

## "Story Killers" : une journaliste, un meurtre et la poursuite d'une enquête inachevée en Inde

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15–19 minutes



### “Story Killers”: a journalist, a murder and the continuation of an unfinished investigation in India

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In 2017, journalist Gauri Lankesh was murdered in Bangalore. Five years later, Forbidden Stories has decided to continue its work on disinformation. This article is the first part of the Story Killers project, a global investigation into the mercenaries of disinformation.

On September 5, 2017, Gauri Lankesh, then 55 years old, arrived around noon at her office in Bangalore, and began writing an editorial. She gives the title to her text: *“In the era of fake news”* . She describes what she calls *“lie factories”* , websites that spread false information. She analyzes the journey of a rumor that went viral, launched by the website of a local entrepreneur. She claims that it was spread by people close to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist party, who *“used this false information as a weapon”*.

Dusk is barely falling when she sets off on her way back, winding through the streets of India’s “Silicon Valley”. As soon as she arrives at her doorstep, an explosion rings out. Four shots are fired. The first hit him below his right shoulder. Two other bullets lodged in his abdomen, hitting vital organs, while a fourth ricocheted off the wall of his house. A motorcyclist and his accomplice flee. Gauri Lankesh dies instantly. **His murder will cause shock waves throughout the country.** Hundreds of people attended his funeral holding “I am Gauri” placards.

Forbidden Stories , whose mission is to continue the investigations of journalists who have been threatened, imprisoned or murdered, continued the work of Gauri Lankesh, starting, like her, from the postulate that **disinformation has become industrialized and is sometimes used as a weapon** . The association brought together a consortium of 100 journalists from 30 media outlets, including the Radio France investigation unit, to investigate this disinformation industry as part of the “Story Killers” project. For more than six months, in India, Latin America, Europe, and elsewhere, they dissected the workings of this booming deregulated market, made up of real mercenaries and pharmacies who, all over the world, offer their services to the highest bidders, threatening freedom of expression and democracy.

#### Taking up the torch from his father

Gauri Lankesh moved to Bangalore when she was in her thirties. For the Lankesh family, journalism is a bit of a family affair. His father founded the Lankesh Journal - or “Lankesh Patrike” in Kannada, the local language. He was known for his investigations into political corruption in the early 1980s, a time many consider the golden age of Indian journalism, a period of true editorial independence. *“My father brought down governments with his corruption revelations* ,” Kavitha Lankesh, Gauri’s younger sister, tells Forbidden Stories from her office in Bangalore, just above the one where the journalist had once worked. But *“Gauri did not enter journalism with such ambitions* ,” she explains.

She started her career in Delhi. At the time, she wrote about everything: criminal cases or even portraits for the Times of India, for the ETV Telugu television channel and the Sunday Magazine. It was only in 2000, when she took over Lankesh Patrike after the death of her father, that her work took a political turn. Little by little, his pen sharpens. Her colleagues and family remember how this change brought about a *“transformation”* in the way she saw her role as a journalist.



The assassination of Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh sparked the international Story Killers investigation.

In 2005, she created the weekly Gauri Lankesh Patrike. Through its editorials and reports carried out in remote areas of Karnataka, the state of which Bangalore is the capital, its newspaper denounces the rise of Hindu nationalism. It investigates illegal mining in northern Karnataka, **local corruption and religious tensions** . One of its targets is the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. Gauri Lankesh will be sued twice for defamation by Pralhad Joshi, a BJP parliamentarian. According to her colleagues, she saw the fight against fake news spread by the BJP as part of a broader fight against the Indian far right. In an interview he gave to Forbidden Stories, Dr HV Vasu, one of his former colleagues, describes his activity as **a fight against communitarianism, in reference to the inter-religious conflict that reigns in India** . According to him, *“fighting false information was an essential aspect of this work”* .

