



# The Vigilante News Anchor Who Changed Indian TV

In a time of deteriorating press freedom, audiences and the BJP have found a champion in Arnab Goswami, who promises to deliver the justice that the media has failed to bring.

**Erin Blair**

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GIFT STORY FOR FREE



(Illustration: Rohama Malik)

There aren't a lot of channels that get the chance to cover the arrest of their own news anchor. But Republic TV is no ordinary news channel, and Arnab Goswami no ordinary host. On November 4, India's 762 million television viewers had access to clips of Mumbai police dragging Goswami off to prison

VIEWS had access to clips of Mumbai police dragging Goswami on to prison, his iconic rectangular glasses now framed behind the lattice of a police van's window, his face — usually calm, animated, or irate — displaying something like fear. The charges — abetting the suicide of an interior decorator five years ago — were trumped-up and politically motivated, but no more so than the many allegations he'd made on live television over the years. But unlike actor Rhea Chakraborty — who he'd successfully jockeyed into prison on similar charges after the death of her boyfriend — this journalist and vigilante had some very powerful friends.

### Arnab Goswami Assaulted & Arrested By Police; Full 12-minute Video From ...



"Blatant misuse of state power against Republic TV & Arnab Goswami is an attack on individual freedom and the 4th pillar of democracy," tweeted Amit Shah, a close advisor to India Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and one of the most powerful people in the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "This attack on the free press must be and WILL BE OPPOSED."



Twitter.

The irony of the BJP borrowing the language of Western human rights advocates was not lost on liberals and leftists, who laughed as right-wing leaders tweeted about “fascism” and “freedom of the press.” They didn’t laugh long, however: India’s [Supreme Court](#), despite having [tens of thousands](#) of backlogged cases, overruled the state government. Goswami was free in just [14](#) days. Maharashtra’s ruling party, the Shiv Sena, had failed to stop the man who’d been making life hell for local police, demanding investigations for non-existent crimes and maligning the local government when those “crimes” went unsolved. Goswami’s arrest and release from prison was as much a statement of the power of the central government as it was about the power of Goswami. He left jail as dramatically as he’d entered it, arms raised in triumph like a football star who’d just won a match.

*THE TRUTH HAS WON*, declared Republic TV, the words flashing red and white on their show.



(Republic TV)

In a time of declining press freedom and increasing hatred of the media, what kind of journalist gets a get-out-of-jail-free card from the most powerful people in the land? Goswami rose to power on the stepping stones of victims he had transformed into powerful bogeymen, be it Muslims or members of the leftist press. Even the kings and queens of Bollywood are terrified of Goswami, and although he portrays himself as an underdog, he is more of a bloodhound, doggedly pursuing people in the name of justice, though justice is not the result.

“Their problem is with our kind of journalism,” said Goswami, speaking to his employees the day after his release. “And I want to tell them, I, we, all of us, we don’t owe an explanation to these politicians to define what our journalism will be!”

He led the newsroom in a chant: “*The game has just begun.*”

Whether or not you’ve heard his name, you’ve probably heard his news. Since he founded Republic TV in 2017, Goswami’s rants and allegations have been scattered across social media, trickling into Wikipedia pages and [the international press](#). His audience goes far beyond the [rigged](#) television ratings, the 2 million Twitter followers, the 4 million YouTube subscribers--Republic has the power to not just make, but to *change* the news. He helped turn the suicide of a Bollywood actor into a [five-month witch hunt](#) that consumed the nation; on another occasion, his 2017 coverage helped drive billionaire Vijay Mallya to his exile in the U.K. He helped convince millions that Muslim religious gatherings [spread](#) more COVID-19 than the lockdown’s mass migrations, and that Congress minister Shashi Tharoor [killed](#) his wife. Fans say Goswami revolutionized Indian journalism. Critics say he killed it.

“He’s always supported the truth,” one Indian American auntie told me. “That’s why I like him. He’s not scared of anyone.”

