

Misconceptions on media freedom



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In contemporary India, “press freedom” is invoked with a striking duality, as a constitutional guarantee on one hand and as a fragile ideal under constant threat on the other. Pamela Philipose’s *Framing the Media: Government Policies, Law, and Freedom of the Press in India* unsettles this familiar narrative by posing a more difficult question: Has the Indian media ever been free in any meaningful sense? What does it mean to speak of a “free press” in a context where both the state and the market exercise pervasive influence over what can be said, shown and circulated?

Tracing the entangled histories of

state regulation, legal frameworks, and market expansion, Ms Philipose shows that media freedom in India has always been conditional and negotiated, shaped by enduring structures of power. Moving across decades of policy shifts and legal developments, she maps how media in India has been continuously “framed”, not only by governments but also by the intertwined logic of law, capital, and technological change. Rather than treating press freedom as a given democratic ideal that comes under periodic threat, the book situates it within a longer history of regulation, legal contestation, and economic transformation. In doing so, Ms Philipose argues that the contours of media freedom in India have been shaped as much by policy and law as by the imperatives of the market.

Ms Philipose’s account moves across the long arc of India’s media history, from the regulatory frameworks of the colonial period to the complexities of the contemporary digital landscape. The book is organised around key shifts in

technology and governance, tracking the transitions from print to broadcasting and from state-controlled media to liberalised, market-driven ecosystems. In doing so, it brings into view the dense web of policies, judicial interventions, and institutional arrangements that have shaped media practice over time. Moments often treated as exceptional, such as the Emergency, appear here not as aberrations but as part of a longer continuum of regulation and control. By placing these developments within a single analytical frame, Ms Philipose highlights how each phase of media expansion has been accompanied by new forms of oversight, constraint, and negotiation.

At the heart of the book lies a refusal to treat the state as the sole site of control. Instead, Ms Philipose situates media freedom within a broader field shaped by the convergence of state power, legal regimes, and corporate capital. Particularly in the post-liberalisation period, the expansion of private

media and the growing dependence on advertising revenue reconfigure the terms of editorial autonomy. Ownership patterns, cross-media consolidation, and the increasing alignment between political and corporate interests emerge as central to understanding what can be reported and how. The result is not simply external censorship but a more diffuse and internalised set of constraints, where market imperatives and regulatory pressures operate together to shape news production. In this account, the limits of press freedom are not imposed from outside alone, but are embedded within the very structure of the media industry itself.

The book’s engagement with the digital turn is particularly significant in this regard. Early narratives of the internet as an inherently democratising space, capable of expanding access and diversifying voices, are treated with caution. Ms Philipose shows how digital media



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has, instead, introduced new and more complex forms of regulation, from intermediary liability rules to expanding regimes of surveillance and content control. The shift is not simply from censorship to freedom, but from visible forms of state restriction to more diffused mechanisms of governance that operate through platforms, data infrastructures, and legal ambiguity. As state oversight deepens and platform corporations acquire unprecedented power over the circulation of information, the terrain of media freedom is fundamentally reconfigured. What emerges is a media environment where control is exercised not only through prohibition, but through the continuous shaping of visibility, reach, and legitimacy.

Framing the Media is a careful and necessary account of how media freedom in India has been historically produced through the interplay of multiple factors. Its strength lies in refusing cel-

ebratory narratives of a once free press now in decline, and instead showing that constraint has been constitutive of the media landscape across time. At the same time, the book leaves certain questions underexplored. The conditions of media labour, marked by precarity, contractualisation, and deepening hierarchies of gender and caste, remain largely outside its frame. This absence is significant, for the limits of press freedom are not only institutional but also embedded in the everyday organisation of work within newsrooms and media industries. Who gets to speak, whose voices are amplified, and whose labour sustains the production of news are questions that demand closer attention. Even so, Ms Philipose’s work offers an important foundation for such inquiries. It compels us to move beyond narrow defences of press freedom towards a more expansive understanding of the political and economic structures that shape it. In doing so, the book remains both timely and necessary, even as it invites further critical engagement.

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