

# India's fearless critic

FROM THE MAGAZINE

## How a journalist became a casualty of increasing intolerance in politics

BY ROLLO ROMIG

Gauri Lankesh usually worked late on Tuesday nights.

The exuberantly leftist weekly newspaper she edited, Gauri Lankesh Patrike, went to press on Wednesdays, and she had to wrap up the articles. But on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2017, she drove home early, around 7:45 p.m.; she had an evening appointment with cable repairmen to fix her TV.

The last person she spoke to before leaving the office was Satish, the paper's

information technology manager (who goes by a single name).

At its peak, Gauri Lankesh Patrike's circulation numbered only in the high four digits, and Lankesh mostly wrote in Kannada, a regional language understood by only 3.6 percent of Indians (though in India, that is 48 million people, more than the population of Spain). But her political activism and her lively social media presence extended her reach far beyond the paper's print run. At a time of intense vitriol against the press in India, she was a fearless, sometimes reckless critic of the right-wing, Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P., which has held power in India since 2014.

Her paper was a tabloid in every sense, gleefully sensational and indifferent to decorum. But the vehemence and humor of her polemics in defense of pluralism and minority rights had made



ESHA LANKESH

**Gauri Lankesh in 2015. She was a beloved figure to the embattled opposition.**

her a beloved figure to an increasingly embattled opposition.

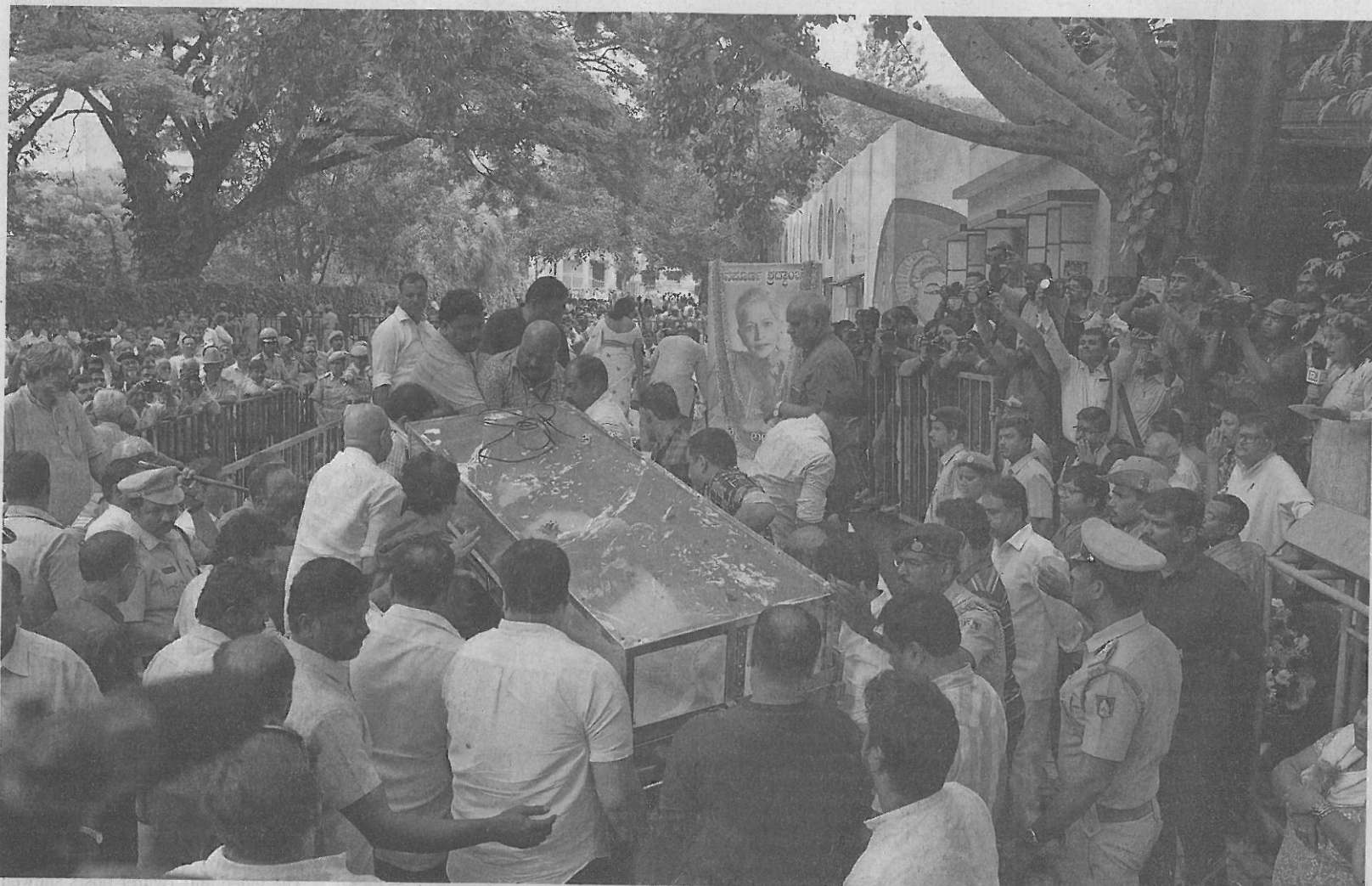
She was more vulnerable than she sounded on the page. She reminded one friend of a sparrow: bursting with noisy argument but fundamentally gentle, her

