

Justus Liebig University of Giessen

Department of English

Political Healing

Prof. Dr. Margareta Olson

Summer Semester 2025

## **Learning Portfolio for ‘Political Healing’**

### **Censorship, Oppression and Narrative Control in Contemporary India**

Sarah Saju Kallungal

Date of submission: 16 September 2025

**Table of Contents:**

1. Introduction	1
2. Dimensions of Censorship in India	3
2.1. Social Media and News Outlets	3
2.2. Education and Curriculum	7
2.3. Entertainment Media	11
3. Hope in Protests	16
4. Conclusion	20

Works Cited

## 1. Introduction

When I attended the seminar on Political Healing, there were two reasons for it. Firstly, I had truly enjoyed Prof. Olson's previous seminar on Imag[en]ing Migration and secondly, I could feel myself getting affected by things around me and felt completely helpless that I could not do anything about it. A sort of despair had started developing in my mindset which I believe came about due to growing awareness. I hoped that the session would give me tools to manage these feelings better.

As a child I was very attentive to political events across the globe as my father was an avid reader. Every morning, he and I would pore over the newspaper to see the latest updates. Later in the afternoon once he got home from work, he and mom would watch the news on the television and then proceed to discuss their viewpoints. However, when I had to leave home for my higher studies, this habit got benched. I didn't feel like diving into what was happening around the world. I knew it would affect me, and I felt I had enough problems to deal with.

Even when I started working, I decided not to actively read the news. I would watch talk shows that would make fun of political issues, but I never sat to read or watch the news. When I moved to Germany, there was a slight shift. I met people here who asked me questions regarding political situation in India, who discussed global events in detail and who were actively trying to do something about issues rather than accept them for what they are. I participated in my first demonstration here in Germany and it was a unique experience for me.

All of this culminated in me not only having better awareness but also more anxiety. Even when we were asked to write about a political issue that is affecting us, I was at a loss – where do I start? I wanted to write about something closer to home even though global events were just as impactful on me. So, I decided to write about the North vs South India debate regarding language that had been coming up on my social media feed often. However, I needed more information, so I decided to research and that led me down another path.

What began as an attempt to understand the language issue made me delve deeper into what the ruling party was doing as an attempt to get total control over a country as diverse as India by disrupting the feeling of unity and escalate communal differences. India can be divided generally into 3 parts – North, South and Northeast. Within these three parts there are even further subdivisions of state based on language and culture. India as a whole is Hindu dominant, however in the South and Northeast, one can find strong Christian and Muslim communities

as well. I belong to the South and from a Christian community, which is why both the language issue and the communal issue affect me.

Originally my plan was to explore how the ruling party (BJP) was attempting to enforce Hindi as a language to learn in schools in the south. This has been attempted many times before, not just by the BJP but also the Congress, in 1937, in 1946 and 1965.

“The biggest turning point came in 1965 when the Union government attempted to replace English with Hindi as the sole official language. Tamil Nadu erupted in flames. Students led agitations, and the movement turned violent. Several students died in police firing, while others set themselves on fire in protest. The backlash was so fierce that Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri was forced to step in and declare English an “associate official language” alongside Hindi.”(Hussain 2025).



In 1963, the protests gained momentum following the arrest of DMK founder C.N. Annadurai on November 16 in Madras. He was booked under the Prevention of Insult to National Honour Act for “conspiring to burn Part XVII of the Constitution of India as a mark of protest against the introduction of Hindi”, and was released after a few months. | Photo Credit: The Hindu Archives

It was solely due to the protest by one state in India that the 3-language policy (Hindi, English, Local Language) could not be enforced in the country. Tamil Nadu refused the imposition of Hindi. This did not mean they did not allow people to learn Hindi. In fact, there were numerous Hindi Language Centres in the state where people could go to learn it. “For Tamil Nadu, the issue has not been about learning Hindi - it has been about the right to choose whether or not to learn it”(Hussain 2025). Their schools continued with teaching only Tamil and English and the state’s current growth charts clearly show that them giving up Hindi doesn’t seem to have any negative results on their development and governance.

The National Educational Policy of 2020 brought back the 3-language policy but revamped it into this model – English, Local Language and One other Indian Language. They did this after the initial draft that stated Hindi as the third language created backlash again. This time also, the Tamil Nadu government has staunchly refused to administer this policy in their state and insists they will stick with their 2-language policy.

However, this time their defiance was met with severe consequences, and this is what I felt was more alarming. The 3-Language Policy was not enforced, but several steps were taken which seems to be a means to control the narrative of how dissenters are portrayed in popular media and even in educational materials – thereby weakening the power of their defiance.

