

# UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the Freedom of Expression

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We thank Ms. Irene Khan, and the entire UN team behind this initiative to explore the link between freedom of expression and accomplishing UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Eight years ago, 17 SDGs were endorsed by member states of the UN. Since then, the collaboration between UN, the private sector, humanitarian sector, and the academic community has been vital to making progress on these goals. The freedom to investigate, to analyze and to critique lie at the core of this progress, and India is at a precarious point in history with respect to this freedom. Several of India's prominent [social scientists, academics, students, journalists, and activists](#) have been jailed and are being tortured. Spaces to exchange ideas are rapidly shrinking with [new social media laws](#), lack of transparency in funding/withdrawal of support for academic conferences, and putting scholars behind bars despite lack of evidence.

Nevertheless, the country has made progress in the right direction and the United Nation's SDG framework has helped guide the allocation of national resources to the common good. We can substantiate the importance of freedom of expression to accomplishing SDGs precisely because independent media to some extent is still allowed to operate in India today. This freedom cannot be taken for granted, and we later provide examples of it being under attack.

This document proceeds as follows: We begin with an executive summary of our views, followed by answers to selected questions asked in the formal request. Additional supplementary materials have been attached in the email correspondence.



## Executive Summary

We would like to comment on the highlighted goals in the image below. The yellow box suggests mixed progress, and the red boxes indicate SDGs that are adversely impacted by the lack of freedom of expression in India.



*Ref. Picture taken from <https://www.un.org/en/sustainable-development-goals>*

India has made great progress in [eliminating diseases](#), in helping the world battle COVID 19 by large scale manufacturing and distribution of vaccines, and has committed to [eliminating tuberculosis](#) by 2025. However, citizens of India have not been equal beneficiaries to health services. On March 24, 2020, the Government of India announced a complete lockdown to meet the Covid crisis, giving only four hours' notice. This left the vast majority of people who survive on daily earnings, without work and even food. It led to a large scale forced migration of workers from the city to their village homes on foot.

Simultaneously, we have been seeing worrying signs of India promoting pseudoscientific practices in medicine. There is a trend towards promoting unscientific casteist health practices that are claimed will produce children with "higher intellectual" capabilities' through the consumption of cow products. This is dangerous for both maternal and infant [health](#).

In 2020, the Indian Medical Association organized strikes across the country protesting the Government's notification allowing [ayurvedic surgeons](#) to perform surgery. A different example, relating to COVID 19 was when the Government introduced a protocol



recommending Indian butter and herbs as treatment for COVID 19, dismaying several [Indian doctors and scientists](#).

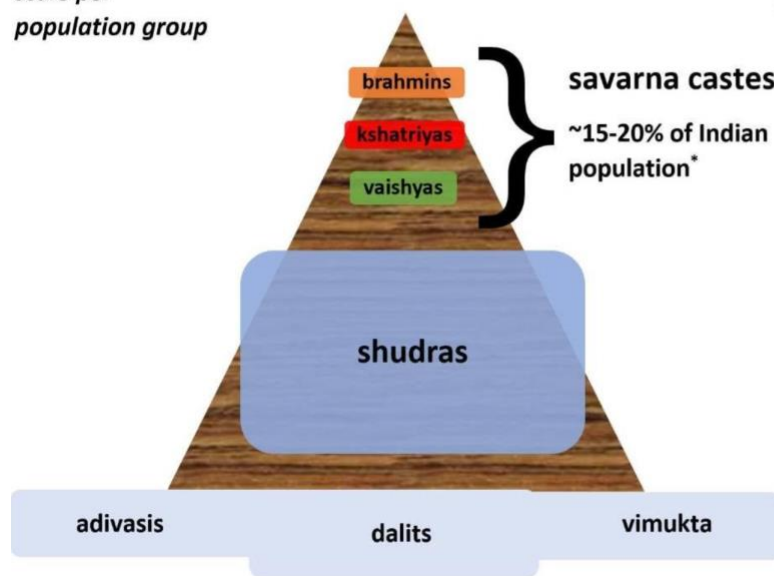
It can probably be argued that BJP's commitment to Ayurveda can cause future problems, especially if their use is mandated and criticism is barred. In the current political climate, freedom of speech in India cannot be taken for granted.

SDG 1 and 2 are interconnected. The poverty rate of India had been [declining](#) until 2018. Most likely, so did hunger, although we have not found post-pandemic statistics for this specific quantity.

