

Assam is the most dangerous place for journalists

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India remains a dangerous country for working journalists, but Assam can claim to be more unsafe for the media fraternity. The country with over a billion population records the killing of 27 journalists in last 20 years. Assam (with nearly three crore population) shares highest number of incidents of journalists' murder in all these years. The trouble-torn State lost over 20 editor-journalist-correspondents in dreadful conditions during last two decades and shockingly no conviction has been made in any case. The broad daylight killing of Mumbai *Mid-Day* journalist J. Day on June 11, 2011 in the city's suburb by the miscreants has once again raised the question of safety of working journalists in the country. If the senior crime reporter was gunned down by suspected elements of the Mumbai underworld, most of the Assam-based journalists were targeted by the militants.

Committee to Protect Journalists, an international media rights body, has recently disclosed that around the world 864 working journalists have been killed in different incidents since 1992. Among them 547 journalists were killed with complete impunity. The New York based media rights body also reveals that India is one of the 13 risky countries where journalists are murdered on a recurring basis and governments are unable (or unwilling) to prosecute the killers. Other nations, where journalists are targeted regularly for deaths and governments fail to solve the crimes include Iraq, Somalia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Colombia, Afghanistan, Nepal, Mexico, Russia, Pakistan, Bangladesh

and Brazil. The slaughtering of mediapersons started with Punarmal Agarwala, a local correspondent of *The Assam Tribune* in Nagaon by the militants belonging to the banned United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in 1987.

Then the militants targeted a veteran freedom fighter-turned journalist Kamala Saikia in 1991.

The killing spree of journalist-correspondents continued as the timber mafia murdered Pabitra Narayan (correspondent of *The Northeast Times*) at Sonari in 1995. The same year witnessed the slaughtering of Dipak Swargiary in Goreswar by the miscreants. It was followed by the sensational murder of Parag Kumar Das, a human rights activist cum journalist in Guwahati on May 17, 1996. The killing of Parag, who was executive editor of *Asomiya Pratidin*, a largely circulated Assamese daily from Guwahati, by the surrendered ULFA militants prompted huge public outcries against the authority, as Parag used to write series of articles criticising the Central Union Government for its 'undemocratic and exploiting' attitude towards Assam and the Northeast. The same year witnessed the murder of a young reporter Manik Deuri of *Pahari Doot* at Diphu by the suspected Bodo militants. Similarly, unidentified gunmen killed Panja Ali at Kokrajhar in 1997. Nagaon-based local journalist Nurul Haq was murdered in 1998.

The ULFA militants again killed a senior correspondent named Ratneswar Sarma Shastri at Barpeta in 1999. Two local correspondents in western Assam (Dinesh Brahma and Indramohan Hakasam) were assassinated in 2003. Timber mafia

gunned down Prahlad Gowala at Golaghat in 2006, who used to report for *Asomiya Khabar*. The year 2007 witnessed the killing of Bodosa Narzary (local TV journalist) from Kokrajhar. Next year Mohammad Muslemuddin (correspondent of *Asomiya Pratidin*) from Hojai and Jagajit Saikia (correspondent of *Amar Asom*) from Kokrajhar were gunned down by miscreants. The Guwahati based editor of *Aji*, Anil Majumdar was shot dead by unidentified gunmen on March 24, 2009. The last incident of killing of journalists in Assam took place on September 4, 2010 at Nagaon. A freelance journalist of Nagaon, Bimala Prasad Talukder was killed by miscreants in his home town Hojai. Some more names, including Alfarid Shazad, Jiten Chutiya, Jogesh Uzir, Girija Das, Monikan Das, Ranbir Roy and Kanak Raj Medhi, were added to the list of unfortunates. But surprisingly enough, not a single perpetrator of all these killings has been punished till date. In fact, working in insurgency-stricken Assam, which publishes nearly 25 morning daily newspapers and supports 6 local satellite news channels is increasingly becoming dangerous for working journalists.

The ongoing insurgency, where over 15 armed outfits have been fighting New Delhi for various demands paves way for tremendous threats to the journalists (most of them are out of insurance cover) not only from the insurgents but also from the surrendered militants and the anti-insurgent security agencies. A huge share in the national list of the victims from Assam only vindicates the worst scenario for the sentinels of the society.