

➤ **Sunita Narain**, Director General of CSE India and Editor of Down to Earth has won the **Edinburgh Medal 2020** instituted by the City of Edinburgh Council. Narain is the **second**

**Down
To
Earth**

Indian after economist Amartya Sen to receive the award. The Edinburgh Medal is presented to persons of science who have made a significant contribution to the understanding and wellbeing of humanity.

Banjot Kaur from Down to Earth bagged the prestigious **Thakur Foundation Fellowship-2020** for reporting on public health. Thakur Foundation is a US-based non-profit that grants such fellowships in the field of public health on an annual basis.

➤ Our grantees have won a bunch of awards at the **Laadli Media and Advertising Awards 2020** announced in November.

**The
Print**

Jyoti Yadav and **Fatima Khan from ThePrint**, Sagar Galani for **Feminism in India**, Chatura Rao from **The Caravan**, Geetika Mantri and Shiba Kurian from **The News Minute** and Vasanthi Hariprakash for **The Wire** were awarded for their reportage on gender issues. Swati Singh from **Feminism in India** received a Jury Appreciation Citation.

➤ **Kashmir Observer's Editor-in-Chief, Sajjad Haider**, has been elected the President of the **Kashmir Editors Guild**, the premier body of major newspapers of Kashmir in September for a two-year term.

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NEWS & UPDATES

➤ **Suno India** also received a grant from **Internews** for its COVID-19 reporting with a focus on solutions arising from various communities in tackling the pandemic.

**SUNO
INDIA**

➤ **Sikkim Chronicle staffer Shradha Chettri** was selected for the **Zubaan-Sasakawa Peace Foundation Grants for Journalists 2020-21**. She will be doing her research on the issues of **LGBTQI** in the region of **North Bengal** and **Sikkim**.

SC
SIKKIM CHRONICLE

2020: Independent media raise the bar for journalism

Over the past year, independent media, especially the Foundation's grantees, have raised the bar for journalism amidst extremely challenging conditions imposed by the pandemic and the extraordinary events that marked the year.



Image courtesy: **The Print**

Despite multiple challenges, including restrictions due to the lockdown, the Foundation's grantees' on-ground coverage only increased. There was no let-up on the coverage of the pandemic, the government's and society's response to it, the protests over CAA, the Delhi riots, the farmer's protests and even of the clashes with China on the northern borders.

The pandemic

While a large section of the mainstream media focused on blaming a religious congregation which became a super spreader event, the grantees' coverage of the pandemic exposed the wide cracks in India's health infrastructure.

The grantees' reportage focused on the structural issues including inadequacies in the government response, the role played by frontline Corona warriors and the plight of migrant workers.

In the initial months of the pandemic, **The Wire** and **The Caravan's** coverage of the conditions of healthcare workers helped drive on-ground impact. Just 24 hours after **The Wire's report**, doctors and medical staff at a Thane hospital who were forced to treat Covid-positive patients without adequate safety protections received the necessary PPE kits.

The Caravan's comprehensive **analysis** shows that the combination of the State's lack of investment in public health and withdrawal from regulating private hospitals has subjected medical staff to poor pay, long work hours, unacceptable work conditions and is ultimately bleeding them dry.

Investigative reports by **The Ken** and **The Lede** exposed how healthcare officials failed to ensure even basic standards in procuring vital equipment like ventilators and test kits.

The Ken's story on favouritism and faulty procurement of ventilators and protective equipment in Delhi forced the bureaucracy to immediately take notice and make amendments in the protocol.

The Lede broke a story of how the **ineffectual procurement protocol** for the antibody testing kits by the ICMR has resulted in profiteering by fly-by-night operators.

Deep reporting by grantees like **The Caravan**, **The Wire** and **Asiaville** brought home the struggles of migrants, who abandoned and on their own, were forced to trek long distances to the relative safety of their homes and villages. Their coverage stamped the migrant story on the national consciousness.

