

News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority

Order No. 196(2025)

Complainant: Mr. Utkarsh Mishra

Programme:

1. Zee News - "Taal Thok Ke – "toh Hinduon se chheena jhapti"
2. News18 India - Desh Nahin Jhukne Denge with Rubika Liyaquat:
Congress आई तो महिलाओं का मंगलसूत्र छिनेगा? | News18
3. Times Now Navbharat - Election Yatra : 'Manmohan Singh-Rahul Gandhi' के बयान पर Congress सच में घिर गई ? | LS Poll 2024

Date of Broadcast: 22.04.2024

Since the complainant was not satisfied with the response received from the broadcaster on 17.05.2024 and 15.06.2024, the complaints were escalated to the second level of redressal.

Complaint dated 29.05.2024 to the broadcasters

The complainant stated that the impugned broadcasts aired on 22.04.2024 violated the Guidelines on election coverage and the Guidelines on reporting sensitive issues on the following grounds: -

- They promoted the rhetoric being espoused by one political party that the wealth survey and redistribution plan in Congress's manifesto would be based on religious identity and sentiment to disenfranchise Hindus and in pursuance of a disastrous Marxist-Islamist conspiracy.
- Despite the broadcasts being a communal voting appeal, the anchors did not highlight the law concerning communal appeals under the Representation of People Act. Instead, they relied on speculative and sensationalist hearsay political appeals as the basis for discussion.

News18

At 00:39, the anchor referred to the Congress manifesto as "*khatarnak*" and "*Batwaara*" formula. She further claimed at 2:25 that Rahul Gandhi's "*Batwarasutra*" formula is what led to the fall of countries like the USSR. Modi's "*mangalsutra*" was a reply to this "*Battwara formula*" of Congress. Between 8.14 -8.25, misinformation was broadcast to show Congress as a Muslim party, by giving reference to an Urdu newspaper to further promote the BJP's claim that the wealth redistribution was not based on the Sachar Committee Report but on religious sentiment.

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Zee News

In the impugned broadcast, the broadcaster repeatedly attributed accusations of communal bias and Muslim appeasement to the Congress in a manner similar to the BJP star campaigners.

At 0:15-0:45, the anchor correlated the Congress's manifesto and the statements regarding wealth redistribution with Jinnah's 1929 statement. Between 5:22 - 5:56, the anchors went on a rant to promote Congress's Muslim appeasement and anti-Hindu stance. During the broadcast, the anchors explicitly promoted the BJP star campaigner's claim that property would be taken from Hindus. An attempt made at 4:20 to establish full context, was interrupted by the anchor and the BJP panellists, who accused them of not showing the full context.

Not once were the findings of the Sachar Committee Report explicitly mentioned, and the statement "*especially Muslims*" was attributed to Congress's communal or political bias by relying on Jinnah's statement and the NIA's report.

Times Now Navbharat

During the broadcast, between time stamps 8:14- 8:45, the anchor replied, '*kya kisi ki bhi sampatti utha ke logo me banttt doge' Rahul Gandhi ne kaha tha.*' At 14:00, the claim by the BJP that wealth would be split amongst the Rohingya was aired. The anchor further started questioning Congress regarding their Muslim appeasement policy.

By failing to highlight the rules and regulations under the Representation of People Act, the broadcasters had violated objectivity and attempted to equate the implied appeasement in the Congress manifesto with the express statements made by the PM. Thus, the broadcasters had violated Guidelines 1, 3, and 7 of the Guidelines for Election Broadcasts, Fundamental Principle Number 6 of the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards, Guidelines 2.1 and 2.2 pertaining to Impartiality, Neutrality & Fairness under the Specific Guidelines Covering Reportage and Guidelines G and K under the Specific Guidelines for Anchors conducting Programmes including Debates.

Response dated 06.05.2024 from Zee News

The broadcaster stated that the complainant had raised various false, misleading, frivolous, and motivated allegations against the contents of the news programme "*Taal Thok Ke – toh Hinduon se chheena jhapti*" aired on 22.04.2024, wherein it had fairly conducted a debate with respect to the ongoing elections.

