

News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority

Order No. 204 (2025)

Complainant: Mr. Indrajeet Ghorpade

Channel: Zee News

Programmes:

- 1. Mehandi Jihad Controversy: मुजफ्फरनगर में क्यों चेक किया जा रहा है आधार कार्ड?
aired on 20.10.2024**
- 2. Mehandi Jihad Controversy: मुजफ्फरनगर में मुस्लिम युवकों को अल्टीमेटम! aired on
17.10.2024**
- 3. Mehndi Jihad Update: 'जिहादियों' के लिए लाठी तैयार! | Karwa Chauth 2024
News aired on 18.10.2024**
- 4. Baat Pate Ki: मेहंदी लगाने वाले सावधान! चौंकाने वाली खबर aired on 20.10.2024**

Since the complainant was not satisfied with the response received from the broadcaster, on 31.10.2024, the complaint was escalated to the second level of redressal, i.e., NBDSA.

Complaint dated 22.10.2024

The complaint concerned broadcasts aired between October 17th and 20th, wherein the broadcaster spread anti-Muslim misinformation claiming that Muslim people spat in mehndi before applying it to Hindu women. It was further alleged that they hide their Muslim identity with the intention of fraudulently marrying Hindu women and then forcing them to change their religion. Muslim men work as mehndi artists to exchange phone numbers with Hindu women and then marry them with the intention of forcibly converting their religion. By airing the impugned broadcasts, the channel amplified violent anti-Muslim slogans by Hindu extremist groups, threats to Muslim men, and called for a boycott of Muslim mehndi artists.

The channel failed to fact-check the misinformation, condemn the threats and abuses against Muslim people, and present an opposing viewpoint. The channel contributed towards spreading communal divide and spreading anti-Muslim fear and hatred through tickers, thumbnails, and headlines. This amounted to a violation of the Code of Ethics and Guidelines, specifically Accuracy, Neutrality, Objectivity, Communal Harmony, Hate Speech, Defamation etc.

During the impugned broadcasts, the following Tickers, Thumbnails, and Headlines were aired:

1. First Broadcast - *"Special drive against mehndi Jihad", "First disclose your identity then apply mehndi"* and *"Only the one who shows Aadhaar can apply mehndi"*.

2. Second Broadcast – *“Mehendi jihad naya fasad”, “UP mein naya fasad mehendi wala love jihad”* and *“Pakde jane par sabak sikhaya jayega”*.
3. Third Broadcast – *“Jihadiyon ke liye lathi taiyar”, “Mehendi jihad par de danadan”, “Aawedan nivedan nahi mane toh de danadan”, “Mehendi jihad ke khilaf lath model launch”* and *“Lathi se lais rahenge jihadiyon ko rokenge”*.
4. Fourth Broadcast – *“Special drive against mehendi Jihad”, “First disclose your identity then apply mehendi”* and *“Only the one who shows Aadhaar can apply mehendi”*.

Reply dated 30.10.2024 from the broadcaster

In the complaint, various allegations have been raised against the contents of news programmes aired on the channel, wherein it had addressed the controversy concerning "Mehandi Jihad," in which certain Hindu organizations (Hindu Sangathan) had urged individuals in the vicinity to ensure that they only engage Hindu women to get henna (Mehndi) designs on their hands. In reply to the allegations contained in the complaint, the broadcaster stated:

1. That the impugned programmes did not violate any of the guidelines, code of ethics, and principles of self-regulation and were completely neutral, objective, and impartial. The complaint has been submitted on the basis of speculation and conjecture, and the complainant had failed to identify any specific segment of the broadcasts that did not contain the factual information and disseminated any anti-Muslim misinformation, amplified threats against Muslim men, or substantiated the other allegations made against it and had also failed to prove any of the contents of the impugned programme being violative of any of the applicable guidelines.
2. The complainant had fundamentally misconstrued and misinterpreted the contents of the program in question. In the broadcast titled "Mehandi Jihad, Naya Fasad," factual information regarding a specific situation was presented without fabricating any details or attempting to incite religious animosity. The report highlighted that certain Hindu groups in Western Uttar Pradesh had proclaimed that, on the occasion of Karwa Chauth, Hindu married women should have their henna (mehndi) applied exclusively by Hindu women. In accordance with the announcements made by these groups, 13 designated mehndi application points were established to facilitate this directive, where the identities of individuals applying henna could be verified.
3. Its intention was to inform law enforcement agencies and relevant authorities about the activities occurring in various parts of the state. It was explicitly stated in the broadcast that members of the Hindu organizations were prepared to use force against any individual who falsely assumed a Hindu identity to exploit the situation or promote conduct against which they were actively protesting. By

conveying this information, its objective was to emphasize the necessity of preventing any potential violence and to alert law enforcement agencies to be prepared to address such incidents effectively.