#### “A lie with the appearance of truth”

From his first years at the head of his newspaper, the subject of the manipulation of information for political ends permeated his writings. About former BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpaye, she writes: *“he believes in the power of a lie which takes on the appearance of truth through its constant repetition”* . In another article aimed at debunking a viral rumor, she discusses the *“false ‘facts’ of history* ,” referring to claims that a former leader in her region attempted to forcibly convert Hindus to Islam. Its growing notoriety is beginning to disturb in the state of Kamataka, a region described by some as a laboratory of false information favoring religious conflicts.

From his Bangalore office, lawyer BT Venkatesh recalls the countless times he defended Gauri Lankesh. *“She was pulling from all sides,*” he remembers. *A gangster, a politician or businessmen could file a complaint against her. She attacked anyone who was corrupt.*” Despite the accumulation of legal threats, **Gauri Lankesh continues to denounce the actions of the ruling party** , opposition figures and elites whom she considers corrupt. *“Her guts, her audacity, her way of looking at the magazine... In the space of two years, she has transformed* ,” affirms the lawyer.

#### A pyramid organization

In the mid-2010s, Hindu nationalists gained popularity. The election of Narendra Modi in 2014 propelled the BJP to power, in particular thanks to a vast network of *“information technology cells”* , whose mission was to disseminate positive information about the BJP and target its detractors, which made part Gauri Lankesh. These *“cells”* obey a **pyramidal hierarchical structure** . At the top: the party leaders who are obeyed by a network of influencers, explains Joyojeet Pal, associate professor at the University of Michigan. Below, those who create and disseminate the stories, while maintaining a certain distance from the hierarchy, which allows leaders to dissociate themselves from their little hands in the event of deviation. These low-level influencers also work to discredit party *“dissidents* ,” such as independent journalists or activists. This can have a *“paralyzing effect on journalists, who no longer want to express themselves online* ,” adds the researcher.

In personal emails addressed to journalist Chidanand Rajghatta, her ex-husband, Gauri Lankesh admits to feeling discouraged by this pyramid ecosystem. *“When [Narendra] Modi mania becomes a popular mantra, when fascist fury becomes part of everyday discourse, when distorted information becomes the mantra of the mainstream media, when religious fundamentalism blinds people...I am in it upset, disenchanting, disturbed* ,” she wrote in August 2016.

Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh was the target of online harassment before her assassination in 2017.

Her friends confide that towards the end of her life, she seemed worried. His newspaper loses its subscribers. She goes into debt because she refuses to accept advertisers. **She became the target of near-constant online harassment from far-right networks linked to the BJP.** The “trolling” is clearly organized. He lashes out when she gives a speech or posts photos online. Far-right activists then described her as an “easy woman”.

#### “Hang them”

At the end of 2016, about a year before her death, posts on social media called her a “commie” (English abbreviation of communist), a “naxalite” (a far-left Indian movement with Maoist leanings) and a “presstitute”. contraction, in English, of “press” and “prostitute”, a term generally used to attack female journalists. In a Postcard News publication widely shared on social media, the journalist is described as being *“known for her hatred of Hinduism”* . The article refers to a now-deleted YouTube video of a speech that Gauri Lankesh gave in 2012. On social networks, publications that mention her are often followed by hateful comments: *“Hang them,*” writes one Facebook user talking about her and her loved ones.

Gauri Lankesh remained discreet about the extent of the cyberharassment she suffered. She often told her friends and colleagues not to take these threats seriously. Investigative journalist Rana Ayyub recalls how, days before his assassination, she explained to him that online harassment was *“the last thing”* to worry about. *“I didn’t realize how vicious it was* ,” Gauri Lankesh’s sister regrets today.

On the advice of a colleague, the journalist still installed a video surveillance camera in her house. Her friends insist that she also hire a security guard. But she won’t. At that time, Gauri Lankesh and his colleagues planned to launch a project to verify information in the Kannada language, via a decentralized network of WhatsApp groups to counter viral rumors. In the days before her death, she shared verified facts on her Twitter account and publications from Alt News, a fact-checking site run by Mohammed Zubair and Pratik Sinha, who were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022 for their work on disinformation in India.