The impugned program was a live debate, and the content of the debate was in the backdrop of the ongoing Lok Sabha Elections. The aforementioned program was carried out with fairness and impartiality, seeking to gather diverse perspectives on

the matters pertaining to the manifesto unveiled by the Congress party for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The objective was to facilitate a thorough exploration of the issues at hand and encourage an open exchange of viewpoints. The panel consisted of Shri Siddhartha Yadav, Spokesperson BJP, Shri Aziz Khan, Spokesperson SP, Shri Kishor Tiwari, Leader Shiv Sena IUBTI, Shri Sangeet Ragi, Political Analyst and Shri Atikurrahman, an Islamic Researcher, to ensure balance and impartiality.

The debate primarily focused on the points outlined in the Congress Party manifesto and the statements made by former Congress president Rahul Gandhi concerning wealth inequality and the redistribution of wealth. The Congress party's manifesto mentioned the increasing wealth gap between the rich and poor, with a commitment to tackle this disparity through appropriate policy modifications. Additionally, the manifesto emphasized the necessity of economic empowerment for minorities.

The statements, alongside the manifesto, sparked a controversy that was being discussed and debated by various political parties, political analysts, and the general public at large. Therefore, there arose a necessity to discuss this issue by inviting representatives, spokespersons, and religious scholars for a comprehensive and lucid discussion and to educate and make the general public aware of this important issue.

Thus, in the said video, the anchor did not endorse the narrative advanced by any specific party; rather, he presented factual information in an objective manner. The anchor primarily sought to elucidate the positions articulated by panellists. The impugned program did not in any manner levy accusations of communal bias or favoritism towards the Muslim community against a specific political party. As a responsible media entity, its aim was solely to pose inquiries and have a reasonable discussion and debate with the due representations from various parties and diverse religious backgrounds.

It vehemently denies and refutes the allegation that in the impugned video, the anchor personally accused the Congress party of Muslim appeasement or holding an Anti-Hindu stance. The anchor's main focus was to address this issue and point out the views of all representatives involved. The anchor posed questions and sought responses from representatives of all participating parties during the discussion. For instance, at 17:13 hrs., the anchor asked the BJP MP Mr. Subrat Pathak, whether the manifesto stated anywhere that Mangal Sutra and houses would be confiscated and redistributed among the public or if these statements reflected the anxiety within the BJP party due to lower voter turnout in phase 1 than anticipated.

The allegation that the anchor was relating Congress' manifesto and statements regarding wealth redistribution with 1929 Jinnah's statement is false and denied in totality as the anchor's remarks were not made independently or out of context; they were specifically in reference to a statement by former Prime Minister Mr. Manmohan Singh, where he said that the minorities must have the first claim over the resources of the development. Moreover, the Congress party and Rahul Gandhi had consistently mooted the topic of wealth redistribution and the principle of "*jītnī aabadi-utna haq*" in their election rallies and speeches. This stance had sparked significant debate, echoing the discussions surrounding Jinnah's 14-point plan, which similarly proposed ideas related to resource allocation. The parallels between these historical debates and the current discourse underscore the enduring relevance and complexity of these socio-economic issues. Hence, this point raised by the anchor was not an original assertion but rather was a part of the ongoing discourse among the public, scholars, and analysts.

The accusation suggesting that the anchor explicitly endorsed the BJP's star campaigners' assertion regarding the confiscation of property from Hindus was unequivocally inaccurate and unfounded. As the fourth pillar of democracy, it is its duty to engage in discussions and debates concerning matters that have the potential to impact society at large and are of significant interest to the public. Its analysis was not based on subjective interpretations but rather on addressing issues repeatedly emphasized by political parties that had generated substantial public attention. Therefore, it is imperative to scrutinize and deliberate on such issues irrespective of their proponents, as they hold relevance within the public domain and warrant thorough examination.