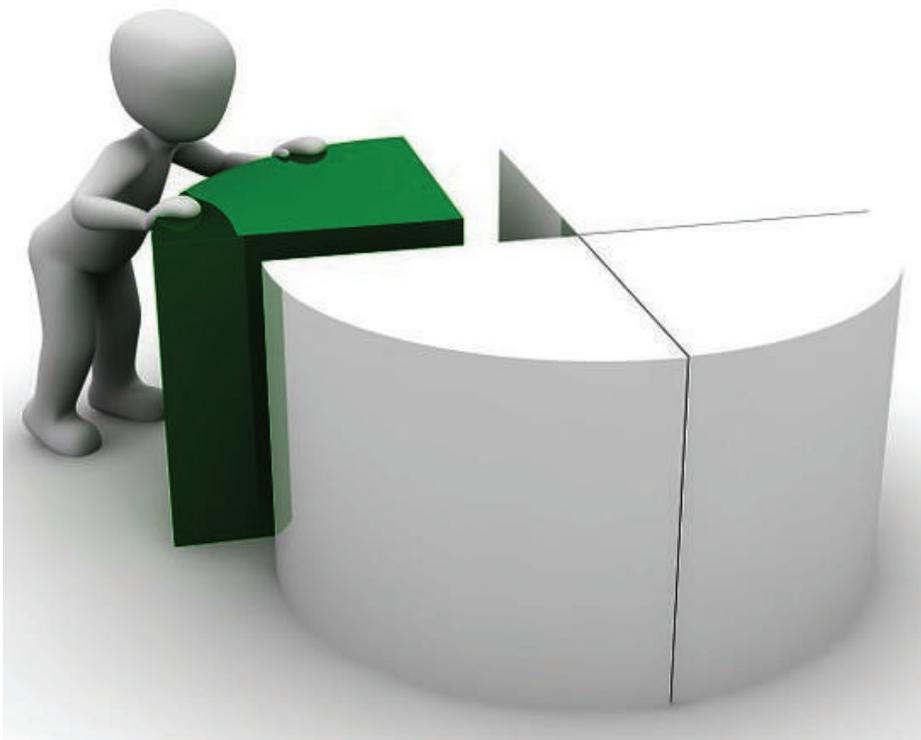
Khabar Lahariya's story on daily wagers and their families in Banda, in UP, brought an immediate response from

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New FDI rules set roadblocks for independent news

The Indian government on 16 October clarified the types of entities which would be covered under its new Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) policy for the digital news media sector.



According to the clarification, the FDI for news agencies, news aggregators and companies publishing news and current affairs content on digital platforms would be capped at 26 per cent after government approval and companies which are not in line with the policy will have a year to comply.

Even as the policy offers greater clarity for investors and entrepreneurs in the sector, it could severely affect the fundraising ability of start-ups since independent news companies have comparatively low valuations and a 26% restriction may neither be sufficient motivation for FDI investors nor for media start-ups.

The regulation appears to be aimed at discouraging foreign investors from the sector and force independent news start-ups to restrict themselves to Indian investors, significantly narrowing the amount of capital available to them.

The lack of foreign investor participation may in all likelihood hold back Indian investors who might be interested in backing innovative news start-ups but see fewer opportunities to exit their investments.

Amid tough economic and market conditions precipitated by the pandemic, online news media seems to have no choice but to seek overwhelming support for their news products from individual readers.

We see an increasing trend where online media have begun to appeal for individual reader donations and succeeding at it.

Over a six-month period between April and September 2020, the Foundation's grantees were able to attract greater reader revenues than during the previous 12 month period through innovative campaigns. This is also an indicator that readers are actively seeking credible, independent sources of news and are willing to pay for such content. ●

News & Recognitions

➤ In July 2020, **Feminism in India (FII)** received a grant from the Association for Progressive Communications, an international network of civil society organisations to run a **campaign** in Hindi on gender-based violence.



➤ As part of its special series on gender and COVID-19, **Khabar Lahariya** hosted a Facebook Live discussion titled - **Covid-19 & Women Farmers** in partnership with Breakthrough India, that drew attention to how the pandemic aggravates underlying gender prejudices and norms, especially in rural areas.



➤ Takshashila Institution's analysts **Anirudh Kaniseti** and **Pavan Srinath** were featured in The New Indian Express' "40 Under Forty" list of people to watch-out for, for their public-policy focused podcasts.

