

## The Question Hon'ble PM Modi Wouldn't Answer



India calls itself the world's largest democracy. But when a foreign journalist asked Indian Prime Minister about press freedom, the answer was silence. The episode reveals how media capture, digital intimidation, and fascist autocracy are reshaping India's public sphere—and why the crisis is inseparable from the insolvable global crisis of imperialism-capitalism itself.

There are moments when the crisis of imperialism-capitalism and its political superstructure reveal themselves not through wars, coups, riots, or declarations of emergency, but through silence.

That silence hung heavily in the room when Norwegian journalist Helle Lyng asked PM Modi whether he would ever begin taking critical questions from the Indian press. PM Modi did not answer. Rather he left the venue in hurry. His officials did not answer. Indian diplomats later responded with a familiar litany about yoga, vaccines, and India's global stature—but not the question itself. Yet the silence was more revealing than any official statement could have been.

Lyng's question was devastating precisely because it was ordinary. In functioning bourgeois democracies, journalists are expected to ask political leaders difficult questions every day. Accountability is not treated as an act of hostility but as the minimum expectation of public life. But in contemporary India, the simple act of questioning power has become akin to sedition or anti-national act. For nearly thirteen years of his tenure as PM, hon'ble Modiji has avoided holding an open press conference. No unscripted exchanges. No sustained questioning from independent reporters. No routine public accountability before the media. That fact alone should alarm anyone concerned with democracy. But in capitalist India, it has gradually become normalized.

The incident involving Lyng therefore was not a sideshow. It was a glimpse into the deeper transformation of capitalist India's political culture—a transformation where democracy increasingly survives as a mere spectacle while its institutions of scrutiny steadily weaken. The symbolism was impossible to ignore. India currently ranks 157 out of 180 countries on the global Press Freedom Index, while Norway ranks first. The contrast is more than statistical. It reflects two radically different understandings of democratic life.

During the advent of bourgeois democracy, press was recognized as the fourth state and journalism as a public necessity. But now in dying capitalism, what is entertained is a committed press and pliable journalism.

India's media landscape has changed dramatically over the past decades, more so in last decade. Large sections of television journalism have evolved into hyper-nationalist performance arenas where anchors function less as investigators than as ideological enforcers. Debate shows often resemble political tribunals rather than forums for democratic discussion. Independent journalists face lawsuits, raids, surveillance, online harassment, economic pressure and even incarceration. Media ownership has become concentrated among powerful corporate conglomerates deeply intertwined with the power that be. The result is not classical censorship in the old authoritarian sense. It is something more sophisticated: a culture of managed conformity.

Governments no longer need to silence every critic directly when economic pressure, digital intimidation, and manufactured outrage produce self-censorship automatically. The public sphere becomes saturated with noise but emptied of inquiry. Citizens are overwhelmed by spectacle while deprived of accountability.

This is where the Lyng episode becomes globally significant. Her question punctured the carefully constructed international image of PM Modi as the charismatic leader of a rising imperialist superpower. More importantly, it exposed the contradiction at the heart of contemporary India: a state that celebrates electoral legitimacy while systematically insulating executive power from scrutiny.

Bourgeois democracy, however, is not simply the act of orchestrating elections at specific intervals or keeping a façade of parliament. It depends upon continuous public questioning and scrutiny of the pattern of governance. Without that, elections alone become hollow rituals.

The crisis unfolding in India is part of a broader global pattern tied to the deeper instability of twenty-first-century imperialism-capitalism itself. Across the world, bourgeois democratic institutions are weakening under the pressures of inequality, oligarchic concentration, social fragmentation, and permanent economic insecurity. In moments of systemic crisis, ruling classes increasingly rely not only on economic control, engagement of coercive machinery but also cultural regimentation.

Instead of addressing unemployment, inequality, agrarian distress, or social precarity, the decadent bourgeois political system redirects public wrath and grievances toward casteist-communal-ethnic-lingual identities, narrow sectarian views and fanned up communal-parochial-chauvinist polarization. The supreme leader is mythologized as the embodiment of ordained national destiny. Criticism is framed as anti-national. Honest journalism is recast as an act of treason or disloyalty.

This is why, fascism, as shown by Comrade Shibdas Ghosh, founder of the SUCI(C) and an outstanding Marxist thinker, 64 years back that fascism has become a general feature of all capitalist-imperialist countries in the post-second world war period seeking to redirect thinking process into the blind alley of mysticism, blindness and irrationality.

So, Fascism in the twenty-first century does not always arrive through marching uniforms or formal dictatorships. It emerges through media ecosystems, digital propaganda, personality cults, and the normalization of threat culture. It thrives when public anger generated by economic crisis is redirected away from structures of wealth and power toward manufactured enemies—minorities, dissenters, interrogative intellectuals and questioning journalists.

The online abuse directed at Helle Lyng after her questioning reflected precisely this culture. Women journalists, particularly those asking uncomfortable political questions, are routinely subjected to coordinated intimidation campaigns. The goal is not merely to insult them but to send a wider warning: questioning power carries consequences. In such environments, silence becomes contagious.

And yet the irony is profound. India's democratic tradition was historically built upon argument, dissent, and public contestation. The doyens of Indian freedom movement understood democracy not as obedience, but as a system where legislators would be accountable to the people and policies would be framed through due debates and discussions. And journalists would function as apostles of public opinion. But that cherished argumentative culture is increasingly under siege.

The refusal to answer Helle Lyng's question was therefore not simply a personal choice by one leader. It reflects a larger political condition: the shrinking space for democratic accountability in contemporary India. A confident democracy does not fear journalists. A secure leader does not avoid unscripted questions. A genuinely free press does not require permission to scrutinize power. What happened in Norway mattered because it briefly broke the choreography. For a moment, the polished spectacle of power collided with a basic democratic demand: answer the question.

The refusal spoke volumes. A simple question from a journalist unveils the entire gamut of eroding democratic values— fear of being caught napping, arrogance bred by power and ostracized accountability.