4. It is important to clarify that the ticker and headlines used in connection with the aforementioned program were not solely its original creation nor entirely devoid of context. Rather, these elements were directly derived from public statements made by members of the Hindu organization in question. The intent of the impugned programme was to address the viewpoints and issues put forward by these religious groups. Furthermore, it had conducted interviews with representatives of these groups to present their perspective regarding the rationale behind their actions.
5. Furthermore, the content was not crafted with the intention of disseminating misinformation regarding Muslim individuals or of promoting a boycott against Muslim mehndi artists. It reiterated that its primary objective was to inform the public about the slogans propagated by these organizations, and it did not seek to amplify any violent or anti-Muslim rhetoric. The purpose of the reporting was strictly to provide transparency and awareness concerning the discourse surrounding these groups, with a focus on fostering an informed public dialogue rather than inciting division or hostility.
6. It is pertinent to note that it had not broadcast any anti-Muslim misinformation regarding the unfounded claims that Muslim individuals engage in the practice of spitting in mehndi prior to its application on Hindu women. The reporting of this matter was undertaken solely with the intent to convey factual information, ensuring that both communities remain vigilant against any potential undemocratic activities. Furthermore, this reporting served to alert the relevant authorities to effectively address any illegal actions that may arise in connection with these claims.
7. It categorically rejected the allegations that its programming endorsed harmful narratives about a certain community, including claims of fraudulently marrying Hindu women or coercing them into religious conversion. It also denied amplifying any violent anti-Muslim slogans, threats against Muslim individuals, or calls for a boycott of Muslim mehndi artists. Its commitment to responsible journalism is reflected in its diligent fact-checking and balanced reporting, which aims to inform the public without promoting hostility or division. Furthermore, it strives to present diverse viewpoints and highlight instances of injustice without bias, consistently working to foster understanding among communities rather than contribute to communal division or fear.

8. The narrative presented was not a fabrication aimed at inciting hate; rather, it was its obligation as a responsible media organization to report on prevailing societal issues.
9. That, thus, in view of the aforesaid, it is submitted that it had neither breached any of the fundamental principles of NBSA and the Code of Ethics nor had it spread any misinformation or hate about the Muslim community, as alleged in the complaint. Thus, the complaint ought to be dismissed at the outset.

Complaint dated 31.10.2024 to NBDSA

The channel had responded and denied the violations. However, the complainant stated that he was not satisfied with the justification provided by the channel. The channel used the reportage including the headlines and tickers, to dog whistle against the Muslim community.

Decision of NBDSA at its meeting held on 13.12.2024

NBDSA considered the complaint, response of the broadcaster, and after viewing the footage of the broadcasts, decided to call the parties for a hearing.

On being served with the Notices, the following persons were present at the hearing on 22.05.2025:

Complainant:

1. Mr. Indrajeet Ghorpade

Broadcaster:

1. Ms. Ritwika Nanda, Advocate
2. Ms. Annie, Senior Manager - Legal

Submissions of the Complainant

The complaint concerned four broadcasts aired on Zee News. The news in these broadcasts pertained to a Hindu organization in Muzaffarnagar, which had, on the occasion of Karwa Chauth, alleged that Muslim artists spat and added non-vegetarian food to mehndi, which was then applied to Hindu women, thereby offending their religious sentiments. The organization further alleged that Muslim mehndi artists conceal their true identity, wear a kalava, and falsely present themselves as Hindus in order to marry Hindu women. As a result, this organization had established thirteen mehndi camps and encouraged Hindu women to have their mehndi applied at these locations. Additionally, the organization stated that it would verify the identification documents of all stall owners operating Mehndi stalls. The Hindu organization had performed a puja of the lathi and claimed that they had warned the authorities that if the authorities failed to take action, they would take

the law into their own hands and beat any such person who was caught applying Mehndi with a lathi.

The complainant submitted that using the term “*Mehndi Jihad*,” a fabricated phrase with no factual basis, mirrors discredited conspiracies like “*Love Jihad*,” aimed at demonizing interfaith interactions and dehumanizing Muslims by labelling harmless contact, such as applying henna, as a sinister conspiracy. Further, demanding Aadhaar based on religion is discriminatory and legally questionable. The boycott of Muslim workers could be equated to economic apartheid. The organizations had, by inciting mob violence justified as self-defence or moral policing, and created a climate of intimidation and vigilantism.

This was broadcast on national television, without critique or accountability, which was both dangerous and irresponsible. The impugned broadcasts amplified the rhetoric of this Hindu organization, as evidenced by the transcript, tickers, headlines, and thumbnails aired during the broadcast. In addition to the tickers reproduced in the complaint, the complainant drew the Authority's attention to specific timestamps in the impugned broadcasts.

