



Press Freedom in India: Challenges and Strategies

This editorial is based on the article [‘Questions on press freedom’](#) which was published in The Hindu Business Line on 21/5/2024. The article discusses India's recent ranking in the World Press Freedom Index which is alarming, especially considering its status as the world's largest democracy.

For Prelims: [World Press Freedom Index](#), [Article 19\(1\)\(a\)](#), [section 124A](#), [Reporters Without Border](#), [Freedom of the press](#), [Freedom of speech and expression](#), [Press Council of India](#), [Ministry of Information and Broadcasting](#), [News Broadcasters Association \(NBA\)](#), [Press freedom in India](#), [Whistleblowers Protection Act, 2014](#), [Asia-Pacific region](#).

For Mains: Significance of free press for Indian democracy, measures to ensure free press in India.

In a democratic country like India, the press plays a pivotal role in **amplifying the voices of the populace** and shedding light on government actions, serving as a **crucial watchdog**, tasked with scrutinising the workings of the government and bringing attention to any **perceived injustices or shortcomings** done by any state actors. However, the recently released **World Press Freedom Index** presents a concerning picture for India.

India's ranking in the recently released **World Press Freedom Index -159th** out of 180, is alarming, especially considering its status as the world's largest democracy. While there was a slight improvement in rank, it's not due to progress but rather due to declines in press freedom in other countries.

The challenge to [Freedom of Press in India](#) includes the **concentration of media** in the hands of a few individuals or entities (corporate and political hijacking of media institutions) and the ownership of media can lead to a **lack of diversity** in viewpoints and a **potential dominance of specific narratives** or agendas and can **limit the plurality of voices**, thereby hindering the ability of journalists to freely report.

What is the World Press Freedom Index (WPF)?

▪ **Introduction:**

- It is a comprehensive assessment of the level of press freedom in countries around the world, compiled annually by [Reporters Sans Frontiers \(RSF\)](#) since **2002**.

▪ **Objective:**

- It aims to gauge the extent to which journalists, media organisations, and citizens can freely exercise their rights to gather, report, and access information, while also considering the efforts made by authorities to uphold this freedom.
- The index focuses specifically on press freedom and **does not evaluate the quality of journalism** or broader human rights issues within the countries it assesses.

▪ **Methodology:**

- Its methodology, **updated in 2021**, centres on defining press freedom as the ability of journalists, both individually and collectively, to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest.
- It emphasises independence from **political, economic, legal, and social influences**, as well as ensuring the safety of journalists, both physically and mentally.
- **Key Indicators:** To assess press freedom, the index utilises five key indicators:
 - Political context
 - Legal framework
 - Economic context
 - Socio-cultural environment
 - Safety

What are the Key Highlights of the World Press Freedom Index (WPFI) 2024?

- **Global Trends:**
 - Press freedom remains relatively robust in European Union countries, notably with the recent implementation of the **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)**.
 - Conversely, the **Maghreb and Middle East regions** face severe government-imposed press restrictions.
- **Comparative Analysis on a Global Scale:**
 - Scandinavian countries like **Norway, Denmark, and Sweden** lead the rankings, while Eritrea, Syria, and Afghanistan are ranked at the bottom.
 - Within the BRICS nations, **Brazil and South Africa rank higher than India**, with China and Russia ranking lower. In South Asia, India ranks lower than all countries except Bangladesh.
- **India's Position in Press Freedom Rankings:**
 - India's 2024 ranking at 159th, slightly better than 2023's 161st, places it alongside countries such as the occupied Palestinian territories, UAE, Turkey, and Russia, reflecting worrying levels of press freedom.
- **India's Response:** India rejected this report on the following grounds:
 - **Reasonable Restriction:** Freedom of speech and expression (**Article 19(1)**), **encompassing freedom of press**, can be curtailed on certain grounds outlined under **Article 19(2)** - in the interest of **sovereignty, security, friendly relations, public order, decency, morality, contempt of court, defamation**, or incitement to an offence.
 - **Dubious Methodology:** This reluctance is attributed to several factors, including the **small sample size**, inadequate consideration of **democratic principles**, and the methodology perceived as dubious and lacking transparency.

