

## The 'fake news' fiasco

Has Smriti Irani, Union Minister for Textiles and Information and Broadcasting (I&B), become an embarrassment for the government? Her fake news press release is not the first time she's stumbled on a banana skin. There have been several earlier occasions and each time she's thrown the skin herself. Let me recount the facts, and then you can decide for yourself.

Journalists to lose accreditation if news is found to be 'fake'

The fake news episode is, of course, the worst. Only infrequently does the Prime Minister's Office overrule a decision by a senior colleague in less than 24 hours. It's even more rare for this to be made public. Ms. Irani was not allowed to claim she changed her mind. She was ordered to do so.

Ever since 2104

However, Ms. Irani's gaffes go all the way back to 2014, beginning with contradictory claims about her Bachelor's certificate. Eventually, she was moved from the HRD Ministry. By then she was considered "the most controversial Minister in the NDA government".

But her worst errors have happened in connection with the media. The first happened just weeks after she took over as I&B Minister in July last year. The incident revealed that she not only lacks judgment but needs a better sense of humour.

Smriti Irani 2.0: more wit, less aggression is the way

It happened when the Press Trust of India released a photograph of some people wearing Narendra Modi and Nitish Kumar masks to mark friendship day. It was a harmless picture of an innocuous bit of innocent fun but enough to enrage Irani. "Is this how elected heads will be projected?" she asked PTI on Twitter. "Is this your official stand?"

Clearly, the I&B Minister did not accept a news agency's right to release a picture it thought the public wanted to see. More significantly, she did not accept politicians could be mocked. Most obvious of all, she felt she could admonish the media without contradicting her government's commitment to honour free speech.

At the time the Prime Minister did not intervene, and PTI was forced to issue an apology. This may have left Ms. Irani feeling triumphant but it also proved she doesn't understand what free speech is all about. George Orwell once pointed out that free speech doesn't mean anything unless someone is offended. And if that person is the Prime Minister or a colleague, they have to accept it as the price of freedom.

Far more serious are her run-ins with Prasar Bharati. I'll come to the specific issues in a moment's time, but first consider the tone and tenor of the Prasar Bharati Chairman A. Surya Prakash's angry comments. And remember, he was appointed by the NDA government. He is not a survivor from the days of its predecessor.

What is the Prasar Bharati Act all about?

"The bureaucrats in the Ministry have passed several orders which indicate that they have utter contempt for the Prasar Bharati Act. In fact, they behave as if the Act does not exist at all," Mr. Prakash told *The Hindu*. "I regard such orders as gross contempt of the Act and of Parliament itself."

Perhaps the most serious cause of the problem is the Ministry's order requiring that the Prasar Bharati CEO's appraisal be done by the I&B Secretary and reviewed by the Minister. Mr. Prakash calls this "absolutely and patently illegal". It flouts Section 6(vii) of the Act which stipulates that the CEO is an employee of the Corporation and not the Ministry.

However, the Corporation's differences and discord with the Ministry have several more causes. In February, the Ministry directed Prasar Bharati to terminate all contractual employees. This was a blatant attempt to undermine its autonomy to hire its own staff. It wanted a serving IAS officer appointed as a full-time member of the Corporation's board, ignoring the fact such people should be employees of Prasar Bharati and selected by a committee chaired by the Vice President. It wanted officers of the Indian Information Service, which comes under the Ministry, to work with Doordarshan and AIR news divisions. It wanted 2.92 crore paid to a Mumbai-based private firm for services that could easily have been performed by Prasar Bharati itself. It's even held back release of money allocated by the Finance Ministry, presumably to force acceptance of its orders.

We, therefore, have a clear rift between Prasar Bharati and the Modi government. Mr. Prakash may only talk about "bureaucrats" but they would not act without Ms. Irani's support.

The latest folly

The recent 'fake news' guidelines compounded her folly. The truth is fake news is hard to define and even, at times, to identify. It's also generated by multiple sources and not just journalists. In these circumstances, Ms. Irani's 'cure' was arguably worse than the disease. The attempt to suspend a journalist's accreditation before proof of guilt was liable to be misused. To many it suggested an attempt to muzzle the media in this crucial year before the 2019 elections. Finally, the fact that she made her decision known around the same time that Malaysia is proposing high-handed action against fake news — prior to its own election — only added to doubt and suspicion.

As far as the journalist community is concerned, on this occasion she went one step too far. She has shown she doesn't understand journalism, cannot be relied upon to protect press freedom and, therefore, does not deserve to be I&B Minister.

So, now, what's your answer to the question: has Smriti Irani become an embarrassment? Mine is obvious.

*Karan Thapar is a television anchor*

Receive the best of The Hindu delivered to your inbox everyday!

Please enter a valid email address.

The India-Japan economic relationship remains underwhelming in relation to strategic ties

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com