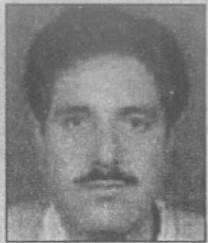


Mass Media - Freed



By Iftikhar Gilani

It is not enough for the officials and politicians to just condemn these killings and incidents. They must bring those responsible for such attacks to justice

WITHIN a span of a month, South Asia lost two of its most prolific investigative journalists: Jyotirmoy Dey in Mumbai and Syed Saleem Shahzad in Pakistan. At the time of their deaths, they were working on stories of great importance: J Dey had exposed Mumbai's powerful oil mafia and money-launderers and Shahzad had revealed how al Qaeda militants had infiltrated the Pakistan Navy. Between 1992 and 2010, 27 journalists were killed in India, while, according to Committee to Protect Journalists (CJP), Shahzad was the 37th journalist murdered in Pakistan since 1992.

Both cases made headlines, because both of them worked for leading publications and were operating from the metros. But, one shudders at the fate of journalists working in state capitals, small towns and conflict regions who are wronged by the arms of the government, militant groups and the mafia. Few years ago a reporter with Amar Ujala miraculously escaped from an Uttar Pradesh Police net, when they allegedly tried to stage his encounter. More recently, the Jammu and Kashmir Police filed an FIR against a London-based Kashmiri journalist, Nayeema Ahmad Mahjoor, for her views

# Journalists' lives in danger in Pakistan and India

on Facebook, accusing her of 'inciting violence on Facebook'. On June 6, an unidentified person fired a bullet at Muhammad Afzal Khan, 55, near the Lal Chowk area in Srinagar. The police had said that Mehjoor had blamed the police for the killing. But, the correct reading of her message on Facebook shows that she had only quoted some published media reports.

The violent events in Held Kashmir in the last summer and the Amarnath land row agitation in 2008 also highlighted how vulnerable the journalists working in Srinagar are. Torn between the guns of security forces, militants and renegades (pro-government militants), the press continues to remain a soft target. A small community of not more than 200 journalists (out of which 84 reporters are accredited with the Department of Information) a dozen have so far lost their lives since the onset of militancy in 1990. More, worrying is that the community is suffering in isolation, with little consolation from either the national or international fraternity, barring on a few occasions. Perhaps the first enforced disappearance that came to light in Held Kashmir was that of a journalist. Mohamad Sidiq Sholuri, senior calligrapher with an Urdu fortnightly magazine *Takbeer*, left his home for office in 1989, but never reached anywhere.

While militants have issued threats, kidnapped journalists and even banned circulation of newspapers in the past, the government has not lagged far behind. In 1990, then governor Jagmohan ordered the arrest of a young journalist Surinder Singh Oberoi and the closure of three newspapers. Their printing presses were sealed and cases were registered against them under the infamous Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act. At present, there are two journalists in prison, one held under the

Official Secrets Act, who has been under detention since 2004 and that too without trial. Eminent Kashmiri journalist Shujaat Bukhari was kidnapped last year by unidentified gunmen. He managed to escape.

Photojournalist Muhammad Maqbool Khokar (better known as Maqbool Sahil) was released from the notorious Kotbalwal Jail in Jammu after three-and-half years without trial. Many requests by the Jammu and Kashmir High Court and the National Human Rights Commission for his release were ignored. The high court twice urged the authorities to drop charges



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against him, but no decision was taken on it. Unfortunately, this case did not evoke the sympathy of the journalist community in Delhi.

Even in the cases where militants are involved, the police have shown little spine in investigating cases of killing of journalists. Like the 1991 murder of *Al-Safa* editor Mohamad Shaban Wakil, a long list of such killings and attacks have still remained a mystery. In 1992, another calligrapher Ghulam Mohammad Mahajan was dragged out of his residence in old Srinagar and killed in cold blood along with his younger brother in full public gaze.

The thrashing by the security forces and the militant groups are not the only deterrents to

do good journalism in Held Kashmir. The leader of a major political party once summoned the editor of an Urdu daily and made him to walk barefoot in the market for publishing reports inimical to his political interests. In another case, two political parties stormed the office of a respected weekly *Chattan* on similar grounds.

A decade ago, when the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) split, the warring factions had warned the press of dire consequences if they carried reports of the rival group. Not knowing how to respond to the situation, the Indian-held Kashmir press stopped work

one of its commanders. Two years later, when the renegade militia took over, they also issued a death warrant against him for writing against their leader Kuka Parrey. Fortunately, he survived all these threats.

In India-held Kashmir, every scribe has a story to tell. Yusuf Jameel, a respected journalist who was working with BBC and Reuters, had several narrow escapes. The parcel bomb that claimed the life of another journalist, was meant for him. His office was attacked with grenades. Threat was a permanent feature of his life. He was awarded the International Press Freedom Award by the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

In 2003, Ahmad Ali Fayaz, the Srinagar bureau chief of *The Daily Excelsior*, received a threatening phone call from a senior officer of the Border Security Force, who identified himself as Deputy Inspector General Desraj. The officer threatened to shoot Fayaz.

None of it has stopped as yet, not fully. Few years ago, a young reporter survived an attack while sitting in his office. The doctors said that it was a miracle that he was now leading a normal life. Bullets went through his nose but missed the nervous system. The last victim so far has been Parvaz Sultan, the editor of a local news agency, who was gunned down in his office, apparently for reporting a feud between two factions of a militant group.

Bukhari recalls the trauma when he, along with a group of journalists, was taken hostage in south Kashmir by a pro-government militant outfit called Ikhwan. "I was among the five who were locked up in a room, and the self-styled commander was issuing direction in our presence that he wanted the five lives to be converted into lifeless bodies by the next day," he recalls. They

... since politicians aligned with Karzai, maintain... er the status of forces agreement res... in Kabul on Saturday... Clear... are widening even as negoti...

the withdrawal of foreign forces.”  
Meanwhile, Karzai has already  
moves to hold a loya jirga (grand  
soon after Eid. As things stand, the  
head of

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were, however, released after a lot of back-room activity by their colleagues in Srinagar.

The government has its own ways to muzzle the press. Jammu and Kashmir does not have a vibrant private sector to support the media. Therefore, most of the newspapers owe their existence to official advertisements. Moreover, taking queue from militants, who used both threats and the lure of money to newspapers to fall in line, government and intelligence agencies have also got trapped in the same vice. In a research paper, the editor of *Kashmir Observer* Sajjad Haider argued that the absence of a healthy media industry in Held Kashmir was a challenge in itself for the media. “Just emerging from the throes of nearly two decades of conflict situation, the media, because of this reason, has few accepted ethical standards,” he wrote.

The travails faced by the press in Held Kashmir are a grim reminder that if they can do it with me, they can do it with you tomorrow. These cases should be a wake-up call for all journalists and concerned citizens. It is not enough for the officials and politicians to just condemn these killings and incidents. They must bring those responsible for such attacks to justice and recognise the important role journalists perform in society. COURTESY TEHELKA

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