## The killing of Gauri Lankesh

By Siddhartha Deb

29-36 minutes

Last September, as the journalist Gauri Lankesh was returning to her home from work, a man approached her in the driveway, his face obscured by a motorcycle helmet. He fired a pistol as she ran toward her house, about 10 feet away. She collapsed before she made it inside. Autopsy reports suggested she had been shot twice in the chest and once in the back. A fourth shot had missed or misfired. The footage from security cameras showed only two men on a motorcycle, including the helmeted shooter, a man about five feet tall, but the police suggested that two other men had also been involved, following the first pair on a second motorcycle.

Lankesh, the editor and publisher of a Bangalore weekly, the *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, was an outspoken left-wing journalist working in an India that, since the 2014 election of Narendra Modi, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as prime minister, has become one of the world's most dangerous countries to be a reporter. But the BJP is only the most overt face of a Hindu right that comprises more than 30 loosely affiliated organizations. Together, they all subscribe to the virulent brand of Hindu nationalism known as Hindutva, and they have in recent years been associated with activities ranging from lynchings, riots, and bomb blasts to threats of rape, dismemberment, incarceration, and hanging of people critical of them and their sectarian idea of India.

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According to the 2017 Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, India ranked 136 out of 180, a position quite out of keeping with India's image as the world's most populous democracy. Zimbabwe, before the fall of Robert Mugabe, came in at 127, while Afghanistan, mired in a grinding war, ranked 120th. Since 1992, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 43 journalists have been killed in India. The number tallied by the International Federation of Journalists is far higher: 73 journalists killed since 2005. Nine journalists were killed in 2015, one of them allegedly set on fire by policemen working for a politician accused of rape. Five were murdered in 2016. In the cases of 30 journalists murdered since 2010 being tracked by the Indian media watchdog The Hoot, there has been exactly one conviction.

But who was Gauri Lankesh? Her assassination made her briefly, startlingly, visible everywhere, a slender figure with short, cropped hair, sometimes looking animated and sometimes appearing deeply introspective. Protests and vigils broke out throughout India, under posters and giant, colorful puppets proclaiming "I am Gauri." Within a month of her death, her work had been posthumously granted the Anna Politkovskaya Award, named in honor of a Russian journalist who was assassinated in Moscow in 2006. By December, Navayana, a progressive publishing house in Delhi, had brought out a collection of Lankesh's writings and a Bangalore-based singer, Aarti Rao, released "Song for Gauri."

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One understands why people might have responded in this way:
Lankesh's life lends itself easily to the dramatic, a biopic, a novel, a
narrative illustrating through a single, individual portrait the tectonic
shifts of a vast, populous country. It is important to remember that
her struggle was connected to a larger reality, in life and in death,
beyond even the apparent serial assassination of critics of
Hindutva. Lankesh was dangerous to a Hindu right that, in spite of
its vigorous claims to represent a majority, remains keenly aware of
how recent its widespread dominance is.

Yet the fact remains that while Lankesh's work was known to, and admired by, those connected to progressive politics and causes in India—people critical of Hindu nationalism, crony capitalism, sexism, and casteism—it was largely invisible beyond those realms. This was particularly true in the domain of national television and print media, outlets that seesaw between tawdry consumerism and rancorous nationalism, between retreating into strategic silence on controversial matters of the day and actively cheering on the right-wing politics of the BJP and its various vigilante armies.

Lankesh, who grew up in Bangalore, worked for The Times of India, the nation's largest daily newspaper, in the mid '80s, first in her home city and then in Delhi. She returned to Bangalore in 1989 and began reporting for Sunday, a now-defunct English-language magazine, before switching to Kannada-language television in the late '90s. Kannada was not a language she was initially comfortable in, according to her friends and associates, a detail of some significance because her father P. Lankesh, a polymath who was a literature professor, poet, playwright, filmmaker, and publisher of a weekly tabloid called Lankesh Patrike, was a well-known figure in the world of Kannada letters. The Lankesh Patrike did not accept advertisements, and it expressed what the Kannada-speaking journalist Krishna Prasad, former editor of the newsmagazine Outlook and writer of the incisive media and politics blog, Churumuri, described to me as an "eclectic world view," erudite and literary while also being political and punchy.

