

Journalism and Advancing Human Rights: *Suo Motu* Cases in India

Azadeh Changrani-Rastogi



Abstract: Journalism plays a pivotal role in advancing human rights. Newspapers and media not only make citizens aware of human rights, they are also key in reporting incidents of violation of these rights. In India, this journalistic responsibility is heightened manifold with the *suo motu* cognizance afforded through the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Applying *suo motu*, the NHRC issues orders and acts without being petitioned. As such, newspapers and media in India have the capacity to not just increase public awareness but also lead to direct remedial action. In this paper, NHRC *suo motu* cases registered in the study period of five months from April 2024 to August 2024 are examined. This includes a total of 65 eligible cases, of which 60% stem from 7 newspapers and 40% from 21 additional newspapers. Nearly three-quarters - 48 of the 65 - cases are reported from 7 states. The cases cover hazardous and illegal employment, rape and sexual offences, medical issues, negligence and mismanagement by authorities, police mistreatment, and other incidents. Four illustrative cases of deaths filed within the NHRC *suo motu* cognizance are presented in detail, reflecting the nature and content of grievances of human rights violations in India. These include sewer deaths, suicide due to police harassment, a police custody death, and death by electrocution. By understanding *suo motu* cases in the human rights context in India, journalists can gain perspective on their role in advancing the dignity of our society.

Keywords: Human Rights, India, Newspapers, *Suo Motu*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite being the world's largest democracy, India has a record of significantly compromised human rights with credible reports of serious human rights concerns [1]. Prominent human rights concerns involving large numbers of people such as recent issues in Jammu and Kashmir or Manipur are extensively covered in the national and international media and closely followed by international human rights monitoring agencies with efforts to resolution [2]. However, the vast majority of human rights concerns in India involve individuals and are likely to go unnoticed, unreported, and unaddressed [3]. This is especially true in small towns and rural areas. These concerns include inhuman treatment by officials particularly the police, torture in prisons, physical abuse, rape, child labour, and manual scavenging, amongst others.

In order to protect human rights in India, the National Human Rights Commission of India ("NHRC") was established in 1993 under the statute of the Protection of Human Rights Act (PHRA), 1993 as amended by the Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Act, 2006 [4]. NHRC conforms with the Paris Principles, adopted at the first international workshop for the promotion and protection of human rights held in Paris in October 1991, and endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations by its Regulations 48/134 of 20 December 1993. NHRC embodies India's concern for the promotion and protection of human rights as guaranteed by the constitution of India or embodied in international covenants and enforceable in the courts in India. Amongst several tasks the NHRC is mandated to perform, the Protection of Human Rights Act of India entrusts NHRC to proactively or reactively inquire into violations of human rights, including but not limited to violations by government and other officials. As part of its responsibility for reviewing and addressing human rights violations, the NHRC has the authority to take "*suo motu*" cognizance of human rights violations, even in the absence of a formal complaint.

In law, *suo motu* (Latin: "on its own motion") describes an act of authority taken without formal prompting from another party [5]. While *suo motu* is usually applied to the actions taken by a judge, it also includes actions taken by government agencies or individuals acting in their official capacity without a prior motion or request from the parties [6]. As such the term is reasonably applied to actions by government agencies and individuals acting in their official capacities [7].

NHRC takes *suo motu* cognizance of newspaper reports of incidents such as police mistreatment, medical negligence, exploitation, abuse, hazardous employment, and more. For these incidents, the NHRC examines the details and determines whether they raise issues of human rights violation. As needed, the NHRC then issues notices to the relevant authorities to follow up with the necessary steps to redress [8]. As such, newspaper articles covering incidents of human rights violations, even at the individual level, have the potential to effect societal change. For this study, an analysis was conducted of all NHRC cases registered based on *suo motu* cognizance from April 2024 to August 2024 to determine the types of cases, their location, and the newspapers reporting the incidents, including their languages. Case studies are presented and discussed. By understanding the patterns and details of *suo motu* cases stemming from newspaper articles, journalists and media outlets can participate more fully in this process whereby the reporting of an incident against an individual, even at the rural level, can lead to justice and also prevent further similar human rights violations.