Furthermore, the allegation that the panellist was being prevented from presenting the entirety of his context is entirely without merit. The panellist himself paused the audio at a specific juncture and selectively played a segment of it to support his argument. The anchor's intervention occurred when the panellist halted the video prematurely and began offering his commentary. The interruption was solely to request the panellist to play the complete video, and upon his agreement to do so, he was given opportunity without further interruption. This clarification underscores the commitment to ensuring a fair and comprehensive exchange of information during the discussion.

Thus, it had strictly adhered to the guidelines set forth by NDBA and NBDSA in its reporting. The coverage aimed to inform the public objectively about relevant electoral matters, political parties, candidates, campaign issues, and voting processes. Its reporting was in accordance with the rules and regulations. Further, it had not violated any Specific Guidelines for Anchors conducting Programmes, including Debates, as it had clearly refrained from using religion-linked adjectives in a

pejorative manner and avoided any character assassination or attacks based on religion, political affiliations, or prejudices in its programs and debates.

Response dated 09.05.2024 from News18

The broadcaster denied the allegations made in the complaint and stated that it had not violated the NBSA's guidelines or any other applicable guidelines, rules, or law. Its telecasts were consistent with the policy on accurate, impartial, fair, and neutral reporting. The program was about the allegation and claims of BJP that the manifesto of the Congress party talks about doing an economic survey if voted to power and giving the properties /wealth of one class to another due to which there was a big political storm in which BJP and Congress leaders exchanged barbs with each other and went out giving one statement after the other. BJP had also claimed that this was a part of appeasement of some by the Congress party. This news captured the imagination of everyone, including people across the country. In order to identify and explain the said controversy to the general public, this news was covered. The purpose of the news was also to explain to the public what the economic survey is all about and what may be the requirement of conducting such kind of survey in the country. An apprehension was also raised if the manifesto of Congress, as claimed by BJP, talked about distributing wealth/properties. Does it mean that the idea of equitable distribution is the driving force behind it?

To make the program balanced, it also showed the version of the Congress party to the BJP allegations levelled against it, including Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge's statement that the BJP is lying and they want to divert the attention of the public from the other issues.

The interest in telecasting this news was to bring the allegations and counter allegations of political parties and their leaders before the general public by disseminating newsworthy material to the public at large. The story in question was also telecast with this interest in mind alone.

Response dated 04.06.2024 from Times Now

1. All allegations/contentions/averments made in the subject complaint are denied and disputed. No part of the present written submissions may be treated as an admission of any such allegation / averment / contention.
2. The complaint is not maintainable as the broadcaster has not violated any rules and regulations. The subject program was part of special coverage during election times. These were predominantly current issues, keeping in mind the public interest and significance of such news items in a democracy.
3. The broadcaster stated that the subject broadcast was carried out and telecast live

from Gwalior City, Madhya Pradesh. The anchor led a panel discussion that was open to the public and onlookers to express their views and comments. The agenda behind the program was to discuss the statements made by Prime Minister Modi and the context behind which the statements were made. The minister from Congress and BJP were invited along with a senior journalist to shed light on the ongoing controversy in respect of the statements made. The anchor put a question to Dharmendra Sharma while inviting the counter to the opposition's claims from Brij Gopal Loya. Ministers from both parties attacked each other parties and their parties' representative actions.

4. The statement made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi was that the Manmohan government in 2006, during its tenure, made a statement suggesting favoritism towards Muslims regarding property rights. The statement made by the erstwhile Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh in 2006, was also run in the broadcast. PM Modi, in his speech, further highlighted the impact of the statement made by Rahul Gandhi. The statement of Rahul Gandhi was also aired in the broadcast wherein he was seen saying during one of the election rallies that *"hum financial and institutional survey karenge or yeh pta lagenge....kiske hath me hai konse varg ke batho me hai"*.
5. As the debate was in an open ground, various public and onlookers were also present and the anchor invited comments from them as well. Some questioned the work done by Modi in his tenure, while others questioned the Congress. Thus, at no point in time, the anchor violated any guidelines of NBDSA or guidelines for election broadcast. The debate and the program were carried out in a fairly neutral manner and only from the perspective of an election critic for the viewers to be informed properly of every statement made or action taken on behalf of any political party. Throughout the program, the anchor ensured adherence to guidelines and maintained a neutral stance, providing viewers with comprehensive insights into political statements and actions.
6. The impugned broadcast did not violate any guidelines for election broadcast, code of ethics, rules, regulations of NBDSA, NBDA in any manner whatsoever as alleged or otherwise or at all *inter alia* on the following counts:
 - The debate in question has to be viewed in the context of the issues raised and as a whole.
 - The complaint highlights selected comments made by the anchor to level the allegations of bias and appears to be targeting the anchor in their individual capacities as journalists.
 - The said complaint focuses only on one side of the spectrum and does not appreciate that a counter argument is equally relevant, important, and critical for viewers to form their opinions, specifically when popular

