

INDIA AT 142ND RANK ON PRESS FREEDOM INDEX

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues relating to Growth & Development - Demographic Economics & Various Indexes

The World Press Freedom Index, 2021, produced by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a French non-governmental organisation, has again ranked India at 142nd out of 180 countries. This is despite the fact that for a year, on directions from Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba, an index monitoring cell worked to improve the rankings, even holding a meeting between the Indian Ambassador to France and the RSF officials to lobby for a change in the ranking.

In 2016, India's rank was 133, which has steadily climbed down to 142 in 2020.

The RSF report says India is one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists trying to do their job properly. They are exposed to every kind of attack, even police violence against reporters, ambushes by political activists, and reprisals instigated by criminal groups or corrupt local officials.

In February last year, fearing such an adverse assessment, the cell was set up in 18 Ministries to find ways to improve the position on 32 international indices.

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry was delegated to look at the freedom of press index.

According to the report of this cell, accessed by *The Hindu*, on April 26 last year, the Additional Director-General, Public Information Bureau, first wrote to RSF chairman Pierre Haski asking for the criteria on the basis of which it compiles the index, for a better understanding of the ranking. This was followed by a meeting between Indian Ambassador Javed Ashraf with the RSF's secretary-general Christophe Deloire and the head of its Asia Pacific desk, Daniel Bastard.

The minutes of this September meeting are part of the report of the cell. Mr. Ashraf said the openness of the government to be criticised and questioned with respect to subjects such as economy, international affairs and defence deals such as Rafale were indicators of press freedom.

Internet ban in J&K

The RSF representatives, however, questioned the Internet ban in Jammu and Kashmir from August 5, 2019, which went on for nearly a year. The Ambassador said the shutdown was for the security of the region. "Members of the press could access the Internet through the Internet kiosks set up by the government and there was active reporting in Indian and international media on the situation in Kashmir, which could only have been possible with unhindered access to the Internet and freedom of the press," the minutes say.

The minutes also note that on the issue of violence raised by the RSF, Mr. Ashraf said, "many incidents reported as attacks on journalists are often a consequence of the law and order situation in some areas of India. This is often misrepresented as targeted attacks on journalists by the State in western media."

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