

**BEFORE THE ADJUDICATING OFFICER
SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE BOARD OF INDIA
ADJUDICATION ORDER No. Order/BD/VS/2020-21/7827**

**UNDER SECTION 15-I OF SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE BOARD OF INDIA ACT, 1992 READ
WITH RULE 5 OF SEBI (PROCEDURE FOR HOLDING INQUIRY AND IMPOSING PENALTIES)
RULES, 1995**

In respect of:

Shruti Vishal Vora
(PAN: AKZPM7724N)
701-A, Surya Apartment
53, Bhulabhai Desai Road
Opp: Breach Candy Hospital
Mumbai – 400026

**In the matter of circulation of unpublished price sensitive information (UPSI) through
WhatsApp messages with respect to Asian Paints Limited**

BACKGROUND

1. During November 2017, there were certain articles published in newspapers / print media referring to the circulation of Unpublished Price Sensitive Information (*hereinafter referred to as "UPSI"*) in various private WhatsApp groups about certain companies ahead of their official announcements to the respective Stock Exchanges. Against this backdrop, Securities and Exchange Board of India (*hereinafter referred to as "SEBI"*) initiated a preliminary examination in the matter of circulation of UPSI through WhatsApp groups during which search and seizure operation for 26 entities of Market Chatter WhatsApp Group were conducted and approximately 190 devices, records etc., were seized. The WhatsApp chats extracted from the seized devices were examined further and while examining the chats, it was found that in respect of around 12 companies whose earnings data and other financial information got leaked in WhatsApp.

2. Accordingly, SEBI carried out an investigation in the matter of circulation of UPSI through WhatsApp messages with respect to Asian Paints Ltd., to ascertain any possible violation of the provisions of the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992 (*hereinafter referred to as “SEBI Act”*) and SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 2015 (*hereinafter referred to as “SEBI (PIT) Regulations”*) during the period March 27, 2017 to May 11, 2017 (*hereinafter referred to as “Investigation Period”*).
3. It was observed that Asian Paints Limited had announced financial results for the quarter ended March 2017 on stock exchanges on 11th May 2017 (16:23:28 hours on BSE, 16:33 hours on NSE). Details of the major corporate announcements made by Asian Paints Limited, on NE, during IP and their impact on the price of the scrip are given as follows:

(Source: www.nseindia.com)

S. N.	Date-Time	Announcement/News	Price Impact/Shares Traded						Remarks
			Date	O	H	L	C	No. of shares traded	
1.	11/05/2017 (16:33)	Audited Financial Results For The Year and Quarter Ended 31-03-2017	11.05.2017	1159	1178.9	1152.3	1166.45	1003768	The number of shares of Asian traded recorded an increase by 1.49 times i.e. 149%
			12.05.2017	1170.2	1179	1127	1132.95	2500503	
2.	18/04/2017 (19:25)	Board Meeting on 18/05/2017 Asian Paints Ltd has informed BSE that the Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Company is scheduled to be held on May 11, 2017, inter alia, to consider and approve the Audited Annual Financial Results of the Company for the Corporate Financial Year ended March 31, 2017 (FY17) and declaration of Final Dividend on equity shares Further, as per the company code of conduct for Prohibition of Insider Trading, the Trading Window for dealing in the securities of the Company will closed from March 27, 2017 to May 13, 2017 (both days inclusive).	18.04.2017	1062.4	1068.95	1037.3	1040.45	722855	The number of shares of Asian traded recorded a decrease by 0.45 times i.e. 45%.
			19.04.2017	1044	1056	1033.7	1048.9	398732	

Chronology of events pertaining to financial results of Quarter/Year ended March 31, 2017

4. Vide SEBI letters dated May 24, 2018 and June 18, 2018, Asian Paints Limited was, inter-alia, asked about the detailed chronology of events w.r.t announcement of quarterly results on May 11, 2017 for QE March 2017, the details of persons involved in preparation of financial results / having access to financial information at various stages / persons who attended the corresponding Board Meeting, details of trading window closure period etc.
5. The Company vide letters dated June 12, 2018 and June 22, 2018 provided the information's sought by SEBI. From the chronology provided by the company, it was observed that preparation of accounts had started from April 01, 2017. Asian Paints Ltd also provided the list of persons involved in preparation of financial results / having access to financial information at various stages / persons who attended the corresponding Board Meeting vide aforesaid letters dated June 12, 2018 and June 22, 2018.

