

Short description of what happened

Political campaigning in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu has hit a fever pitch as the state prepares for elections on April 6, 2021. The campaigns pose heightened threats to journalists in a state where members of the press have been subject to physical¹ assaults, arrests, and online harassment of both female² and male journalists³ in recent years, as documented by CPJ and local news outlets. Freelance journalist Sandhya Ravishankar has faced persistent attempts at intimidation and harassment since 2017, including death and rape threats, doxing, and a still-unsolved 2018 attempt to sabotage her motorbike. Despite her repeated complaints to the police, authorities have not made any arrests or taken legal action in those cases.

In a phone interview with CPJ, Ravishankar spoke about her experience covering ongoing election campaigns and other topics in the state, and why women journalists in Tamil Nadu rarely cover beats like politics or crime.

Full case study

What are the key concerns for press freedom in Tamil Nadu today?

There are a variety of concerns for the freedom of press. Many journalists have been attacked and grievously injured while doing their duty—assailants include the police and political party workers. A number of journalists have been killed for exposing corruption and illegal activities of politicians.

Women journalists, in particular, are being hounded and harassed online by political workers. There has been a chilling effect on the media from the ruling party in many instances. The largest cable distributor is the government, which effectively means that they are able to control and punish any television news channel that dares to air reports against the government of the day. It is almost literally a war zone for the press in Tamil Nadu.

Do you feel safe covering the political campaigns in the state?

Women journalists who cover the election campaigns are no stranger to harassment like groping and misbehavior. A lot of alcohol is distributed during election campaigns and this leads to women being targeted.

- 1 <https://cpj.org/2020/03/indian-reporter-m-karthi-attacked-threatened-in-ta/>
- 2 <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/kishore-swamy-arrested-chennai-after-multiple-women-journalists-complain-harassment-109794>
- 3 <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/why-tn-journalists-are-fighting-right-wing-attack-tamil-tv-media-129243>

Journalists also have to be very circumspect of what they report. In many districts where there are powerful leaders contesting, reporters are told not to be too “negative” about the chances of particular candidates. If journalists speak out openly about some candidates and put out a fair picture of what is going on, the journalists are attacked even while they are speaking on camera.

This once happened when former Chief Minister [Jayaram] Jayalalithaa was awaiting a verdict in a trial court in a disproportionate asset case. A large number of journalists were waiting outside her home in Chennai. A couple of journalists were reporting that she has been convicted, and a large number of her supporters attacked those journalists and their broadcast vans.

It is a very tricky situation on the ground. One has to be very circumspect and ensure that we don't hurt the perceived sentiments of the people in that area. It becomes very difficult, especially for television journalists, to do fair and accurate reporting from the ground. So, at times, we have to move away from the campaigning area to speak on camera about what is actually happening on the ground. In this sense, there is chilling effect, and one has to think once, twice, twenty times before reporting on facts in Tamil Nadu during election campaigns

What are the concerns specific to Tamil Nadu?

The concern specific to Tamil Nadu is the fact that we have cult leaders who are larger than life. This becomes hugely problematic in reporting the unbiased truth. These leaders are god-like. Their followers do not take to criticism, or even a critic, very kindly.

For example, investigative magazine Nakkeraan's office was ransacked by All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam activists. In another incident Times Now's crew was beaten up by supporters of opposition leader Muthuvel Karunanidhi Stalin outside his house. This is very common for followers of cult-like, larger-than-life leaders to take things into their own hands and indulge in violence.

How is it different from the rest of the country?

It is specific to Tamil Nadu because of the nature of politics in the state. It is an extremely vicious environment and very polarized. People are not open to any kind of criticism or accuracy in reporting. The journalists themselves are divided. Now the same phenomenon has happened across India with the advent of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

However, in Tamil Nadu for really long, reporters are either seen as pro-AIADMK or pro-DMK. These are ridiculous notions created by the politicians themselves. It becomes very difficult to have that credibility or neutrality that a journalist is expected to have. You may be a neutral credible journalist but eventually you are boxed into a stereotype in a very quick and easy manner.

What are the concerns of women journalists during the elections?

There are very few women who cover politics. Politics is a very difficult beat to cover in Tamil Nadu. There is a very misogynistic environment at play both within the newsrooms in Tamil Nadu and outside the newsroom in the field — right from being groped to being ill-treated when you go out to politicians and government officials not treating women journalists on par with other journalists. All these are a huge problem.

Apart from these, there is a problem of families not allowing the daughters to go out beyond a certain point of time. Women end up choosing roles in journalism that might be second choice otherwise. Of late, there has been rising intolerance towards women journalists, especially on social media forums where they have been attacked, abused, and targeted in a very vile manner. They have been called prostitutes. There are leaders like BJP's S.Ve. Shekhar, who has said that women journalists and

anchors get to those positions only by sleeping with the bosses. It is a very nasty and cruel kind of atmosphere in which women work in. It is almost like a conflict zone for women journalists in Tamil Nadu.

Is surveillance an issue in Tamil Nadu?

The miners I had been writing about issued a press release in which they said that they have employed five detective agencies who were following me wherever I was going. CCTV footage from a cafe of me meeting a source was also made public on a blog. Surveillance is par for the course. Lots of journalists know that they are being surveilled.

How does the press situation in Tamil Nadu compare to the rest of India?

I would personally like to believe that Tamil Nadu is one of the last bastions of free thought and rationalism, and freedom of speech and expression in the country. We are increasingly seeing cases of freedom of speech and expression being curbed by the powers that be, in other states. In Tamil Nadu, it has not come down to that stage. I am afraid that it will come down to that stage soon and I would not like that to happen.

Tamil Nadu is very far removed from Delhi and our politics in the state are very, very different. It is a state that is one of the best across all economic and social indicators in the country. And a large part of it is because of an active press which has done its job over the decades. If that were to be curbed now, then I'm afraid that Tamil Nadu is not likely to top any of these indicators.

It is very important for a state and a country to have free speech and free press. In Tamil Nadu, Tamil-language journalists, Tamil publications, and news channels openly criticize the prime minister's policies which is not possible in many other states in the north part of the country. Tamil Nadu is unique in that fashion. We have been able to criticize the government because we had a fair amount of freedom to do this.

For this to be abrogated, it will really spell a death knell for freedom of speech in the country because Tamil Nadu is now one of the last bastions of free speech in India.

This case study was originally published by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

<https://cpj.org/2021/04/indian-journalist-sandhya-ravishankar-describes-war-zone-for-press-in-tamil-nadu-ahead-of-state-elections/>

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