

EXTREME MEASURE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON FALSE CLAIMS AND ARRESTS

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December 08, 2022 12:10 am | Updated 01:24 am IST

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A [political party's spokesman has been arrested](#) for sharing an apparently false claim about the expenditure involved in [Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Morbi](#) in Gujarat, in November, in the aftermath of [the collapse of a bridge that caused nearly 140 deaths](#). Even if the claim that a fabulous sum of money was spent on preparations and the renovation of facilities for the visit was false, the arrest of Saket Gokhale, spokesman of the All India Trinamool Congress, is in striking contrast to the fact that the promoters and executives of the company, whose negligence could have caused the recently renovated bridge to collapse, have not been detained so far. It is difficult not to highlight the irony involved, as the penal sections invoked against Mr. Gokhale for the offence of forgery attract prison terms of two to three years only; whereas the acts of commission and omission that led to such a high fatality figure are punishable with prison terms ranging from 10 years to life. Nothing but an intention to teach a lesson to an Opposition political activist can explain the arrest of Mr. Gokhale when he could, instead, have been summoned for an inquiry. It is one of those cases in which arrest is obviously avoidable, even if the government of the day is seriously aggrieved by the purported falsehood in the claim that he shared on Twitter.

That police custody was sought and obtained in a case in which not much is needed to be investigated or unearthed — except perhaps the provenance of the purported Right to Information reply that contained the false claim — is quite strikingly indicative of vendetta. Another aspect, which is taking place with disturbing frequency, is the fact that the Gujarat police went to Jaipur in time to detain Mr. Gokhale and bring him to Ahmedabad. It is disconcerting that provisions relating to the inter-State operation of criminal law allow anyone to be held by the police from another State with ease, especially when the arrest is required by a State in which the Bharatiya Janata Party is the ruling party. It is not clear if the jurisdiction police were informed about the impending arrest. The dissemination of fake news is indeed a formidable problem in times when social media are a major source of information. That those with a significant following on these platforms should exercise due care before sharing information they receive is also not in doubt. However, it is questionable whether every instance of the dissemination of possibly false information should lead to arrest, unless grave consequences are likely to arise. An official fact-check and a legal takedown may well meet the ends of justice.

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