I decided to explore this aspect further – how the ruling party silences dissenting voices and how they are force feeding a story in their favour through the means of selective censorship, withholding of state funds and control over the narrative. In many ways history is being rewritten in their favour, and for me that is a powerful concern that needs to be addressed, or else a whole generation is going to grow up believing the BJP version of history. The government is forcing their communal views on to the public and creating an atmosphere of fear, religious intolerance and hatred.

However, there are many aspects to this concern of authoritarian control by the ruling party and it being a vast area of research, I wanted to explore how the autocratic government uses selective censorship to fuel feelings of otherness, creates division and suppresses voices of dissent for the purpose of this paper.

## **2. Dimensions of Censorship in India**

I decided to focus on three categories in which I felt censorship has been active in India and I will not be focusing on South India alone but on how any dissenter is being silenced through these means. These are News and Social Media, Education and Curriculum, and Entertainment Media. I plan to showcase a few examples under each category and identify recent changes made by the regulatory bodies to enforce them. I would then move on to the movements of resistance and counter voices that have been emerging because of these acts of suppression – which I believe aligns with the major points discussed in this lecture.

### **2.1 Social Media and News Outlets**

The News Media are supposed to play the role of independent watchdogs in the democratic system. However, nowadays we see them reprising their role and the government slowly

becoming the ‘gatekeeper’ of all news being shared. This has become a significant tool for the BJP to spread news in their favour and avoid any news that can harm them.

One of the tactics they adopted was the “quiet purge of digital content. News stories critical of the government are being erased – scrubbed from websites, replaced with 404 errors or removed after veiled legal threats. Veteran journalist and author Ruben Banerjee calls it ‘404 journalism’” (Zaffar 2025). The story that used to exist is just not there anymore

One can argue that in the digital age, nothing posted online is truly gone, however these steps are taken to create a long-term impact. It is aimed at weakening the journalists mentally and psychologically, to show them no matter what they write they have no power -as it can go in an instant. It is a warning to them – to let them know they are under scrutiny.

The 2022 arrest of the Kashmiri PhD scholar Abdul Aala Fazili for an article he wrote in 2011 is a notable example that shows how following his arrest media houses and their contributors have grown more wary. Several authors and scholars started to request takedowns of old pieces, afraid that the government would come after them. ““What’s worrying,” said Banerjee, “is that many media organisations don’t wait for official orders. They self-censor, just to avoid displeasing the powers that be.”” (Zaffar 2025). Reading about how the news media are now willingly succumbing to the government without protest reminded me of Snyder’s text ‘On Tyranny’ where he states, “individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want and then offer themselves without being asked” (2017:10). This is a dangerous trend that allows the autocratic regimes a much easier transition into power. Instead of facing hurdles that should in fact at least slow down if not completely stop the attempt for control by the ruling party, they are given the red-carpet welcome.

The same is seen in India. When the BJP came into power, several news outlets anticipated what BJP would demand and realigned their values to match the BJP to curry favour. Considering how news outlets have always tried to uphold a fair representation of facts, now they are willing to avoid or even modify news to remain active.

There have been many instances where the government has cracked down on journalists, which has led to news outlets resorting to self-censorship now to appease the government. Editors advise their reporters to avoid anti-government stories and pen articles that would rather favour them. Several prolific journalists from leading news outlets quit in protest. Salil Tripathi, writing in Index on Censorship, stresses:

“We have come to expect that if someone writes or paints or imagines something that others find offensive, the offended party will take the law into their own hands and impose silence. This should outrage us. Instead, some have been telling writers to think more pleasant thoughts, artists to curb their imagination, playwrights to tackle safer topics, and not provoke the beast within all communities and religions” (2008: 170-71).

However as always, there are scattered voices of protest in the News industry. Independent journalists are coming forward as well as news outlets such as The Wire, News Laundry, The Quint and Alt News. They run mostly on donations by the public and focus on trying to balance the narrative by fact checking and highlighting atrocities committed by BJP members which are often left out in mainstream media. I found the Quint Lab particularly insightful as it doesn't focus only on Indian issues but also fact checks international claims and some of their findings are hard hitting.

But as Smucker rightly said, “When powerful people and institutions feel threatened, they tend to fight dirty, using every tool at their disposal, including police and legal repression.”(2025), any dissenter that does not stick to the narrative that the ruling party wants will be harassed by any means possible. The following are a few examples of how the BJP attempted to repress news media that tried to oppose the narrative of BJP.

