

## **INDIA**

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### **The dead begin to speak up in India**

Kashmir is one of two war zones in India from which no news must come. But those in unmarked graves will not be silenced

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A Kashmiri farmer walks past unmarked graves in Bimyar, west of Srinagar, in 2009. Photograph: Mukhtar Khan/AP

At about 3am, on 23 September, within hours of his arrival at the Delhi airport, the US radio-journalist [David Barsamian was deported](#). This dangerous man, who produces independent, free-to-air programmes for public radio, has been visiting India for 40 years, doing such dangerous things as learning Urdu and playing the sitar.

Barsamian has published book-length interviews with public intellectuals such as Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Ejaz Ahmed and Tariq Ali (he even makes an appearance as a young, bell-bottom-wearing interviewer in [Peter Wintonick's documentary film](#) on Chomsky and Edward Herman's book [Manufacturing Consent](#)).

On his more recent trips to India he has done a series of radio interviews with activists, academics, film-makers, journalists and writers (including me). Barsamian's work has taken him to Turkey, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Pakistan. He has never been deported from any of these countries. So why does the world's largest democracy feel so threatened by this lone, sitar-playing, Urdu-speaking, left-leaning, radio producer? Here is how Barsamian himself explains it:

**"It's all about Kashmir.** I've done work on Jharkand, Chattisgarh, West Bengal, Narmada dams, farmer suicides, the Gujarat pogrom, and the Binayak Sen case. **But it's Kashmir that is at the heart of the Indian state's concerns.** The official narrative must not be contested."

News reports about his deportation quoted official "sources" as saying that Barsamian had "violated his visa norms during his visit in 2009-10 by indulging in professional work while holding a tourist visa". Visa norms in India are an interesting peep-hole into the government's concerns and predilections. Using the tattered old banner of the "war on terror", the home ministry has decreed that scholars and

academics invited for conferences and seminars require security clearance before they will be given visas. Corporate executives and businessmen do not.

So somebody who wants to invest in a dam, or build a steel plant or a buy a [bauxite mine](#) is not considered a security hazard, whereas a scholar who might wish to participate in a seminar about, say, displacement or communalism or rising malnutrition in a globalised economy, is. Terrorists with bad intentions have probably guessed that they are better off wearing Prada suits and pretending they want to buy a mine than admitting that they want to attend a seminar.

David Barsamian did not travel to India to buy a mine or to attend a conference. He just came to talk to people. The complaint against him, according to "official sources" is that he had reported on events in Jammu and Kashmir during his last visit to India and that these reports were "not based on facts". Remember Barsamian is not a reporter, he's a man who has conversations with people, mostly dissidents, about the societies in which they live.

Is it illegal for tourists to talk to people in the countries they visit? Would it be illegal for me to travel to the US or Europe and write about the people I met, even if my writing was "not based on facts"? Who decides which "facts" are correct and which are not? Would Barsamian have been deported if the conversations he recorded had been in praise of the impressive turnouts in Kashmir's elections, instead of about daily life in the densest military occupation in the world (an estimated [600,000 actively deployed armed personnel](#) for a population of 10 million people)?

David Barsamian is not the first person to be deported over the Indian government's sensitivities over Kashmir. [Professor Richard Shapiro](#), an anthropologist from San Francisco, was deported from Delhi airport in November 2010 without being given any reason. It was probably a way of punishing his partner, [Angana Chatterji](#), who is a co-convenor of the international peoples' tribunal on human rights and justice which first chronicled the existence of unmarked mass graves in Kashmir.

In September 2011, May Aquino, from the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances (Afid), Manila, was deported from Delhi airport. Earlier this year, on 28 May, the outspoken Indian democratic rights activist, [Gautam Navlakha](#), was deported to Delhi from Srinagar airport. Farook Abdullah, the former chief minister of Kashmir, justified the deportation, saying that writers like Navlakha and myself had no business entering Kashmir because "Kashmir is not for burning".

Kashmir is in the process of being isolated, cut off from the outside world by two concentric rings of border patrols – in Delhi as well as Srinagar – as though it's already a free country with its own visa regime. Within its borders of course, it's open season for the government and the army. The art of controlling Kashmiri journalists and ordinary people with a deadly combination of bribes, threats, blackmail and a whole spectrum of unutterable cruelty has evolved into a twisted art form.

While the government goes about trying to silence the living, the dead have begun to speak up. Perhaps it was insensitive of Barsamian to plan a trip to Kashmir just when the state human rights commission was finally shamed into officially acknowledging the existence of [2,700 unmarked graves from three districts in Kashmir](#). Reports of thousands of other graves are pouring in from other districts.

Perhaps it is insensitive of the unmarked graves to embarrass the government of India just when India's record is due for review before the UN human rights council.

Apart from Dangerous David, who else is the world's largest democracy afraid of? There's young [Lingaram Kodopi](#) an [adivasi](#) from Dantewada in the state of Chhattisgarh, who was arrested on 9 September. The police say they caught him red-handed in a market place, while he was handing over protection money from Essar, an iron-ore mining company, to the banned Communist party of India (Maoist). His aunt Soni Sori says that he was picked up by plainclothes policemen in a white Bolero car from his grandfather's house in Palnar village.

Interestingly, even by their own account, the police arrested Lingaram but allowed the Maoists to escape. This is only the latest in a series of bizarre, almost hallucinatory accusations they have made against Lingaram and then withdrawn. His real crime is that he is the only journalist who speaks Gondi, the local language, and who knows how to negotiate the remote forest paths in Dantewada the other war zone in India from which no news must come.