head topped with a feathery whorl of short gray hair. She was five feet and a half-inch tall — she always insisted on the half-inch, her ex-husband said — and skinny, possibly because of her heavy smoking and her tendency to work through mealtimes.

At 55, she lived alone in an unusually quiet pocket of Bangalore, the capital city of the south Indian state of Karnataka. Her lone concession to friends and family concerned about her safety was a few closed-circuit TV cameras she installed half a year earlier — cameras that captured some of what happened on the night of Sept. 5.

Just after 8 p.m. she parked her car, a compact white Toyota, at an indifferent angle, then jumped out to open the gate. From the camera footage, it appeared that she hadn't noticed the motorcycle with two riders that had followed her  
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## WORLD



MANJUNATH KIRAN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Gauri Lankesh's funeral in Bangalore after she was shot dead in 2017. About 20,000 people from all layers of Indian society attended a rally in her honor a week later in the city.

# Fearless journalism cost her life

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home. The moment she got her gate open, the motorcycle's passenger rushed up and shot her with a crude pistol. Two bullets hit her in the abdomen, one passing through her liver.

Lankesh turned to run, and the third shot missed her and struck a wall. A fourth bullet hit her in the back, passing through a lung and grazing her heart before exiting through the left cup of her bra. The whole encounter lasted about five seconds. Within a minute, the cable repairmen pulled up and found her splayed across the entryway to her house in a pool of blood.

About 20,000 people attended a Bangalore rally in her honor a week later. Her friends marveled not only at the number of supporters but at their variety: writers, students, activists, members of the marginalized Dalit and Adivasi communities, transgender women,



MANJUNATH KIRAN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

Investigating the crime scene, above, at Lankesh's Bangalore home. Below, the cover of

and lynch mobs have murdered scores of people, largely Muslims, suspected of slaughtering or selling cattle. In July of last year, a B.J.P. minister invited to his home eight men who had been convicted in such a lynching and presented them with garlands and sweets.

By the time the B.J.P. won in 2014, Lankesh had, for nearly a decade, been using her own newspaper to thrust herself into the center of local debates over Hindu nationalism. She sometimes got death threats at the office, either by phone or by mail. "She would ignore it," said Satish, her colleague. "She would say, 'Who will shoot me?' We didn't take it seriously." Like her father, she often treated political argument like sport. "She loved it," Lankesh's sister, Kavitha Lankesh, said. "She loved fighting, she loved voicing her views, she took great pleasure in standing up for people. She would make a joke saying, 'I am on the

pairmen pulled up and laid out on a stretcher, splashed across the entryway to her house in a pool of blood.

About 20,000 people attended a Bangalore rally in her honor a week later. Her friends marveled not only at the number of supporters but at their variety: writers, students, activists, members of the marginalized Dalit and Adivasi communities, transgender women, rickshaw drivers, landless farmers, Muslims, Christians. Large "I Am Gauri" demonstrations arose nationwide in outrage at the increasing attacks, rhetorical and physical, on Indian journalists. Narendra Modi, the prime minister, routinely tweets condolences after airplane crashes in foreign countries but made no comment about Lankesh's murder.