“On 9 May 2025, *The Wire*'s founder and editor-in-chief Siddharth Varadarajan and veteran journalist and consulting editor Karan Thapar were targeted. On 21 August, another New Delhi-based journalist, Abhisar Sharma, was targeted by a similar complaint after criticizing the Chief Minister of Assam in a video posted on his YouTube channel on 8 August” (“India: The Wire” 2025). They were targeted for stating obvious facts that pointed fingers at the rich and powerful. The oppressors were able to do this by using a revised form of a colonial sedition law (Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code) which was suspended in 2022 due to repeated abuses. But it reappeared in 2023 as Section 152 of the new Indian criminal code and has henceforth been the preferred means of repression.

“The repeated use of the revised sedition law by the police in Assam, a state ruled by the BJP, is a blatant attack on press freedom. Targeting Siddharth Varadarajan and his colleagues at The Wire for their journalistic coverage of the military escalation between India and Pakistan, as well as freelance journalist Abhisar Sharma for his criticism of the government, amounts to criminalising journalism. - Célia Mercier, Head of the RSF South Asia desk” (“India: The Wire” 2025).

What is truly alarming is to witness the scale at which voices are disappearing. The sane voices of professional journalists who sift fact from fiction are the first to go. But those

journalists who are keen on sensationalizing and amplifying fake narratives are bestowed with government patronage. “The peddling of propaganda and fake news by India’s major television news channels increased sharply during Operation Sindoor. “This was absolute nonsense, absolute junk, absolute fake news, and amplification,” Bhasin said, adding that “the whole idea of such coverage is to reduce the thinking capacities of Indian citizens”” (Qadir 2025). I feel this statement is very true. When citizens are constantly bombarded day in and day out with fake news that is amplified to epic proportions, they will naturally assume it is true. When social media posts or YouTube videos are trying to redirect the viewers to actual facts, the comment box shows a very disturbing reality. People state all these videos are spreading misinformation and refuse to accept the facts. They refuse to think beyond what the mainstream news force feeds them. And unfortunately, most of the mainstream news is now in the hands of the BJP.

As much as legacy news media are targeted, the pressure faced by social media is far more intense. Twitter was one of the major social media platforms that was targeted by the Indian Government in recent years, and it was also the one that tried its best to fight back the restrictions. Twitter made attempts to cut down the misinformation and hatred being spread by Hindu nationalist accounts, amid growing legal pressures from the Government.

“In 2021, Twitter labeled some BJP official tweets of a fake “media toolkit” supposedly used by the National Congress party as “manipulated media.” When asked by the Government to take this label off, Twitter refused and soon found its New Delhi office the target of a police raid. Additionally, Twitter was asked by the Indian government to block over 500 accounts, many of which belonged to political opposition, activists, and journalists”(Malcy 2022).

Twitter also attempted to stop hate messages being circulated by pro-BJP members. This led them to not only being harassed by the government, but also to facing protests from the right-wing activists who claimed their voices were being suppressed. I felt this was ironic since they also demanded that liberal voices should be suppressed.



*Right-wing activists march in 2019 to Twitter's office in New Delhi, alleging that their political views were being silenced on the platform. (Burhaan Kinu/Hindustan Times/Getty Images)*

Twitter fought hard against the numerous restrictions the government had imposed upon them. In June 2022, Twitter argued in court that the government's demand for blocking accounts was not transparent and that the targeting of political and journalistic content threatened the platform's standing as a safe space for free expression. Twitter lost the challenge and had a cost of 5 million rupees imposed, which it has appealed

However, following its acquisition by Elon Musk in 2023, a large number of Twitter staff hailing from India were fired, severely reducing the bandwidth it had to monitor content that was propagating hatred and misinformation. Several previously suspended Hindu nationalist accounts were also reinstated. “ ‘I have seen a quite significant spike in anti-minority content and posts shared on Twitter since Musk’s takeover’ in October, said Raqib Hameed Naik of the research group Hindutva Watch, which monitors attacks against religious minorities by pro-Hindu groups in India.” (Purnell 2023) It makes me wonder based on Carole Cadwalder’s talk, does the “broligarchy” (2024) have something to gain by allowing the rampant emergence of Hindu Nationalist accounts which favour the Government of India?