Born in Assam in 1973, Goswami studied Social Anthropology at Oxford before returning to India in 1993, where he would eventually popularize the Fox News style of entertaining, aggressive, and right-wing populist TV news. He is considered one of the major reasons Indian TV news is often a 12-person screamathon, full of [seizure-inducing graphics](#), loud soliloquies, and “chase scenes” where journalists shove the mic in peoples’ faces.

“He changed the definition of journalism altogether in the last 10 to 15 years,” said Shantashree Sarkar, a former on-the-scene reporter for Republic TV. “Before we started out at Republic, we all had that impression that Arnab Goswami was someone who could stand up for the truth, that he would not cower down when it comes to political pressure. It turned out to be something different.”

For years, TV news, unlike print, was overly deferential to politicians; Goswami made a name for himself as someone who wasn’t a political brown-noser, despite his blatant [links](#) to the BJP. “It felt fucking great to have him on your



side,” said one person in media, Seema Acharya\*, referring to a well-known

monologue where Goswami had lampooned a hypocritical BJP spokesperson. In 2014, his gentle evisceration of the Congress Party’s heir-to-the-throne Rahul Gandhi — a man former U.S. President Barack Obama recently described as having “a nervous, unformed quality about him” — is deeply satisfying to anyone frustrated by Gandhi’s flip-flopping ineptitude. And in a country where justice is neither just nor swift, Goswami served public humiliation to criminals who would never see a day in jail.

“Nobody brought up the issue of Vijay Mallya,” said Sarkar, referring to the billionaire playboy who took huge government loans, never repaid them, and currently lives in luxurious London exile. “But he did.”



Vijay Mallya (left) with fashion designer Manoviraj Khosla. (Royal Challengers Bangalore)

“I have often felt cheated by large sections of the Indian media... when

from a friend who said, ‘I have often felt cheated by large sections of the Indian media... when

[reporters] did cute interviews, [said](#) Goswami in a 2018 broadcast during his

campaign against Mallya. “There was a reporter from a Lutyens channel who was told by his editors to ask two deep and incisive questions to Vijay Mallya. The first was, ‘Mr. Mallya, what do you think about our victory against Australia in the test match? And Vijay Mallya blew cigarette smoke in his face and commented on it...These were the sellouts, ladies and gentlemen, but the country is changing, the politics is changing and the media will also change.”

Goswami built his persona on a deep disgust with the corruption and elitist hypocrisy of the Congress Party, and the class of moneyed, Westernized elites whom it brought to power. This was epitomized by the “Lutyens crowd,” named after a Delhi neighborhood, one that invokes a corrupt, incestuous, and powerful English-speaking elite. When government auditor Vinod Rai released [a series of reports](#) alleging that hundreds of billions of dollars had been siphoned off by the Congress Party in a series of scams, the nation — though not the Lutyens crowd — was shocked. One scam alone, the 2G Scam, led to the disappearance of \$26 billion of public funds. The six-year-long trial ended in an unsatisfying but predictable conclusion: not a single person went to jail.

“What a shame! What a shame!” Goswami [shouted](#), echoing the feeling of millions, while [left-leaning](#) news organization NDTV restrained itself, describing the decision as “[significant](#).” “What an absolute shame! We waited *six years* for this!”

Goswami rose to power amid the mix of privilege and disillusionment created by economic liberalization under Congress, one that created an English-speaking middle class but also gave it a front-row seat to the snobbery and greed of India’s ruling elite. “[T]he middle class fumed at sleazy politicians and shady tycoons,” wrote James Crabtree in his book *Billionaire Raj*, “even though they themselves were typically expert bribe payers and tax avoiders.”

Outrage was a commodity, and Goswami knew how to peddle it. And he did so 24/7, turning injustices — real or imagined — into advertising revenue, and his viewers into a political army for the Hindu Right.

Among many of his critics, Goswami is called the “Doorknob,” a pun on the Bengali pronunciation (or-nob) of his name. The reason is twofold: first, he can twist Left or Right, depending on the pressure, and second, he has the empathy of a piece of wood.