(Source: Company submissions dated June 12, 2018 and June 22, 2018)

Sr. no.	Particulars	Quarter and year ended 31st March, 2017
a	An estimate of the Profit and Loss Account (P&L) of the standalone financial results of the Company for the quarter were prepared on the 1 st working day subsequent to the relevant quarter end date by certain employees forming part of the accounts team, finance function and submitted for review to the finance hierarchy. The estimate is based on actual sales for the quarter and all the other expenses like material cost, employee cost, fixed and variable overheads, inventory provisions, etc. are based on past trends and budgeted numbers. The final results could vary depending on the actual spends.	1 st April 2017
b.	The process of closure of standalone accounts was undertaken subsequent to the end of the quarter by certain employees of the accounts team forming part of the finance function. Details of the employees of the finance function and finance hierarchy, for the financial year 2016-17, were included as part of our Company Letter.	1 nd to 8 th April, 2017
c.	After completion of all activities relating to closure of accounts as mentioned in point no. (b) above, draft financial results were prepared. The same was submitted to the finance hierarchy (as stated in point no. (b) for their review and perusal.	8 th April, 2017
d.	The draft financial results (along with trail balance) were shared with the Statutory Auditors of the Company ("Statutory Auditors") for audit purposes and discussions were held with the Statutory Auditors to share an update on certain key matters relating to financials for the relevant audit period. Following were the joint Statutory Auditors for the FY 2016-17: a. BSR & Co. LLP, Chartered Accountants, Firm Registration No. 117366W/W-100018 ("BSR") b. Deloitte Haskins & Sells, LLP, Chartered Accountants, Firm Registration No. 101248W/W-100022 ("DHS")	12 th April, 2017 (BSR & DHS)
e.	The draft financial results received from all the overseas, domestic subsidiaries and joint venture companies were reviewed by the accounts team. As part of the review, variances from past trends and plans were analysed and explanations sought from the respective subsidiary and joint venture companies. Post the review, consolidated financials were prepared.	12 th April 2017 to 30 th April 2017
f.	A presentation on the financial performance of the Company, for the relevant period was prepared for submission to the Executive Council of the Company ("EC").	8 th April 2017 to 21 st April 2017

g.	The Statutory Auditors carried out an audit/limited review of the standalone financials of selected subsidiaries and consolidated financial results of the company, as applicable.	12 th April to 5 th May 2017
h.	The abovementioned presentation on review of financial performance of the Company as mentioned in point no. (f) above, for the relevant quarter was submitted to the EC, for its review.	21 st April, 2017 (for standalone and consolidated financials)
i.	The agenda for the meeting of the Audit Committee of the company ("Audit Committee"), excluding the financial results, was circulated to the members of the Audit Committee.	29 th April, 2017
j.	A presentation on review of financial performance of the Company, for the relevant quarter, was prepared for submission to members of Audit Committee. The presentation contained analysis and comments on the performance. The balance sheet, segment results and related notes to the draft financial results were prepared and shared with the finance hierarchy for their review and with the Statutory Auditors for audit, during this period.	21 st April 2017 to 5 th May 2017
k.	The draft financial results for standalone financials were prepared in the format of publication to the stock exchanges and submitted to the Statutory Auditors and the finance hierarchy.	29 th April, 2017
l.	The Agenda for the meeting of the Board of Directors of the Company (" Board "), for the relevant quarter/year end, was circulated to the members of the Board, excluding the financial results. The Company circulates the financial results. The Company circulates the Agenda notes and all related documents to the Directors electronically through a platform which ensures high standards of security and confidentiality required for circulation and storage of Board papers. Physical copy is shared upon request of Directors.	4 th May, 2017 (the Agenda included notes reviewing the performance of the Company, its subsidiary and joint venture companies)
m.	Draft financial results along with certain other items of the agenda were circulated to the members of the Audit Committee and the Chief Internal Auditor of the Company. Details of the Chief Internal Auditor of the Company for the financial year 2016-17, were included as part of our Company Letter.	5 th to 6 th May 2017
n.	Discussions were held with the Statutory Auditors to understand audit status, observations and provide clarifications, if any.	5 th to 9 th May, 2017
o.	The notes reviewing the performance of the Company, its subsidiary and joint venture companies, were circulated to the members of the Board.	4 th May, 2017 (the Agenda included notes reviewing the performance of the Company, its subsidiary and joint venture companies)
p.	On specific request of one of the Non-Executive Directors of the Company (viz., Shri Mahendra Choksi), certain additional financial information was also submitted, in a specified format, to him for his review and perusal in preparation of the upcoming Board meeting. This was done post circulation of financials to all members of the Board.	7 th May, 2017
q.	A note containing relevant financial information was prepared and shared with the Corporate Communications team of the Company (" Corporate Communications Team "), to be used for making presentation during the investors' conference. The same was done one day prior to the date of Board meeting to consider and approve the financial results.	10 th May, 2017
r.	Draft financial statements were circulated to the members of the Board	10 th May, 2017
s.	A draft of the press release document was prepared and shared with the Corporate Communications Team on the date of Board meeting, prior to the announcement to the stock exchanges.	11 th May, 2017
t.	The draft financial results in the format to be submitted to the stock exchanges, tabled at the Board meeting, were considered and approved by the Board and published on the Stock Exchanges.	11 th May, 2017

6. The definition of ‘unpublished price sensitive information’ as prescribed under Regulation 2(1)(n) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015 is as follows:

"unpublished price sensitive information" means any information relating to a company or its securities, directly or indirectly, that is not generally available which upon becoming generally available, is likely to materially affect the price of the securities and shall, ordinarily including but not restricted to, information relating to the following: –

- i. financial results*
- ii. dividends*
- iii. change in capital structure*
- iv. mergers, de-mergers, acquisitions, delistings, disposals and expansion of business and such other transactions*
- v. changes in key managerial personnel; and*
- vi. material events in accordance with the listing agreement*