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II. METHODS

As part of the National Informatics Centre, the NHRC complaints database is searchable online. A search was conducted of all suo motu cases that were registered on the NHRC database from April 1, 2024, to August 30, 2024. Each case was then downloaded and the complaint proceedings were reviewed.

Eligible cases were considered as those wherein NHRC

- (1) took suo motu cognizance and
- (2) directed the relevant authorities to issue a response.

Ineligible cases were those wherein either of these criteria were not fulfilled due to any reason.

Data from the eligible case files was entered into Microsoft Excel, including: Date of Registration, Source Newspaper, Mode of Complaint, Language of Complaint, Category of Complaint, Incident State, and Complainant State. The language of the Source Newspaper was added to the database. Whereas the category of incident was variably entered on the NHRC database, upon review of the individual cases, it was placed into one of 7 categories including:

1. Electrocution Death
2. Hazardous/Illegal Employment
3. Medical Issues
4. Negligence/Mismanagement by Authorities
5. Police Mistreatment
6. Rape/Sexual Offence
7. Miscellaneous

This involved a review of the matter presented within a case and then assigning appropriate categorization, resulting in fewer categories. For example, in the NHRC database, there were several descriptions of the divisions within health/medical concerns, such as Medical Negligence, Lack of Proper Medical Facilities, Malfunctioning of Medical Professionals, Irregularities in Government Hospitals and Primary Health Centres. For our analysis, we combined them into the category of Medical Issues. Descriptive analysis was done in Microsoft Excel to generate the results. Case details of three categories of cases resulting in death, including (1) Manual Scavenging/Sewer Deaths, (2) Deaths Due to Police Mistreatment and (3) Death Due to Electrocution are discussed to provide insights into the type of journalistic reporting that is used to file suo motu cases.

III. RESULTS

A total of 68 suo motu cases were registered with the NHRC during the study period of April 1, 2024, to August 31, 2024. Of these 3 cases were deemed ineligible on account of being outside of NHRC purview or if it was a duplicate of a previously filed complaint citing the same newspaper article.

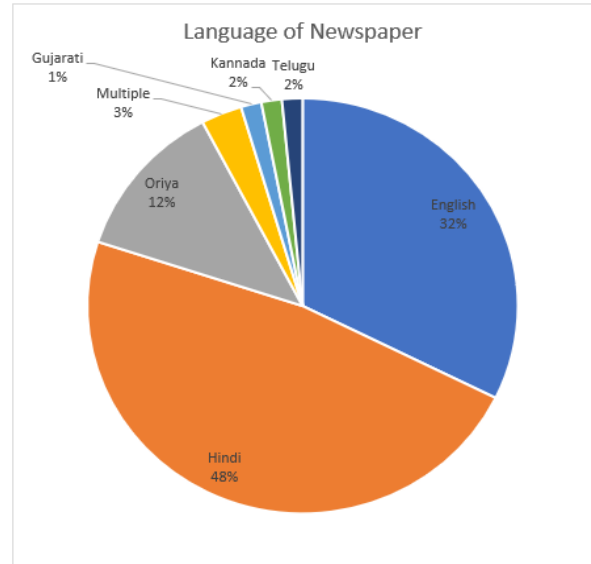
A. Newspapers

Newspaper	% of Cases
The Times of India	17%
Dainik Bhaskar	12%
Amar Ujala	9%
Dainik Jagran	6%
Sambad	6%
Patrika	5%
Dainik Tribune	5%
All others	40%

Articles from a total of 28 newspapers were cited in filing the 65 NHRC suo motu cases. Of these 28 newspapers, 21

newspapers were cited once or twice. Articles from 7 newspapers were cited 3 or more times. The percentage of cases filed using these 7 newspapers are presented in Table 1.

