



Threats to Freedom of Press

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Why in News

According to a report by the **Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)**, a record number of journalists were imprisoned during 2020.

- **The Committee to Protect Journalists** is an **independent, nonprofit** organization that **promotes press freedom worldwide**.
- It defends the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal.

Key Points

- **Highlights of the Report:**
 - The overall number of jailed journalists in 2020 is at **record high of 272**.
 - Turkey remains the world's worst offender against press freedom with at least **68 journalists imprisoned for anti-state charges**. At least **25 journalists** are in prison in **Egypt**.
 - There are **dozens of reporters missing or kidnapped** in the **Middle East and North Africa**, including several held by Houthi rebels in Yemen.
 - Amid the **Covid-19 pandemic**, authoritarian leaders tried to control reporting by arresting journalists.

- **Importance of Free Media:**

- Free Media **promotes open discussion of ideas** that allows individuals to fully participate in political life, making informed decisions and strengthening society as a result — especially in a large democracy such as India.
- A free exchange of ideas, free exchange of information and knowledge, debating and expression of different viewpoints is important for **smooth functioning of democracy.**

As the free media by virtue of being the voice of masses, empowers them with the right to express opinions. Thus, free media is critical in a democracy.

- With Free Media, **people will be able to exercise their rights as questioning decisions of government.** Such an environment can be created only when freedom of press is achieved.
- Hence, Media can be rightly considered as the **fourth pillar of democracy**, the other three being legislature, executive and judiciary.

- **Threats to Freedom of Press:**

- The **hostility** towards the media which is **openly encouraged by political leaders** poses a great threat to democracy.
- Government's pressure in the name of **regulations, bombardment of fake news and over influence of social media** is dangerous for the occupation. **Corruption-paid news, advertorials and fake news** are threats to free and unbiased media.
- Security of journalists is the biggest issue, **killings and assaults on the Journalists covering sensitive issues are very common.**
- **Hate speech targeting journalists** shared and amplified on social networks are targeted against journalists using social media.
- **Corporate and political power has overwhelmed large sections of the media**, both print and visual, which lead to vested interests and destroy freedom.

- **Press Freedom in India:**

- In 1950, the Supreme Court in *Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras* observed that **freedom of the press lay at the foundation of all democratic organisations.**
- The Constitution, the supreme law of the land, guarantees freedom of speech and expression under Article 19, which deals with '**Protection of certain rights regarding freedom of speech, etc.**
- Freedom of press is not expressly protected by Indian legal system but **it is impliedly protected under article 19(1) (a) of the constitution**, which states - "All citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression".
- However, **Freedom of press is also not absolute.** A law could impose only those restrictions on the exercise of this right, **it faces certain restrictions under article 19(2)**, which is as follows-
 - Matters related to interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.
- **Press Council of India (PCI):**
 - It is a regulatory body established under the Press Council of India Act of 1978.
 - It aims to **preserve the freedom of the press and maintain and improve the standards of newspapers and news agencies in India.**

- **International Initiative for Freedom of Press:**

The Paris based **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)** publishes annually a World Press Freedom Index (WPI) purporting to evaluate the level of freedom available to the media in 180 countries, which makes the governments and authorities aware of their policies and regulations against and for freedom of press.

India has dropped to two places on the **World Press Freedom Index, 2020** to be ranked **142nd out of 180 countries.**

Way Forward

- Media freedom has been **deteriorating around the world** over the past decade. The threats to global media freedom are real and concerning in their own right, **their impact on the state of democracy is what makes them truly dangerous.**
- Countering content manipulation and fake news to **restore faith in the media without undermining its freedom** will require public education, strengthening of regulations and effort of tech companies to make suitable algorithms for news curation.
 - Any future **legislation to curb fake news should take the whole picture into account and not blame the media** and go for knee-jerk reactions; in this age of new media anyone can create and circulate news for undisclosed benefits.

- It is important for the media to **stick to the core principles like truth and accuracy, transparency, independence, fairness and impartiality, responsibility and fair play** so that they can gain credibility.

Source:IE