7. From the chronology of events as tabulated in para 5 above, information relating to financial results of Asian Paints Ltd. for quarter ended March 2017 was a Price Sensitive Information (PSI), and with respect to the same, the preparation of draft preliminary financial statements started from April 01, 2017. However, trading window closed from March 27, 2017 and therefore the UPSI was observed to have come into existence on March 27, 2017. The corporate announcement of audited financial results for the quarter ended March 2017 was made to the stock exchanges on 11th May 2017 (16:23:28 hours on BSE, 16:33 hours on NSE) by Asian Paints Limited. Therefore, it was observed that the period of UPSI (unpublished price sensitive information) would be March 27, 2017 to May 11, 2017.
8. The investigation *inter alia* revealed that Ms. Shruti Vora (hereinafter referred to as Noticee) communicated the UPSI related to total income, EBITDA and PAT of Asian Paints for QE March 2017 through WhatsApp messages. From the WhatsApp chat of Noticee (retrieved from her device – Apple iPhone 6s, IMEI: 355767073570777), the following chat was observed on May 09, 2017 “Asian Paints:- total income 4416cr, ebitda 782cr, pat 480cr. Volumes growth @9.2%.”

9. In the following table, financial figures circulated on WhatsApp pertaining to Asian Paints Ltd. are compared with actual figures disclosed subsequently on stock exchange to gauge the deviation between two sets of figures.

Abbreviations format used:

Figure1 in WhatsApp (F1W) Figure1 in Actual (F1A) Figure1 Deviation (F1Dev)

Date and time of WhatsApp message (after adding 5:30 hrs)	Figures in WhatsApp message	Date and time of disclosure on Exchange	Actual figures disclosed on Exchange	F1W	F1A	F2W	F2A	F3W	F3A	%ge Deviations observed in Figures		
										F1Dev	F2Dev	F3Dev
09/05/2017 14:53:07	total income 4416 cr, ebitda 782cr, PAT 480 cr. volumes growth @9.2%	11/05/2017 16:23:32	Income 4416.23 EBITDA 781.98 PAT 479.61	4416	4416.23	782	781.98	480	479.61	.005	0.002	0.08

Note: EBITDA is calculated as: EBITDA (Earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization) = Profit from Operations before other income, finance costs, exceptional item and tax + Depreciation and amortization expense = 689.48+83.49+9.01 = 781.98 crores

* % ge deviation is calculated as per the following methodology:

%ge Deviation = (Figure in WhatsApp message-Actual Figures disclosed on exchange)*100/(Actual figures disclosed on exchange)

10. From the above table, it was observed that the financial figures of Asian Paints Ltd. were communicated through WhatsApp prior to their announcement on stock exchanges
11. The timing of the said message as per extract chat from Shruti Vora's device was 09:24:49 (outgoing message with remote part name as Sumeet Hinduja Exide Life). However, expert agency,(Helik Advisory Ltd), hired for retrieval and backup of the data from the instruments/devices seized, vide email dated March 12, 2018 informed SEBI that their forensic tools generate zero G.M.T. timing by default, so add +5.30 hours as Indian G.M.T in all the reports generated.
12. The details of communication of WhatsApp message related to Asian Paints Ltd. as observed from WhatsApp Chat retrieved from Shruti Vora's device are tabulated below:

Entity from whom Shruti Vora (SV) received the message		Date and Time of receipt of message by SV (After adding 5.30 hours)		Entities to whom SV forwarded the message		Date and Time of forwarding of message by SV (After adding 5.30 hours)	
Name	Tel. Number	Date	Time	Name	Tel. Number	Date	Time
Neeraj Agarwal *	9004089401	09/05/2017	14:53:07	Sumeet Hinduja*	9819227915	09/05/2017	14:54:49
Mobile no. of Ms. Shruti Vora: 9820832032				Sunil Kumar*	9820808438	09/05/2017	14:54:49
				Navjeevan Khosla	85297006939 (hk)	09/05/2017	14:54:49
				Parikshit Shah	8800333788	09/05/2017	14:54:49
				Only Trade, No Bakwas (WhatsApp group)	NA (17 numbers in group)	09/05/2017	14:54:49

*Note: Remote party name displayed in messages are Neeraj Antique, Sumeet Hinduja Exide Life and Sunil Kumar Sbilife, respectively.

13. It was observed from the WhatsApp chats retrieved from the Noticee's device that the aforesaid message was received by Shruti Vora from Neeraj Agarwal on May 09, 2017 at 14:53:07. The said WhatsApp message was forwarded by Shruti Vora on May 09, 2017 at 14:54:49 to several other entities namely, Sumeet Hinduja, Sunil Kumar, Parikshit Shah, Navjeevan Khosla and certain members (mobile numbers available in chat) of one WhatsApp group.

14. It was observed that the financial figures of Asian Paints (viz; total income, EBITDA and PAT) circulated through WhatsApp closely matched with those disclosed subsequently by Asian Paints on Exchanges (deviation in financial figures was within a range of 0.002% to 0.08%). Hence, the aforesaid message related to Asian Paints Ltd. was observed to fall under UPSI and such circulation of financial figures through WhatsApp was considered as communication of UPSI.