The Committee to Protect Journalists has been keeping track of 35 cases of Indian journalists murdered specifically for their work since 1992, and only two of these cases have resulted in a conviction. India's newspaper culture has long been among the most varied and vigorous in the world, which the country's free-speech laws help enable. But India has no explicit constitutional protection of freedom of the press, and the laws that do exist are easily curtailable in the interest of security, public decency or religious sentiment.

The situation has unquestionably deteriorated over the past several years — a fact that owes much to the ascent of the Bharatiya Janata Party. In the 2014 elections, the party won 282 of the 545 seats in the lower house of India's Parliament, which determines the prime ministership. The Congress party, which has led nearly every Indian government since independence, won only 44. Political pressure on journalists is nothing new in India, but the current government is the first in many years to treat them as an ideological enemy. Since he took office in 2014, Modi has not held a single news conference in India. Among B.J.P. politicians, a popular term for journalists is "presstitutes." A dispatch on Indian journalism last year by the Committee to Protect Journalists described an unprecedented climate of self-censorship and fear, reporting, "The media is in the worst state India has ever seen."

By the end of this May, national elections will determine if Modi and the B.J.P. are elected to another five years. Hostility toward journalists and opposition figures is intensifying as voting day approaches. The investigative journalist Rana Ayyub, best known for her investigation into B.J.P. complicity in religious riots (which Lankesh had published in a Kannada translation), wrote in a New York Times Op-Ed last year that she has been the target of an unrelenting online assault by right-wing activists: Her face was grafted onto a pornographic video; her home address and phone number were circulated; there were threats of gang rape.

**LANKESH'S MURDER SEEMED** to fit what was by then an unmistakable pattern of assassinations of intellectuals who opposed the fundamentalist Hindu ideology that animates the B.J.P., all of which remained unsolved. Between 2013 and 2015, three religiously freethinking Indian writers and activists were shot dead near their homes by assailants who es-



Investigating the crime scene, above, at Lankesh's Bangalore home. Below, the cover of her tabloid newspaper, Gauri Lankesh Patrike, following her murder.



caped on motorcycles: the doctor Narendra Dabholkar, in Pune; the politician Govind Pansare, in Kolhapur; and the scholar M.M. Kalburgi, in Dharwad. After Kalburgi's murder, scores of Indian writers returned their awards from the National Academy of Letters to protest both the lack of progress in the murder investigations and the B.J.P.'s silence over rising intolerance, to no effect. There was much anxious speculation over who might be the next writer to die. But few thought it would be Lankesh, in part simply because she lived in Bangalore.

Situated on a plateau at the center of India's southern triangle, Bangalore has a reputation as an easygoing, tolerant place. Bangalore reflects India's diversity — its mélange of cultures, languages, religions and histories — more than most places. It is a city that attracts migrants from all over the country. India's science research efforts have centered on Bangalore for more than a century as has, in recent decades, its information technology industry, and the city consequently has one of the world's most educated work forces. According to the Karnataka Police, a year can pass in Bangalore without a single instance of a gun used in a crime.

To many Bangaloreans, Lankesh's murder felt like the violent announcement of the end of an era — an era that had arguably sprung from the imagination of Lankesh's father, P. Lankesh. A commanding figure with huge eyeglasses and a generous mustache, Lankesh was a compulsively productive, endlessly quarrelsome English professor, fiction writer, poet, playwright, filmmaker, essayist and journalist. He dominated the cultural and political discourse in Karnataka for the 20 years in which he edited Lankesh Patrike, the tabloid he founded in 1980.

Gauri Lankesh grew up in her father's

shadow. When he died in 2000, it was unthinkable that anyone could fill his shoes — least of all his daughter, who was then barely literate in Kannada. But her family legacy proved irresistible, and she moved back to Bangalore to serve as the paper's editor.

Lankesh found she loved it. She never approached her father's literary talents in Kannada but was his equal in pluck. Her immersion in Karnataka's problems transformed her into a leftist and an activist, and Lankesh Patrike transformed with her. Its new direction led to an ideological rift with the paper's owner and publisher, her brother Indrajit. In 2005, she left the paper, and the next week she started a new tabloid of her own: Gauri Lankesh Patrike.