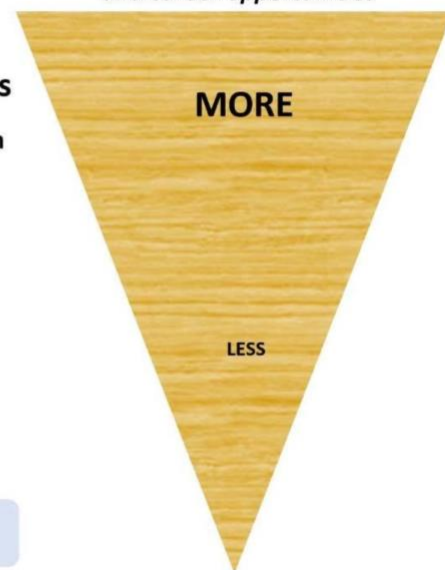
There are troubling trends in the quality of education in the last few years, adversely impacting SDG 4. The Government has tried to meddle with [doctoral dissertations](#), bans books shedding light on the economics and [political history of caste](#) (Indian analogue of race), and has tried to impose pseudo-scientific "[cow science exam](#)" on students of higher education.

While Asia's richest man comes from India, 80% of India's population is significantly poorer. Extreme poverty in India cannot be eradicated without understanding how caste dynamics play out in India. Exploring these dynamics, and translating this understanding to concrete policy proposals, faces significant resistance from the Indian government. Academics and students are being jailed, tortured, or exiled from India. To take just one example, [Stan Swamy](#) a Jesuit priest, who had for three decades worked with the struggles of Adivasi communities in Central India against the take-over of their lands and livelihoods, died in custody at the age of 84.

*Boxes are approximately to scale per population group*



*Access and ownership to resources such as land and career opportunities*



References: Human development in India, challenges for a society in transition.

[http://www.vanneman.umd.edu/vita/book\\_contents.pdf](http://www.vanneman.umd.edu/vita/book_contents.pdf)

Equality labs: Caste Survey <https://www.equalitylabs.org/castesurvey/#what-is-caste>

Ternary societies and colonialism, the case of India, pp. 334-345

<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.4159/9780674245075-010/html?lang=en>



SDG 16, “Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions” is directly related to freedom of expression, as the detainment of political prisoners is inherently unjust. In 1999, Amnesty International reported that [thousands of political prisoners](#) and prisoners of conscience were detained without trial, while hundreds died from inhumane prison conditions. In 2002, the Government passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act ([POTA](#)), which enabled arrest for up to 180 days in the absence of evidence and a scope for a trial. The POTA has transformed to a modern and more brutal version called [UAPA](#) (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), which has extended the 180-day period of detention to an arbitrary number of years. Under this law, numerous academics, anti-caste activists, students and journalists have been arrested since 2014. The number of political prisoners under UAPA have been [increasing](#) in the last 7 years. According to the Union Government, the number of under-trial prisoners [doubled](#) between 2016 and 2020. Their number is somewhere between 6000-10,000 but there is no rigorous statistics on this information today.



## Answers to selected questions:

- 1. In your view, how does the right to freedom of opinion and expression contribute to the achievement of the SDGs? Please provide examples, where possible, with concrete data relating to impact. Please also mention relevant laws, policies and other measures.**

The right to freedom of opinion and expression, and simply the right to *think* are central to all the SDGs endorsed by the UN. SDG 1, 2, and 6 aim at eliminating hunger, poverty and providing water and sanitation to *all*. These goals provide the foundation for economic development (SDG 8). Economic development does not reach all members of a society when the society is stratified. In India, poverty is correlated with caste denomination. In rural and urban households, the [risk of poverty](#) is the highest among members of lower castes and Muslims in India.

UN's SDG 4 calls for ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all". Within the framework of this goal, the [Johannesburg Plan of Implementation together with the Dakar Framework for Action on Education](#) aimed at eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2015. In the Indian cultural context, caste disparity adds an additional dimension to the problem of inequality. Despite having the same education, members of lower castes do not get the same returns and are not able to rise to the same level of household-consumption rates compared to higher caste members of the society (<https://doi.org/10.1080/21665095.2014.967877>).

To tackle caste-based hierarchies, the Government of India had implemented affirmative action policies soon after the independence of India in 1947. However, these policies were not able to achieve equal dignity for all. 80% of India belongs to members with lower caste backgrounds who own very little; many of whom are treated with very little [dignity](#). Economists and scholars such as [Anand Teltumbde](#), who challenge how affirmative action policies are implemented, are put behind bars, preventing improved results and challenging the achievement of SDG4.

- 2. Are there restrictions or other challenges to freedom of expression or access to information that affect the delivery of public services and achievement of economic, social and cultural rights in your country?**

Challenges to access to information and access to basic amenities pose two different challenges to delivering public services to poor communities. With regards to access to information, consider the Ayushman Health insurance scheme, which is a welfare program for the poorest of the poor. This scheme requires a national ID card (the Aadhar card), and well as a mobile phone. The state has set up



local booths to help *send* applications for the health insurance scheme, but to follow up on the application, applicants later need to log on online using a password which is sent to their phone. Oxfam India reports that the literacy rate of India is about 70%, but it is much lower among marginalized communities who are supposed to benefit the most from this scheme. For example, less than 40% of [Dalit](#) “Untouchable” women in the state of Bihar are literate. This poses a monumental challenge to access to public services when most needed.

