

INDIA'S PUBLIC BROADCASTER AND THE ABORTED INTERVIEW

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(English Version)

In the normal course, one would like to stay away from any controversy surrounding an organisation that one has headed for over four and a half years. But since the matter has a bearing on India's democratic traditions and its federal polity, I would need to clear the air. This relates to the allegation that India's public broadcaster has refused to broadcast the Independence Day speech of the Chief Minister of Tripura. The question that comes to our mind first is whether this action, as reported, falls within the ambit of the public broadcaster. During my tenure, I do not recall any such instance of questioning a Chief Minister's speech and the deduction we arrive at is that under earlier regimes such monitoring or attempt thereof was possibly not there or not visible. It is not that earlier governments, that included Atal Behari Vajpayee's regime as well, were not politically alert or hurt if a leader of an opposition party made strong remarks that criticised them. It simply means that they were more tolerant or more conscious of the fact that federalism demands that the heads of its constituent units or states be given sufficient space. Moreover, democracy also enjoins that contrary voices, however bitter, be heard. This incident appears, therefore, to be the first such case, or at least the only one we have in recent memory.

When Justice Sawant delivered the historic verdict of the Supreme Court's bench in 1995 in the matter filed before it by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, the very words that used were that "it is imperative that the 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 Prasar Bharati Act was thus operationalised and now this body has to ensure these mandates that have been spelt out so clearly. The Tripura CM speech issue was thus a test case and it appears that the public broadcaster was found wanting. The fact that it did broadcast the Chief Minister's Independence Day event does not mean that it could refuse to carry out his address on the public radio and television. The Supreme Court made it abundantly clear when it directed the public broadcaster to "ensure pluralism and diversity of opinions and views" and to "provide equal access to all the citizens and groups to avail of the medium." In this background, there can no operational procedure for dealing with a CM who may have used strong words but the crux of what he stated appear factually correct. This includes the rather sad fact that the organisation that spawned the ruling party did not take part in India's struggle for freedom. One may find words like "conspiracies" that were used to be rather bitter, but the rest of CM's statement is largely true. He said

that “attempts are underway to create an undesirable complexity and divisions in our society; to invade our national consciousness in the name of religion, caste and community”. Several recent facts and events appear to lead to such a concussion.

There is one example of similar circumstances that comes to mind. During the 2014 general elections, DD had interviewed Mr Narendra Modi, who was then the opposition candidate but this was not being telecast for unknown reasons. The DG of DD's News wing was mulling over certain words that Mr Modi had used to describe Mrs Sonia Gandhi's family but the moment it came to Prasar Bharati's attention, we directed DD to telecast it. DD did so but it edited out some parts and immediately the BJP alleged that this was tantamount to censoring and that this was done at the behest of the ministry. Again, when this fact came to light, DD had to be given written instructions to telecast the complete unedited interview which became quite controversial then. Even Mr Modi rued the "decline" in journalistic freedom in the public broadcaster, which he said invoked "horrific" memories of the Emergency."On days such as this, I feel very sad to see our national TV channel struggling to maintain its professional freedom,"Mr Modi said on Twitter, while extending his wishes to journalists on the World Press Freedom Day.

This was on the 3rd of May 2014 and the wheel seems to have a complete circle.