The complainant reiterated that the channel had not only aired these views but amplified them with an approving tone, offering no counter-narratives, expert voices, or legal perspectives. The reports lacked neutrality and objectivity, using loaded communal terms like “*mehndi jihad*” without evidence. In the broadcasts, Muslim men were presumed guilty of deceitful intent, and no Muslim voice or independent verification was presented, thereby violating the basic tenets of journalism.

The tone of the anchor was supportive of the Hindu organizations' stance, presenting violent threats and discriminatory actions as justified. There was no critique of vigilante actions like lathi poojas, threats of physical assault, or forced Aadhaar checks.

Repeated slogans like “*dande maro salon ko*” and “*de danadan*” were aired without warnings, censorship, or condemnation, normalizing violent vigilante behaviour. These reports encouraged public surveillance based on religion, justified physical violence, and called for economic and physical boycott of a community.

The headlines and commentary were designed to provoke, and not inform. Muslim men were repeatedly labelled as “*jihadis*”, “*adharmis*”, or part of a hidden agenda. The narrative promoted religious stereotyping and implied criminality based purely on faith. The anchors echoed and legitimized the language of Hindu right-wing groups.

Submissions of the Broadcaster

The broadcaster stated that the impugned broadcasts were entirely factual and neutral, as they had merely reported on the developments and statements made by certain local groups in Western Uttar Pradesh. It was a matter of fact that this incident had happened in Uttar Pradesh. 'The term' Mehndi Jihad' was used by the persons interviewed in reference to this incident.

Regarding the tickers, the broadcaster submitted that while the complainant may object to certain words used, it was unable to understand what guidelines were violated in the impugned broadcasts. It reiterated that although the language may not have been tasteful, it is unclear what violation had occurred in the impugned broadcasts, as at no point in the broadcasts did the broadcaster disseminate misinformation about any religious community, promote or amplify threats, violence, or communal hatred, or call for the boycott or demeaning of Muslim mehndi artists.

The broadcasts were factual and impartial, and there was no endorsement of defamatory or harmful narratives about Muslim men or any other community. Further, it denied the allegations of promoting fraudulent marriages, forced conversions or violence. It reiterated that the impugned broadcasts did not amplify anti-Muslim slogans or call for the boycott of Muslim mehndi artists.

The broadcaster is a 24/7 news channel, and the clips complained of were very short, typically lasting for two minutes. Therefore, the broadcaster submitted that it must be analysed what percentage of the broadcasts carried by the channel the impugned clips constituted. The complainant's interpretation of the impugned broadcasts was based on a misunderstanding of the broadcaster's neutral and responsible reporting, which aimed to inform the public without inciting communal disharmony.

Decision

NBDSA considered the complaint, response of the broadcaster, gave due consideration to the arguments of the complainant and the broadcaster, and reviewed the footage of the broadcasts.

NBDSA noted that the impugned broadcasts were reports concerning the decision taken by Hindu Groups in Western Uttar Pradesh during Karwa Chauth, declaring that Hindu married women should have mehndi applied solely by Hindu women.

Having perused the footage of the broadcasts, it was noticed that in all four impugned broadcasts, while ample time was given to the views of the Hindu Groups, the broadcaster had failed to present any other point of view, including that of the people affected by such a decision or the government. Failure to present the views of all affected parties constituted a violation of the principle of neutrality under the

Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards and the Specific Guidelines Covering Reportage.

NBDSA also noted that it was the submission of the broadcaster that the tickers and headlines aired during the broadcasts were not endorsed by the channel; rather, they merely reflected the statements made publicly by third parties, and the tickers were presented in this context. Its primary objective was to inform the public about the slogans propagated by these organizations. However, the broadcaster, while running these tickers did not issue any clarification that these were the statements made by third parties, nor any endorsement to the effect that these tickers did not represent the views of the broadcaster.

NBDSA observed that while it cannot comment on the subject of the broadcast itself, which is part of editorial discretion and is protected under the freedom of speech and expression, it was necessary at this juncture to remind the media of the role it plays as the fourth pillar of democracy in shaping public discourse. When dealing with potentially sensitive subject matters, it would behove the broadcasters to critically examine the content they air, to ensure that the same aligns with the journalistic standards outlined in the Code of Conduct.

Accordingly, in view of the above violations, NBDSA decided to admonish the broadcaster and directed it to be careful in future by obtaining the views from the other side as well.

NBDSA further also directed the broadcaster to remove the videos of the impugned broadcasts, if still available from the website of the channel, or YouTube, and remove all hyperlinks, including access, which should be confirmed to NBDSA in writing within 7 days of the Order.

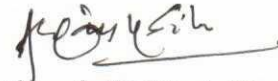
NBDSA decided to close the complaint with the above observations and inform the complainant and the broadcaster accordingly.

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 : 25.09.2025