

INDIAN LAWS MUST BE FOLLOWED IRRESPECTIVE OF TWITTER'S OWN RULES: GOVT ISSUES STATEMENT

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Centre on Wednesday issued a statement after holding a virtual conference with officials of Twitter amid its recent "disagreement" with the micro-blogging site on its representation of farmers' agitation over the platform.

The Secretary Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Government of India held a virtual interaction with Monique Meche, Vice President Global Public Policy and Jim Baker Deputy General Counsel and Vice President Legal today.

"In view of the order issued by the Centre directing Twitter to remove tweets and accounts using hashtag related to 'farmer genocide' and accounts supported by Khalistan sympathizers and backed by Pakistan and blog post issued by Twitter today morning, this meeting took place as per schedule," an official statement read.

Moreover, as per the statement, Secretary told the Twitter representatives that in India, "we value freedom and we value criticism because it is part of our democracy. India has a robust mechanism for protection of freedom of speech and expression that is very elaborately explained as Fundamental Rights under Article 19 (1) of the Constitution of India. But freedom of expression is not absolute and it is subject to reasonable restrictions as mentioned in Article 19 (2) of the Constitution of India. Various judgments of the Supreme Court have also upheld this from time to time."

He further highlighted that Twitter is welcome to do business in India. Due to India's conducive business environment, open Internet and firm commitment to the freedom of expression Twitter as a platform has grown significantly in India in last few years. Twitter, as a business entity working in India, must also respect the Indian laws and democratic institutions. Twitter is free to formulate its own rules and guidelines, like any other business entity does, but Indian laws which are enacted by the Parliament of India must be followed irrespective of Twitter's own rules and guidelines.

The Secretary took up the issue of using a hashtag on 'farmer genocide' with Twitter executives and expressed strong displeasure on the way Twitter acted after an emergency order was issued to remove this hashtag and content related to that. Spreading misinformation using an incendiary and baseless hashtag referring to 'farmer genocide' at a time when such irresponsible content can provoke and inflame the situation is neither journalistic freedom nor freedom of expression as envisaged under Article 19 of the Constitution of India. Despite the attention of Twitter being drawn to such content by the Government through a lawful process, the platform allowed the content with this hashtag to continue, which was extremely unfortunate.

Secretary reminded Twitter about the action taken by Twitter during the Capitol Hill episode in the USA and compared that with the disturbance in Red Fort in India and its aftermath. He expressed dissatisfaction over Twitter's differential treatment in the two incidents. A deep sense of disappointment at seeing Twitter side not with 'freedom of expression' but rather with those who seek to abuse such freedom and provoke disturbance to public order, was conveyed to the Twitter representative.

Secretary also mentioned that revelations around a certain "Toolkit" has made it evident that a

strong social media campaign was planned in a foreign country around farmers protest. Misuse of Twitter's platform for execution of such campaigns designed to create disharmony and unrest in India is unacceptable and Twitter must take strong action against such well-coordinated campaigns against India, through compliance with the applicable law of the land.

"Lawfully passed orders are binding on any business entity. They must be obeyed immediately. If they are executed days later, it becomes meaningless," the statement further read.

The Secretary expressed his deep disappointment to Twitter leadership about the manner in which Twitter has unwillingly, grudgingly and with great delay complied with the substantial parts of the order. He took this opportunity to remind Twitter that in India, its Constitution and laws are supreme. It is expected that responsible entities not only reaffirm but remain committed to compliance to the law of land.

The government further conveyed to the Twitter leadership that the manner in which Twitter officially allows fake, unverified, anonymous and automated bot accounts to be operated on its platform, raises doubts about its commitment to transparency and healthy conversation on this platform.

Twitter leadership affirmed their commitment towards following Indian laws and rules. They also expressed their continuing commitment towards building their services in India. They have also requested for better engagement between Government of India and Twitter's global team.

MEITY had first directed the microblogging platform to remove more than 250 accounts and this week added over 1,000 more under the rules of the Information Technology Act, which allows such actions in the interest of the country's sovereignty, defense and security.

Earlier today, the micro-blogging site had announced that it had permanently suspended more than 500 accounts and blocked access to hundreds of others within India, acceding to the government's order to restrain the spread of misinformation and inflammatory content related to the farmers' protest.

Among the actions undertaken by Twitter, which included the suppression of hashtags containing harmful content, the company "withheld a portion of the accounts identified in the blocking orders" within India, making them accessible only outside the country's borders in order to come into compliance with local law.

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