## **2.2 Education and Curriculum**

The next category is something very important to me - Education and curriculum revision in schools. Growing up I knew that as governments change, textbooks were also revised usually in favour of the government. For example, when Congress was in power – the

history books would often focus on the struggle for Independence and the role of Congress party. When the BJP came to power (under Atal Bihari Vajpayee's regime) there wasn't as much focus on the role of Congress but more importance on the ancient texts and focus on the Aryan civilization etc. However, the recent changes made by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) makes me wonder – did we ever have a time when entire sections of history were omitted? As per the new revision, the section on the Mughal Empire was omitted as well as that about the Delhi sultanate – both of which were parts of history when India was ruled by Islamic rulers. The BJP is looking for ways to if not erase then at least severely depreciate an entire community's contribution to the development of India. “Xenophobic and authoritarian politics draw their power from a fear of foreigners and strangers, an idea that the dangers they pose are already around us, needing to be identified and rooted out” (Pandian 2025). This is what BJP banks on. There have always been communal differences in India, however the level of animosity to Muslims and other religious factions has never been as strong as it is under the BJP. By amplifying the already underlying prejudices they have gained favour in the eyes of the Hindu majority. It is very much similar to what Trump is propagating in the US. The immigrants are seen as the threat to the upstanding American citizen. Their presence means dilution of American values, loss of jobs, rise in crime and much more. Likewise in India the Muslims, Christians and Dalits are the others – the ones who are going against the Hindu values, who are converting the upstanding Hindu youth, who are taking jobs and who are the reason for rising crime rates.

Not only is the Islamic story of India's history being wiped clean, but even scientific facts such as evolution are being rewritten. “Satya Pal Singh, who was the minister of state for human resource development, said Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was ‘scientifically wrong’. ‘It needs to change in the school and college curriculum. Since man has been seen on Earth, he has always been a man. Nobody saw an ape turning into a man,’ he said” (Jaswal 2023). In the latest edition of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade Science textbooks, the section on evolution has been completely removed. However, the section on Heredity has been kept, perhaps to further reiterate the indigenous origin of Aryans. It is helpful for propagating notions of racial purity of some Indians or of the superiority of some castes. They also seem to be willing to accept religions such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism – but in the fold of Hinduism.

Any allusions to communal violence incited by the BJP party were also removed – including the Godhra riots, the rath yatra, Babri Masjid takeover, etc. Basically, they have

whitewashed their image to appear as benevolent rulers who have brought forward development and improved the country that was in tatters thanks to the previous ruling party.

In the class 12 political science textbook, two whole pages on the riots in the chapter titled "Politics in India Since Independence" have been deleted. The first page carried the chronology of events and referred to the National Human Rights Commission's criticism of the Gujarat government for failing to control the violence. "Instances, like in Gujarat, alert us to the dangers involved in using religious sentiments for political purposes. This poses a threat to democratic politics," the deleted portion read. ("NCERT" 2023)

When the NCERT Chief, Dinesh Prasad Saklani was asked about the removal of this aspect he stated: "Why should we teach about riots in school textbooks? We want to create positive citizens not violent and depressed individuals" ("Why" 2024). By his logic history books should not teach about the wars that happened either or the struggle for Independence. It is as if they want to suppress any thoughts of revolution at the school level itself.

Along with changes in school level textbooks, my research led me to some deeply disturbing changes happening at University level. These are not changes that have been broadcast widely in the news or media – it's an undercurrent of suppression. Seminars or lectures that may lead students to start looking at problems from different angles and make their own decisions are not permitted. "The authorities have become very cautious. Names of the speakers have to be cleared by the authorities. There is an order in one university to share the slides the speakers would use three days before the event. The teachers are also cautioned against going to places that could upset the regime or accepting invitations from people who are considered to be its critics" (Apoorvanand 2025). In those rare instances when brave teachers and students still make an attempt to invite speakers who are declared person non-grata in academic premises, these speakers are bound to be uninvited the previous evening by the authorities.

In an attempt to 'rationalize' education, the BJP has made significant changes to school and university education. Their claim is that they wish to reduce to student workload and to promote an India-centric narrative. However, opposition iterates that these are all ideologically driven changes that promotes a "*Hindu*-centric vision of India's history while marginalising other communities and perspectives" (Pradhan 2024).

The consequences of such an attempt will have implications that extend beyond the classroom as this in effect changes the worldview of an entire generation. It injects the feelings of division, intolerance and hatred in society. Any academic who challenges this narrative can

face harassment, threats and even outright dismissal. “the message is clear: conform or face the consequences” (Pradhan 2024). Debates and discussions are no longer free from consequences. Voices and thoughts must conform to the mainstream narrative.

