

When Doordarshan fiddled with a Narendra Modi interview

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Synopsis

Prasar Bharati may have had no business censoring a CM's Independence Day speech, but in 2014 it did something similar to an interview with a future PM



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By Jawhar Sircar

It was sad to see [Prasar Bharati](#) getting into an avoidable controversy and, as its former CEO, I was asked endlessly: was it legitimate and proper to ‘censor’ the pre-recorded Independence Day speech of the chief minister of Tripura, [Manik Sarkar](#)? Legitimacy and propriety are two distinct issues, but let us first look at the legal aspect.

In 1995, the Supreme Court ruled that “it is imperative that Parliament makes a law placing the broadcasting media in the hands of a public or statutory corporate... whose constitution and composition must be such as to ensure its/their impartiality in political, economic and social matters and on all other public issues”. The Supreme Court also directed the public broadcaster to “ensure pluralism and diversity of opinions and views”. Incidentally, Parliament had already passed an Act in 1990 to take the control of All India Radio (AIR) and [Doordarshan](#) (DD) away from the government and vest it with an autonomous public broadcaster. But PV Narasimha Rao’s government sat on it for five years and it was only in 1997 that the ministry was compelled to take it out and operationalise it.

Section 12 (2) (b) of the Act of Parliament makes it clear that Prasar Bharati’s duty is to safeguard “the citizen’s right to be informed freely, truthfully and objectively on all matters of public interest,

national or international, and presenting a fair and balanced flow of information including contrasting views without advocating any opinion or ideology of its own". The public broadcaster is in a weak position to raise questions on the speech of the Tripura CM and the fact that it did televise his public event on Independence Day is a different matter altogether.

There is a Broadcasting Code that DD and AIR refer to often but that does not cover such eventualities and cannot overrule the law. The CM may have used strong words like "conspiracies" but the crux of what he stated is not untrue.

The rather sad fact is that the ruling party's mentor organisation did not take part in India's struggle for freedom. DD can, of course, raise questions if what one says falls within the ambit of, say, Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code. It cannot "promote enmity on grounds of religion, race, language, etc" and this is one legal provision that could be used more effectively to punish hate crimes all over India. There is one similar incident that is necessary to recall. When the 2014 General Elections were on, the News Wing of DD interviewed [Narendra Modi](#), who was then the opposition prime ministerial candidate. Prasar Bharati had no prior information but when this recording was not telecast, all hell broke loose.

We had to step in, to advise the DG of DD's News Wing to air it forthwith. The News Wing, however, decided, either on its own or after consulting someone, to telecast it after editing out some parts in which Modi had described the family of Congress president Sonia Gandhi. We thus had another row though one could understand the worry of government servants who run DD and AIR. It is like DD broadcasting a speech made by Rahul Gandhi or by Mamata Banerjee during the current dispensation.

The BJP obviously alleged that this "censoring" was inappropriate and Prasar Bharati had to give written instructions, once again, to telecast the complete unedited interview. Modi would not let a wide ball like this go unpunished and he came out castigating the "decline" in journalistic freedom in the public broadcaster, which he said invoked "horrific" memories of the Emergency. Modi continued to air his grievances against Prasar Bharati on World Press Freedom Day which was incidentally the very next day, May 3, 2014. He tweeted that he "was very sad to see our national TV channel struggling to maintain its professional freedom".

In an ironic twist, the wheel seems to have turned a complete circle, and while Prasar Bharati has reportedly not broadcast Tripura CM's speech, Modi's interview was actually broadcast in 2014, in spite of naysayers.

The writer was Prasar Bharati CEO between February 2012 and October 2016

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