15. The Noticee who were in possession of the UPSI were termed as Insiders as per Regulation 2 (1) (g) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015, the provisions of which are furnished hereunder:

“insider” means any person who is:

- i. *A connected person, or*
- ii. *in possession of or having access to unpublished price sensitive information*

NOTE: Since “generally available information” is defined, it is intended that anyone in possession of or having access to unpublished price sensitive information should be considered as “insider” regardless of how one came in possession of or had access to such information...”

16. Therefore, it was *inter alia* alleged that the Noticee being an insider had communicated the UPSI relating to Asian Paints Ltd., to other person(s) through Whatsapp messages.

17. Accordingly, it was alleged that the Noticee communicated the UPSI related to total income, EBITDA and PAT of Asian Paints for QE March 2017 through WhatsApp messages, which is prohibited and is in violation of the provisions of Section 12 A (d) & 12 A (e) of the SEBI Act, 1992 and Regulation 3 (1) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015.

APPOINTMENT OF ADJUDICATING OFFICER

18. The undersigned has been appointed as the Adjudicating Officer (*hereinafter referred to as “AO”*) vide Order dated December 26, 2019 under Section 19 read with Sub-section (1) of Section 15-I of the SEBI Act, 1992 and Rule 3 of SEBI (Procedure for Holding Inquiry and Imposing Penalties) Rules, 1995 (*hereinafter referred to as “SEBI Adjudication Rules”*) to inquire into and adjudge under section 15G of the SEBI Act, 1992 for the alleged violations of provisions of section 12A(d) and 12A(e) of SEBI Act, 1992 and Regulation 3(1) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015, committed by the Noticee.

SHOW CAUSE NOTICE, HEARING AND REPLY

19.A Show Cause Notice dated November 04, 2019 bearing ref No. EAD/BJD/VS/4565/2/2020 (*hereinafter referred to as ‘SCN’*) was served on the Noticee under Rule 4 of the SEBI Adjudication Rules, calling upon to show cause as to why an inquiry should not be held against her in terms of Rule 4 of the SEBI Adjudication Rules

read with Section 15-I of SEBI Act, 1992 and why penalty should not be imposed on her in terms of Section 15G of SEBI Act, 1992 for the aforesaid alleged violations. In reply, Noticee vide her letter dated December 13, 2019 sought for the additional documents in support of the allegation made against her, besides seeking inspection of the documents. With respect to the aforesaid request by the Noticee, it was communicated to her vide email dated December 18, 2019 that all the documents that were relied upon with respect to the alleged charges against her were provided along with the SCN and no additional document were relied upon in the matter apart from the documents supplied along with the SCN. Further, upon the request of the Noticee, an opportunity of inspection was granted, which was carried out and thereafter the Noticee was given an opportunity to file her reply on merits by January 24, 2020 and also to avail an opportunity of personal hearing on January 28, 2020.

20. The Noticee vide email dated January 13, 2020 contended that the inspection of documents remained incomplete and sought all the documents that were collected during the investigation by SEBI whether or not they are actually annexed to the SCNs. In support of her contention, the Noticee placed a compilation of 13 judgments of Hon'ble Supreme Court and various High Courts.
21. Vide email dated January 14, 2020, while refuting the contentions raised by the Noticee; it was informed to the Noticee that the inspection and supply of documents relied upon for the proceedings have already been granted in consonance with the principles of natural justice. Accordingly, the Noticee was once again informed to furnish her reply by January 24, 2020 and also to avail the opportunity of personal hearing on January 28, 2020.
22. Aggrieved with the decision the AO, the Noticee preferred an Appeal before the Hon'ble Securities Appellate Tribunal (*hereafter referred to as "Hon'ble SAT"*) on January 16, 2020. The matter was heard at length by the Hon'ble SAT on January 29, 2020. Pursuant to the hearing, the matter was adjourned and since there was no Order granting interim stay on the Adjudication proceedings, the Noticee was provided with another opportunity to submit her reply on merits latest by February 14, 2020.

23. The Noticee vide email dated February 10, 2020 submitted that since the Hon'ble SAT has already seized of the matter and is deciding on the issue of inspection and keeping due reverence to the fact that the Order has been reserved by the Hon'ble Tribunal, requested to await for the decision of the Hon'ble SAT and once the same is passed, further directions to file the reply within a reasonable time and fixing of a date of hearing, can be given by the Ld. Adjudicating Officer.
24. Vide email dated February 10, 2020 it was reiterated to the Noticee that all the relevant and relied upon documents in support of the charges have already been made available to her along with the SCN and therefore filing of reply on merits does not suffer from any constraint/ prejudice. Accordingly, the Noticee was given time till February 20, 2020 to furnish its reply.
25. The Hon'ble SAT vide Order dated February 12, 2020 (Appeal {L} No. 28 of 2020) while upholding the decision taken by the AO on inspection and supply of documents, made the following observations, which are summarized hereunder:

