

**News Broadcasting Standards Authority
Order No. 90 (2021)**

Order of NBSA Complaint dated 1.5.2020 filed by Mr. Indrajeet Ghorpade against ABP Majha on 21.4.2020

The complaint was escalated to the second level of redressal, i.e., NBSA, as the complainant was not satisfied with the response received from the broadcaster.

Complaint dated 21.4.2020

The complaint relates to a news report aired by ABP Majha on 21.4.2020. In the impugned report, which was about COVID-19 cases in Mumbai and Pune, the news anchor labelled these two cities as "*corona bombs*". In the complaint, following questions have been raised by the complainant: 1. Is the term "*corona bomb*" defined by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India or by the Public Health Department, Government of Maharashtra or by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation or by the Pune Municipal Corporation? 2. If not, what is the origin of the term "*corona bomb*"? 3. What is the definition or the meaning of the term "*corona bomb*"? 4. What are the criteria used to be label a city as a "*corona bomb*"? What are the thresholds of these criteria that need to be met? 5. Did both Pune and Mumbai meet these thresholds? 6. ABP News Hindi has labelled Nizamuddin Markaz as a "*corona bomb*", did Nizamuddin Markaz meet the threshold? 7. Has any of your previous shows explained to the viewers the meaning of the term "*corona bomb*"? If so, please reference the date and time of broadcast of all instances when this explanation was provided. The complainant stated that migrants and residents of Pune and Mumbai had been subjected to exclusion and harassment by people from other villages and towns in Maharashtra due to the Covid-19 related stigma and terror. This terror is further propagated by the channel by labelling these two cities as "*corona bomb*". Moreover, it creates an atmosphere of fear, anxiety and hopelessness among people living in Pune and Mumbai, who are already struggling with their own mental health. The use of the term "*corona bomb*" in reference to Mumbai and Pune and indirectly with people from these cities is derogatory, unscientific, stigmatizing and terrorizing. Therefore, it violates the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards laid down by News Broadcasting Standards Authority, namely, Principles of Self-Regulation, Section 1, sub-section 1. [Principles of Self-Regulation: Impartiality and objectivity in reporting: Channels must strive to not broadcast anything which is not obviously defamatory or libelous]

Reply dated 12.5.2020 from the broadcaster:

The broadcaster stated that the impugned news clip was highlighting the alarming situation that developed in Mumbai and Pune, where the number of Covid-19 cases were rising swiftly. The report stated that on the said date, there were around 4,500 Covid-19 cases in the State of Maharashtra, out of which around 3,000 Covid-19 cases were in Mumbai and around 600 were in Pune. Hence, it could be clearly

interpreted that around 75% of the total Covid-19 cases of Maharashtra were collectively present in these two cities of Mumbai and Pune alone on the said date. The use of the term *corona bomb* was solely used for the purpose of showing the rapid and explosive increase in Covid-19 cases in Mumbai and Pune. The broadcaster also showed the rise in the number of attacks against doctors and medical practitioners, non-compliance of social distancing norms, crowd gatherings near banks, ration shops and vegetable markets and several instances of commute by the public using commercial vehicles. In furtherance of truthful and fair reporting, the broadcaster also informed the viewers about the mitigating /preventive steps taken by the Inter-Ministerial Central Teams (IMCTs), which have been formed in accordance with the Disaster Management Act 2005 by the Central Government to make an on-spot assessment of Covid-19 situation in the cities of Mumbai and Pune. The broadcaster submitted that the term *corona bomb* should not be misinterpreted or be read in its strict literal sense. Generally, in all languages, it is common to use comparative/qualifying phrases to create awareness about the gravity of the situation and the kind of attention which the situation deserves. For instance, it is common to use the term population explosion while referring to any instance of overpopulation. Similarly, also in the motion picture industry, it is common to use “Box office bombed” or “box office flop” for a highly unsuccessful or unprofitable theatrical run. Thus, it is absolutely normal practice to use comparative/qualifying phrases while describing and explaining the gravity of the situation and the same can in no manner be construed as not being impartial or not being objective. In fact, the present situation in Maharashtra clearly established the correctness and the importance of the awareness that the broadcaster tried to create as far back as 21st April 2020. Maharashtra was the number one state which reported of the number of reported cases, and the virus was also doubling at a rate unlike in the other states. It clearly was an alarming state of affairs. Further, the said term was solely used for showing that Mumbai and Pune constituted around 75% of the total Covid-19 cases in Maharashtra as on the said date. This situation was important to be conveyed to all the viewers in the larger public interest so that the people of these two cities strictly follow the lockdown and social distancing norms and collectively work towards flattening the curve. The use of the term *corona bomb* is thus well within the ambit of editorial discretion. The broadcaster reported each and every incident with due impartiality and transparency. It was doing its national duty classified as Essential Services of disseminating each and every single news so that the viewers remained alert and informed at all times. The broadcaster submitted that it had not violated any applicable statutory rule/guideline, including any principles of self-regulation laid down by NBSA. It also vehemently denied that the said news clip acted as a catalyst in any manner for any kind of harassment to the migrants and residents of Mumbai and Pune at the hands of people from other villages and towns in Maharashtra. The said news clip was based on the facts available on the said date, and the broadcaster further denied that the news story created any kind of atmosphere of fear, anxiety and hopelessness among people living in Pune and Mumbai as alleged in the complaint.

