

News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority

Order No. 220 (2026)

Complainant: Citizens for Justice and Peace Mumbai

Channel: Aaj Tak

Programme: "महाकुंभ में भगदड़ के पीछे VVIP मूवमेंट का फैक्ट चेक"

Date of Broadcast: 29.01.2025

Since the complainant did not receive a response from the broadcaster within the time stipulated under the News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Regulations, on 20.02.2025, the complaint was escalated to the second level of grievance redressal, i.e., NBDSA.

Complaint dated 5.2.2025

The complainant stated that its grievance was against a broadcast aired on Aaj Tak shortly after a devastating stampede at the Maha Kumbh Mela at Sangam Ghat, which tragically resulted in a significant loss of life due to an unexpected surge in the crowd. The concern specifically relates to a small portion from within the broadcast, a short video of which was later posted on the broadcaster's official X account under the title "महाकुंभ में हुई मौत पर खुश होने वाले लोग कौन?". This portion of the program was deeply troubling as it disproportionately focused on Muslim names taken from various unverified social media posts. Through this segment, the anchor showcased certain names on the screen, the majority of whom were Muslims who had put "laughing emojis" on news related to the Maha Kumbh stampede, implying that members of the Muslim community were, in some way, celebrating the tragic deaths in the Maha Kumbh stampede. The anchor's framing and commentary not only misrepresented the facts but also had the potential of fuelling divisive rhetoric with no basis in reality. By singling out Muslim names and making generalised and unsupported claims, the broadcast diverted attention from the actual causes of the stampede and sought to create an unfounded communal divide. This kind of reporting, which lacks verification and context, can be deemed to be irresponsible and unnecessary.

The entire 50-minute broadcast was not problematic, and hence the complaint only relates to the above-mentioned section. The content leading up to this segment focused on the chaos of the stampede and other related issues, which were in line with the topic at hand. However, the portion aired from 36:10 to 37:21 minutes was where the problem lie.

Contents of the particular portion:

At the outset, the anchor in his statement unnecessarily sensationalised the issue by suggesting that there was a collective glee among Muslims over the tragic loss of life. The anchor began by addressing the tragic stampede that occurred during the Maha

Kumbh Mela, highlighting the chaos and loss of life. However, the segment took a troubling turn when the anchor singled out social media posts related to the tragedy, focusing specifically on those who had reacted to pictures of the incident with laughing emojis. The anchor's language was highly problematic when he stated, *"Today, you should also take a look at the names of those who, instead of feeling sad about the deaths that occurred in the Maha Kumbh, are celebrating." There are such people too. On various social media platforms, many pictures related to the chaos at the Maha Kumbh have been posted, and there are a large number of people using laughing emojis on those posts. These people are laughing at the deaths in the Maha Kumbh, mocking them, and finding happiness in this chaos. And today, I want to read out the names of all these people. Take a look at the larger screen and see what their names are. When someone reacts to a social media post with a laughing emoji, they have to specifically choose it from the different available emojis. All these people made the effort to do so, and now you can see how they are laughing at the chaos here."*

The attempt to link the use of laughing emojis to a broader narrative of celebration was both misleading and manipulative. By specifically highlighting the names of individuals, particularly those from the Muslim community, in this context, the anchor created a false and harmful connection between individual social media reactions and the entire Muslim community. This kind of sensationalism not only damaged the credibility of the broadcast but also further created division in an already fragile society.

Such misleading and harmful content was not only a violation of ethical journalism but also contributed to the further polarization of society. The narrative pushed in this segment failed to distinguish between individual social media posts and the actions of an entire community. It painted a distorted picture of Muslims, turning them into scapegoats for a tragedy that was a result of crowd mismanagement, not community behaviour. The focus on Muslim names and the deliberate emphasis on portraying them negatively was an attempt to divert attention from the real issues at hand.

As per the guidelines issued by the NBDSA, news broadcasters are explicitly prohibited from airing content that may incite violence, promote unrest, or foster communal hatred. NBDSA stresses that broadcasters must avoid reports that sow enmity based on religion, caste, community, or any other divisive factor. This directive has been flagrantly violated by the broadcaster, both in terms of communal sensitivity and journalistic responsibility, as demonstrated in the segment.

The broadcaster had, in the impugned broadcast, violated the Fundamental Principles 4 and 6 as enshrined in the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards apart from the Principles of Self-Regulation concerning Neutrality and Racial and Religious Harmony. Further, according to the Guidelines laid down by the NBDSA,

Editorial Policy of a particular channel cannot be a defence to a breach of the Code of Ethics and the Guidelines. Furthermore, adding a Disclaimer to any programme including debates does not absolve Editorial personnel, Anchors, Journalists and Producers of their responsibility in case of violation of the Code of Ethics and the Guideline.

The complainant relied on the observations made by a bench of Justices KM Joseph and BV Nagarathna on January 13, while hearing a batch of petitions seeking action against hate speech and the judgment of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in *Amish Devgan vs. Union of India and others* [Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 160 of 2020] and in *Pravasi Bhalai Sangathan v. Union of India and ors.*, reported in AIR 2014 SC 1591, concerning hate speech.