A recent news report of how a teacher in a university was targeted because she attempted to neutralize the hate the Hindu students in her class were voicing during a discussion in Ethics class is a case in point. Some students allegedly shared instances of Muslim acquaintances posting WhatsApp statuses about Aurangzeb on Chhatrapati Shivaji's coronation anniversary. This led to some students eventually accusing Muslims of “being rapists and never getting punished for their crimes” (Goyal 2023). The teacher was worried about the students from other religions who were also in the class and tried to defuse the growing incitement by stating that “rape is not limited to any particular religion or community, and rapists don't have any religion or caste”. She pointed out cases where Hindus were also involved in such cases. Her students were recording a video of her statements and later an edited video of hers was circulated on social media – where it was made to look like she was claiming Hindus were rapists. She was allegedly “sent on forced leave as a disciplinary action” for 14 days.

The attempt to censor education is not limited to academic content. There is a severe underinvestment in education in India, which makes it more difficult for people from lower strata to access higher education.

“India currently spends 4.6 percent of GDP on education, which sounds reasonable until compared to the six percent that UNESCO recommends and the seven to eight percent that countries like Finland and South Korea invest. Increasing educational allocation to six percent would require an additional investment of approximately one lakh fifty thousand crore rupees annually—substantial but entirely feasible given India's current economic size” (Singarayar 2025).

The public education facilities across India are not equal. The Central government decides how much funds get allocated to states. And this is where the states that oppose the BJP face consequences. I had mentioned earlier how the South was one of the regions that opposed the 3-language system in the new Education Policy put forward by the BJP. The consequences are clear in the financial allocation. “Five southern states – Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka – contribute significantly to India's GDP. Yet together they received only ₹27,338 crore (15.8 percent) from the ₹1,73,030 crore tax devolution in January 2025. In contrast, BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh alone received ₹31,039.84 crore (17.95 percent)” (Chandra 2025)

Now the BJP claims that is because the northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar etc, which are BJP governed have more needs for funds due to higher poverty rates and lack of education. However there are reports that state the educational facilities are still in shambles in such states, even with huge funding allocated to them.

“The Annual Status of Education Report reveals that while ninety-six percent of children are enrolled in schools, barely half of fifth-graders can read second-grade text. Step into a typical government primary school in rural Uttar Pradesh or Bihar and you’ll find a different reality. Classrooms with leaking roofs house sixty children sharing outdated textbooks, taught by teachers who often lack basic training in modern pedagogy. In Rajasthan’s remote villages, children still walk three kilometers to reach schools that lack electricity, let alone computer labs or science equipment” (Singarayar 2025).

The question remains, where does the money allocated to education go then? Even foreign aid has been restricted. Several NGOs working in critical areas such as education, human rights and environmental protection, which were supported by foreign funding are now facing hurdles as a result. By controlling who receives what education in India, the BJP gains the power to shape the mindset of India’s future generations

### **2.3 Entertainment Media**

The third category is entertainment media – movies, comedy shows, documentaries, cartoons etc. This is an area that has been receiving a lot of attention compared to the restrictions on education. I believe people feel more strongly with movies and comedy shows. The artistic means of theater as well as other forms of visual media such as photographs or memes can have a highly suggestive effect on the public, and thus are always open to the risk of being misused by authoritarian, anti-democratic tendencies (Bayer 2025). As Bayer states in her work ‘Truth, Trial, Tragedy: The Cultural Frame of Criminal Law’, artistic forms such as theatre, or in this case movies, cartoons, art etc. has a stronger impact on people – maybe it is a result of the visualization which allows them to be a part of that story and make conscious decisions based on it as a result. Growing up I was heavily influenced by movies and cartoons – many of my life principles were molded and even unmolded by what I saw in television or read in books. So, if these forms are controlled by the government, it is safe to say that future generations will be molded as per the way they want.

Again, I come to the issue of the South and North, because as I said earlier – this is where my research began. After BJP came into power, there have been several attempts to undermine and restrict southern movie industry. Movies from the South such as ‘Empuraan’,

'Marco' etc. were subjected to re-censoring after releases. 'Empuraan' had referred to the Gujarat Riots and had also portrayed BJP supporters (Sanghis) as violent, which led to severe backlash from BJP supporters. In contrast the movie 'The Kerala Story', which depicts how Kerala has now become a hub for religious conversions to Islam and a center for love-jihad, has recently won the National Award for Best Director and Best Cinematography. During its release also there was backlash from states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu who claimed that such a movie, which was being marketed as the true story of 32,000 girls from Kerala, was a targeted propaganda to tarnish the south and cause divisions. What was interesting to note was that this movie had received tax-free status in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan. It made me wonder, why was this movie given so many perks? Even with states such as Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu raising concerns at the court, the Supreme court refused their demands and allowed the movie to be released and even asked the Tamil Nadu government to clear the release of the film and ensure adequate safety measures were put in place for an event-free screening.