When Lankesh's father died in 2000, she and her brother, Indrajit, took the paper over, the editorial duties going to her while he became the publisher. (Their third sibling, Kavitha, a filmmaker, did not take a role at the paper.) This new responsibility involved a significant transition for Lankesh, not only in her beginning to write in Kannada and her first position as an editor, but also, Prasad notes, a shift in focus from the urban, fluffy issues dominating the corporate English media to rural issues that involved a more critical, engaged kind of journalism. In an interview she gave shortly after she took over the post, she said she had deliberately distanced herself from the weekly while her father was running it "because it is such a strident, hard-hitting paper, and I was working for the mainstream English media." She added that she had been stagnating in English-language journalism, while her slightly cryptic references to "being alone" and "personal confusions" also hinted at the difficulty of being a single—her marriage to the journalist Chidanand Rajghatta had ended in divorce in the early '90sindependent-minded woman in a patriarchal, conservative milieu.

While some skeptics questioned at the time whether Lankesh, given her lack of editing experience and previous involvement with the paper, could fill her father's role, by all accounts, she embraced the transformation. She took an increasingly critical position on what Prasad calls "the upsurge of Hindutva forces of polarization" around the country and in particular in Karnataka. In 2002, she protested the Hindu right's attempt to claim that the 11th century Sufi shrine of Baba Budan Giri, 170 miles west of Bangalore, where both Hindus and Muslims had worshipped for centuries, belonged exclusively to Hindus. "She courted arrest on the streets during the protest," says her former husband Rajghatta, who remained friends after their divorce and is now a Washington-based columnist for *The Times of India*. "She was taking an increasingly leftist stand, always siding with the underdog."

As Lankesh became more involved in political questions, she traveled in June 2004 to the southwestern region of Malnad to attend a press conference held by members of the Indian ultra-left movement variously referred to as Naxalites or Maoists. One of the Naxalites she met there was Saketh Rajan, a former Bangalore classmate and the son of an army officer, a radical who had written histories of Karnataka and worked as an environmentally conscious, muckracking journalist before becoming a guerrilla. Eight months after the meeting, Rajan was dead, shot down in the kind of extrajudicial execution referred to by the police in India as "encounters." Lankesh wrote an article about the killing. Her brother Indrajit, an occasional filmmaker and television personality who last year officially joined the BJP, citing Modi as the inspiration behind his decision, refused to publish the article, apparently for being much too sympathetic to the Naxalites. Lankesh claimed he threatened her with a revolver.



Gauri Lankesh was an outspoken left-wing journalist working in an India that has become one of the world's most dangerous countries to be a reporter. Photo courtesy of Kavaitha Lankesh.

Following the dispute, she left her father's former paper and decided to start her own, the Gauri Lankesh Patrike. The seemingly minor adjustment in title had a wider significance. It brought into even sharper focus her status as a woman who had positioned herself against the dominant currents in India. Instead of denigrating the Naxalites, she attempted to get the government into dialogue with them. An op-ed she wrote for her paper in 2003, translated and republished by The New York Times in the weeks following her death, talked about the commonality and mutual curiosity of Indians and Pakistanis staring at each other across the heavily militarized border between the two nations. Younger activists who often split along lines of identity and ideology spoke of Lankesh's successful attempts to mediate between them-leftists, Muslims, Dalits, women, the indigenous—on the basis of their common antipathy to Hindutva and its dystopian blueprint for the future. Rana Ayyub, an independent journalist whose book, Gujarat Files, is an account of her undercover investigation of bureaucrats and police officials involved in the anti-Muslim pogroms of 2002, recalled in an email about her friendship with Lankesh, "She published my book Gujarat Files in Kannada despite the threats and intimidation she was subjected to."

In spite of a lack of coordination of investigators, certain patterns have emerged that connect the killings of journalists.

