

Narendra Nayak

Last update: 30 March 2023

Prominent Indian rationalist, Narendra Nayak, has lived under police protection since 2016 owing to persistent threats to his life as a result of a career spent challenging superstition in the country. A retired teacher, Nayak received notification from the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) in Mangalore on 4 March 2023 that he would be required to pay for his protection detail from there on in. Nayak contested the request on the basis that he does not have the personal means to meet such a cost. On 30 March, Nayak's protection detail was withdrawn due to his failure to pay. Humanists International believes that Narendra Nayak is targeted for his peaceful exercise of his rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression, and urges the Karnataka authorities to reinstate his protection detail immediately.

History of the case

2023

March

On 4 March 2023, Nayak received a letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) informing him that he would be required to pay for his protection detail personally from thereon in.

Nayak contested the request, owing to the continued need of protection and his inability to afford the cost of a 24-hour protection detail. Nayak is a retired teacher in receipt of a modest pension that could not possibly cover the cost of such security arrangements.

On 30 March 2023, Nayak's protection detail was withdrawn,¹ exposing Nayak to serious risk of violence.

2021

Nayak becomes the victim of a viral smear campaign² following the circulation of an audio recording in which a man makes derogatory remarks and incites violence against Nayak, as well as another man. In response, Nayak files a police complaint.

The police dropped charges against the man after he confessed and apologized.

2016

Nayak is placed under police protection following serious threats to his life and the discovery of his name on 'hit lists'.³ The cost of his protection detail is assumed by the State.

Background information

1

<https://www.mangaloretoday.com/main/Government-withdraws-police-security-provided-to-Prof-Narendra-Nayak.html>

2 <https://humanists.international/2021/05/indian-rationalist-victim-of-viral-hate-campaign/>

3

<https://scroll.in/latest/908884/gauri-lankesh-murder-sanatan-sanstha-also-tracked-rationalist-narendra-nayak-say-police>

Nayak, a biochemist by training, is the President of the Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations who has for decades campaigned within his community against superstition, exposing so-called 'God men' as fraudsters and advocating for the upholding of secularism in a country that has witnessed a sharp rise in Hindu nationalist rhetoric over the last decade.

As a result of his fearless campaigning and his respected position within the rationalist community, Nayak has been identified as a target for assassination – his name appearing on numerous 'hit lists'.⁴ As a result, he has received the protection of police bodyguards since 2016.

The threat against Indian rationalists and activists is real and deeply concerning. Since 2013, at least three prominent Indian rationalists have been murdered in retaliation for their work challenging superstition.⁵ Others have been the subject of smear campaigns. Many critics of the government are often labelled as 'anti-national', 'unpatriotic', 'naxalites', 'maoist-sympathisers' or 'communists'.⁶

Country background

India is the world's most populous democracy, religiously pluralistic, and for many years, in the main, proud of its secular Constitution.⁷

Despite its famously secular Constitution, concerns about Hindu nationalism and interreligious tension have risen under the premiership of Narendra Modi. Modi's presidency has been linked to a rise in Hindu nationalism — both socially and on the part of officials appearing to elevate and promote a politicized Hindu nationalist agenda. Several state or federal laws introduced by the ruling Bharatiya Janata

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https://humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/3098_Humanists-International_Humanists-at-Risk-Action-Report_Amends-V2_LR.pdf

⁵ https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/india/#Highlighted_cases

⁶ <https://pen-international.org/app/uploads/Fearful-Silence-The-Chill-on-Indias-Public-Sphere.pdf>

⁷ <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/india/>

Party (BJP) have been designed to promote patriotism or Hindu national identity in particular. Along with a rise in Hindu nationalist rhetoric and state-sponsored religious fundamentalism these developments have sparked deep concern for minorities and their right to freedom of religion and belief.

Rationalism as a belief has a long and proud history throughout Indian culture; since the 6th century BCE. According to the 2012 WIN-Gallup Global Index of Religion and Atheism report, 81% of Indians were religious, 13% were non-religious, 3% were convinced atheists and 3% were unsure or did not respond.

Between 2013 and 2015, three prominent rationalists were assassinated apparently because of their work combating superstition or Hindu nationalism. The authorities were quick to promise action, but were also accused of prematurely ruling out links to Hindu nationalist extremist groups. Government officials refrained from forcefully condemning the killings. Whilst India's Minister for Minorities, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, has said that "you cannot judge the government with isolated incidents of violence or isolated statements by some ministers," this violence has happened against a backdrop of a number of BJP politicians making deeply derogatory remarks about minorities — including, Niranjan Jyoti implying that non-Hindus were bastards by telling attendees at a rally that they would have to decide between a government led by 'sons of Ram or by bastards'.

Humanists International's concerns and calls

Humanists International believes that Narendra Nayak is targeted for his peaceful exercise of his rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. The organisation calls on the Karnataka State authorities to reinstate his security detail immediately and unconditionally.