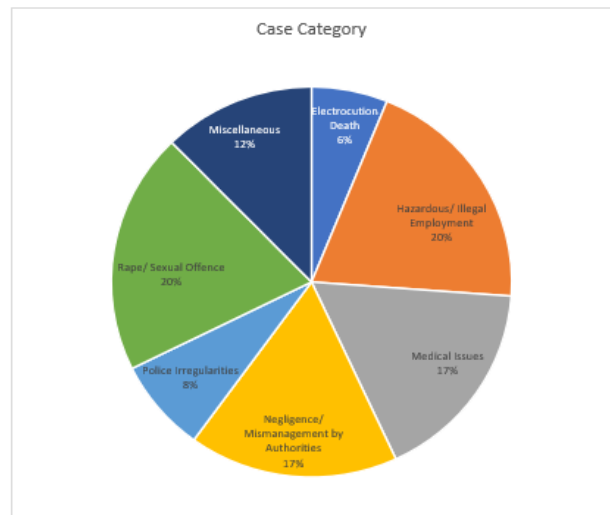
Regarding the language of the newspaper articles used to file the cases, 47.7% of the articles were in Hindi, 32.3% were in English, 12.3% in Oriya, and the rest were in Gujarati, Kannada, Telugu or multiple languages (Figure 1).



[Fig.1: Language of Newspaper]

B. Types of Incidents

Of the 7 categories of incident cases (Figure 2), the most prevalent were Hazardous/Illegal Employment (20%) and Rape/Sexual Offence (20%). The next most frequent were Medical Issues (16.9%) and Negligence/Mismanagement by Authorities (16.9%), followed by Police Irregularities (7.7%) and Electrocution Death (6.2%). The remainder of 12.3% was Miscellaneous.

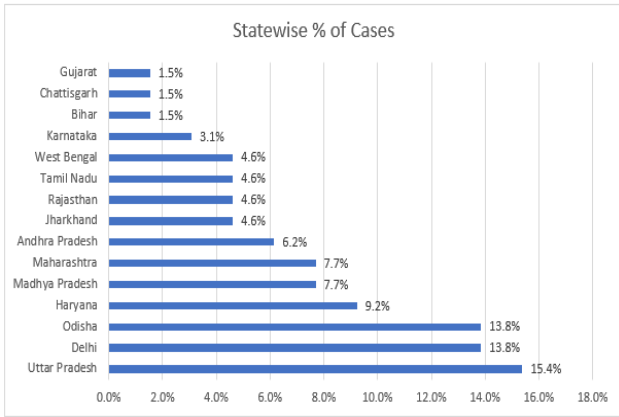


[Fig.2: Case Category]

C. State-Wise Distribution of Incidents

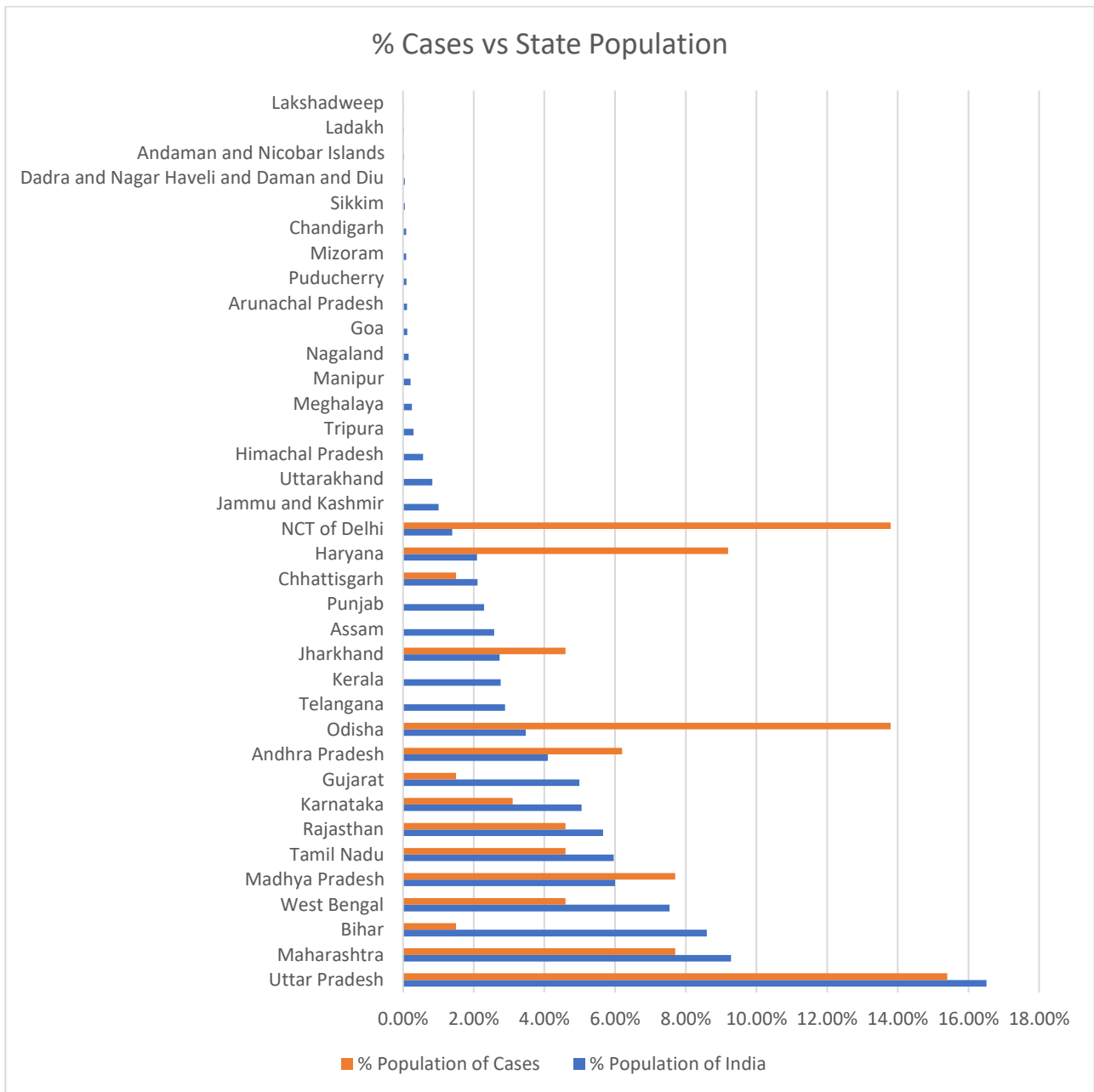
The incidents were reported from 15 states, and over 52% of the cases were from the top four states: Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Odisha and Haryana (Figure 3).