INDEX 2024

159 / 180

Score : 31.28

INDEX 2023

161 / 180

Score : 36.62

POLITICAL INDICATOR **159**
21.58

ECONOMIC INDICATOR **157**
31.67

LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR **143**
40.87

SOCIAL INDICATOR **156**
33.33

SECURITY INDICATOR **162**
28.97

POLITICAL INDICATOR **169**
33.65

ECONOMIC INDICATOR **155**
34.15

LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR **144**
42.92

SOCIAL INDICATOR **143**
45.27

SECURITY INDICATOR **172**
27.12

What is the Significance of Free and Unrestricted Media in Democracy?

▪ Essential in a Democratic Framework and Civic Awareness:

- The liberty of the press constitutes a cornerstone of democratic societies such as India, as it fosters the reinforcement of democratic principles and instigates engagement with the three pillars of democracy.
- An example is the case of **Romesh Thapar v. State of Madras (1950)**, in this case, the Supreme Court of India affirmed the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression, including the **freedom of the press**, as guaranteed by the Indian Constitution.

- **Enhancing a Nation's Resilience:**
 - Through unbiased reporting and analysis, media outlets facilitate informed decision-making among citizens, ensuring the integrity of the democratic process by making them aware of their **rights and responsibilities**.
 - For example, during elections, media outlets play a pivotal role in disseminating information about political parties, candidates, and their policies to the electorate.
- **Safeguard against Governmental Overreach:**
 - A free and independent press serves as a vital check on the actions of governments and administrative bodies.
 - The **RTI Act, enacted in 2005**, grants citizens the right to access information held by public authorities, thus promoting transparency and accountability in governance.
- **Advocating against Societal Injustices:**
 - It bears the responsibility of raising awareness and advocating against societal wrongs and injustices.
 - Media coverage of the **Nirbhaya case in 2012**, galvanised public discourse and prompted discussions on crucial issues such as women's safety, law enforcement reforms, and the importance of gender sensitisation.
- **Vigilant Oversight and Championing Public Interests:**
 - Across national, regional, and local levels, the media functions as the voice, advocate, and watchdog of the public, while also serving as an educator, entertainer, and contemporary chronicler.
 - For instance, in uncovering instances of **fraud or corruption**, the media plays a pivotal role in scrutinising government policies and expenditures, contributing to **transparent governance** through unbiased reporting.

What are the Various Obstacles Hindering the Freedom of Press in India?

- **Physical Threats and Violence against Journalists:** Particularly when they report on sensitive issues like **corruption or communal tensions**, tragically, some journalists have paid the ultimate price, facing attacks or even losing their lives while fulfilling their professional duties.
 - Laws such as **section 124A** of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises sedition with potential life imprisonment, further endanger press freedom.
- **Corporate and Political Influence:** The overwhelming influence of **corporate and political entities** on large sections of the media, both print and visual, compromises journalistic independence and serves **vested interests**, thereby undermining the freedom of the press.
- **Fake News and Hate Speech:** Media practices such as **paid news, advertorials**, and the proliferation of fake news undermine the credibility of the media and erode its ability to report impartially.
 - **Hate speech** targeting journalists is frequently disseminated and amplified on social networks, posing a direct threat to their safety and well-being.
 - For instance, in **Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala (1986)** SC held that the right to speak includes the right to be silent or to utter no words.
- **Self-Censorship and Ethical Challenges:** The practice is pervasive within the media fraternity, influenced by the **fear of consequences** or pressure from different sources and this careful attitude results in **avoiding certain subjects** or taking a less outspoken position on controversial issues.
 - Prevalent ethical challenges revolve around the **balance** between **reporting the truth and navigating censorship** or government-imposed restrictions.
 - Journalists may find themselves torn between their duty to provide accurate, comprehensive information to the public and the risk of facing censorship, legal repercussions, or **personal harm** for reporting on sensitive topics or dissenting viewpoints.
- **Government Interference:** Government involvement makes the situation more complex, as it can undermine the **editorial independence** of media organisations, by controlling **advertising budgets**, authorities can either favour media that aligns with their views or **punish those that express dissent**, thus shaping the media's portrayal of events.

What are the Various Bodies Associated with Press Freedom in India?