**2 a) Which groups of people are most affected by these restrictions and in what ways?**

The most affected groups in India are the Dalits (lowest caste citizens of India), Adivasis (Indigenous Indians), Muslims and Christians (religious minorities on India). An example of challenges to freedom of expression affecting the delivery of public services (education), is the [Burka Ban](#) and [inhumane treatment](#) of Dalit children at school. The ban on burkas on university campuses was initiated in the State of Karnataka, which had direct consequences on women’s right to education. Dalit students often face direct discrimination at school, for example when Dalit students were allegedly [forced to clean toilets](#) in a Tamil Nadu school.

Lastly, an example of challenges to achievement of economic, social and cultural rights in India with regards to the indigenous communities is the threat of displacement in the name of development or [defense](#).

**2 b) What measures would you recommend to address their problems?**

In addition to UN’s ongoing measures, we suggest the following other actions:

- Observe International day for eliminating caste discrimination, like the one that exists for [race](#).
- UN can find more ways to directly work with Dalit and indigenous peoples from South Asia.
- UN can help steer a dialogue on regulating labour conditions. Several of the members of the marginalized communities work in manufacturing industry (such as clothes factories and mines), and the jobs created by multinationals can provide a gateway out of poverty in the host country. However, labour conditions are poor and often not regulated in the host country, thus not helping with upward mobility.
- UN can initiate a report on the status of Academic Freedom in Indian universities.

**3. What have digital companies done to promote safe and uninterrupted online access to timely and pluralistic information and communications of women and poor and marginalized communities?**



The digital infrastructure of the country usually functions smoothly - until the Government sets restrictions. The ongoing row of the Government banning BBC's documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots is a case in point. [10 students](#) were suspended at a university in Rajasthan for watching this documentary; 8 of whom are Muslims, and 1 is Christian. Large digital companies, such as Youtube and Twitter, have complied with the Government and [censors references to the documentary](#).

**4. How can information and communication technology companies better engage with governments and communities to promote sustainable development?**

The IT sector can directly engage with the Government and the community to design education programs to advance computer literacy. There is a need to set up education centers outside of the school system to reach a wider population. With regards to censorship demands from the Indian government, companies have a responsibility to challenge unjust demands, instead of meekly complying.

**5. What role does the media play in promoting sustainable development in your country? What challenges and threats do journalists face in accessing public information or reporting on or criticizing development policies?**

Media serves as an independent check that the Government actually *is* working towards sustainable development. The following links highlight some of the challenges and threats faced by Indian journalists:

- Threats to 2005's Right to Information Act: This act enabled journalists or any other citizen to obtain data and other information from the Government to ensure transparency and accountability. There have been recent amendments that give Government officials more power to not share data, and allow companies to be exempt from certain categories pertaining to data sharing: <https://thewire.in/rights/activists-information-commissioners-fear-data-protection-bill-will-crush-rti-act-provisions>
- Recently, there have been demands by the Government to reveal journalists' anonymous sources, which would stifle whistleblowing: <https://www.newslaundry.com/2023/01/04/could-indias-new-data-protection-bill-force-journalists-to-reveal-their-sources>  
<https://thewire.in/media/delhi-cbi-court-journalists-sources-confidential>
- There have been changes to data protection laws in India making State surveillance easier  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/23/india-data-protection-bill-fosters-state-surveillance>.



- The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has proposed an amendment allowing the Government to decide what is fake news: <https://internetfreedom.in/meity-proposes-another-amendment-to-the-it-rules-pibs-fact-check-team-will-be-able-to-take-down-fake-news/>

**6. What do you believe are the key issues in relation to sustainable development in addition to or instead of the bullet points above that deserve attention by this mandate?**

Digitalization, and advances in the usage of computer technology is fundamental to sustainable development, but the IT landscape needs to be threaded with care. In an environment where policies cannot be challenged in a democratic manner, technology can also be used to steal from the marginalized that they need most for sustainable development. A case in point is the ongoing land digitization in India:

<https://article-14.com/post/how-gujarat-s-rural-land-digitisation-programme-was-botched-starting-a-fresh-trail-of-land-litigation--63929cdfce158>

Please see attached articles for further references.

**7. Do you have any specific recommendations that you think the Special Rapporteur should make in her report?**

- The UN could facilitate a solidarity meeting among marginalized communities of South Asia, to give a voice to and empower communities facing the same struggles.
- The UN can put pressure for a country wide caste census to help with correlational studies involving caste, gender and sustainable development.
- The Special Rapporteur could pay special attention to the role of SDGs and Trade agreements made with India. Please see supplementary material (Trade Justice Movement report) for more details.

**8. Additional supporting materials, such as reports, academic studies, and other types of background materials are welcome and may be annexed to the submission.**

Supplementary reports are included in the same folder as the letter. Thank you once again for the opportunity to express our views.

In solidarity,  
Isha Savani,  
InSAF India collective