"We are of the opinion that concept of fairness and principles of natural justice are in-built in Rule 4 of the Rules of 1995 and that the AO is required to supply the documents relied upon while serving the show cause notice. This is essential for the person to file an efficacious reply in his defence"

"The contention that the appellant is entitled for copies of all the documents in possession of the AO which has not been relied upon at the preliminary stage when the AO has not formed any opinion as to whether any inquiry at all is required to be held cannot be accepted. A bare reading of the provisions of the Act and the Rules as referred to above do not provide supply of documents upon which no reliance has been placed by the AO, nor even the principles of natural justice require supply of such documents which has not been relied upon by the AO. We are of the opinion that we cannot compel the AO to deviate from the prescribed procedure and supply of such documents which is not warranted in law. In our view, on a reading of the Act and the Rules we find that there is no duty cast upon the AO to disclose or provide all the documents in his possession especially when such documents are not being relied upon."

26. As per the directions of the Hon'ble SAT, the Noticee submitted her reply dated February 28, 2020, which is summarized hereunder:

- a. No Connection established between company and me or the sender of the message: No connection has been established between the company, its promoters /directors /employees/ auditors with either me or the person who forwarded the said HOS to me.
- b. No leak established from the Insiders: SEBI has relied on the declarations given by the said company/promoters/directors/employees/auditors who had access to the financial results prior to the date of announcement of the same. They have declared and SEBI has accepted that they have not leaked any UPSI. SEBI has investigated and found no leak in this matter or the other matters covered by SCNs issued to me.
- c. Without establishing even a remote connection and without leak there cannot be UPSI: Thus, if there was no connection with the company and there was no leak from the insiders it is humbly submitted that the concerned estimate cannot change its nature from being a market guess to a full proof UPSI. Admittedly, individuals who have sent me the HOS messages alleged to be UPSI have also on numerous instances sent me HOS messages which were not closely matching and therefore not UPSI. While choosing whether a particular message is UPSI or gossip, the holistic view of the entire evidence, including the exculpatory evidence is required to be taken. The entire evidence if taken into consideration would give the reason to any judicial mind that I have the benefit of doubt and that the messages were not UPSI.
- d. Without the guarantee about the source that the information is from the company there cannot be UPSI: There is no information/allegation that the source of the estimate is the company or any person who was factually in possession of the UPSI. In fact, HOS means that the estimate is not from the company and, therefore, estimate received by me was from an unknown source and such estimate whose origin is not known cannot be regarded as UPSI. UPSI necessarily means estimates whose origin is definitely the company and/or a person who is in possession of UPSI. It is second nature to participants in the securities market to keep on guessing about estimates and the same is not a prohibited activity.
- e. HOS forwarded by me just closely matching with the actual numbers does not make it UPSI. The SCN fails to consider numerous instances where estimates did not match: While the SCN has cherry picked a few instances, it clearly ignores the more evolved analysis of my messages which establish that closely matching of numbers was a rare occurrence and more of an aberration than the rule. In any event, I have never been the originator of any of the alleged messages and have merely received and forwarded the same. The person sending the message to me is not even alleged to be a person who could reasonably be in possession of the UPSI.
- f. Cherry picking of HOS which have closely matched: SEBI has admittedly analysed thousands of messages from my phone. SEBI has also analysed my husband's phone. SEBI has not found a single instance where I forwarded the HOS to any family member. There are several instances where the HOS turned out to be preposterously incorrect, however SEBI has cherry picked only those HOS which have closely matched with the actual numbers and issued the SCN. All HOS were speculative

in nature. Any post facto analysis done post result declaration is useless. In this background of estimates, the nature of a HOS estimate cannot change to UPSI retrospectively once the actual numbers match as there is no benefit of hindsight.

- g. I forwarded HOS/Estimate/speculation and not UPSI: The SEBI PIT Regulations prohibit sharing of price sensitive information which has not been published. By its very definition, information is something that is accurate, certain or based on facts. An analysis of the messages on WhatsApp would reveal HOS was sent and clearly understood as market gossip and the same cannot be treated as “information”. Admittedly, there was no source-based credibility to any of such HOS.
- h. Forwarding of HOS to various persons including non-clients: Since I did not deem the said HOS to be UPSI, I merely forwarded the same to clients/market groups/acquaintances who actively track the securities market) without application of mind. Had the information been UPSI, I would not have widely circulated the same.
- i. No nexus/no definite pattern of access to UPSI: There has been no pattern / no arrangement established from my phone available with SEBI which suggests that any insider kept sharing any UPSI with me or that I was soliciting the same from any person. There has been no trading or quid pro quo arrangement established or alleged. The HOS received by me were random / sporadic in nature and did not follow any quarterly pattern. If I would have had access to UPSI for one Quarter then I would reasonably have access to UPSI on a continuing basis. There is no such pattern established even with respect to any one company. On the contrary, there have been instances when the HOS matched for one quarter and for another quarter it did not match.
- j. No mens rea: There is no allegation in the SCN that there was a wilful attempt to source UPSI and then share the same. On the contrary, all the information received was without solicitation and all the information shared did not result in insider trades. All the messages were intact on my phone and there has never been an intent to evade questions or escape the investigation for two years.
- k. No breach of law established: The SCN, on a plain reading, does not establish any breach of law / rules / regulations by me and merely makes a bald allegation. The SCN is contrary to the SEBI PIT Regulations, that mandates SEBI to prove that I had access to UPSI.