Having signed over vast tracts of indigenous tribal homelands in central India to multinational mining and infrastructure corporations in a series of secret memorandums of understanding, the government has begun to flood the forests with hundreds of thousands of security forces. All resistance, armed as well as unarmed has been branded "Maoist" (In Kashmir they are all "jihadi elements").

As the civil war grows deadlier, hundreds of villages have been burnt to the ground. Thousands of adivasis have fled as refugees into neighbouring states. Hundreds of thousands are living terrified lives hiding in the forests. Paramilitary forces have laid siege to the forest, making trips to the markets for essential provisions and medicines a nightmare for villagers. Untold numbers of nameless people are in jail, charged with sedition and waging war on the state, with no lawyers to defend them. Very little news comes out of those forests, and there are no body counts.

So it's not hard to see why young Lingaram Kodopi poses such a threat. Before he trained to become a journalist, he was a driver in Dantewada. In 2009 the police arrested him and confiscated his Jeep. He was locked up in a small toilet for 40 days where he was pressurised to become a special police officer (SPO) in the [Salwa Judum](#), the government-sponsored vigilante army that was at the time tasked with forcing people to flee from their villages (the Salwa Judum has since been declared unconstitutional by the supreme court).

The police released Lingaram after the Gandhian activist [Himanshu Kumar](#) filed a habeas corpus petition in court. But then the police arrested Lingaram's old father and five other members of his family. They attacked his village and threatened the villagers if they sheltered him. Eventually Lingaram escaped to Delhi where friends and well-wishers got him admission into a journalism school. In April 2010 he travelled to Dantewada and escorted villagers to Delhi to give testimony at the independent peoples' tribunal about the barbarity of the Salwa Judum and the police and paramilitary forces. In his own testimony, Lingaram was sharply critical of the Maoists as well.

That did not deter the Chhattisgarh police. On 2 July 2010, the senior Maoist leader, Comrade Azad, the official spokesperson for the Maoist party, was captured and executed by the Andhra Pradesh police. Deputy Inspector General Kalluri of the Chhattisgarh police announced at a press conference that Lingaram Kodopi had been elected by the Maoist party to take over Comrade Azad's role (it was like accusing a young school child in 1936 [Yan'an](#) of being [Zhou Enlai](#)). The charge was met with such derision that the police had to withdraw it. Soon after they accused Lingaram of being the mastermind of a Maoist attack on a congress legislator in Dantewada. But oddly enough, they made no move to arrest him.

Lingaram remained in Delhi, completed his course and received his diploma in journalism. In March 2011, paramilitary forces burned down three villages in Dantewada – Tadmetla, Timmapuram and Morapalli. The Chhattisgarh government blamed the Maoists. The supreme court assigned the investigation to the Central Bureau of Investigation. Lingaram returned to Dantewada with a video camera and trekked from village to village documenting first-hand testimonies of the villagers who indicted the police. By doing this he made himself one of the most wanted men in Dantewada. On 9 September the police finally got to him.

Lingaram has joined an impressive line-up of troublesome news gatherers and disseminators in Chhattisgarh. Among the earliest to be silenced was the celebrated doctor Binayak Sen, who first raised the alarm about the crimes of the Salwa Judum as far back as 2005. He was arrested in 2007, accused of being a Maoist and sentenced to life imprisonment. After years in prison, he is out on bail now.

[Kopa Kunjam](#) was my first guide into the forest villages of Dantewada. At the time he worked with Himanshu Kumar's Vanvasi Chetna ashram, doing exactly what Lingaram tried to do much later – travelling to remote villages, bringing out the news, and carefully documenting the horror that was unfolding. In May 2009 the ashram, the last neutral shelter for journalists, writers and academics who were travelling to Dantewada, [was demolished by the Chhattisgarh government](#).

Kopa was arrested on human rights day in September 2009. He was accused of colluding with the Maoists in the murder of one man and the kidnapping of another. The case against Kopa has begun to fall apart as the police witnesses, including the man who was kidnapped, have disowned the statements they purportedly made to the police. It doesn't really matter, because in India the process is the punishment.

It could take years for Kopa to establish his innocence. Many of those who were emboldened by Kopa to file complaints against the police have been arrested too. That includes women who committed the crime of being raped. Soon after Kopa's arrest Himanshu Kumar was hounded out of Dantewada.

Eventually, here too the dead will begin to speak. And it will not just be dead human beings, it will be the dead land, dead rivers, dead mountains and dead creatures in dead forests that will insist on a hearing.

In this age of surveillance, internet policing and phone-tapping, as the clampdown on those who speak up becomes grimmer with every passing day, it's odd how India is becoming the dream destination of literary festivals. Many of these festivals are

funded by the very corporations on whose behalf the police have unleashed their regime of terror.

The Harud literary festival in Srinagar (postponed for the moment) was slated to be the newest, most exciting literary festival in India – "As the autumn leaves change colour the valley of Kashmir will resonate with the sound of poetry, literary dialogue, debate and discussions ..."

Its organisers advertised it as an "apolitical" event, but did not say how either the rulers or the subjects of a brutal military occupation that has claimed tens of thousands of lives could be "apolitical". I wonder – will the guests come on tourist visas? Will there be separate ones for Srinagar and Delhi? Will they need security clearance?

The festive din of all this spurious freedom helps to muffle the sound of footsteps in airport corridors as the deported are frog-marched on to departing planes, to mute the click of handcuffs locking around strong, warm wrists and the cold metallic clang of prison doors.

Our lungs are gradually being depleted of oxygen. Perhaps it's time use whatever breath remains in our bodies to say: "Open the bloody gates."