beliefs and criticisms are challenged. Viewers have a right to know an alternative argument to such popular beliefs on significant matters.

- Raising pertinent, strong, and pointed questions cannot be brushed aside with the allegation that they *'peddle a narrative'*.

7. Further, the program, by no stretch of imagination, amounted to any violations of NBDSA guidelines as alleged or otherwise or at all. The complainant is deliberately targeting the anchors for being selective towards a particular community, party, or religion on frivolous grounds. The pivotal intention is to malign the reputation of the channel and to dissuade it from broadcasting news on important issues. A complete perusal of all the debate programs would show that neither any favoritism is given to any political party nor any political party is attacked. Further, the debate did not propagate or attack any particular religion or communal attitudes. It is vehemently denied that biased coverage is made in order to favor any particular political or religious belief.
8. It is denied that the broadcast is in violation of Fundamental Principle No. 6 of the NBDSA guidelines or Point 2 of Specific Guidelines Covering Reportage. It is further denied that the broadcaster is in violation of Guidelines for Election Broadcasts or Point G and K of Specific Guidelines for Anchors Conducting Programmes including Debates of the NBDSA. Mere perusal of the video footage of the debate/ program would make it amply clear that there is no such violation of any of the alleged principles or any guidelines.
9. The channel or the anchors have not, by way of such debates, violated any guidelines or regulations as alleged or otherwise or at all. The program was conducted in an open and objective manner and did not cause any incitement of communal bias or influence or mislead the viewers in any manner whatsoever.
10. The aforesaid program by no stretch of the imagination can be deemed to have been made on selective and biased coverage or have outraged religious feelings of any class or community, statement creating or promoting enmity or promoting enmity, hatred or ill- will between classes or violated any provisions of Indian Penal Code, 1860, Cable Television Network rules, 1994 or fundamental principle of Journalism or principles of self-regulations. Further, no program has been made to propagate some particular political or religious ideology or is made against any political belief. Media freedom is an essential pillar of a free democracy and plurality of views and opinions, however strong and direct they may be, must be allowed to protect this sanctity.
11. The fundamental principles in the Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards were framed so as to regulate the contents of the broadcasters in order to provide

impartiality and objectivity in reporting. The programs in question merely debated issues of public importance. Nowhere do the said programs violate any fundamental principle or principles of self-regulation.

12. It is a settled law that the media and press should not be unnecessarily restricted in their speech as the same may amount to curtailment of expression of the ideas and free discussion in the public on the basis of which a democratic country functions. It has been held by the Hon'ble Supreme Court that the freedom of speech and expression includes freedom of propagation of ideas and that freedom is ensured by the freedom of circulation, without which the publication would be of little value. The Hon'ble Supreme Court has also held that the liberty of the press is an essential part of the right to freedom of speech and expression and that this liberty consists of allowing no previous restraint upon publication.
13. Apart from the right of the respondent to disseminate, to the public at large, the citizens of India have the right to know about the current affairs of the country, and the right to know, is also another aspect of free speech and democracy. The freedom of speech and expression includes the right to hold opinion without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas to any media regardless of frontiers. It has been observed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India that when freedom of expression is put to use by the mass media, it requires additional dimensions and becomes freedom of information. It has been held that the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech is not so much for the benefit of the press as it is for the benefit of the public. The freedom of speech includes within its compass the right of all citizens to read and be informed. The aforesaid programmes were one such criticism, and a fair one.
14. The framers of our Constitution recognized the importance of safeguarding the right under Article 19(1)(a) since the free flow of opinion and ideas is essential for the collective life of the citizenry.
15. It is settled law that the press is entitled to make fair comments on issues that impact the public at large, which is a right guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India. This is an integral part of the right of free speech and expression, and the same must not be whittled away. The broadcaster relied on several judgments in support of its assertion.
16. The said program was merely reflective of the various facets of the topic being reported upon and must not be viewed in isolation but in the overall context of the subject being discussed. The reporting done was factually correct and of public importance. Thus, no prejudice was caused to any specific community or religion under any circumstances whatsoever.