“The BJP has been a mammoth ad spender for a long time, and it was just a matter of time, once they were in power, before they bought themselves a rabid mouthpiece — as all fascists need to,” said Acharya. “It came down to the question of which major, influential journalist was spineless and greedy enough to take the job. And now the nation knows,” she said, punning on his much-meme-ed catchphrase, *the nation wants to know*.

Goswami began as an understated news anchor at left-leaning NDTV in the late nineties. It was in 2006 at Times Now, Goswami's 24-hour-news channel, when he adopted a new, dramatic persona, and took on his anti-corruption role. A former guest on the show recalled his surprise when he saw Goswami in the green room, laughing with a group of politicians from different parties. “You’ve been speaking so chummily with the politicians that just five minutes previously you called out for corruption,” he remembered thinking to himself.

Some employees called Goswami ‘meethi churri,’ honeyed knife: sweet at first, then deadly, someone who could butter-you-up and gut you in the same breath. By many accounts, he is hell to work for, with a mercurial temper and ideology.

“The only opinion we can be certain he holds is that money and power are important to him, and democratic values and journalism are not,” said Acharya. “I recently learned that his son is named ‘Che’ and he has a Che Guevera poster in his living room. I don’t know what to make of that.”

On paper, Goswami bears a remarkable resemblance to the elites he so



lucratively despises, the group of Brahmin Bengali leftists with a soft spot for communism, masters in Humanities, and verbose English rhetoric. He hails from Assam, which — much like West Bengal — is known for its communist intellectual tradition, and he attended the Hindu College at Delhi University, a stronghold for leftist politics before going on to Oxford to study Social Anthropology for his masters. These days, he accuses people of being “urban Naxals” on a channel co-owned with his Bengali wife, then goes home to a son bearing the Brahmin-communist name Che Goswami.

Goswami changed, and so did the nation. Within 20 years, both Goswami and India flipped from socialist to capitalist, left-wing to right-wing, secular to Hindu nationalist, angry to angrier. The Lutyens Goswami used to work with are now a ghettoized government-in-exile, confined to Delhi cocktail parties and to commenting in the English press. The government has been claimed by anti-Western nationalists, who think in Hindi and Gujarati. The Lutyens no longer possess the ear of those in power. Goswami, however, is more powerful than ever before.

“I know how his mind functions,” a former colleague [told](#) *The Caravan* in 2012. “He’s not a rightist, though a lot of people think he wears saffron chaddis — nothing of the sort. He believes in one thing, which is opportunity.”

Goswami began in 1995 as a news reporter at NDTV, a television channel formerly run by the state. He joined only a couple years after privatized news reporting hit the Indian market, breaking the monopoly the state held on TV reporting since the early 1980s. Before liberalization, the only news channel was Doordarshan, from which NDTV sprung — a mouthpiece for the government, which had almost uninterruptedly been controlled by the Congress Party, and the Nehru-Gandhi family.

“The public sphere in the Indian context was, to some extent, a proxy for the ventriloquism of the state,” said Arvind Rajagopal, a New York University professor who wrote *Politics After Television*. “[Doordarshan] imitated the BBC: there was this presumption of neutrality and the facade of objectivity, which

had real consequences. They did not think that they could afford to appear unfair.”

Doordarshan’s news coverage was dignified, plodding, relatively objective, and dry. It adopted the secular, post-caste language of the state to maximize neutrality, but it focused on governance, not elections. An audience [survey](#) conducted in 1987 found that 92% of respondents believed “that the political opposition’s views were not sufficiently represented on Doordarshan,” while [another](#) conducted in 1992 found a 90% dissatisfaction rate and that viewers had switched over to cable TV. Print was the domain of hard-hitting journalism, and Hindi reporting remained decidedly non-objective and unchecked.

“The vernacular media took on the function of rumor because the English language press assumed that they were the truth,” said Rajagopal. “[The English language press] assumed they could control the contours of discourse, and that brought the BJP to power. The growth of television empowered the vernacular press.”