- **Regulatory Bodies:**

- **Press Council of India (PCI):** Established under the [Press Council Act of 1978](#), the Press Council of India serves as a **watchdog** to uphold and promote press freedom and **ethical standards** in journalism.
- Ministry of Information and Broadcasting: This governmental body is tasked with creating policies and guidelines for the media sector in India.
- **News Broadcasters Association (NBA):** The NBA is a **self-regulatory organisation** representing private television news broadcasters in India. It sets and enforces ethical standards for television news channels.
- **Bodies Ensuring Press Freedom:**
 - **Editors Guild of India:** Comprising editors from prominent newspapers and news magazines, it defends press freedom and addresses journalists' rights and responsibilities.
 - **Legal System:** India's judiciary, including the Supreme Court, plays a vital role in safeguarding press freedom and courts have the authority to address press freedom violations, protect journalists, and interpret media-related laws.
 - **International Organisations:** Global entities like **Reporters Without Borders (RSF)** and the **Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)** monitor press freedom in India and highlight violations on the international stage.

What Strategies Can Be Adopted to Revamp Press Freedom in India?

- **Implementing Committee's Recommendations:**
 - **Justice J.S. Verma Committee (2012), the Press Council of India, and the National Human Rights Commission** have recommended adopting legal and ethics training for journalists, fostering transparency and accountability within media institutions, and ensuring the protection of constitutional guarantees of press freedom via legal measures and international cooperation.
- **Strong Legal Framework:**
 - India has a robust legal framework in the form of [Article 19\(1\)\(a\)](#) of the Constitution, which guarantees **freedom of speech and expression**.
 - However, there is a need to strengthen laws and regulations to protect journalists from harassment, intimidation, and violence. **In 2017**, the Supreme Court upheld the importance of free speech and the press, stating that freedom of speech and expression is the "**quintessential instrument**" to attain truth.
- **Independent Media Regulatory Bodies:**
 - Establishing **independent and autonomous regulatory bodies** to oversee the functioning of the media can help ensure fair and unbiased reporting.
 - **Ensuring transparent appointment** processes for their members, providing adequate resources and funding, and **fostering public trust** in their ability to regulate the media impartially.
- **Protection for Whistleblowers and Journalists:**
 - Enacting laws and mechanisms to protect whistleblowers and journalists who expose wrongdoings or report on sensitive issues can encourage fearless reporting.
 - For example, the [Whistleblowers Protection Act, of 2014](#), provides a legal framework to protect whistleblowers in the public sector.
- **Addressing Online Threats and Fake News:**
 - With the increasing use of digital media, it is essential to address online threats such as **cyber harassment, trolling, and misinformation** campaigns targeting journalists.
 - In 2022, the [News Broadcasters & Digital Association \(NBDA\)](#) launched a campaign to combat online harassment and abuse of journalists, particularly women journalists and fake news.
- **Media Literacy and Training:**
 - Media literacy and ethics training programme for journalists to tackle ethical dissonance in journalism, promoting transparency and accountability within media organisations, and safeguarding constitutional guarantees of press freedom through legal protections.
- **International Cooperation:**
 - Collaborating with international organisations and forums can help promote best practices, share experiences, and leverage global support for press freedom in India.
 - India is a member of the **International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC)**, a UNESCO initiative that supports media development and

freedom of expression worldwide.

Conclusion

The endeavour to uphold press freedom in India is multifaceted and requires collaborative action, recommendations from committees such as the **Justice J.S. Verma Committee (2012)**, the **Press Council of India**, and the **National Human Rights Commission** emphasise the importance of enhancing media literacy, strengthening ethics training for journalists, promoting transparency and accountability within media organisations.

Drishti Mains Question:

Examine the primary obstacles confronting press freedom in India and propose strategies for safeguarding and advancing a free and autonomous press within the nation.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q. Right to Privacy is protected as an intrinsic part of Right to Life and Personal Liberty. Which of the following in the Constitution of India correctly and appropriately imply the above statement? (2018)

- (a) Article 14 and the provisions under the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution.
- (b) Article 17 and the Directive Principles of State Policy in Part IV.
- (c) Article 21 and the freedoms guaranteed in Part III.
- (d) Article 24 and the provisions under the 44th Amendment to the Constitution.

Ans: (c)

Mains:

Q. What do you understand by the concept of “freedom of speech and expression”? Does it cover hate speech also? Why do films in India stand on a slightly different plane from other forms of expression? Discuss. (2014)