17. It is necessary that the debate program is viewed as a whole, and not on the basis of breaking, and dissecting a sentence or a stanza to show any adverse effect, without contextually understanding as to why that statement or sentence or stanza came about.
18. The choice of a news debate is entirely editorial discretion. The topics chosen here were the recent incidents in the nation. There was no cherry-picking and no interest groups that were being served by such debates. Such allegations are motivated, and in fact, the complainant has cherry-picked statements made in the debate to push an agenda. The channel did not impose its opinions in the debate. Raising pertinent questions is the media's right to report on issues that are of public interest. Several opinions are made available on a debate like this. To call it an opinionated program is incorrect and baseless.
19. A comment or a sentence or stanza, or the program as a whole may be independent, bold, and even exaggerated. Mere exaggeration, however gross may be, would not make the comment unfair if not founded by malafide. This view has been followed till date by various courts in India while balancing the rights of Freedom of Speech and Expression and its restriction under Article 19(2).
20. The object and context of the program can be understood only by viewing the program in totality and not by picking and choosing words and sentences out of context and reading them in the literal sense, as has been done by the complainants. The program was not intended to polarize citizens nor to spread negative propaganda, nor to encourage violence against any class of people in the country/ society.
21. A news channel is well within its right to present the news event and current affairs of extreme public and national importance in the (i) manner that it deems appropriate, without violating the restrictions contained under Article 19(2) of the Constitution of India, (ii) discuss the same leading to a fruitful discussion amongst the participants, and (iii) present unpopular views for the public to review the same.

In the light of various submissions made, both factual and legal, and also various judgments referred, it is submitted that the broadcaster, in the exercise of its fundamental right envisaged under Art 19(1)(a), had telecast the said debate program. Thus, the present complaint is not legally sustainable and, hence, needs to be rejected.

Complaint's Application dated 27.06.2024 seeking condonation of delay
The delay was inadvertent. The complainant requested NBDSA to condone the

delay as under the principles of natural justice and in the interest of strengthening self-regulatory structures as the NBDSA's grievance redressal model, which has been recognized by various government committees as the one that can be built upon both at the broadcasting service provider level as well as the industry level to further improve self-regulation. Further, there are no other forums to approach regarding violations of these guidelines.

Reply dated 28.06.2024 of the broadcaster, Times Now Navbharat
With respect to the application for condonation of delay filed by the complainant under Proviso 1 to Regulation 8.2 of the News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Regulations, the broadcaster requested the Authority to strictly view the delayed filing as non-compliance of Regulation 8.2.

Decision of NBDSA at its meeting held on 1.07.2024

NBDSA at its meeting held on 1.07.2024, considered the captioned complaints response of the broadcasters and after viewing the footage of the broadcasts, decided to call the parties for a hearing on 31.07.2024.

In respect of the complaint filed against Times Now Navbharat, NBDSA noted that there was a delay of 24 days on the part of the complainant in escalating the complaint at the second level of redressal. However, since there were other complaints of a similar nature, the delay of 24 days in escalating the complaint at the second level of redressal in respect of the broadcast aired on Times Now Navbharat on 22.04.2024 was condoned.