[Fig.3: Statewise % of Cases]

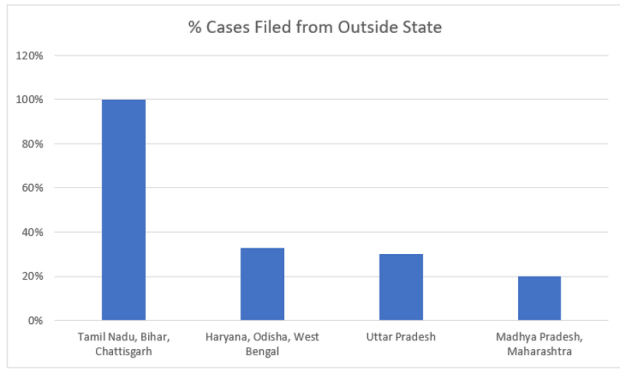
In examining the state population as a percentage of India’s population compared with the percentage of cases in the suo motu filing (Figure 4), the states that are not proportionately represented may be noted. For example, several states with only blue bars and no orange bars (Telangana, Kerala, Assam, Punjab, and others) had no suo motu cases filed in the study period. Whereas other states with the orange bars far exceeding the blue bars (such as Odisha, Haryana, Delhi and others) have higher proportion of cases compared with their state populations.



[Fig.4: Percentage of Cases Versus State Population as a Percentage of India]



Further, the suo motu incidents can occur in one state and be filed by another state. For example, the incident can be reported in a local newspaper in a given state, picked up by either the NHRC directly or through a human rights advocate or activist and filed in a different state. In this study period, 9 of the 15 states had incidents in their states filed in another state (most commonly Delhi). 3 states – Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Chattisgarh had 100% of their cases filed from outside of their state, and others with lower percentages as shown in Figure 5.



[Fig.5: Percentage of Cases Filed from Outside the Incident State]

IV. CASE DISCUSSION

A. Manual Scavenging/Sewer Deaths

Manual scavenging is the practice of removing human excrement by hand from sewer lines or septic tanks. This degrading and perilous practice has been banned by the Apex court in 2023 and implementation of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. However, the practice remains prevalent in several parts of India, and the media plays an important role in bringing to light the instances of this hazardous task, often leading to death and injuries. In our analysis, 12.3% of the suo motu cases filed in the five-month period were sewer deaths. As these are typically local events, the news reports published in local daily newspapers are brought to the attention of NHRC which then takes suo motu cognizance based on the news report. A typical case example is presented herein.

