

# Yogi govt expands gag order for officials & employees to include social media, digital news portals

*Shikha Salaria*

**Lucknow:** Bureaucrats in Uttar Pradesh are now barred from expressing their opinions on digital news portals, social media platforms like X, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram, apart from traditional media.

In its order which came in the form of reiteration of an old set of rules, the Uttar Pradesh government asserted that its officials and employees cannot participate in broadcasts or write articles in newspapers or publications without name or using a pseudonym, or without prior permission from the government.

The new order, which incorporates social media under its ambit, is being viewed by a section of bureaucrats, as an attempt to put more restrictions on media interaction of government officials.

ThePrint has a copy of the order issued 19 June.

As the fresh guidelines fail seemingly to distinguish between private and public conversations on WhatsApp, some government officials are concerned about the tendency of mischievous elements misusing private conversations on the platform which is widely used for private and public interactions.

In the government order, additional chief secretary (appointments and personnel) Devesh Chaturvedi said that Section 3 (2) of the Uttar Pradesh Government Servants' Conduct Rules, 1956 has an arrangement that "every government employee will conduct himself according to trending specific and implicit government orders issued to regulate their behaviour and conduct."

New provisions have been introduced in these rules with regard to newspapers and radio and criticism of the government, he said.

The provisions go like this: "Any government employee, except for in conditions when he has taken prior permission from the government, will not become the owner of the completely or partly of a newspaper or periodic publication, won't run it or participate in its editorial work or management.

"Any government employee, except for in conditions when he has taken prior permission from the government or an officer authorised by the government or when he/she is discharging his duties in goodwill, will not participate in radio broadcast or send write-ups in any newspaper or publication or write any letter in any newspaper or publication without name or using a pseudonym."

No permission letter is required for literary, cultural or scientific write-ups or broadcast, the order notes.

"It is notable that in the present time, the media's form has also expanded. Under this, the following media are included in it: print media (newspapers and news channels), electronic media (Facebook), X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, etc and digital media

(news portals, etc),” asserts the order to incorporate “all possible prevalent forms of media in the current scenario”.

Action is to be taken against government employees found violating the rules, it added.

Contacted by ThePrint, special secretary (appointments and personnel) Rajesh Pratap Singh explained that the order was merely an explanation of the existing arrangement in the conduct rules.

“This is nothing different but merely an explanation and more clarity on existing provisions about criticism of the government. The number of media platforms has increased and at times, officials tend to claim that they wrote something on social media by mistake. This is just to avoid any confusion so that in future, no one can claim that there is no provision controlling writings on social media and other new platforms,” he said.

Asked about bureaucrats worried over no differentiation between private and public conversations on WhatsApp, Singh said that he would not be able to explain beyond the government policy.

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## What former bureaucrats say

However, a senior UP government official termed it a “gag order” which would only add to the trend of putting curbs on bureaucracy’s ability to express its thoughts.

“This is like a gag order only to ensure that there are curbs on any kind of criticism of the government. There have been instances in the past where people have taken screenshots of a private WhatsApp conversation that an official has had with someone and circulated as his/her opinion,” the official said.

“Nowadays, bureaucrats hardly express themselves on any issues. Usually, the subordinates don’t express their views on issues even privately and depend on the seniors’ directions. Hence, resolution of issues is also only at suboptimal level. This will only ensure that there is no interaction with the media, which is already prevailing. This trend is only set to grow in future.”

Another senior UP official, however, said that a bureaucrat cannot have an opinion and added that the order merely was a reiteration of what had been prescribed earlier.

“The intention seems to be obviously limited to curbing exchanges on public platforms and that any kind of communication on public platforms by government servants is not acceptable. Such directions were in place earlier too as the government feels bureaucrats expressing their thoughts publicly can lead to anarchy, and that the government may have to bear its brunt. As the executive branch of the government, you can’t express your thoughts publicly. A bureaucrat cannot have an opinion,” the official said.

And there are some who assert the order only highlights the sensitivity of the government about bureaucrats interacting with the media.

“Earlier too, curbs were there as bureaucrats are an organ of the government. Criticising the government can have repercussions. It is all about having a large heart. Some governments tend to have a large heart, while some don’t. The present government’s move is only a reiteration of an old stand and the attempt to include social media platforms reflects its sensitivity towards the issue and its criticism. These days, there are so many discussions happening about caste and communal lines, which are avoidable,” a retired IAS officer, who served in UP for over three

decades, told ThePrint.

“Democracy is healthy, but bureaucrats don’t have to fight elections. So, expressing themselves on social media is not always necessary either.”

A former principal secretary to an ex-CM told ThePrint that earlier too, if officers wrote on WhatsApp groups of IAS or IPS associations, actions followed in the form of putting them in waiting period, “punishment posting”, or calling them back from deputation.

Former Prasar Bharati CEO Jawhar Sircar, who is now a TMC Rajya Sabha MP, said that the UP government was battered by a “tsunami” which the party had not expected in the polls.

“The BJP government is in its fault-finding mode, which is why we are hearing phrases like bulldozer justice. (But) demolitions are responsible for the loss. The bureaucracy is the softest target in such a situation and the government will find fault on a certain level,” he told ThePrint.

He linked the latest UP government order with the Centre’s alleged step to target digital media platforms, OTT platforms and social media including YouTubers.

“Over the last five years, these three platforms have proliferated coinciding with Modi 2.0. The central government has been clamping down on these platforms because criticism has been possible there. Now, the UP government wants the bureaucrats not to wake up and is hence issuing orders to stop talking to media platforms,” Sircar suggested.

(Edited by Tony Rai)

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