However, the same was not held true for a documentary released by the BBC titled 'India: The Modi Question' which investigated the 2002 Gujarat riots. "The Ministry of External Affairs had described the documentary as a "propaganda piece" which "lacked objectivity" and reflected a colonial mindset" (Sarda 2024). This is quite the irony considering the 'propaganda piece' and Islamophobic narrative of 'The Kerala Story'. Several movies such as 'Parzaania' and 'Firaq' that have tried to address the Gujarat riots have faced backlash and bans. The BBC documentary was even blocked on YouTube and Twitter. One refreshing image that I came across, however, was how in the South, they made it a point to go against this ban and publicly screened the documentary at a bus terminal.



Activists from the Indian Democratic Youth Front hold a public screening of the BBC documentary "India: The Modi Question" in front of a bus terminal in Kochi, India, on Tuesday, January 24, 2023. AP - Sunoj Ninan Mathew

Art forms such as cartoons have always existed to point fingers at the tomfoolery of the political parties. My interest in art came about because of such cartoons I would find in the newspaper. It was ok to make fun of people in power, whether it was about politicians, policemen or any one in power. We were allowed to do so without repercussions. When the cartoonists started getting targeted, I don't think it was made into major news. Again only a few of the independent news outlets posted about it and social media accounts tried to create more awareness.

Vikatan an online platform used a cartoon of "Narendra Modi sitting with Donald Trump, with Modi shown in chains, a satirical commentary on Modi's alleged silence over the treatment of Indian nationals deported by the Trump administration from the United States" ("Vikatan" 2025) as the cover page of its digital magazine. The website was banned without giving any reasons. As per the Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 – the order concerning the blocking remains confidential. Compared to several cartoons of the yester years, this one seems pretty tame to me, but apparently the BJP thinks otherwise.



(Prime Minister Narendra Modi sitting with Donald Trump, with Modi shown in chains)

Another cartoonist Hemanth Malviya was arrested in May 2025 based on a complaint filed by a lawyer and RSS worker who “alleged that he had hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus and disturbed communal harmony by uploading objectionable material on social media” (Bhattacharya 2025). The below image is the cartoon – it took me a while to find it as it was banned in most websites.



(The cartoon depicted a member of a Hindu nationalist volunteer organization bending over with a sliver of exposed buttocks, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was shown with a stethoscope, administering a Covid Vaccine injection.)

Malviya faces charges of “promoting enmity and disturbing public harmony” and “publishing sexually explicit content online”(Gardner 2025). Sexually explicit content – that made me look twice. These are actual cases charged against cartoonists who try to point fingers at the government these days. Malviya has been granted bail on September 2, 2025, after the court considered that he did apologize on social media.

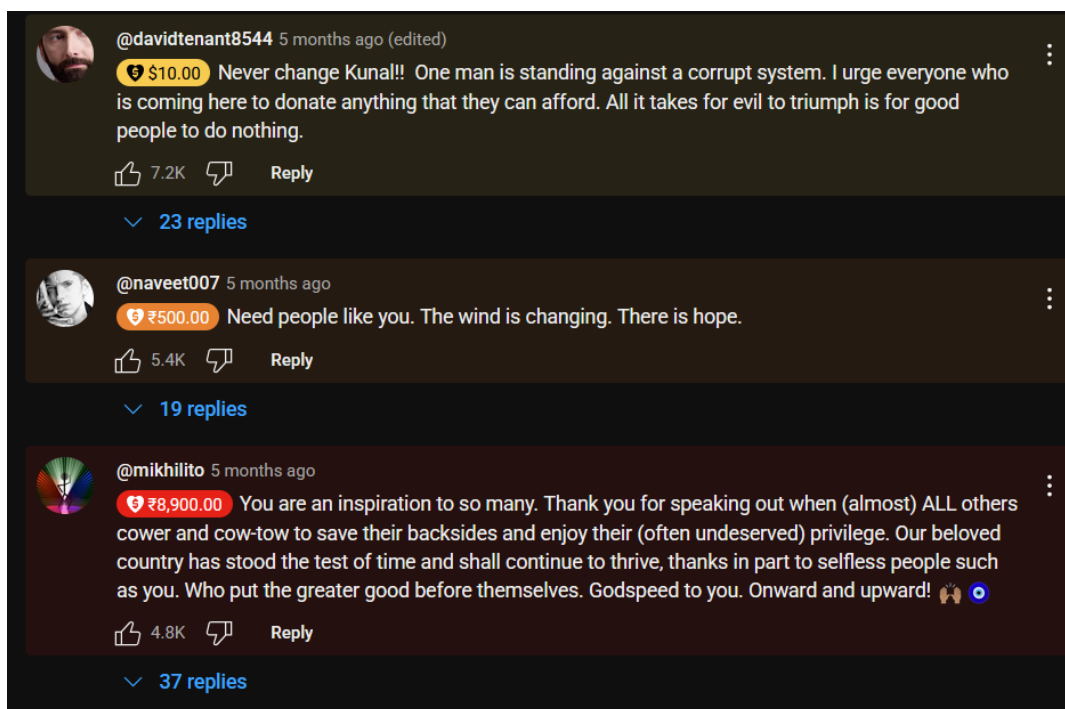
And then there are comedians like Kunal Kamra who refuse to apologize. Kamra is being investigated for alleged defamation he had made during a comedy sketch in March 2025, where he took an onstage jibe at a right-wing politician. He does not explicitly name the politician but only refers to him as ‘traitor’. It created quite an uproar. Members of the Shiv Sena (BJP Support Group) came to the venue and destroyed it. Thankfully this was after the show, and they even posted a video of it.