Case 1: Manual Scavenging/Sewer Deaths

Commission has come across a news report published by the “Dainik Tribune” in its 13.06.2024 edition revealing that two brothers Sanjay (27) and Ankush (22), who had come to clean the septic tank at a private unit, North Point Packaging Factory, located near village Bazidpur Saboli in the district Sonapat, Haryana have died after inhaling poisonous gas inside the tank. Their third companion from the same village, has reportedly survived the accident. The police authorities have sent the bodies of the deceased for post-mortem examination and an FIR has been registered against the factory owner.

The victims were reportedly called to clean the septic tank at the said factory located in village Bazidpur Saboli. As mentioned in the news report, Sanjay and his younger brother Ankush went inside the septic tank but due to the presence of harmful gas inside, they became unconscious and fell into the tank. After pulling out both of them with great difficulty, they

were taken to the civil hospital, where both of them were declared dead. The deceased Sanjay has two sons and the wife of the other victim, Ankush is reportedly pregnant.

The Commission has examined the contents of the news report, which if true, raise serious issue of violation of human rights. It is pertinent to mention here that the Commission has always been insisting the authorities concerned to act as per the Advisory issued by the Commission and guidelines of the Apex court to use machines to get such hazardous work done and to ensure that the safety equipments are provided to the workers before being asked to do such work. The Commission has been consistently advocating total ban on activities of hazardous cleaning without adequate and proper protective / safety gears or equipment and also has advocated suitable use of work friendly and technology based robotic machines, besides fixing responsibility and accountability of the concerned authorities in case, death is caused to any sanitary worker while undertaking hazardous cleaning work. To that extent, the Commission has issued Advisory on 24.9.2021 qua Protection of Human Rights of the Persons Engaged in Hazardous Cleaning to the Union, State Governments and local authorities with an object to ensure complete eradication of such practice. The deceased in the instant case, as mentioned in the news report, were private workers hired by a contractor to work at a private septic tank of a food outlet. In the advisory, it is specifically observed that in case of any sanitary work or hazardous cleaning work, the local authority and the contractor / employers are to be held responsible and accountable, jointly and severely irrespective of the type of hiring/engagement of the sanitary workers.

Apart from this, the decision given by the Apex Court, Dr. Balram Singh vs Union of India (WP(C) No. 324 of 2020) dated 20.10.2023, provides the specific mandate that it is the duty of the local authorities and other agencies to use modern technology for cleaning of sewers etc.

The Commission has observed that the negligence on the part of the factory owner and the local authorities is apparent due to which two precious human lives have been lost. The authorities, in this case, have failed to be alert and conduct proper supervision keeping an eye on such hazardous activities in which poor and innocent people are being deployed to undertake such dangerous work without any safety gear.

The Commission, therefore, takes suo-motu cognizance of the matter and directs issuance of Notices to the Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police, Haryana calling for a detailed report in the matter within one week including status of the FIR registered in the matter, action taken against the responsible persons as well as relief and rehabilitation provided to the NoK of the deceased workers by the authorities.

B. Police Mistreatment

The police in India have a notorious record of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of punishment. Reports span being complicit in crimes from torturing to extort money, arbitrary detentions to obtain forced or false confessions, denial of essentials including sufficient food and water.

Police officers have also been implicated in refusal to register rape cases, allegations of rape by the police officers



themselves, including of rape victims in police custody. Police have been reported to misclassify homicide or suicide cases as deaths from natural causes. In all such cases, media and newspapers occupy an important role, so that the authorities, including the NHRC can be alerted and take the necessary steps.

In our study, 7.7% of the cases related to police mistreatment and complicity in crimes. Two examples from the study period (April to August 2024) are presented to showcase the different dimensions of inaction and irregularities by the police, and the pertinence to journalistic reporting in the diversity of these cases.

Case 2a. Suicide due to Police Harassment

The Commission has come across a news report published in the Hindi daily "Dainik Jagran" in its 25.06.2024 edition, revealing that two brothers have committed suicide in three days due to alleged police harassment in Agra district of Uttar Pradesh.