**THERE ARE TWO** main rival ideas of India. One idea is the pluralist, multireligious, multicultural vision on which the country was founded in 1947. The other is known as Hindutva: a fundamentalist, majoritarian movement that seeks to codify and enforce orthodox Hinduism and to define India as an explicitly Hindu country (despite the fact that India has the second-largest Muslim population in the world). The most important Hindutva organization is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or R.S.S., a powerful Hindu-nationalist paramilitary group that was founded in 1925 and reportedly has millions of members. The Hindutva groups affiliated with the RSS are known collectively as the Sangh Parivar. One of them is the Bharatiya Janata Party.

The Congress party, whose politics are generally secular and social democratic, has undoubtedly been guilty at times of suppressing the press and of condoning the slaughter of religious minorities. But many Indian liberals fear that the B.J.P.'s overwhelming victory in 2014 marks the most profound threat to India's democracy and pluralism since its founding. The B.J.P. had controlled the prime ministership before, for six years, after breaking the Congress party's longtime hold on the office in the 1998 elections, but only as part of a coalition government that required it to tamp down its hard-line positions. A B.J.P. reelection this year would be seen as a mandate to fully implement the party's ideology. In the B.J.P.'s rhetoric, being Indian is equated with being Hindu, and religious minorities are spoken of as if they were foreigners. Critics are branded as "anti-national." Advocates of a secular Indian state — which the Indian Constitution calls for in its very first sentence — are called "sickulars."

Such talk has already emboldened a surge of vigilantism. Since the B.J.P. took power, what is known as "cow protection" has become increasingly a matter of national politics — the cow holds religious importance to many Hindus —

said Satish, her colleague. "We didn't take it seriously." Like her father, she often treated political argument like sport. "She loved it," Lankesh's sister, Kavitha Lankesh, said. "She loved fighting, she loved voicing her views, she took great pleasure in standing up for people. She would make a joke, saying, 'I am on the hit list,' and she felt proud to say that."

More than once, her subjects reported her to the police for criminal defamation and libel. Such charges rarely hold up in Indian courts, but they are effective in harassing journalists because the accused must show up in court wherever the charge is filed. Lankesh's opponents would file cases all over the state. Her lawyer, Venkatesh Bubberjung, would advise Lankesh to be more careful with her words. "She'd say: 'I am going to call a scoundrel a scoundrel! It's your job to defend me,'" he said. In November 2016 she was convicted in a criminal defamation case over a story she had published eight years earlier that claimed several B.J.P. leaders had defrauded a jeweler. She was sentenced to six months in jail. (The sentence was immediately suspended, and when she was killed, she was awaiting appeal.)

I asked Venkatesh if Lankesh's rhetoric went overboard at times. "Frequently, not at times!" he said. In one example that particularly offended her opponents, in response to a campaign to mail sanitary napkins to Modi to protest a new tax on menstrual hygiene products, she suggested on Twitter that women mail napkins that had already been used.

But Lankesh had defenders among mainstream Indian liberals too, like the historian Ramachandra Guha. "There is no such thing as overboard," he insisted, pointedly paraphrasing an adage that had been a favorite of the former B.J.P. prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee: "The answer to a piece of writing is another piece of writing. It's not murdering someone."

**FOR NEARLY HALF** a year after Lankesh's murder, there were no arrests. But then, last May, the Karnataka Police's special investigation team filed a charge against a Hindutva activist named K.T. Naveen Kumar. Fifteen more suspects have been arrested and charged in the months since then; all are in jail awaiting trial and are expected to plead not guilty. The police are still searching for two more. The accused include a young utensil salesman named Parashuram Waghmare, who the police say confessed to pulling the trigger. The police also say that Waghmare wasn't familiar with Lankesh when the conspirators asked him to kill her, so they showed him YouTube videos of her speeches to persuade him to commit the murder. They gave him 10,000 rupees, or around \$150. The police suspect that the accused are part of an apparently nameless, multi-state right-wing assassination network with at least 60 members.

Narendra Modi, meanwhile, has kept his silence. He has never publicly mentioned Lankesh's name or referred to her case.

*Adapted from an article that originally appeared in The New York Times Magazine.*