**Why is India targeting writers during the coronavirus pandemic?**

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Journalists, intellectuals and dissidents are being threatened by Modi’s government

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‘The world is lulled into believing constitutional rights and freedoms thrive in India, when they are in fact under grave threat.’ Paramilitary soldier during the lockdown in Srinagar last month. Photograph: Farooq Khan/EPA

As a lethal virus scorches its way across continents, the leftwing Indian rights campaigner Gautam Navlakha has been reminding us of the words of Leonard Cohen, urging people to speak up for the right things: “There is a crack/a crack in everything, that’s how light gets in.” While many of us experience lockdown in varying degrees of constraint, Navlakha – who [cited](https://thewire.in/law/bhima-koregaon-navlakha-teltumbde) Cohen’s lyrics in a recent statement – faces actual incarceration as does another high-profile Indian, the eminent academic and Dalit intellectual Prof Anand Teltumbde. Meanwhile, Siddharth Varadarajan, the well-known journalist and a founder-editor of the respected investigative online portal [the Wire](https://thewire.in/),faces prosecution in an unrelated case. While locking down its vast population from coronavirus, why is India seeking to lock up dissident intellectuals and intimidate journalists?

The three men have been accused of outrages ranging from assassination plots to promoting “enmity, hatred or illwill among classes” — allegations that have been widely criticised as politically motivated. But their apparent common crime is one that underlies the harassment and intimidation of scores of other journalists, writers, academics and human rights campaigners in India. They have criticised the actions of the hardline Hindu nationalist dispensation that rules [India](https://www.theguardian.com/world/india) today, as well as the culture of divisive bigotry that it has fostered widely in civil society.

The last six years of Modi’s government have seen an alarming crackdown on campus dissidents as well as journalists and writers

Navlakha is a longstanding critic of state and army atrocities in the disputed region of Kashmir, which has faced a disgraceful [lockdown since August](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/23/kashmir-city-srinagar-india-lockdown-calls-protest-march) last year and continues to experience unconstitutional — and, in corona-ridden times, dangerous — limits on internet access. He is accused, along with respected figures like the poet Varavara Rao and trade unionist Sudha Bharadwaj, of [allegedly conspiring](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/india-arrests-activist-anand-teltumbde-2018-dalit-event-200414112452191.html) in a plot against Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2018. Teltumbde, related by marriage to India’s towering Dalit leader and constitution-drafter, Babasaheb Ambedkar, has been [remanded in custody](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-52279301) in the context of violence in the town of Bhima Koregain in 2018. Ironically, Teltumbde has written in the past about how the Indian state seeks to “discredit and eliminate individuals it deems a threat to its apparatus.”

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Varadarajan, whose platform the Wire has previously fallen foul of powerful and wealthy figures with strong connections to the government, faces a different set of charges. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, there have been strong moves in the Indian media and sections of the ruling dispensation to pin blame for the spread of the virus on Muslim communities. Yogi Adityanath, a fundamentalist Hindu cleric turned politician with a good line in inflammatory speech, is the chief minister of India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, where tensions have been rising. Although the Wire misattributed a quote to him on its website, the erratum was quickly corrected and acknowledged.

Nonetheless, Varadarajan now stands accused of a fantastical range of crimes, including disobeying an order of a public servant and creating or promoting enmity between classes. The real problem may be that the Wire [reported correctly](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/up-chief-minister-adityanath-shifts-ram-idol-amid-lockdown/article31160225.ece) that Adityanath had attended a Hindu religious gathering after the national lockdown was declared on 24 March. This report came even as public feelings have been whipped up against Muslims because Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim organisation, held an event prior to the lockdown where many attendees did get infected. The Wire has also noted that “believers” in more than one religious community have been late in adopting precautions against large gatherings.

For a long time now, India has benefited from the title of world’s largest democracy (meaning, in fact, the most populous democratic state). That grand moniker continues to lull the world into believing constitutional rights and freedoms thrive in that nation, when they are in fact under grave threat. Although the misuse of state powers to intimidate principled journalists and of religious divides to garner votes has occurred under other governments, including those of the current Congress opposition, there is little doubt that the last six years of Modi’s government have seen an alarming crackdown on campus dissidents as well as journalists and writers.

[Fourteen journalists](https://cpj.org/data/killed/asia/india/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc_fips%5B%5D=IN&start_year=1992&end_year=2020&group_by=location) have been killed in India since Modi’s election in 2014. (In the 10 preceding years when the opposition was in power, 17 journalists were killed.) Journalists routinely face intimidation, legal proceedings and restrictions on accessing information. Female reporters deal with constant online harassment, including threats of sexual violence. Three prominent rationalists who have challenged Hindu orthodoxy have been murdered in recent years. A widely condemned [2019 Citizenship Amendment Act](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/18/india-clamps-down-against-citizenship-law-protests) promises fast-track citizenship to select religious minorities claiming asylum from neighbouring countries, conspicuously discriminating against Muslims.