As mentioned in the news report, one police officer posted at Sadabad Police Station in Agra arrested one Sanjay on 09.06.2024 alleging that his brother-in-law has eloped with one girl. It is alleged that he was kept in the police custody till 11.06.2024 and released after taking a bribe of rupees Ten thousand. Again, on 13.06.2024, the brother of the said Sanjay, Pramod working with the Home Guard Department and his nephew were picked up by the police and a sum of rupees Ninety thousand were demanded as a bribe for their release. As per news report, the younger brother Sanjay committed suicide on 22.06.2024. His dead body was found hanging from a tree. The elder brother who was pursuing the matter was also being harassed by the police and he also committed suicide on 24.06.2024 by hanging on the same tree in the area. A suicide note was also found stuck in the kalava tied in his hand. The responsible Inspector and the SHO of Sadabad police station of Hathras have been reportedly placed under suspension by the Superintendent of Police.

The Commission has carefully examined the contents of the news report, which if true, raise serious issue of violation of human rights. The police personnel have indeed acted in an inhuman and cruel manner with both the victims. They have grossly abused their powers and subjected both the brothers to extreme harassment due to which they took the painful step to end their lives. The police authorities are supposed to protect the people from any kind of atrocity but in this case, the police officials themselves have been alleged to be the perpetrators, which is a matter of concern for the Commission.

The Commission, therefore, takes suo-motu cognizance of the matter and directs issuance of Notice to the Director General of Police, Uttar Pradesh calling for a detailed report in the matter within one week including status of the FIR registered in the matter, action taken against the responsible officials as well as relief if any, provided to the NoK of the deceased persons.

Case 2b. Police Custody Death

The Commission has come across a news report published in the Hindi newspaper, "Dainik Bhaskar" on 15.07.2024 revealing that one person has died in police custody due to alleged police torture in Jalaun district of Uttar Pradesh. As mentioned in the news report, the police personnel brought the dead body of the man to the District Hospital and fled away after leaving it in front of the Emergency Ward of the hospital. In an effort to hide the incident, the family members

of the deceased were also reportedly detained at the Police Station by the police.

As mentioned in the news report, the doctor on duty noticed the dead body and sent a Ward Boy of the hospital to the Police Station, to inform the police. As stated, the Ward Boy was illegally detained by the police after which a protest was made by the staff of the hospital after which he was released by the police.

As per news report, there were injury marks on the body of the deceased while the police claims that the man, wanted in a case of murder, was ill and after the arrest, he died due to illness, at the Police Station. As per statement given by the Superintendent of Police, Jalaun, the Post-mortem examination on the body of the deceased has been conducted and the further action will be taken by the police on the basis of the post-mortem examination report.

The Commission has examined the contents of the news report which, if true, raise serious issue of violation of human rights. It is apparent that the deceased was arrested by the police being he was wanted in a murder case and after arrest, his condition started deteriorating. It is factually admitted by police authorities that the deceased was arrested by the police and was taken to the police station after which he died due to unknown reasons. It is also matter of fact that his dead body was left in the District Hospital by none other than the police personnel, reportedly without informing anyone. Not only this, the police also allegedly detained the family members of the deceased at the Police Station in a sheer unlawful and inhuman manner. The policemen have apparently abused their power. A precious human life has been lost during police action and his family members were allegedly subjected to harassment and illegal detention, which is a matter of concern for the Commission.

The Commission, takes suo-motu cognizance of the news report and directs issuance of Notices to the Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police, Uttar Pradesh to submit a detailed report in the matter within Two weeks.

The Commission has noticed that as per its guidelines issued regarding reporting of matters relating to deaths in Police/ Judicial custody within 24 hours, the Jalaun police authorities have not yet sent any intimation to the National Human Rights Commission informing about death of a person in police custody. The Superintendent of Police, Jalaun is directed to explain within One week, as to why this case of custodial death was not reported to the Commission within 24 hours.

C. Deaths due to Electrocutation

Deaths due to electrocution, especially during the monsoon season, represent a major safety concern in India. Negligence by public works and private facilities leaving exposed live wires put pedestrians in peril every day. In 2021, the most recent year for which National (NCRB) data is available, 12,529 deaths in India were due to electrocution, averaging 34 deaths/day. Despite the significantly high number of deaths due to electrocution reported in the statistics, there were only 8 deaths reported across 4 electrocution cases we reported in the five-month study period.