On being served with the notices, the following persons were present at the hearing on 31.07.2024:

Complainant:

1. Mr. Utkarsh Mishra

Broadcaster:

News18 India

1. Mr. Puneesh Kochar, Senior Counsel – Legal
2. Mr. Praveen Shrivastava, Associate Executive Producer – Editorial

Zee News

1. Ms. Petal Chandok, Trust Legal
2. Ms. Annie, Manager Legal

Times Now Navbharat

1. Kirtima Maravoor, Compliance Officer, NBDSA

2. Kunal Tandon – Advocate, Tandon & Co.
3. Utkarsh Singh – News Editor, Times Now Navbharat

Submissions of the Complainant

The impugned broadcasts concerned statements made by the Prime Minister on 21.04.2024 during the election on wealth distribution. The Prime Minister equated “*wealth distribution*” as a dangerous Leftist conspiracy to disenfranchise Hindus, he called it “*urban naxal ki soch*” and stated that the properties of Hindus (like mangalsutras), will be snatched and given.

The complainant submitted that the impugned broadcast violated the principles of impartiality, objectivity and neutrality under the Code of Ethics, Guidelines 1, 2,3, 7 of Election broadcasts, Specific guidelines covering reportage, Guidelines G & K of Specific Guidelines for Anchors conducting Programmes including Debates.

In the impugned broadcasts, the issue of wealth distribution was framed as an act of Muslim appeasement, reiterating the statement of the Prime Minister. However, the Congress Manifesto does not claim that wealth from Hindus will be taken and given to Muslims. The complainant submitted that while he was not questioning the Prime Minister’s statements made in his capacity as a political actor, his complaint was with the anchors, who supported the statements made by the Prime Minister and used identical arguments. This, he submitted, violated the principles of neutrality and objectivity as per the Guidelines for Election Broadcasts. In the broadcasts, the anchors made arguments which were identical to the arguments made by the BJP panellists to justify these political accusations.

In the broadcast aired on News18 India, the anchor unduly prejudiced the viewers against the notion of wealth distribution by labeling it as a hard left, “*Batwara*”, “*Khatarnak*” formula that has destroyed nations. She further justified the Prime Minister’s reference to mangalsutra as being a response to the batwarasutra of Rahul Gandhi.

The idea of wealth redistribution itself is not a purely leftist ideal and has many dimensions that have been discussed to address growing wealth inequality worldwide. Wealth inequality is at record levels in India and should be discussed and debated. Therefore, the anchor should have refrained from labelling wealth redistribution as ‘*khatarnak*’. This he submitted also amounted to misinformation.

In the broadcasts aired on Zee News, the anchor promoted the statement made by the Prime Minister that for wealth redistribution, property will be taken from Hindus and given to Muslims. The anchor prevented a panellist from playing the complete speech of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The anchor along with the BJP

panellist in tandem kept trying to allege that wealth distribution implied Muslim appeasement by the Congress. There was no discussion in the broadcasts on wealth distribution as an economic concept rather it was framed as an issue of minority appeasement or as a dangerous leftist conspiracy.

The anchors at 5:22 further laid out a list of allegations concerning Muslim appeasement and disenfranchisement of Hindus, clearly indicating the intent of the anchor to frame the issue of wealth redistribution as primarily a communal one between Hindus and Muslims.

The questions raised through the tickers in the broadcast, such as *"Toh Hinduon se Cheena Chapti"*, *"Sampati Surevy main Hindu lut jayenge"* and *"Congress apka ghar cheen legi"*, were answered in the affirmative in the broadcast.

In the broadcast on Times Now Navbharat, an open platform was provided for debate where questions were being asked from the voters and communicated to the panellists. In the impugned broadcast also the speech of the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was selectively played, and the debate was framed to promote the notion that wealth redistribution was being done to appease the Muslim community. There was misrepresentation of the Congress's Manifesto. The anchor while specifically quoting from the Manifesto, interpreted as there being no space for *Bhausankhyakvad*. An extremely binary and extremist interpretation was given to the Congress manifesto. Additionally, the manifesto's mention of protection of Muslim laws in the country was interpreted by the anchor to mean that there were constitutional rights only for one community. The anchor further did not stop the BJP panellists from claiming that property will be given to the Rohingyas. During the broadcast, only questions regarding wealth distribution were being asked to the candidate, while multiple other issues concerning drinking water, women safety were not taken up.