English remained the language of power-brokers, while Hindi news bubbled with invective, gossip, and emotional power. Goswami’s experience at NDTV, then an English-only channel, seems to be the origin of his disgust with the elitist establishment. Over the next 16 years, he would frequently mention his desire to ‘de-Lutyenize’ and ‘democratize’ the media, beginning with launching Times Now in 2006. By this time, market competition had created a thriving and multilingual TV news industry, with channels like Zee TV penetrating the ‘Hindi heartland.’ The first televised election was the one in 1998; it was a win for the BJP.

“At that point, he was becoming the Arnab Goswami which he wasn’t before,” said one former employee from Republic. “Slowly, the way he would speak, the way he would dominate the speakers on TV, was getting quite a lot of hype, and [ratings] were rising. Goswami was on top and, at that point, he decided to

make something of his own.”

By the early 2000s, Indian TV news had progressed from being slow, technologically clunky and boring to something more dynamic and slick. When Goswami launched Times Now in 2006, he pushed domestic TV news further, making it faster, more entertaining. “The genius of Goswami is the understanding of TV as a medium, and its ability to shape narratives far beyond what print can do,” said Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, associate editor at *Scroll.in*. “Print in particular was always more hard-hitting, in terms of asking questions of the powerful. But that didn't necessarily translate into great television, or into wide readership just because of the nature of the medium.”

Hindi TV was following the trajectory of the non-objective Hindi print news, though the drama of Hindi TV was nowhere near the heights of Republic in 2020. “When it comes to Hindi, they cross every line, they can say anything they like, just to dramatize their presentation of news,” said Sarkar. Goswami borrowed the content of Hindi news and the style of Fox, and produced local interest stories — such as fallacious village “miracles” — in a dynamic, combative style.

“Even before 2014, many news networks, especially in Hindi, were pursuing a competitive advantage in histrionics,” said Raghu Karnad, who was on the founding team of *The Wire*. “It's a lot cheaper to fill airtime with than [actual] reporting.” Soon regional channels were imitating Goswami to make ends meet. A year after Times Now was founded, the golden blip of competitive reporting was over.

“Ownership of media channels narrowed, combined with an explosion of regional language news channels,” said Rohit De, a history professor at Yale University. “There was also an evisceration of reporters and a promotion of star anchors. TV news was less about reportage and more about talking heads in the studio, and there are people (including politicians) whose entire career emerged from their ability to combat TV debates.”

The news networks, Karnad argued, “self-radicalized for profits,” and, with little to no regulation, there were few consequences for pushing a story that was misleading or blatantly wrong. By 2014, money, as well as political power, was in the hands of a far more powerful and centralized right wing; in 2017, Goswami founded Republic TV with Rajeev Chandrasekhar, a BJP politician. Any pretense at objectivity fell by the wayside. Money didn’t talk on Indian television: it screamed.

The Congress party is no longer in power; neither is the Lutyen English press. But ironically, questioning the BJP will get you labeled a sycophant by the online Right’s army, while cozying up to BJP leaders is read as an act of defiance. When Hindi journalist Punya Prasun Bajpai exposed certain BJP officials for coaching a source to lie for a media event with Modi, he was labeled a “presstitute” online and forced to resign when advertisers withdrew. Goswami, perhaps, once did believe in fighting corruption before twisting under the lucrative pressure of the Hindu Right. His guest from Times Now who saw him chatting with politicians from both parties also said Goswami was impressively informed on issues of corruption. “He seemed to know a lot,” said the former guest. “And I mean, we were a bunch of really annoying, ambitious students who kept reading up everything about politics for the last three months, because we knew we were coming on a TV show with this guy. And he definitely knew a thousand times more than us without having to try very hard.”

“We were more prone [than other channels] to show how the common people are being duped,” said Sarkar. “We used to question especially the government, whether it was the state governments or whether it was the central government, whether they were ruling or not.” She recalls a story she did in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, a city once famed for its pearl fishing before industrial waste poisoned its people, causing stillbirths, deformities, and disease. When protestors demanded the closure of an industrial plant in 2018, police opened fire on the people, killing 13 people and injuring 102.