When reported in the media, the NHRC takes suo motu cognizance of such incidents



and seeks resolution. We present here case details of one example of death due to electrocution to provide guidance to journalists and other media reporting associates so that they may consider reporting on such incidents.

Case 3: Electrocution Death

The Commission has come across a news report published in the English daily, “The Times of India” in its 24.07.2024 edition under caption “UPSC aspirant electrocuted on waterlogged street in Delhi”. It is mentioned in the news report that the deceased, identified as Nilesh Rai, aged 26 years who was preparing for the civil services examination and residing in a paying guest accommodation in Patel Nagar area of Delhi has died in a tragic incident due to electrocution on 22.07.2024.

As mentioned in the news report, the passage leading to the PG accommodation was severely waterlogged and to avoid having to walk in the puddle, Nilesh decided to use the support of the gate and climb over the pool. The iron gate stands right next to an electric pole with a cluster of open wires going to various homes in the society. Unfortunately, the electric current was flowing in the iron gate through electric pole due to which the incident occurred. The flat mates and the neighbours reportedly tried to remove the victim but they could not succeed. The victim was ultimately pulled away from the gate by the police team and he was taken to the hospital where the doctors declared him dead. An FIR u/s 106 (1) and 285 of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) has been registered by the police. A spokesperson of the Electricity distributor i.e. Tata Power-Delhi Distribution Limited (DDL) has reportedly stated that it was caused by electric current leakage from the customer's damaged motor wiring which came into contact with the iron gate.

The Commission has carefully examined the painful contents of the news report which, if true, raise serious issue of violation of human rights. The right to life of the young and innocent victim have been grossly violated due to apparent negligence by the authorities concerned that too in the National Capital. The water logging in the area and flow of electric current from the electric pole to the iron gate, prima-facie seem to be the acts of negligence causing the tragic accident in which a precious human life has been lost.

The Commission, takes suo-motu cognizance of the news report and directs issuance of Notices to the Chief Secretary, Government of NCT of Delhi, the Commissioner of Police, Delhi and the Chairman, Tata Power-Delhi Distribution Limited (DDL) to submit a detailed report in the matter within Two weeks. The Commission would also like to know about the action taken against the responsible persons/ authorities, compensation to the NoK of the deceased as well as steps taken/ proposed to be taken to ensure that such heart-rending incidents do not recur in future.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” capturing the essence of human rights [9]. Journalists bear witness to, research relevant details on, and expose human rights abuses. International Federation of Journalists embraces the guiding principles of ethical journalism and respect for human rights to create a culture of human rights

[10]. Media has the potential to play a remarkable role in creating a culture where human rights are central to the society – from recording violations, encouraging discussions, and fueling corrective action [11]. Indeed, one could argue that most, if not all, news is connected with human rights – from covering issues of health, education, crime, politics, and many other spheres of life [12].

In India, with the strong path to corrective action through the suo motu cognizance by NHRC, journalists play a pivotal role in improving society. In reporting incidents of negligence and mismanagement by authorities, and particularly police mistreatment and irregularities, Indian newspapers effectively give a voice to the voiceless [13]. People know about their rights and are empowered to negotiate with authorities to claim them. As such Indian journalism should not view human rights reporting as an ad hoc activity, but a fundamental obligation [14]. Actions taken by the NHRC involve demanding the authorities provide detailed reports, including police reports, querying on compensation and counseling provided to aggrieved families, seeking detailed plans to prevent future instances of similar incidents, and investigating action taken against delinquent parties. Our study shows that whereas some states are actively engaging with the suo motu provisions of the NHRC, others are lagging behind. For the states who are not well-represented, outreach and education could be conducted to the newspapers, journalists, NGOs to determine barriers to filing cases with NHRC and implementing corrective measures as needed. Further, for all future journalists in India, the curriculum of any reputed journalism education program in India should include detailed instruction on human rights, the NHRC, and suo motu cognizance [15]. The Training Division of NHRC can be a valuable resource and ally in training journalists through programmes on human rights. Newspapers and media in India can harness this very unique tool of filing suo motu human rights violation cases thereby contributing to improving our society.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The adequate resources of this article are publicly accessible.
- **Authors Contributions:** The authorship of this article is contributed solely.



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