

Seriously, NIA?

It is a decade since the National Investigation Agency (NIA) was set up in response to an outrageous act of terrorism in India — the sea-borne attack which struck at the heart of Mumbai. There was a perceived need for a sophisticated central agency which could connect the dots between the information silos of the numerous state and central agencies, and deliver a unified response to the threat of terror.

The mission objectives of the NIA are sharply chiseled in its citizen charter: “In-depth professional investigation of scheduled offences using the latest scientific methods of investigation... Developing a professional work force through regular training and exposure to the best practices and procedures... Displaying scientific temper and progressive spirit while discharging the duties assigned.”

But 10 years after its ambitious beginning, the NIA is prosecuting a free-lance photojournalist for suspected involvement in stone-pelting, and the flimsy linchpin of its argument is that Kamran Yusuf is insufficiently journalistic. Authentic journalists apparently engage in “nation-building” and their “moral duty” is apparently to cover developmental activities and the inauguration of roads, bridges and hospitals, and other sundry triumphs of the ruling party — according to the NIA. A cub reporter who harboured such a primitive idea of the profession would be very quickly shown the door, and not very politely, either. Yet, this is the basis of a case on which the right to liberty of a citizen of India depends.

The NIA’s citizen charter commits it to the protection of human rights and the dignity of the individual. Unfortunately, in the matter of Kamran Yusuf, the agency is found to be unable to preserve even its own dignity. The argument that the photographer’s archive contains mostly images of what the government terms “anti-national” activities, and very little public relations on behalf of the state, is either irrelevant or may even suggest good journalism. With such callousness, the NIA could go the way of the CBI, which gained notoriety for bungled investigations and hopeless paperwork, whether in prosecutions or in seeking extradition.

The mandate that the NIA was launched with remains critically important — India needs a hub for processing and sharing information across agencies efficiently, and to develop an intelligent national response to terrorism. To perform its role, however, the NIA must display more efficiency and intelligence than it has done in making its case against Kamran Yusuf.

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