Reply dated 12.5.2020 by the complainant to the broadcaster :

The complainant stated that during a pandemic, news channels must focus on reporting facts and statistics and refrain from using language and terms which are unscientific, and which in turn result in dissemination of fear and not awareness. Therefore, it is extremely essential that news reports use clear language to convey a holistic picture in an objective manner. The channel is denying the allegations without conducting any research about the effects of its reporting practices. Based on the points raised, he stated that the channel should closely follow the principles laid out by NBSA and refrain from using unscientific terms while reporting about a pandemic. The channel must also educate its viewers about all the factors that lead to higher numbers of Covid-19 cases, including testing rate and population density. Lastly, the channel must apologize to the viewers in Pune and Mumbai who were affected due to the label used by the channel.

Reasons for escalating the complaint to NBSA

The complainant stated that the broadcaster had violated the Principles of Self-Regulation relating to Impartiality and Objectivity in reporting and channels must strive to not broadcast anything which is not obviously defamatory or libelous.

Decision of NBSA on 10.7.2020

NBSA, at its meeting held on 10.7.2020, considered the complaint, response from the broadcaster and also viewed the CD of the alleged broadcast. NBSA noted that while the broadcaster was highlighting the alarming situation in Mumbai and Pune where the number of Covid-19 cases were rising swiftly, the use of the words like *Corona Bomb* in a pandemic when there was so much uncertainty and fear in the minds of the people living not only in these two cities referred in the broadcast but across the globe, might not have been necessary.

NBSA decided to call the broadcaster and the complainant for a hearing by Video Conference at the next meeting of the NBSA.

The following persons were present at the hearing on 7.9.2020:

Complainant: Mr Indrajeet Ghorpade

Broadcaster: Mr. Raj Kumar Varier, VP- Legal & Regulatory Affairs
Ms. Disha Sachdeva, Sr. Executive – Legal

Complainant reiterated his written submissions. He stated that under the pretense of creating awareness, the broadcaster was indulging in fearmongering and had used terms about the people of Mumbai and Pune, which were not acceptable. This terror was propagated by the channel by labelling these two cities as "*corona bomb*". The use of the term "*corona bomb*" in reference to Mumbai and Pune and indirectly with

people from these cities is stigmatizing and terrorizing the public. The broadcaster justifying the use of the term 'population explosion' and 'Box office' was irrelevant. He submitted that it is necessary for a news channel to stick to facts when the people of the country are trying to overcome the trauma of an unexpected pandemic and its consequences. He submitted that there are reports of migrants going back from Mumbai and Pune to their hometowns and villages experiencing exclusion, discriminations and stigma due to the fear generated by various news agencies, including ABP Majha, through their unethical, incomplete and non-objective reporting practices.* He submitted that the channel should apologize for such kind of reporting.

*Post the hearing, the links of these reports were also shared by the complainant with NBSA.

The broadcaster submitted that the news report pertained to an increase in the number of cases, why it was happening due to testing or otherwise, the reasons were explained. The word '*corona bomb*' was only used in the context of the increase in the number of cases and the manner in which the authorities should deal with this. It is common to use comparative/qualifying phrases to create awareness about the gravity of the situation and the kind of attention which the situation deserves. The intention was only to educate the people. The use of the term was within editorial discretion, which may be fine with some and not with others.

Decision of NBSA

NBSA thoroughly looked into the complaint, response from the broadcaster and also gave due consideration to the arguments of both the complainant and the broadcaster and reviewed the footage.

NBSA was of the opinion that though the use of the expression "*Corona Bomb*" could have been avoided, however, it did not find any violation of the Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards and Guidelines and decided to close the complaint and inform the complainant and the broadcaster accordingly.

NBSA directs the NBA to send:

- (a) A copy of this Order to the complainant and the broadcaster;
- (b) Circulate this Order to all Members, Editors & Legal Heads of NBA;
- (c) Host this Order on its website and include it in its next Annual Report and
- (d) Release the Order to media.

It is clarified that any statement made by the parties in the proceedings before NBSA while responding to the complaint and putting forth their view points, and any finding or observation by NBSA in regard to the broadcasts, in its proceedings or in this Order, are only in the context of an examination as to whether there are any violations of any broadcasting standards and guidelines. They are not intended to be 'admissions' by the broadcaster, nor intended to be 'findings' by NBSA in regard to any civil/criminal liability.

Sd/-

**Justice A. K Sikri (Retd.)
Chairperson**

**Place: New Delhi
Date: June 16, 2021**