Although the southern state of Karnataka, of which Bangalore is the capital, is currently run by the centrist Congress Party, it remains a hotbed of activity of the Hindu right. This often manifests itself in violent forms. Two years before Lankesh's murder, the scholar M. M. Kalburgi was gunned down in his living room in Dharwad, a small city 260 miles northwest of Bangalore. Before that, in the neighboring state of Maharashtra, Govind Pansare, an author and left-wing trade unionist, and Narendra Dabholkar, a doctor and an activist, were murdered.

Like Lankesh, all three were critics of Hindutva and wrote in local languages (Lankesh and Kalburgi in Kannada; Pansare and Dabholkar in Marathi). All were killed in a similar manner, shot by motorcycle-borne, helmeted men who had used a 7.65mm pistol of the kind referred to in India as "improvised" in recognition of their local, illegal, manufacturing origins. Nevertheless, there were some efforts at the beginning to suggest that Lankesh's violent death was sui generis, with the police claiming the men they suspected of the crime were contract killers. The Congress chief minister of Karnataka, K. Siddaramaiah, also initially suggested that Lankesh's death was the work of "organized crime," but added his government was "confident of nabbing the culprits and bringing them to book at the earliest." Months later, the culprits have not been nabbed and brought to book. At the same time, the stalled state of investigations into the murders of Kalburgi, Pansare, and Dabholkar —the latter was assassinated in August 2013, more than four years ago—as well as the ongoing intimidation in India of the media, public intellectuals, activists, and ordinary citizens, raises the question of whether justice will be carried out any time soon, or at

In recent years, Lankesh's opposition to right-wing Hinduism had taken the form of claiming that the Lingayats, the community in Karnataka to which she belonged, should be given the status of a separate religion, an argument that would have angered the powerful, conservative faction of the Lingayats, the Veerashaivas, who saw themselves and, by extension, all Lingayats as part of the Hindu fold. Kalburgi, the scholar assassinated in August 2015, had also been a Lingayat. Using the 12th-century texts central to the Lingayat movement, Kalburgi too had made a similar argument about Lingayats being quite distinct from caste-based Hinduism. After receiving threats, he had been provided with police protection. Fifteen days after he asked his bodyguards to be withdrawn, he was killed.

"Lingayats have been recruited as the BJP's largest voting bloc," Raghu Karnad, an editor at the nonprofit news site The Wire who was friendly with Lankesh, tells me in an email, making the issue especially controversial in the run-up to Karnataka's state assembly elections in May. Karnad, who first met Lankesh in person at a vigil for Kalburgi, thinks it was this nexus of local and national politics that led to Lankesh's death. "A declaration that Lingayats are a minority religion is the single worst thing that could happen to the BJP, when it was planning to eliminate the Congress in Karnataka."

ICYMI: "Suddenly, the car jerks back as a fiery explosion rips through the front seats"

Yet whatever specific combination was involved, the broad finger of suspicion points, inexorably, to members of the Hindu right, people determined to eliminate those it considers its ideological enemies, stubbornly standing in the way of India as a Hindu nation. Pansare and Dabholkar, who had been assassinated in the neighboring state of Maharashtra, were not involved specifically in the Lingayat question. They were part of what is referred to as the rationalist tradition of southern and western India, strongly committed to a scientific temperament, debunking superstition and the power of godmen and gurus, and opposed to both the political violence of Hindu majoritarianism as well as its social practice of enforcing caste and gender hierarchy. Pansare had promoted intercaste marriages. Dabholkar had been attempting to get the state government to introduce a law banning superstitious practices. His death finally provoked the government into action, and in December 2013, it passed the astonishing-sounding "Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and Other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act."

Yet the investigation of the killings of Dabholkar, Pansare, and Kalburgi remained tardy, often at cross purposes. The inquiry into Dabholkar's killing, the oldest of the four cases, was botched by the Maharashtra Police and transferred, through the orders of the Bombay High Court, to the Central Bureau of Investigation, a federal agency. The Maharashtra Police continues, however, to investigate the Pansare killing, while the Karnataka Police handles the Kalburgi and Lankesh killings. The National Investigation Agency, a federal counter-terrorism body, is also involved. The involvement of different police agencies, with coordination required across bureaucratic boundaries, may be one of the factors responsible for the slow pace of the investigations. Abhay Nevagi, who has been representing the Dabholkar, Pansare, and Kalburgi families pro bono in a public interest litigation urging the Bombay High Court to demand accountability from the investigating bodies, says that there have been 24 court hearings to date.