Submissions of the Broadcasters

News18 India

The broadcaster submitted that an allegation had been raised against it that in the impugned broadcast it was leaning towards a particular political party. In response to the allegations, the broadcaster submitted that the impugned broadcast was a news program and not a debate. The program was based on a statement made by Rahul Gandhi on wealth distribution. The intent of the program was to understand wealth distribution, what would be its impact and its requirement.

The broadcaster submitted that following Rahul Gandhi's statement on wealth reduction, the topic had gained significant attention in news space. In fact, it was the

BJP and Prime Minister Modi himself, who had criticized wealth redistribution and labelled it as being "*khattarnak*" and "*batwara formula*".

As a result, a serious discussion had started on how Congress planned to redistribute wealth. There was adherence to principles of neutrality as the statements made by Rahul Gandhi, Mallikarjun Kharge and Pawan Khera were also broadcast and Congress's counter to the claims being made by BJP were also shown.

In the impugned broadcast only, a question was raised as to how wealth redistribution would be implemented. In the broadcast, it was also discussed that the idea of wealth redistribution was inspired by Karl Marx's theory and how the USSR disintegrated as a result of wealth redistribution. Further, several economists had also opposed wealth redistribution in India. It had also broadcaster the statement made by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on wealth redistribution, as Prime Minister Modi had referred to his statement.

Zee News

The broadcaster submitted that the impugned broadcast was a live debate, wherein primarily two questions were raised by the anchor. These questions were based on the statements made by Rahul Gandhi in his rally and by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which were shown before the debate.

In so far as question concerning wealth redistribution in Congress manifesto is concerned, the former Prime Minister had clearly stated in his speech that minorities especially Muslim community will have the first claim on our resources. In the broadcast, the anchor had raised the question as to what the former Prime Minister meant, when he stated that the Muslim community will have the first claim on our resources, whether resources from other community will be given to minority community and whether this resonates with Jinnah's 14-point plan.

At 4:40 in the broadcast, the statement "*these people are looting you*" which was made by Rahul Gandhi in a rally in Maharashtra was broadcast, and a question was raised by the anchor as to what Mr. Gandhi meant.

Further, the allegation concerning Muslim panellists not being provided an opportunity to express their views was false, as ample opportunity was given to all panellists. In fact, the debate ended with the statement made by the Congress leader.

At 5:20, the entire video of the speech made by the former Prime Minister was broadcast. Later on, one of the panellists, Mr. Azeez, played a part of the audio of the speech. He stopped the audio at a point that suited him. The anchor in fact interrupted the panelist only to ask him to play the complete audio clip.

In the broadcast, the anchor was merely raising questions and had not made any allegations as alleged by the complainant. The impugned broadcast has to be seen in its entirety. The moot point was arising from factual statements made by both the leaders and no ideas or allegations were created by the anchor at any point of time. The nature of debate itself is to raise questions, which is what had transpired in the impugned broadcast.

Times Now

The impugned broadcast was a debate conducted in the middle of the street in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. In the debate, three panellists, namely the Congress spokesperson, the BJP spokesperson and a Senior Journalist were present.

The debate emanated from a speech made by the Prime Minister. From the complaint, it appears that the complainant seems to be raising questions about the correctness of the speech made by the Prime Minister, which the channel cannot question. The righteousness of a speech made by the Prime Minister in an election rally cannot be judged either by the channel or by NBDSA. Further, it submitted that a speech made by the Prime Minister is bound to create a debate.