(Screenshot of video and description from @KunalSarmalkar post in X on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2025)

They threatened that Kamra would be next. No action was taken against them for this. Kamra however refused to apologize and stated “As far as I know, it is not against the law to poke fun at our leaders and the circus that is our political system. I don’t fear this mob and I will not be hiding under my bed waiting for this to die down”(Mogul 2025) I felt even more hopeful when I saw the huge support Kamra received from his viewers. His Youtube video of

this comic sketch that came under fire has garnered more than 16 million views and the comment box is filled with donations from people all over the world who want to support him. When I read those comments, I felt that one man’s act to voice the concerns of the nation through his sketch has inspired people to help and support him to do more. Snyder talks about how we must defend Institutions. “Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other unless each is defended from the beginning. So choose an institution you care about—a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union—and take its side”(2017:13). I believe every aspect I read about – News, Social Media, Education, Entertainment has voices that break away from the narrative that BJP wants to propagate and they need our support. Whether they are artists, directors, academics, comedians – we need to help defend them so that they continue hammering away at the autocratic government’s plans – whichever country it is from. I believe comments, donations and support in the form of protests will help them to keep fighting and it is something we need to do. If not, they will fall and so will much of our freedom in this world.



(Screenshot of comments from ‘Navya Bharat’ video posted by Kunal Kamra on YouTube on March 23 2025)

### 3. Hope in Protests

“When part of a larger power-building strategy, protest can play an essential role in forcing issues onto the public agenda, changing popular opinion, delegitimizing powerholders, shifting the balance of forces and even toppling regimes” (Smucker 2025). A very recent example is the protest in Nepal that took place in September 2025. It led to the very thing that

Smucker states – a complete shift in the balance of forces and the ousting of the government. I wanted to see how India represented this in their media. As expected, the Indian news media covered it in such a way that it looked like a bunch of Gen-Z kids who were addicted to social media decided to become unruly and get it back when the ban was enforced. The most recent update I saw of it in the Republic Channel (which I personally feel is the BJP’s mouthpiece) and the points expressed in it are examples of how “social movement participants are characteristically slandered and stereotyped by their opponents, with slanted news coverage often parroting the messages or sharing the assumptions of the ruling class”(Smucker 2025).



(Screenshot taken from Republic World’s Video “Arnab Exposes Deep State Toolkit, Warns Against The Nepal-Like Situation In India” 2025)

In this update Arnab Goswami the main reporter of Republic News, calls the social media activists – ‘Malicious, anti-national youtubers’. This sentence is repeated quite a few times in the video. He goes on to say that we must be careful not to listen to such youtubers and even urges the viewers to investigate them to see if they have foreign links. The Republic’s attempt is to link the protests in Nepal as the brainchild of the US. And the Indians must not fall prey to this tactic. So, in essence he makes it seem like anyone who even dares to challenge India’s democracy is an ally of the Western powers who want to disrupt the power that is India. I felt guilty watching it, that’s how powerful their rhetoric is. Maybe it is true that the US was involved, but does that mean we can never protest? If we do, we must face the risk of being called Anti-Nationals.

