Arrests of Journalists - Sedition Charges

What is the issue?

- Dhaval Patel, editor of a news portal in Gujarat, was arrested on the serious charge of sedition.
- The frequency with which journalists have been arrested since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic demands attention.

What is the case about?

- It involved an article speculating that State Chief Minister Vijay Rupani may be replaced by the BJP.
- The said reason was his alleged inept handling of efforts to combat the pandemic.
- The report had even named a possible successor.
- It is contentious how such a report could amount to sedition, regardless of whether the speculation is true.
- Oftentimes, the source of such speculation is a disgruntled section of the ruling party itself.
- In any case, it is excessive to punish 'reportage with inadequate verification' with arrest and prosecution for sedition.
- Mr. Patel has also been charged under Section 54 of the Disaster Management Act.
- This was for allegedly spreading panic through a false alarm concerning a disaster.

What are the other recent instances?

- In the Andamans, a reporter was arrested for a social media post.
- It claimed that people who had contacted a COVID-19 positive patient over phone were also being quarantined.
- In Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, police recently arrested a news portal founder.
- This was following a report on alleged corruption in food distribution by the local administration during the pandemic.
- In Delhi, a reporter was summoned for a report claiming that an audio clip allegedly containing a speech by the head of the Tablighi Jamaat was doctored.

What is the larger concern?

- Special provisions are in place to prevent the spread of rumour during disasters.
- But these are being used to suppress reporting on political developments and possible governmental corruption.
- The Editors Guild of India has seen a “growing pattern” in the misuse of criminal laws to intimidate journalists and suppress dissent.
- The use of sedition law to fight fake news is an attempt to suppress inconvenient reports.

What does this call for?

- Section 54 of the Disaster Management Act only penalises the spreading of panic relating to the severity or magnitude of a disaster.
- It does not extend to mere incorrect reporting.
- Asking a journalist to join the investigation may not by itself be illegal.
- But the police should not use the power of summons to intimidate reporters or extract details of the source.
- There ought to be greater restraint while invoking special provisions relating to handling disasters and epidemics.

Source: The Hindu

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