New Grantees



StoriesAsia (www.storiesasia.org) Launched in May 2018 by four independent journalists, StoriesAsia emphasises the power of the visual medium to tell stories from the ground - 'from underreported geographies about marginalised people'. StoriesAsia focuses on telling stories about poverty, agriculture, the informal sector, dalits, tribals, the minorities and the environment.

MojoStory (<https://tinyurl.com/y2nm4ka7>)



Mojo Story is a video-first news and views platform founded by Barkha Dutt, one of the foremost names in journalism in India. Mojo Story offers high-quality, deep reporting on news and events and has recently been commended and awarded for its trailblazing coverage of the Covid pandemic in India.



Image courtesy: Asiaville

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volunteers in the local community in the form of food and rations.

CAA-NRC protests

Shaheen Bagh, a tiny park in Delhi became the epicentre for citizen protests against the CAA, which while giving sanctuary to persons facing religious persecution from three neighbouring countries through grant of Indian citizenship, was perceived to be discriminatory against a particular community. While a large section of mainstream media tried to vilify the protests and protestors as anti-national, the grantees provided a ground-reported account of protestors’ concerns about the amended law.

The Caravan penned a **first-hand account of Shaheen Bagh**, which had in many eyes taken the shape of a movement, and analysed what the agitation teaches us about being an Indian citizen.

AltNews investigated and found that the ‘viral’ allegation that protestors at Shaheen Bagh were paid Rs 500 each to participate in the agitation was naked misinformation.

The Print focused on the **real fear and anguish at Shaheen Bagh** when the Delhi riots broke out. It highlighted the general sentiment that the government, the police, the judiciary and media had failed them in their search for justice.

Feminism In India, meanwhile, covered the ‘**other Shaheen Bagh**’, down in Chennai’s Washermanpet, and found the same “determination and resoluteness” that was driving the protests in Delhi.

Delhi riots

While a large section of mainstream media relied on official versions of the riots in Delhi, the Foundation’s grantees depended on their ground reportage to cover the most deadly communal violence to hit the nation’s capital in decades.

Janjwar reported from Shiv Vihar, a locality in North East Delhi where many homes and a school were burnt down by a violent mob. The reportage highlighted how the local administration, police and authorities turned a blind eye to the violence that was unleashed.

Down To Earth (DTE) spoke to **activists and experts** to highlight how the healthcare system failed riot victims who faced real challenges in accessing government hospitals.

The Wire did a **detailed five-part analysis** debunking the purported “fact-finding committees” that had given their own reports on the riots to the government and questioned both the facts and the motives.



Farm legislation

When the farm bills were passed in Parliament and the farmers went up in protest, a large section of the media was pre-occupied and mesmerised by the drama surrounding Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput’s death. (**Feminism in India** analyses the media trial that ensued).

It took the Foundation’s grantees to go deep into the epicentre of the protests to contextualise the agrarian distress. For instance, **Janjwar** spoke with farmers in Haryana and agriculture experts to find out their struggles and why exactly the farmers are against the “reforms”.

Asiaville talked to **protesting farmers in Patiala**, who put aside the fears of COVID-19 and voiced their dissent against the government’s move of favouring corporates through removal of MSP, the implementation of contract farming and the hidden dangers in the amended essential commodities act.

Khabar Lahariya reported on the farmers; protests that erupted in Lalitpur, Bundelkhand and Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh against the farm bills and also against the lack of compensation on their crop insurance. DTE visited the Delhi-Noida border and brought the **voices from the farmers protest against the three agriculture bills**.

Max Maharashtra highlighted the **reasons why the Farm bills are being opposed** to by farmers and why protests are erupting in various parts of the country.

Skirmishes at the border

The outbreak of Sino-Indian clashes at India’s borders broke the peace of decades “when not a bullet was fired in anger” between the two Asian neighbours. The skirmishes raised hackles and led to questions about the sagacity of ‘trusting’ China and the ‘hegemonic designs’ of India’s north-eastern neighbour, and the need to counter its designs.