“They were massacred,” said Sarkar. “Republic TV was the only channel that spoke about what happened.” She performed a sting operation and collected evidence against the policemen who’d murdered the protestors. “This is one kind of story, which I believe if it had been played out now by Republic TV, it would have not exactly toed the line of sympathies for the people out there; rather, it would have toed the political line.”

In contrast, while covering the brutal and much-publicized gang rape of a minor, Republic TV sang a very different tune. The case was putting pressure on the BJP government, which put pressure on Republic TV. “We got tapes and tried to malign the victim’s family, and tried to bring out a different kind of story altogether...[saying] that there are certain anti-social elements who are trying to fan communal violence,” said Sarkar.

Michael Kugelman, an analyst in Washington, D.C. who has often appeared on Goswami’s debates, noted the stark difference between being a guest on a normal day, versus one in which a particular government line was being peddled.

### Delhi Violence - 'Pogrom Lie' Vs Riot Truth | The Debate With Arnab Goswami



“They invited me [during the Delhi riots] because they saw me as sort of the

representative of the Western media,” said Kugelman, who was prevented from speaking while another guest ranted about the “information war launched by the Western media.” Usually, Goswami would let him speak for 45-60 seconds, said Kugelman, “which is long for him. But that day there was clearly an agenda he and his channel were trying to get across.”

The “debate” was framed, not very subtly, as “Pogrom Lie vs. Riot Truth,” and sought to discredit Western news reporting on upper-caste Hindu rioters being aided by government police. Topics like Pakistan, China, and Muslim protests are often covered in this manner, with guests of particular communities being invited, then shouted into silence.

As Goswami made moves to grab the Hindi heartland, the integrity of Republic’s journalism deteriorated even further, particularly while covering the suicide of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput. The actor’s partner, Chakraborty, was an easy target: a Bengali woman, stereotyped as more dominant and aggressive, controlling men with “kala jadoo.” The campaign was massively successful in terms of popularity, and Goswami used the vilification of Chakraborty to transcend into Hinglish entertainment, whose numbers and therefore ad revenues vastly outweigh those of the Indian Anglosphere.

“Only Arnab Goswami has been able to do it,” said Sanjay Renade, a media professor at the Department of Communications in Mumbai. “He straddled the Hindi-English space very powerfully, moving from one to the other in a seamless fashion.”

“The English channel frequently lapses into Hindi in ways that could easily be clipped for WhatsApp and build a much bigger audience than, say, a purely English debate,” said Venkataramakrishnan. “There’s definitely a very deliberate courting of the broader Hindi audience as well.”

Republic TV is gaining power as the government clamps down on real journalism — this summer, for instance, Indian police arrested more than 50 journalists — but not Goswami —for covering the pandemic when it proved

embarrassing for the government, throwing Goswami's special treatment into further light.

"It's not about Goswami," said Rajagopal. "It's basically, 'he's our bloodhound.' But it could be another bloodhound next time — it doesn't matter, they're totally dispensable. It's just the way this government inhabits power...they cannot afford to show weakness."

"Powerful politicians place these people in a space where they are made to look powerful," said Renade.

But in the age of television and social media, perception is often power. Americans for years watched Donald Trump, before he was president, pose as a powerful leader on television, and soon it created a political consciousness that was larger than Trump himself. As a former speechwriter of George W. Bush once [said](#), "Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us, and now we're discovering we work for Fox."

"He was so pleasant," said Acharya, who viewed Goswami as a living meme and took a selfie with him for her Instagram. "[But then] it dawned on all of us that he was, in fact, a crucial pillar of the most divisive hate-propaganda machinery of my lifetime. I took the photo down."

Goswami's audience is larger than Republic's ratings, than its YouTube views, or its followers on Twitter. It has hijacked the conversation, creating an alliance between the middle class and the numerous Hindi janata. Behind the noise, the yelling, and the heated debate there is a far more disturbing silence. Even stars, even Lutyens must now watch their step and whisper, in fear that Arnab Goswami might someday scream their name.

*Erin Blair is a political reporter living in Delhi.*

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