**Jailed in India** Part - II

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By Vijay Prashad

In February 2021, India’s Enforcement Directorate launched raids on eight locations associated with Newsclick. The raid on Prabir’s house lasted for 113 hours. It was a grueling process, the agents of the State interested in financing that Newsclick had received and alleging that Newsclick had been paid by foreign interests to undermine India.

The idea that reporting on farmers’ protests and workers’ strikes is against India is to immediately suggest that Indian farmers and workers are not Indian. In an interview shortly after this ordeal, Prabir was asked about the funds that had allowed Newsclick to grow. Prabir’s answer is instructive:

“The investments that have come are public – on the balance sheets of the company, and that have come through the Reserve Bank of India. Now, our income – today, foreign investment up to 26 percent is legal in digital platforms. Our foreign investment is much lower than that, around nine percent. There was nothing illegal about it in any case because till then, there was no bar on foreign investment in digital platforms. So, what is the issue I have not understood? Why is this being raised, even that I don’t understand.”

The Role of the New York Times: The case against Newsclick and Prabir continued, as the harassment did over Tricontinental Research Services. The harassment seemed to be the punishment. Low-level officers of the intelligence services and the police suggested that there was no evidence of any crime, but that they were being pushed to keep the investigation alive. The case remained alive, but it appeared as if the final destination for the journalists was Purgatory and not Hell.

But then the New York Times (August 5, 2023) appeared with a hallucinatory article on the foundations funded by Neville Roy Singham, who had made his money in the tech industry and who had decided to give his money away – unlike the normal fashion – without fanfare. There is no Singham Foundation, no Singham anything really. Roy’s idea was to give his millions away to enhance media that covered people’s voices and to build left-wing institutions around the world. Nothing in any of this is illegal. The story by the Times was built on public information but pretended to be a major scoop that revealed the existence of a network guided by the Chinese government. The article is incoherent, but it had its impact.

The day after the Times article came out, India’s Minister of Information and Broadcasting Anurag Thakur held a press conference, where he launched another attack on Newsclick. Now, the Times article had said explicitly that the Modi government had raided Newsclick and accused it of having “ties to the Chinese government but offering no proof.” The Times linked to their own article from 2020 with a headline, “Under Modi, India’s Press is Not So Free Anymore.” But the Times allowed itself to be a weapon in the hands of people like Thakur. The entire fracas in India was not even about Newsclick but about the leader of the Congress Party, Rahul Gandhi. Gandhi’s popularity has been rising due to his Bharat Jodo Yatra (2022-2023), when he walked from one end of India to the other to argue for a different dispensation for the country.

A fierce attack on Modi’s proximity to the businessman Gautam Adani – whose businesses have been shown to be financed by a fraudulent scheme (as reported by the Financial Times in August 2023) – led to Gandhi being disqualified from parliament in March 2023. On August 7, thanks to the intervention of the Indian Supreme Court, Rahul Gandhi was to return to parliament. Thakur used the New York Times article to argue that Rahul Gandhi was somehow related to Newsclick and therefore to Singham. None of this is true, but it was useful political theatre with Newsclick as the collateral damage.

Ten days after Thakur’s press conference, and after news media in India published leaked (by the government) emails from Roy to Prabir and myself, the Delhi Police filed a suo motu case against Prabir and Amit under the hugely draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act [UAPA] (in 2022, the Foundation of Media Professionals filed a motion in the Indian Supreme Court saying that this Act has “manifestly arbitrary” provisions and has a very broad definition of “unlawful activity”). The raids of the houses and the arrests of Prabir and Amit were conducted under the shadow of this UAPA law. “This is India’s McCarthy-like moment,” said former editor of The Hindu N Ram to one of India’s leading television anchors Rajdeep Sardesai. “This is an attack on the freedom of the press,” Ram said.

Prabir, age 76, and Amit are now in custody. They are both people of great sensitivity, who have spent their entire lives trying to make the world a better place. My friends are in prison. Since this case started, Prabir would laugh and say that he prefers to cover stories than to be the story, a line that journalists often use. A few weeks ago, Prabir (a frequent contributor to CounterPunch) and I spoke about his new book for Peoples Dispatch, where he reminisced about how we “used to sit in that little basement of ours.” I remember those days fondly.

We believed in building a press that would be alive to the needs of workers and peasants and would be instructed by the need for peace and not war. That’s the press we wanted then, and it is the press we need now. India sits at 161 out of the 180 countries counted in the World Press Freedom Index. As more and more Indian journalists become a guest of the State, India will likely slip all the way to the bottom.

Concluded

This article was originally published in www.counterpunch.org as: ‘My Friends Prabir and Amit Are In Jail in India For Their Work in the Media’.