The attention of NBDSA was invited to certain time stamps in the broadcast. At around 8 minutes, the Prime Minister's objection to the Congress's Manifesto was broadcast, thereafter the speech of the Prime Minister, wherein he referred to the Congress's Manifesto and 2006 speech was broadcast. At 4:25, the statement made by Rahul Gandhi wherein he referred to the then Prime Minister of 2006 was shown, then the justification advanced by Promod Tiwari and Pawan Khera on the show was also aired. In view of the above, the broadcaster submitted that it had adhered to the principle of neutrality.

The broadcaster submitted that even the public present in the debate was divided, with questions being raised to both parties and their spokesperson. At this juncture, the impugned debate did not merit any interdiction.

Rejoinder of the Complainant

The complainant reiterated that he was not questioning the speech made by the Prime Minister in his capacity as a political actor rather his complaint was with the manner in which the broadcasters had attempted to promote the statements/claims as a matter of fact.

The Prime Minister had alleged that the concept of wealth redistribution was something which was motivated by Congress's appeasement politics and by the Leftist extremist ideology, which was clearly promoted by News18 in its broadcast, as the broadcaster called wealth redistribution "*batwara*" and "*khatarnak*". The terms

used by the broadcaster was also in violation of the NBDSA's Guidelines on Hyperbole. The broadcaster in its submissions has failed to explain why such terms were used in the impugned broadcast, which tended to prejudice the viewers against the opinion being promoted by one political party.

The broadcaster Zee News in the impugned broadcast promoted the claim that property will be taken from Hindus and given to Muslims as a matter of fact and not as a question. No questions were raised by the anchor, rather throughout the debate the anchor went on a long rant on Congress's history of appeasement politics. At the time of the impugned broadcast, the statement made by the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh concerning the first claim to resources was well known. So, when the panelist from Samajwadi Party wanted to speak on this matter and was stopped by the anchor in tandem with the panelist from BJP party, was clear indication of bias.

In a rejoinder to the submissions of Times Now, the complainant submitted that it was categorically false that questions were asked to BJP panelist. The broadcaster had failed to answer the allegation regarding the misrepresentation of Congress's manifesto, which was promoted as being discriminatory against Hindus in the broadcast.

In the impugned broadcasts, the issue of wealth redistribution was framed as an issue of Muslim appeasement and discrimination against Hindus. There was only lip service in the broadcasts, as the panelists were called without giving an opportunity to express their views. Further, it is also inappropriate to raise questions in a biased manner.

The Election Guidelines clearly requires the broadcasters to be careful and sensitive while reporting every aspect of elections. The broadcaster is required to conduct such broadcasts in a neutral manner. Merely inviting diverse panellists in the debate does not absolve the broadcaster of its responsibility under the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards.

In counter, the broadcaster Zee News submitted that the complainant has cherry picked statements in the impugned broadcast.

In order to scrutinize the impugned broadcasts to ascertain whether the conduct of the anchors was in line with the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards and the Guidelines issued by it, the decision on the broadcasts was deferred by NBDSA in the meetings held on 31.07.2024 and 13.12.2024.

Decision

NBDSA at its meeting held on 22.02.2025 considered the complaint, response of the broadcasters, gave due consideration to the arguments of the complainant and the broadcasters and reviewed the footage of the broadcasts.

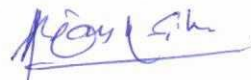
On a perusal of the footage of the broadcasts aired on News18 India, Zee News and Times Now Navbharat, NBDSA noted that all the broadcasts were based on the issue of wealth redistribution, the statements made by various political leaders and various versions of persons were taken. No doubt, there appears to be a little tilt in favour of one version by the anchors of these programmes, at the same time, it is noticed that all sides were given due opportunity to express their point of view. Therefore, looking into the matter in a holistic manner, NBDSA is of the opinion that these complaints should now be closed without any further action thereupon.

NBDSA accordingly decided to close the complaint and inform the complainant and the broadcasters accordingly.

NBDSA directs NBDA 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 NBDA;
- (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 NBDSA while responding to the complaint and putting forth their view points, and any finding or observation by NBDSA 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 NBDSA in regard to any civil/criminal liability.



Justice A.K Sikri (Retd.)
Chairperson

Place: New Delhi

Date : 08.05.2025