And yet, in spite of the lack of coordination, cross-communication, and perhaps even unwillingness of the investigating bodies to dig very deep or very far, certain patterns have emerged that connect all four killings. According to the ballistic report of the Karnataka police, which looked at the bullets fired in the assassinations, two 7.65mm pistols were used in the killing of Pansare in February 2015. One of those pistols matched with the single weapon used to kill Dabholkar in August 2013, while the other matched with the weapon used to kill Kalburgi in August 2015. "The CBI laboratory has confirmed these matches," Nevagi tells me. Now, reports from the forensic labs in Bangalore appear to have confirmed that the weapon used to kill Pansare and Kalburgi was also the weapon used to murder Lankesh. A Bangalore-based reporter who did not wish to be identified told me his own sources in the Karnataka police had confirmed this match as well.

The suspects around these linked pistols are members of a shadowy Hindu organization called the Sanatan Sanstha (SS), with headquarters in Goa, a state bordering Maharashtra and Karnataka. Two members of the SS, Vinay Pawar and Sarang Akolkar, are suspected of being the gunmen in the Pansare and Dabholkar cases. They are also wanted in connection with a bomb blast in a Goa marketplace in 2009 where two other members of the SS died—this explains the involvement of the counter-terrorism NIA—but the government has so far been unable to trace them. Two other SS members were also arrested for involvement in the Dabholkar and Pansare murders, a doctor called Vinay Tawade and a man called Samir Gaikwad, with the latter currently out on bail.

The SS has responded to the charges by parading 31 lawyers at a court hearing and threatening on social media to sue media organizations. One of its websites claims it "exposed corrupt practices of Comrade Pansare and Dr Dabholkar." Dabholkar's son, Hamid, however, noted in his affidavit to the Bombay High Court that his father's photograph had been displayed on the SS website before the murder with a "red cross across his face."

Lankesh was the third journalist killed in India in 2017, but not the last. Even as I spoke on the phone to Prasad about her death, he was on his way to Agartala, capital of the northeastern state of Tripura, to cover the murder of a cable television reporter who had been killed during a political demonstration. Tripura, like Karnataka, holds assembly elections this year, and the BJP is also a prime contender.

In other states on the frontline of armed conflicts between the government and the local population, such as Kashmir and Chattisgarh, it is dangerous to be a journalist even when there are no elections on the horizon. Under the pretenses of protecting national security, soldiers and police personnel (not to mention gangsters and vigilantes) intimidate media critical of government policies with complete impunity. In Kashmir, the government regularly shuts down social media, television channels, and newspapers. Of the 45 attacks on journalists in India recorded in 2017 by The Hoot, six were in Kashmir. In Chattisgarh, where mining companies, encouraged by the state and paramilitary forces, are facing off against indigenous populations and Naxalite guerrilla forces, journalists face dangers ranging from being denied hotel rooms and their phones being tapped to threats and arbitrary arrests by the police.

Journalists, however, are not the only ones under threat, as the killings of Kalburgi and the rationalists make clear. Sometimes, it appears as if the enemy is information itself, along with transparency, exposure, critical thinking—anything and everything that might be seen as characteristic of a free, open society. In the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, in a scandal involving admission to medical colleges that implicated the top BJP officials in the state, including the chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, more than 40 whistleblowers, accused, and witnesses—doctors, medical students, policemen, and civil servants—turned up mysteriously dead over a period of three years. Ironically, national media took notice of the case, known as the Vyapam scam, only in 2015 when Akshay Singh, a television reporter investigating the death of a 19-year-old medical student—a death that had been passed off by the police as a suicide in spite of the strangulation marks on her body—himself collapsed and died in the middle of an interview with the student's family.

The Vyapam deaths, at least, sparked a brief phase of outrage within India's mainstream media. But this was an exception. More recently, the national media has largely refused to touch two recent stories involving Amit Shah, president of the BJP and Modi's consigliere. In October, The Wire reported that a company owned by Shah's son, Jay Shah, had increased its revenues from approximately \$780 in 2014/2015 to \$12.5 million the year following Modi's election. A year later, the company ceased business altogether. Their scoop received scant attention from other English and Hindi outlets.