27. Further, with respect to the charges, the Noticee also submitted a brief Background of her work profile with Antique Stock Broking Limited (“**Antique**”) as under:

- a. I am currently working in the institutional sales and cater to institutional clients for the firm like Mutual Funds, Insurance companies etc.
- b. I act as the bridge between my company’s research team and the clients and my job also involves sending updates to such institutional clients on various aspects including:
 - Indices and expected technical analysis of the same;
 - Calls and recommendations on scripts;

- *News about events in the market;*
 - *Reviewing reports from other brokerage house on several scrips;*
 - *Market intelligence in the form of news items, news appearing on TVs etc., heard on street estimates.*
- c. *I have been employed in the said role since 2016 and prior to the same I was in the Derivatives Sales Department and prior to that I worked as a technical analyst. I have been working with Antique since 2008.*
- d. *As you would appreciate, it is part and parcel of my daily job to accumulate information about movements in the market, possible stock prices, news about important elements in the financial world and communicate the same to the institutional clients of Antique.”*

28. Further, the Noticee contended that the nature of information forming part of the allegation against her was that of *Heard on Street (HOS)* and made the following submissions in support of the same:

Concept of Heard on Street (HOS)

- a. *Heard on Street or HOS is a common practice within traders, market analysts, institutional investors etc. whereby unsubstantiated gossips are widely shared and the said gossips are clearly understood as speculation / rumours in the market. In fact, reputed journals in the USA like the Wall Street Journal also have an entire page dedicated to such speculations. In fact, the Wall Street Journal runs a twitter handle @WSJHeard (Title: Heard on the Street) and the said handle shares “The first word on what Wall Street is talking about.”. Even in India, the Economic Times carried an entire column dedicated to such market chatter. Leading news channels like CNBC, ETNOW also regularly have talk show hosts citing anonymous sources on probable results, developments etc.*
- b. *The Street expectation is the average estimate of a public company's quarterly earnings and revenues that is derived from forecasts of research analysts who provide research coverage on the company. The Street expectation is a closely-watched number that becomes prominent during the period when most public companies report their results. The term is derived from the fact that analysts of the biggest brokerages are typically based on Wall Street in the U.S., Bay Street in Canada and Dalal Street in India.*
- c. *HOS used to be shared by the way of newspaper articles earlier and with the advancement of technology, HOS estimates started floating across instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp. It is a well-known fact that nobody gives undue weightage to HOS while*

making investment decisions as it is pure speculation / gossip from unverified sources. However, a lot of traders and investors rely upon HOS to get a pulse of market and make their decisions on the basis of several factors, one of which is HOS. HOS functions like a grapevine whereby the said is shared by news agencies (like CNBC / Reuters), analysts with broking houses, traders, active investors etc. News agencies typically are a part of such groups for sourcing their news and also share news on such groups. It is common knowledge that HOS cannot be a sole factor for making a trade decision, however, traders consider awareness about the same as important to understand market sentiment. Every element that a trader uses has some level of probability attached to it as the price of a scrip is not a direct function of any one factor. The market sentiment around a scrip is affected by several factors (technical charts, volumes in F&O Segment, general economy news, sector specific news, news about any Key Managerial Person, HOS about results etc.,). Therefore, any person trading has to factor in several elements and then plan his trades accordingly.

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- d. It is a common practice that the analysts of various brokerage houses come out with a preview report and estimate the results across all coverage companies. These estimations are based on several factors including financial modelling, management guidance, global factors, meetings with management of listed companies etc. Once the official results are declared, the estimated numbers are compared with the actuals and an analysis is done as to whether the numbers **"in line with estimates"** / **"beats estimates"** / **"misses estimates"**. The entire trading community / active investors use these estimates to plan their trades. Even the comment board on popular websites like "moneycontrol.com" / "ET poll" are used frequently by investors / traders to get a sense of the market.*

29. In addition to the above, the Noticee denying the allegation that the information shared by her was in the nature of UPSI, further submitted as under:

"....

- a. Despite the fact that such a detailed search was conducted, there is no allegation that I forwarded the said HOS to any of my family members or that I have made monetary gains from the said forwards. Further, the SCN is completely silent on any arrangement between me and any other person / persons for forwarding of such alleged UPSI. The SCN is completely silent on any quid pro quo arrangement for sharing the information. The same is only attributable to the fact that I always believed the information being forwarded was to be HOS / speculative in nature and not UPSI as alleged or at all.*
- b. SEBI has analysed the entire data on my phone and would appreciate that the nature of my messages shows that there is widespread conversation on stock charts, fundamentals, historical behaviours, analysis and pattern, estimates-in house and external, market talk,*

market intelligence. It would be appreciated that as an employee working in the institutional sales team, it was my role and responsibility to provide the clients all such information. While the SCN has cherry picked a few messages, it conveniently ignores the pattern whereby the larger role of coordination and knowledge sharing as a part of sales function and sharing HOS information being a very small element of it.

