that this news media portal is now close to being silenced. The editors at Newslick said that this action by the IT department is “a continuation of the administrative-legal siege” that began with the Enforcement Directorate raids in February 2021, was deepened by the IT department survey in September 2021, and the large-scale raids of October 3, 2023, that resulted in the [arrest](#) of Newslick’s founder Prabir Purkayastha and its administrative officer Amit Chakraborty. Both remain in prison.

### **Organs of Indian Democracy**

In February 2022, the Economist [noted](#) that “the organs of India’s democracy are decaying.” Two years before that assessment, India’s leading economist and Nobel Prize laureate Amartya Sen [said](#) that “democracy is government by discussion, and, if you make discussion fearful, you are not going to get a democracy, no matter how you count the votes. And that is massively true now. People are afraid now. I have never seen this before.” India’s most respected journalist, N. Ram (former editor of the Hindu), wrote in the Prospect in August 2023 about this “decaying” of Indian democracy and the fear of discussion in the context of the attack on Newslick. This attack, he [wrote](#), “marks a new low for press freedom in my country, which has been caught-up in a decade-long trend of uninterrupted down sliding in the ‘new India’ of Narendra Modi. We have witnessed a state-engineered McCarthyite campaign of disinformation, scaremongering, and vilification against Newslick.” The world, he wrote, “should be watching in horror.”

In May 2022, 10 organizations—including Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders—released a strong [statement](#), saying that the Indian “authorities should stop targeting, prosecuting journalists and online critics.” This statement documented how the Indian government has used laws against counterterrorism and sedition to silence the media, when it has been critical of government policies. Use of technology—such as [Pegasus](#)—has allowed the government to spy on reporters and to use their private communications for legal action against them. Journalists have been physically attacked and intimidated (with special focus on Muslim journalists,

journalists who cover Jammu and Kashmir, and journalists who covered the farmer protests of 2021-22). When the government began to target Newslick, it was part of this broad assault on the media. That broader attack prepared the journalist associations to respond clearly when the Delhi Police arrested Purkayastha and Chakraborty. The Press Club of India [noted](#) that its reporters were “deeply concerned” about the events, while the Editor’s Guild of India [said](#) that the government must “not create a general atmosphere of intimidation under the shadow of draconian laws.”

### **Role of the New York Times**

In April 2020, the New York Times ran a [story](#) with a strong headline about the situation of press freedom in India: “Under Modi, India’s Press Is Not So Free Anymore.” In that story, the reporters showed how Modi met with owners of the major media houses in March 2020 to [tell](#) them to publish “inspiring and positive stories.” When the Indian media began to report the government’s catastrophic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Modi’s government went to the Supreme Court to [argue](#) that all Indian media must “publish the official version.” The Court denied the government’s request that the media must *only* publish the government’s view but instead said that the media *must* publish the government’s view alongside other interpretations. Siddharth Varadarajan, editor of the Wire, [said](#) that the court’s order was “unfortunate,” and that it could be seen as “giving sanction for prior censorship of content in the media.”

The Indian government’s “administrative-legal siege” on Newslick began a few months later because the website had offered independent reporting not only on the COVID-19 pandemic but also on the movement to defend India’s constitution and on the movement of the farmers. Despite repeated searches and interrogations, the various agencies of the Indian government could not find any illegality in the operations of Newslick. Vague suggestions about the impropriety of funding from overseas fell flat since Newslick said that it followed Indian law in its receipt of funds.

When the case against Newslick appeared to go cold, the New York Times—in August 2023—published an enormously speculative and disparaging [article](#) against the foundations that provided some of Newslick’s funds. The day after the story appeared, high officials of the Indian government went on a rampage against Newslick, using the story as “evidence” of a crime. The New York Times had been [warned](#) previously that this kind of story would be used by the Indian government to suppress press freedom. Indeed,

the story by the New York Times provided the Indian government with the credibility to try and shut down Newslick, which is what they are now doing with the IT department's decision.

### **Upside Down World**

The 141 members of Parliament are accused of trying to justify a breach of the parliament building that took place on December 13. Two men jumped from the press gallery into the hall and released smoke canisters to [protest](#) the failure of the elected officials to debate issues of inflation, unemployment, and ethnic violence in Manipur. The men received passes to enter parliament from Pratap Simha, a parliamentarian of the BJP. He has not been suspended. The BJP used this incident to suspend the opposition parliamentarians because they either did not condemn the incident, or they came out in defense of colleagues who were suspended.

Neither of the [people](#) who threw the smoke bombs into parliament nor those who planned that action have a political background, let alone any linkage to the opposition. Manoranjan D lost his job in an internet firm and had to return to assist his family work their farm; Sagar Sharma drove a taxi after he had to drop out of school due to financial problems at home. Azad had an MA, an MEd, and an MPhil, but could not find a job. These are young people frustrated with Modi's India, but with no political connections. They tried to use normal democratic means to be heard but were not successful. Their act is one of desperation, a symptom of a broader social crisis; the suspension of the parliamentarians and the attack at Newslick's finances are also symptoms of that crisis: the suffocation of democracy in India.