#### A brainwashed hitman

In July 2022, the doors of the Bangalore court will open to a restricted audience, made up of lawyers and journalists. 17 suspects, almost all linked to the Hindu nationalist Sanatan Sansitha sect and far-right groups, are on trial for his murder. The police were efficient. A “special investigation unit” was created specifically to elucidate the case. Shell casings were compared to those of similar crimes committed in recent years. The fleeing vehicle was identified using video surveillance images. It only took six months to arrest a first suspect: Naveen Kumar. Several months later, investigators filed a roughly 10,000-page indictment, naming 16 other suspects, one of whom remains at large.

Investigators concluded that the murderers were part of a network operating in several southern Indian states. He is accused of being behind several high-profile bomb attacks in the early 2000s in Goa, the coastal state neighboring Karnataka. Thanks to the elements discovered by the scientific police, investigators were able to establish a link between the assassination of the journalist and **the murder of three other intellectuals** who were also killed by members of this group.



Gauri Lankesh’s home in April 2022.



Amol Kale, the alleged mastermind of the murder, recruited far-right activists at religious gatherings and trained them to become killers. According to court records, he trained them during a months-long indoctrination process that included meditation, weapons training and religious education. They were made to read Gauri Lankesh’s articles and watch videos over and over again. At least five members of this small group have seen the video of his speech given in 2012 in Mangalore, in which he is heard questioning the roots of Hinduism. According to a local police investigator, Waghmare, **the hitman, could quote long extracts from this video by heart.**

It was during a meeting in a house they had rented that the plotters decided to assassinate Gauri Lankesh. According to police sources, the video - downloaded to Amol Kale’s laptop from YouTube - was one element among others in a process of *“progressive indoctrination”* . This video spread widely among Indian far-right groups, fueling a smear campaign against the journalist portrayed as anti-Hindu.

#### A truncated video

The researchers found that **eight YouTube links widely shared on Facebook** , three of which received more than 100 million interactions (likes, shares and comments), pointed to the video of Gauri Lankesh’s speech. In 2014, the official page of the BJP in Karnataka also shared the video with a warning: *“The next time we hear such speeches, we must give an appropriate legal response.”* On several occasions, it was posted on accounts using the same language elements, suggesting potential coordination in posts. It opens on a black screen where the words “why I hate secularism in India” flash. The video was truncated during editing and the words distorted. According to KL Ashok, who organized the event where Gauri Lankesh gave her speech, the speech was not an attack on Hinduism. *“It was shortened to only include the part where it says that the Hindu religion has no father or mother,*” laments the organizer. *By saying this, his intention was to emphasize the plurality of this religion which includes thousands of castes and several forms of beliefs.*



An employee of Naanu Gauri (“I am Gauri”) shows an example of a hateful Facebook comment directed at Gauri Lankesh.

According to Guillaume Chaslot, a former Google engineer, **suggesting acts of violence instead of directly calling for violence is a common strategy for outsmarting algorithms** . *“As certain types of content are banned based on keywords, people will find other ways to phrase things,*” he explains. *“Instead of saying, ‘We need to kill this person,’ they can say, ‘He’s anti-Hindu, he should go to hell,’ that sort of thing.”* In a press release, Google - which bought YouTube in 2006 - defends itself: *“Over the years, we have put in place the necessary policies to combat harmful content. The vast majority of violent videos are now deleted before they exceed 10 views.”*

Our analysis also shows that the video was also posted from Facebook by the @GarudaPurana account belonging to far-right activist Bhuvith Shetty, known in India for acts of violence and for spreading hate speech online. In 2014, he wrote a petition on Change.org that sought to have Gauri Lankesh arrested for “violating religious sentiments.”

Gauri Lankesh should have appeared in court 10 days after his assassination, for “disturbing communal harmony”. *“[I] am being put on trial because of this speech* ,” she wrote on Twitter several months earlier. She then added this sentence full of meaning today: *“I take responsibility for each of the words I may have said.”*