Swarajya reported on the **Indian moves to counter China’s** ‘string of pearls’ strategy to encircle India and contain its influence in the Indian Ocean Region. The story highlighted the efforts by India to build a ‘blue water navy’ which will enable it to keep the sea lanes open and enforce freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean, and even the South China Sea.

The Print columnist analysed the ‘**lesson from Ladakh**’ and concluded that China’s moves at the border were a reminder to India of the yawning power disparities between the two neighbours, and a pointer to “what makes for real rather than illusory power”. ●

Readers willing to pay for ‘independent’ content



FY 2019-20

Twenty-six grantees generated Rs.17 crs in FY 2019-20 through Reader contributions.



FY 2020-21

In just six months of FY 2020-21 Reader contributions touched Rs. 14 crs

*Chart does not include other revenue streams.



Grantee Impact

▶ Non-payment of salaries of government employees for months together is a major issue in Manipur, where the majority of its working population opt for government jobs amid the lack of other job opportunities. The situation worsened during the Covid pandemic, especially for sanitation workers who continued serving the public amid the lockdown and curfew despite not being paid since April.

Imphal Free Press highlighted their plight in its **July story** entitled – Sanitation workers, sweepers serve the public as unsung heroes amid COVID-19 despite non-payment.

After the story was published, the state government **addressed the issue** and the workers got their pending salary of three months in September.

▶ The Ken's **story** on Byju's using third party resources to silence dissent against its product and services on the internet, connected the dots to say how the largest online platforms— LinkedIn, Reddit and YouTube— were using obscure copyright clauses to take down content or video that were critical of the company. After the story was published, it kicked off a **discourse** about edtech companies and their business practices. The Ken **reported** on how some large states were not doing follow-up RT-PCR tests after symptomatic negative rapid antigen tests and how that was dangerous for Covid spread. Within 24 hours, the government issued a **notice** asking all states to do follow-up RT-PCR tests.



▶ EastMojo's **story** on the impact of Covid-19 on Assam's handloom weavers prompted readers from the US to come forward and donate about Rs 1.4 lakh to the weavers.



▶ Suno India published an **episode** on the 'Surabhi Theatre group' in its Telugu news show 'Samacharam Sameeksha'. The theatre group had come under severe financial strain after running for 130 years.



Former MP Kavitha Kalvakuntla responded to the story on Twitter and promised help. The MLA of the constituency provided groceries for a month to 30 families of the theatre group.

▶ Feminism in India (FII) spoke with women who faced police brutality during the CAA protests at the Jamia Millia University on February 10, 2020, who had been cited in the report released by the National Federation of Indian Women. This was one among the detailed reports on the **issue** done in Hindi.



▶ Khabar Lahariya's reportage of **three cases of sexual violence** against women and minors in Banda led to escalation of the issue to senior officers of the police administration and filing of FIRs in the local stations.



▶ Kashmir Observer's **exclusive story** on the unavailability of a vital drug during the pandemic in Kashmir's hospitals generated a lot of public attention. Within days, the government not only stockpiled the hospitals with the vital drug, but also made them available free of cost. The story saved the serious situation in the hospitals where seething relatives were beginning to vent their anger against the doctors and medical staff as their relatives lay "almost unable to breath".



▶ A Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) investigation, published by grantee Down To Earth (DTE), into the quality of honey, led to the stunning revelation that most brands of the product, including prominent ones, being sold in India are adulterated with sugar syrup. **The story** created a storm and was covered extensively in the media.



Additionally, **DTE** did a **series based on field reportage** on the banana disease (banana fusarium wilt) that threatens the banana plantations in India. As a part of this series, DTE reported on the successful experiments (FUSICONT technology) by Indian scientists to control the disease. After the DTE story came out, governments of the Philippines and Malaysia contacted the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) for access to this technology. This has led to bilateral MoUs between India and the two countries. Officially, DTE stories have been attributed to this inter-country collaboration.

41 Grants from FY 2015-16 till date

Board Meetings

FY 2015-16	FY 2016-17	FY 2017-18	FY 2018-19	FY 2019-20	FY 2020-21
5	7	7	5	6	4