The channel actively pushed an anti-minority narrative. By falsely portraying the Muslim community as mocking the Maha Kumbh stampede, it had irresponsibly injected a divisive angle into the incident. This deliberate misrepresentation not only weakened social cohesion but also reinforced harmful stereotypes.

In view of the above, the complainant stated that it was in the broadcaster's best interest to remove those sections of the above-mentioned show, from all social media accounts of its channel and its website, and to issue a public apology for the communal reportage.

Decision of NBDA at its meeting held on 14.10.2025

After considering the complaint and viewing the footage of the broadcast, NBDSA decided to call the parties for a hearing.

On being served with the notices, the following persons were present at the hearing on 23.02.2026:

Complainant

1. Ms. Tanya Arora
2. Mr. Aman Khan

Broadcaster

1. Ms. Vrinda Bhandari, Advocate
2. Ms. Shivangi Goswami, Legal Counsel
3. Mr. Manish Kumar, Senior Managing Editor & Head

Submissions of the Complainant

Aue

The complainant submitted that its complaint does not concern the entire 50-minute programme, but rather its complaint was confined strictly to the portion aired between 36:10 to 37:21 minutes.

During the impugned segment (36:10–37:21), the anchor stated: *“Today, you should also take a look at the names of those who, instead of feeling sad about the deaths that occurred in the Maha Kumbh, are celebrating.”* He further stated: *“These people are laughing at the deaths in the Maha Kumbh, mocking them, and finding happiness in this chaos... When someone reacts to a social media post with a laughing emoji, they have to specifically choose it.”*

The tragic stampede at the Maha Kumbh was an incident of crowd mismanagement and a public safety issue. However, the impugned segment shifted focus from the causes of the tragedy to selectively highlighting names — the majority of whom were Muslims — allegedly reacting with laughing emojis. By reading out and displaying these names and pairing them with statements suggesting celebration of Hindu devotees’ deaths, the broadcast introduced a communal dimension not inherent to the incident itself. This selective framing created a narrative that members of a particular religious community were rejoicing over the tragedy.

These statements attribute motive and intent — celebration of deaths — to individuals based solely on unverified emoji reactions. The posts themselves were not contextualised, verified, or examined. Instead, the anchor concluded that the reactions were deliberate mockery and celebration.

Further, instead of providing viewers with verified context about social media behaviour, the segment conclusively told viewers what to infer — that these individuals were “laughing at the deaths” and “mocking” them. The language used did not leave room for alternative explanations, misinterpretation, irony, bots, or lack of context. It presented a conclusion rather than information.

Submissions of the Broadcaster

The broadcaster submitted that the impugned broadcast contained an objective and neutral fact-check of the ground-level reality of the Maha Kumbh stampede. The host delves into the events leading up to the stampede, which led to an influx of large crowds at the ghat around 01:00 am and resulted in overcrowding and a subsequent crowd crush (which left 30 people dead and 90 people injured). Thereafter, the host questioned whether the administration failed to control the crowd and whether the stampede could have been prevented. The host even criticised the reservation of roads for the VVIP, which further contributed to the tragedy. The stampede was a national crisis warranting sensitivity from all sections of society. Against this backdrop, the host in the impugned portion of the broadcast highlighted the lack of sympathy demonstrated in various social media posts

reporting on the stampede. In the face of national tragedy, it is unbecoming of individuals to perceive such a crisis with insensitivity and apathy. As such, the host only highlighted the unsympathetic response on various social media posts on the stampede — both by users with Hindu and Muslim-sounding names— who reacted to the posts with pictures of the Kumbh stampede with laughing emojis. No particular community or religion, including the Muslim community, was singled out by the host at any point, but names of individuals from all backgrounds were discussed. He consistently maintained that “Aise Log hai”, thus pointing towards the generality of his tone. If, based on the aforesaid verified information, it so happens that the majority of names who had reacted with laughing emojis are Muslim, then the same does not amount to a violation of the Code of Conduct.

The broadcaster also submitted that the said pictures were properly verified and, in fact, were taken from reactions to Facebook posts by news publications, both dated 29.01.2025.

Decision

NBDSA considered the complaint, reviewed the footage of the broadcast, and considered the submissions advanced during the hearing.

NBDSA noted that the impugned broadcast inter alia, covered the Maha Kumbh stampede. However, the complainant’s grievance is not with the 50-minute broadcast in its entirety but is limited to a short portion of the broadcast between 36:10 and 37:21, during which the anchors refer to social media posts showing individuals who had reacted to the Maha Kumbh stampede by posting a laughing emoji. It is this aspect of the broadcast, where the anchor delves into these reactions on the incident, that the complainant alleges violates the principles of the Code of Ethics & Broadcasting Standards, particularly the principles of Racial and Religious Harmony.

NBDSA was of the view that, from the footage, it is evident that the anchor, while showing these social media reactions, did not build any narrative targeting a particular community. Given the same, NBDSA held that no violation of the Code of Conduct was made out in the impugned broadcast.

In view of the above, NBDSA decided to close the complaint 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 : 19-05-2026