

# *Stand up against attacks on India's pluralism, for Lankesh*

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For The Straits Times

The most recent murder of one of India's prominent journalists, Ms Gauri Lankesh – shot at close range in the chest and head by motorbike-riding gunmen in front of her home in Bangalore on Tuesday – is symptomatic of a larger climate of politically-motivated attacks on journalists asking difficult questions and critical of the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) Hindutva agenda of targeting minorities that risk turning India into a republic of hate.

Ms Lankesh, through her Kannada newspaper, Gauri Lankesh Patrike, had been critical of the BJP's targeted strategies of Hindu nationalism. Her articles drew attention to the increasing climate of communalism nurtured by the BJP. Her critiques of the caste structure of Hinduism and the Hindutva strategies of deploying threats, intimidation and violence against those opposed to Hindu nationalism drew the ire of Hindutva forces.

Also, she had been running a series of stories on alleged corruption in the dealings of a BJP lawmaker from Karnataka. She had been sued for defamation for running the stories, was out on bail and had been appealing the lawsuit.

Ms Lankesh's Patrike was an outspoken critic of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's strategic cultivation of violence through, on the one hand, support for far-right forces and, on the other hand, studied silence in the backdrop of attacks, even violent murders, of India's public dissenters. The Patrike also drew attention to issues faced by the poor, lower castes, and women in rural, semi-urban and urban margins.

The murder of Ms Lankesh follows those of the rationalist academic M. M. Kalburgi, rationalist Narendra Dabholkar in Pune, and Mr Govind Pansare, a left party worker in south Maharashtra.

They were all rationalist voices critical of the Hindutva ideology and Hindutva's monolithic agenda of stoking communal sentiments to build a Hindu nation.

At its heart, the Hindutva ideology seeks to mobilise the narrative of a Hindu India to transform the nation's socio-political-cultural landscape. At the heart of the Hindutva ideology is its authoritarian erasure of oppositional thought. The message is that dissent will not be tolerated. This explains why writers, intellectuals and journalists are targeted.

The toxic agenda of the BJP and its Hindutva ideas are disseminated by media channels, including Zee TV, Times Now and Republic TV. The marking of a critical voice as "anti-national" gives legitimacy to the calls for and enactments of violence.

The preferred weapon to spread

Hindutva ideology is violence and the threat of it. Targeted murders of rationalist intellectuals and activists are synchronised with lynchings and murders of Muslims and lower-caste community members.

The climate of violence spills over into social media. The tweets and Facebook posts inciting, threatening and celebrating violence mirror the violence being carved into India's everyday fabric. Ms Lankesh had received death threats, social media abuse and abusive phone calls for the stories she published. After her death, some Hindutva Twitter handles celebrated the murder – including some followed by Mr Modi.

The response to this political climate of violence and intimidation must not be one of fear. It is heartening that journalists and activists across India are standing up to protest against the latest murder. Activists gathered at the Press Club and in cities across India, holding signs that read "#IamGauri" and chanting slogans like "May Gauri Lankesh remain immortal".

Amid this onslaught of attacks on India's democratic principles of pluralism and diversity, the international community has an urgent and salient role to play in standing up for the idea of India as a pluralist democracy.

The everyday forms of violence against minorities and oppositional thought in India are being obfuscated by the seductive stories of "Make in India" being narrated globally through public relations campaigns and advertising strategies.

The image of India as a test bed for digital transformations, carefully cultivated by well-orchestrated public relations campaigns, needs to be interrogated against the backdrop of the surge in violence across the country.

Beyond the shine and gloss cultivated through large-budget "Digital India" campaigns, the rapid attack of the Modi government on India's democracy needs to be questioned and challenged internationally.

The narratives celebrating India's emergence and digital transformation need to be juxtaposed against the narratives of Hindu nationalism that fundamentally threaten the very moral fibre of pluralist Indian democracy.

Now is the time for the international community to exert pressure on India for its weak governance structure in addressing violence, the absence of protection for journalists and dissenting voices, and the active promotion of hatred by the ruling party.

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