

India's Modi government uses "anti-terror" laws to persecute NewsClick editor and manager

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In a move befitting a fascist regime, India's Narendra Modi-led government is wantonly trampling on basic democratic rights to intimidate and silence the left-wing news website *NewsClick*. Following police raids Tuesday on its offices and the homes of scores of people associated with the website, police have arrested *NewsClick*'s founder and Editor-in-Chief, Prabir Purkayastha, and Human Resources head Amit Chakraborty on frame-up terrorism charges.

The now jailed Purkayastha and Chakraborty stand accused of offences under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which allows the government to lock away persons for years on spurious charges without a court hearing and/or providing any sort of meaningful evidence against them.

Since coming to power in 2014, Modi's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has repeatedly used the UAPA, which allows the state to circumvent constitutionally protected due process, and India's sweeping sedition laws to persecute government opponents.

Unsurprisingly, India's courts, which have repeatedly given their imprimatur to the Modi government's ever more brazen evisceration of democratic rights, has sanctioned the UAPA charges against Purkayastha and Chakraborty and ordered them held in police custody for at least seven days.

The authorities have alleged that *NewsClick* is being funded "from China," a deliberately provocative claim as the Indian government has identified China as its principal strategic threat and has formed a de facto military alliance with US imperialism to encircle China. Since 2020, Beijing and New Delhi have been locked in a stand-off over their disputed border with each country forward deploying tens of thousands of troops, tanks, and warplanes.

The government—through the Delhi police, which are directly under the control of India's Home Ministry, and the Finance Ministry's Enforcement Directorate—has accused the website of peddling "Chinese propaganda" and "plot[ting] to disrupt the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India."

NewsClick is in the crosshairs of the far-right Modi government because it is one of the few prominent news websites that is stridently critical of its actions, including its

relentless promotion of communalism. *NewsClick* has also sought to expose the corrupt nexus between Modi and his close friend, the billionaire businessman Gautam Adani.

In the early morning hours of Tuesday, October 3, hundreds of police mounted a dragnet-style operation across India, raiding offices and residences in order to interrogate scores of journalists, historians and researchers. These individuals were targeted either because they had written articles for *NewsClick* or were otherwise associated with it.

According to the Press Trust of India, 88 locations in Delhi and seven in other states were raided.

The raids in New Delhi were mounted by the Delhi Police (DP) special cell on economic offences and the Indian government's Enforcement Directorate (ED), a police agency set up to investigate financial crimes such as money laundering.

The police reportedly interrogated the targeted individuals for an average of eight hours and seized their laptops, cell phones and other devices, including disk storage.

In a flagrant demonstration of the raids' true political motivations, the police demanded to know of those they interrogated whether they had covered the farmers' revolt of 2020-21, the anti-Muslim attacks fomented by the BJP in Delhi in February 2020, or the government's ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among those interrogated was the journalist and social activist Teesta Setalvad. At the instigation of India's highest court, Setalvad is already facing grave criminal charges of "fabricating evidence" for her dogged efforts to reveal the role the then Modi-led Gujarat state government and senior police officials played in the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom.

The authorities have sealed the offices of *NewsClick*. The website, which continues to post material, issued a statement following Tuesday's raid which pointed to the police's brazen violations of due process. "We have not been provided with a copy of the FIR (preliminary police report), or informed about the exact particulars of the offences with which we have been charged. Electronic devices were seized from the *NewsClick* premises and homes of employees, without any adherence to due process such as the provision of seizure memos, hash

values of the seized data, or even copies of the data. NewsClick's office has also been sealed in a blatant attempt at preventing us from continuing our reporting."

NewsClick has been hounded since 2021 on "money laundering" charges, purportedly for receiving foreign funds. Even after two years of so-called investigation, during which the authorities have scrutinized NewsClick's records, neither the DP nor ED have been able to file an official complaint against it in the courts.

The charge of NewsClick carrying "Chinese propaganda" comes after the *New York Times* (NYT) published a particularly foul anti-China, hit-piece article on August 5 that purported to unravel "financial networks [that] push Chinese talking points." From the *Times*' standpoint, such "talking points" include any criticism of US imperialism's all-sided strategic offensive and war preparations against China.

The *Times* article singled out an American IT specialist and businessman, Neville Roy Singham, who it claimed "is known as a socialist benefactor of far-left causes and works closely with the Chinese government." According to the article, Singham has "financed" NewsClick which has "sprinkled its coverage with Chinese government talking points."

This nasty, US intelligence agency-scripted "exposé" from America's so-called "newspaper of record" has provided the grist for the Modi government to intensify its persecution of NewsClick and bring charges against two of its most senior personnel under the UAPA.

The police are also trying to connect their case against the NewsClick editor-in-chief Purkayastha with another notorious UAPA frame-up case—known as the Bhima Koregaon case—in which a group of anti-government writers and social activists, labelled "urban Naxhalites" by the police and BJP, have been accused of inciting communal violence and colluding with the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist). In court documents police have reportedly pointed to the friendship between NewsClick's editor-in-chief and one of the accused in the Bhima Koregaon (or Elgar Parishad) case, civil rights activist Gautam Navlakha. It also has claimed Navlakha is a NewsClick shareholder and that "Chinese" funds were dispersed to him via NewsClick.

There has been widespread condemnation of the Modi government for its recourse to police-state tactics and against the NYT for its filthy role in facilitating Modi's assault on the press. Protesters picketed the *Times*' Manhattan office on Tuesday to draw attention to the witch-hunt against NewsClick and the *Times*' role in it.

There have also been protests involving hundreds of journalists and activists in New Delhi and Hyderabad in south India.

Fifteen Indian press organisations, including the Press Club of India, Digipub News India Foundation and the Indian Women's Press Corps, have written to the Chief Justice of India's Supreme Court urging him to intervene to protect

constitutionally guaranteed press freedoms. "Subjecting journalists," they wrote, "to a concentrated criminal process because the government disapproves of their coverage of national and international affairs is an attempt to chill the press by the threat of reprisal—the very ingredient you identified as a threat to freedom."

Throughout its nine-year rule, the Modi government has used repressive methods to muzzle journalists, political activists, and even foreign news organisations that have criticized its conduct.

One of the most prominent instances was the massive raid by Income Tax officials on the British broadcaster, the BBC, in February of this year. The BBC was targeted after it aired documentaries pointing to the central role Modi played, when Chief Minister of Gujarat, in instigating and facilitating the February 2002 massacre of at least 2,000 innocent Muslims.

Similarly, in July 2021, the same Indian tax authorities raided the offices of TV channel Bharat Samachar and Hindi-newspaper *Dainik Bhaskar* for "tax evasion." These organisations came under the government's scanner after they exposed some of the horrors that resulted from the government's criminal indifference to the COVID-19 pandemic, and drew attention to the government's routine spying on journalists, politicians and activists using the Israeli-origin Pegasus spy software.

Even the mainstream newsmagazine and website *Outlook* was forced to concede this week: "Over the last decade, countless Indian journalists have been targeted by probe agencies and many have been put behind bars. While the charges framed against them have been over alleged terror links or illegal funding and anti-national activities, these journalists are usually renowned for their detailed reportage, usually not much in favour of the government."

The Modi government's assault on the press has been especially egregious in Kashmir. There journalists are routinely arrested and charged with criminal offences for reporting anything inimical to the narrative of the Modi government. In October 2020, police sealed the Srinagar offices of the long-established *Kashmir Times*. At least five Kashmiri journalists are currently indefinitely detained under the UAPA—Asif Sultan, Fahad Shah, Sajad Gul, Manan Gulzar Dar, and Irfan Mehraj.



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