- c. Analysing a pattern of WhatsApp Chats, it would be evident that the same HOS/Market Gossip was shared at times by more than one person clearly signifying that I was not the sole person who had the said market gossip and this I believed that said information was widely and generally available to several parties. I had no idea or any reason to believe that the said information was confidential. Also, since the information never came from a person who is connected to the Company, I further had no reason to ever believe that the same was UPSI;*
- d. All the messages were forwarded to clients / market chatter groups instantly, without any specific thought applied to the same and it therefore shows that there was no reason for me to believe that the information was confidential; no message ever came from a connected person.*
- e. There was not a specific entity/person who would regularly send me HOS every quarter of company in question and the information, the HOS information was sent to me by different entities for different quarters. The pattern of receiving information and forwarding the same is sporadic and therefore belies the evidence of a larger conspiracy to communicate UPSI.*
- f. Neither me nor my family members have ever traded on the basis of the alleged UPSI or have had any arrangement that would give us any monetary gain for sharing this UPSI. Further, the alleged HOS / UPSI was never shared with any family member. Further, it must be appreciated that the information was shared on WhatsApp chats/groups, which had several members including journalists from reputed financial news channels. If the intention was to communicate UPSI to select entities, I would have never shared information with larger groups of people. There was no reason for me to hoard the message for myself or my company alone or even delete any such evidence as these HOS numbers had no special significance for me. The very fact that journalists also use such HOS information clearly belies the allegation that the information so shared was UPSI.*

Annexures to the SCN do not make out any charge against me

- g. Annexure 4 is a copy of WhatsApp chat extracted from my phone. It is pertinent to note that the said document is an incomplete document and only select few pages have been*

annexed to the SCN. It is submitted that reliance on an incomplete document is bound to give an incorrect picture and incomplete documents extracted from a report cannot be relied upon to frame a charge. An analysis of the messages would reveal that:

- (i) Neeraj Agarwal (currently working at Antique and was working at IDFC at the relevant time) sent me the message about Asian Paint's HOS. Further, the SCN does not allege that Neeraj was in possession of UPSI or he was connected to any person who would be in possession of UPSI.*
 - (ii) I also got a forward on 11.5.2017 from Shailendra Mehta in the WhatsApp group Only Trade, No Bakwaas. A screenshot of the said message is annexed hereto as Annexure 1.*
 - (iii) A perusal of my chat with Sumeet Hinduja (from Exide Life Insurance) would show that I have forwarded the said message in less than a minute without any application of mind as to the veracity of the same. Exide Life Insurance is a client of Antique.*
 - (iv) A perusal of my chat with Sunil Kumar (from SBI Life Insurance) would show that I have forwarded the said message in less than a minute without any application of mind as to the veracity of the same. SBI Life Insurance is a client of Antique.*
 - (v) A perusal of my chat with Parikshit Shah (from QVT, a hedge fund) would show that I have forwarded the said message in less than a minute without any application of mind as to the veracity of the same. QVT Hedge Fund is a client of Antique.*
 - (vi) A perusal of my chat with Navjeevan Khosla (from Merrill Lynch) would show that I have forwarded the said message in less than a minute without any application of mind as to the veracity of the same. Merrill Lynch is a client of Antique.*
 - (vii) An analysis of the group chat on "Only Trades, No Bakwaas" would show that Shailendra had also forwarded the HOS for Asian Paints Limited later. Further, after I sent the message about Asian Paints, nobody reacted to the same and started sharing their own independent market talk. It is further pertinent to note that the said group did not only consist of traders but also had journalists from Reuters on the said group. If the intention was to reap any benefit from insider information, it would be incomprehensible that journalists would be a part of such groups.*
- h. Annexure 2 and 3 to the SCN is the result of Asian Paints Limited and the chronology. The same does not even speak to the fact that Neeraj or I were connected to Asian Paints or any person in possession of UPSI of Asian Paints and the SCN does not even purport to identify the names of the individuals who according to the company were in possession of the UPSI. However, it is pertinent to mention here that as per the message the total income expected was Rs. 4416 Crores, however, as per the result the total income is Rs. 4486.34 Crores and therefore the alleged UPSI message did not match the actual numbers and on this ground alone the SCN is liable to be dropped. Further, the report by Motilal Oswal*

Securities expected the PAT to be Rs. 489 Crores and the message estimated the PAT to be Rs. 480 Crores (the deviation being ~1.8%).