The same was true of an article in the Delhi-based magazine *Caravan* in November 2017 about the suspicious circumstances surrounding the death of Brijgopal Harkishan Loya, a 48-year-old judge. Apparently a healthy man, Loya was said to have died suddenly of a heart attack on December 1, just weeks before he was scheduled to try Shah in a case about an extrajudicial execution that had taken place in Gujarat under his watch as home minister. An unknown functionary of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Organization (RSS), the mass organization that serves as the fountainhead of the Hindu right, helpfully turned up out of nowhere to contact Loya's family and explain that the body was being sent to them for funeral rites. Less than a month later, Shah was acquitted by the judge who took over the case from



The Hindu right has in recent years been associated with lynchings, riots, bomb blasts, threats of rape, and incarceration of anyone critical of its sectarian idea of India. (Photo by Debajyoti Chakraborty/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

The caution of the national media can in part be explained by pressure and intimidation. The Wire was served with a criminal defamation suit by lawyers for Jay Shah, with the court issuing a gag order in the case until the trial is complete. A CBI raid was ordered last June on the residence of the owners of NDTV, a television channel perceived as being critical of the BJP. The same channel was forced off the air for 24 hours in November 2016 as punishment for allegedly revealing strategic details about an antiterror operation. Yet external pressure is only a partial explanation for the complacence of the national media, which from the owners down to editorial staff often seems to be a willing participant in the project of Hindu nationalism.

Many of the journalists I interviewed for this story had been forced out from earlier positions when articles they wrote or published ran afoul of the Hindu right. Prasad stepped down from Outlook in 2016 because a report he had published had resulted in a defamation lawsuit filed by a BJP functionary. He left voluntarily, he tells me, out of respect for the owners who had come under immense pressure. The story, a five-part investigation painstakingly reported over three months by independent journalist Neha Dixit, detailed the trafficking of 31 indigenous girls, ages 3 to 11, by the RSS, ostensibly for the purpose of Hinduizing them. Hartosh Singh Bal, the political editor of Caravan who published the Loya story only after it was brought to him by a journalist who had it turned down at the magazine he worked for, was fired from his previous job at Open magazine just before the 2014 election that brought Modi and the BJP to power. He was seen as being too critical of the BJP, he told me, and has since taken his previous employers to court for being dismissed without being given a reason.

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Lankesh's work and life take on even greater significance against this wider context. By most accounts, she and her tabloid were struggling by the time of her death. Its circulation was low, somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000. She published textbooks and nonfiction to finance her paper, and her own English writing subsidized her Kannada journalism. But in November 2016, her column for *Bangalore Mirror* was canceled, reducing her income even further.

Friends and associates of Lankesh mention her calls, often connected to efforts to raise money for the paper. She had stopped paying her insurance premiums, Karnad wrote in a tribute published by *n+1* shortly after her death. The house she lived in, Lankesh's sister Kavitha tells me, had been a gift to her from their mother. Prasad, who blogged about Lankesh in the immediate aftermath of her killing, wrote that Lankesh had called him in April and said that she had only enough money left to cover a month's expenses. The sudden cancellation of large denomination banknotes by the Modi government in November 2016 had devastated newsstand sales which her publication depended on. "When her end came, the ignition was on in Toyota's cheapest offering in India," Prasad wrote.

If there was this, a steady erosion of the material conditions of her journalism, there were also the shock waves consisting of lawsuits, threats, and character assassination. In 2016, Lankesh was found guilty by a lower court in a defamation case filed by two BJP politicians who had been accused, in an article published in 2008, of defrauding a jeweler. "Hope other journos take note," the head of the BJP's information and technology tweeted after the verdict. Lankesh felt she was being targeted for her politics and intended to challenge the verdict.

