

General Studies-2; Topic: Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability

Issue Plaguing Press in India

1) Introduction

- The one who brings unwelcome news holds a losing office, Shakespeare had written it in his 16th century play Henry IV.
- The murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh in Bengaluru once again raises questions on freedom of press in our country.
- The violation of human rights and free speech has come under the spotlight.
- US Embassy in India Condemns Murder of Gauri Lankesh. This is the first time in several years that the US embassy has reacted to an incident in which an individual has been targeted.
- As a public good, the news media has an important role in our democracy.

2) Present Issues

- Corporate and political power has overwhelmed large sections of the media, both print and visual
- **Corporate Interest**
 - a. They have large financial stakes in either print or visual media.
 - b. They have full ownership of both categories in innumerable cases.
 - c. Owners having themselves the editorial roles.
 - d. News media organisations diversifying into non-media businesses.
- Overemphasis on TRPs because they determine advertising revenue
- The recent elections in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab have innumerable documented cases by the Election Commission (EC) of paid news.
- The Press Council of India's report on "Safety of Journalists" states that 80 journalists have been killed in India since 1990, with conviction in only one case so far.
- Decline in autonomy of editors/journalists
- Press Council of India (PCI) lacks regulatory powers.
- In India, there are no statutory rights accorded to journalists to protect their sources which are an important element to unearth the truth.
- Corruption – Paid news, advertorials and fake news.
- Intimidation from the state like in the case of NDTV shutdown for reporting during Pathankot attack, weak whistle-blower protection act, defamation suits, etc. have restricted the freedom of press.
- Competition for instant and quick news and reporting without first checking the facts. For example: Reporting of GPS nano-chips in new 500 and 2000 notes.

3) Press freedom rankings

- India slipped three places in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders at 136 out of 180 countries.
- India was ranked just three places above Pakistan and one notch below violence-torn Palestine.
- **Important findings**
 - a. The report cites the rise of Hindu nationalism as a reason for the drop.
 - b. Self-censorship is growing in the mainstream media
 - c. Journalists were increasingly targets of online smear campaigns and threats.

- d. In the absence of any “protective mechanism, coverage of sensitive regions continued to be “very difficult”.

4) Way Forward

- Senior print and television journalists must speak, write and expose more clearly the issues plaguing the Press in India.
- Ownership restrictions on holdings have to be legislated.
- Implementing the recommendations of TRAI with regard to media ownership and investment disclosure norms would help in maintaining transparency required for the news media sector.
- Legislation must create mandatory Chinese walls between managerial and editorial departments.
- Contracts and employment conditions for journalists must meet international labour standards
- Employees must have the right without fear of retribution, to refuse any form of work that infringes upon their professional codes or conscience’.
- Create ‘genuinely independent and transparent systems for assessing circulation and ratings of media’.
- Disclosure, in bold letters, of paid-for news or any reporting at the end of each print article or visual programme.
- Need for political will in improving India's ranking on the Press Freedom Index as they do towards the World Bank's Doing Business Rankings.

5) Conclusion

- In the interest of democracy it is essential that the exchange of ideas take place in an uninhibited manner where all citizens can access information free of bias and prejudice.