Again, those who are protesting are usually from the educated classes or people who have reached influencer status in social media, which is also highlighted in the video where he

calls out their lavish lifestyles and the fact that they are living in foreign countries. It is essential for us to overturn this narrative. Such content “directs populist anger toward these cultural elites, while diverting attention away from far more powerful and destructive economic culprits”. Smucker talks about how we need to make ourselves relatable to the masses by “identifying familiar aspects of our identities that we can emphasize on” (2025). I think that was something the Nepal protests was able to achieve. True it was the Gen-Z who started it, but their concerns were concerns of all the people and as a result they had a huge backing of support from the citizens. I don’t know how Indians can attempt this – when any protest is brought up – it is often given a religious twist as well which makes it far more dangerous. There are also attempts such as the ‘Call Hindu’ app – which is a job portal that only employs Hindus. By offering one particular religious group opportunities and gaining their favour, the ruling party is basically trying to sway them to their side, thereby weakening any unified resistance.

That does not mean I am not hopeful. As Snyder states, “for resistance to succeed, two boundaries must be crossed. First, ideas about change must engage people of various backgrounds who do not agree about everything. Second, people must find themselves in places that are not their homes, and among groups who were not previously their friends”(2017:47). I believe these boundaries are slowly being crossed in India. One of the first major protests against the BJP was from the students of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in 2016. JNU was always a space for progressive ideas and encouraged students to question dominant ideologies of power. It all began with a protest held to commemorate the execution of Afzal Guru, who had been found guilty in conspiring in an attack on the Parliament. The students were not supporting the terrorist but were opposing the judicial killing – where he was not given the basic legal rights to represent himself. However, this protest led to a huge attack by the ruling party, claiming that the students were anti-national and several were charged under sedition. Some of these students have been in jail since 2020.



(A demonstrator shouts slogans and waves the Indian national flag as she takes part in a protest demanding the release of Kanhaiya Kumar, a Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) student union leader accused of sedition, in New Delhi, India, February 18, 2016. REUTERS/Anindito Mukherjee)

The protest in JNU was one where people from all parts of the country came together. Students who had left their homes to come and study here, joined forces with people they had never met before for a cause that united them. They faced heavy and aggressive opposition from the police and central government. Many were physically assaulted also. The Media states that the protests were suppressed, but I believe otherwise. I believe that the JNU protest was the starting point for the young people to work together to oppose a government. “Organizations transform episodic moments of outrage into sustained campaigns that can win concrete victories. Without organization, we’re no match for the powerful forces we’re up against” (Smucker 2025). With the initial protest, the students have learnt and are rallying themselves for the future. Steps are being taken to spread the word and organize movements. Despite threats and opposition from the authorities, the JNU students continue their protests and keep engaging in debate and exchange of ideas to strengthen their voices.

#### 4. Conclusion

Cartoonists, news outlets, academics and even farmers are all protesting the government's attempt to silence them – some may say it is futile, but I would like to believe that all these steps are needed, no matter how small. If everyone just accepts that the ruling Party is always right, that their voices will be censored, that their thoughts do not matter, that it is better to keep quiet instead of struggling then it would be just like a scene from 1984 by George Orwell. “And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed—if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. “Who controls the past' ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell 2021:20). This is the consequence that we will also be faced with if we give in to the selective censorship of the government which aims to change the past by altering history books, renaming cities, forbidding opposition and free speech and hiding their mistakes from their citizens. “If they try to normalize, let us try to denormalize. Let us hold on to facts, truths, values, norms, arrangements that are going to be under siege. Let us not forget what happened and why[...]We can't even fully recognise what tyranny is if we let the ruling powers get away with lying to us all” (Cadwalladr 2024). So, every movement that opposes the ruling party's attempt at silencing their dissenters is an attempt to denormalize. To remind the citizens that what is happening is not a usual occurrence. It is a systemic targeted tactic of the ruling party to gain total power. We must not allow that to happen, and we must safeguard our voices and our right to dissent.

I used to wonder why the people in my city used to protest. I would often see protests daily in the streets of Kerala. Some violent, some peaceful but I did not understand their significance then. I just thought they were protesting just to get a day off. “We're trying to build people's movements; movements that use protest as one tool among many, whose ultimate aim is to win a real voice for working people in determining the policies that impact our lives and communities” (Smucker 2025). This quote makes things much clearer. The idea behind protests is to bring people together for a cause that is worth fighting for – their rights, their voice, their choice.

Researching for this topic has given me several 'aha' moments. I talked to people who faced similar oppression, I got the chance to engage with the group Palästina Solidarität Gießen where I understood how they organize events, and I read up on information that was otherwise not available in mainstream media. There were many moments where I felt disheartened but

also moments where I felt hopeful. I understand better the urgency to oppose and not make it easier for parties such as the BJP and leaders like Trump to gain power. Every step to oppose matters. Every voice that dissents counts. We should not give it up so easily.

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