The virulence did not ease up after her death. Because she was buried rather than cremated, in keeping with Lingayat practices, there were attempts to argue that she was Christian, as if this justified her killing. A man from Gujarat describing himself as a "garment manufacturer" and "Hindu Nationalist," one of 1,779 accounts followed at the time by Modi, tweeted, "One bitch dies a dog's death all the puppies cry in the same tune." Another man posted on Facebook, "Not an iota of sympathy for Lankesh, and the killers should have shredded her body with bullets and even blasted apart her apartment." He also issued a hit list demanding that five women, all publicly visible authors, journalists, and commentators with politics ranging from liberal to left-wing, also be killed.

There is no reason to believe these comments, and the people who make them, are anomalies. The Hindu right, in the run up to the 2014 elections, popularized the term "presstitute," a word that captures perfectly its loathing of a free press as well as the underclass, marginalized women who make a living as sex workers. It remains a depressingly popular hashtag on Indian social media, accompanied by demented rants and fake news attempting to incite violence against its enemies.

The final issue of Gauri Lankesh Patrike had, in fact, been called 
"In the Age of False News," with an editorial by Lankesh that called 
out the Hindu right and its "lie factories." She had noted the 
proliferation of rumors and right-wing abuse, and the deliberate 
stoking of violence, including by troll farms that target women, 
religious minorities, and people of opposing ideologies. There is no 
doubt the Hindu right is at the forefront of this.

Yet the possibility that the Sanatan Sanstha (SS), a relatively recent entrant into the fold of right-wing Hinduism, might have been behind the murders of Lankesh and the others, raises an even more disturbing possibility. It suggests that under the tutelage of the BJP, a model of entrepreneurial Hindutva has been unleashed, with new organizations that carry out independent acts of violence, though with the tacit support and encouragement of establishment Hindutva. Dhirendra Jha, a political journalist with the news site Scroll and author of the book Shadow Armies: Fringe Organizations and Foot Soldiers of Hindutva, notes that Hindu right groups like the SS are connected to their parent organization and yet are not "direct projections." The SS, set up as a charitable trust in 1991, was founded by Jayant Balaji Athavale. Beginning as a hypnotherapist in Britain in the seventies, Athavale transformed himself first into the founding guru of the SS before achieving, in 2015, an even more remarkable transformation: He became, Jha's book notes, a living god as manifested by his "hair turning golden; divine particles falling from his body; the symbol of OM appearing on his fingernails, forehead and tongue; and various fragrances from his body." The seizure of psychotropic drugs from an SS ashram complex in Maharashtra in September 2016—in quantities, Dabholkar's son, a psychiatrist, noted in his affidavit to the Bombay High Court, "only required by a mental hospital"—adds to the perception that the group has many of the characteristics of a cult.

The larger ambition of the SS, however, is the establishment of a Hindu Rashtra or Hindu Nation by 2023, which suggests the point where cult and Hindutva converge, where the shadow world of assassinations meets the realm of electoral politics. "The choice of the date," Jha says, "seems to be connected to the assumption that Modi will win the election in 2019 and give them another five years to achieve their target, around 2023 or 2024."

According to those close to the investigation into Lankesh's killing, there are signs the police may be close to solving the crime. "They are looking at a little more evidence," Lankesh's sister Kavitha tells me. If so, it will be a welcome change from the stasis that seems to have infected the investigations into other slain critics of Hindutva. But will solving the Lankesh case offer answers or will it open up further questions?

Because whoever the killers turn out to be, Lankesh's death has to be attributed to more than the men who pulled the trigger and rode the motorcycles, or even those shadowy figures who planned the assassination. She was killed by the culture of impunity promoted by India's Hindu right, and that goes not just all the way up to the heads of states and political leaders but also includes the complacent media, the talking heads who rationalize Hindutva, as well as, most distressingly, a broad swath of Hindu society—mostly well-to-do, urban, professional, upper-caste—that gives this violence its wider base, whether by choosing to ignore it or by actively cheering on the violence.

There is no police force in the world that can address such widespread social and political malaise. Perhaps, all that is available is what Lankesh herself did, the forging of connections with and between people, and giving importance to politics, and ideas, and words. Kavitha tells me she asked her sister to act a small part in *Summer Holidays*, a Kannada children's film she directed and is set to be released this summer. "She played an activist," Kavitha says, laughing. "She was very good at it."