- i. A perusal of above provisions makes it abundantly clear that the SCN makes out no case of violation of the SEBI Act, 1992 or the PIT Regulations, 2015. The only case against me is that I have received certain WhatsApp forwards about estimates of a company's result, from a person who is in no manner a "connected person" (within the meaning of the PIT Regulations or otherwise) with the Company and I forwarded the information to several clients and some market chatter groups on an "as is where is" basis without any specific application of mind. Therefore, it is submitted that the information shared with me and the information that I forwarded, was not UPSI as the said information was in the nature of mere speculation about the results and rumours. Since the information was mere gossip and market speculation forwarded by people, the same was generally available information and not UPSI.*
- j. Essentially, information that is accessible to the public on a non-discriminatory basis would be considered generally available information. Analysis and research based on generally available information would also be generally available information. Information that is capable of being accessed by any person without breach of any law would be considered generally available. It is submitted that in the facts of the present case, the information that was forwarded to me was in the nature of market gossip and I have given several other examples to show that it is common practice among market participants to keep on predicting future events and the said market gossip is not prohibited under any law. The HOS messages received by me and forwarded by me were clearly understood to be mere speculative estimates and nothing more. Further, it is evident that more often than not, in fact, in more than 90% of the cases, the news did not turn out to be true.*
- k. The High-Level Committee to Review the SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 1992 under the Chairmanship of Mr. Justice N K Sodhi ("**Justice Sodhi Committee Report**") made it abundantly clear that while defining the terms "insider" and "generally available information", due care was taken. The Committee concluded that the term – "insider should be defined to mean all – connected person// and those in possession of UPSI leaving it to the definitions of – generally available information// to safeguard against an over-reach of the prohibition being read as a ban on – informed trading as opposed to – insider trading. The Committee has also provided robust defences against bringing a charge without satisfying the essential ingredient and rationale behind the prohibition on insider trading.*
- l. While determining the fine nuances as to what constitutes to be generally available information and how the same information could be both UPSI and generally available information, the Justice Sodhi Committee Report discusses several illustrations as the*

difference between the same forms the backbone of Regulation 3. At para 25 to 33, the Justice Sodhi Committee Report discusses:

*“
.....”*

m. A perusal of the aforesaid paragraphs would clearly show that whether a piece of information is UPSI or generally available information is a mixed question of fact and law. In the facts of the present case, the SCN only states that I received the information from two individuals who work within the same organisation as me and the SCN does not even attempt to allege that the said individuals had any contact or could have been in a position to procure the alleged UPSI. What is also curious to consider is that although SEBI has information about every single individual who has received the UPSI from me, the SCN is completely silent as to whether any one of them has ever traded on the basis of the alleged UPSI or forwarded the information to anyone who has traded on the basis of the alleged UPSI. As the Justice Sodhi Committee Report rightly concludes, “it is settled law that such regulations ought to be purposively construed and if two views were possible, the view that furthers the legislative objective would need to be adopted over a view that makes a mockery of the legal provisions”. While dealing with the present SCN, the sight of the fact that primary objective of the PIT Regulations is to entail a prohibition on trading by insiders in securities when in possession of UPSI, thus obtaining an unfair advantage. Given the fact that:

- None of the senders of the messages are even remotely connected to the Company or any person who may be in possession of the UPSI;*
- Despite the information being forwarded to several parties, not one of them has alleged that the said information was UPSI; and*
- The SCN also does not allege that anyone traded on the basis of the alleged UPSI;*
- The correct interpretation of law would be that the said WhatsApp messages are merely market gossip and generally available information and not UPSI as alleged in the SCN.*

n. Even in cases where it was proved beyond doubt that the tipper had shared information leading to trades by relatives of the tipper, the same lead to profits by such tippees, SEBI decided not to impose any monetary penalty on the said Noticee.

o. An analysis of the bare provisions of the law and the Justice Sodhi Committee Report would clearly signify that I was not an “insider” or a “connected person” and the information that I have forwarded is merely speculation about the probable results of the

company, it cannot be alleged that I have violated the SEBI Act, 1992 and the PIT Regulations.

- p. I repeat and reiterate that neither I am the originator of any of the messages nor have I ever traded on the basis of such messages. Merely because an estimate closely matches the actual number does not change the fact that the same was a gossip / speculation and converts itself into UPSI. Annexed hereto as Annexure "7" is a compilation of WhatsApp messages received and / or shared by me with several clients / groups which contain such HOS information which did not match the actual numbers.*

30. Further, the Noticee appeared for the hearing on March 18, 2020 and reiterated the submission made above and was given additional time to make submissions on her job profile during the period of allegation. Further, vide her email dated March 25, 2020, the Noticee submitted the same *inter alia* stating as under:

- a. I was working at the relevant period and continue to work with the Institutional Sales team to cater to the needs of Institutional Clients at Antique. I have been employed in the said role since 2016. I am associated with Antique since 2008 in different roles as a Technical analyst and Derivatives Sales Department. I act as the bridge between my company's research team and the clients who are various mutual funds, Insurance Companies, Hedge funds etc.*
- b. My job during the relevant period and presently involves sending updates to such institutional clients on various aspects including:*
- Calls and recommendations –fundamental/technical/quantitative parameters on scrips;*
 - News about events in the market;*
 - Sector reports published by Antique research analysts team from time to time. Arrange calls and set up meetings between Antique research team and fund representatives from time to time to discuss these research reports. "*

31. Further, the Noticee also submitted as under:

- a) Wide circulation of message on whatsapp by unrelated parties indicating that the same was widely and generally available information, since Neeraj sent me the message 9th May 2017 and on 11th May 2017, I received the same from Shailendra on a group. Suggesting widely circulated.*

- b) Total income as per SCN is 4486.34crs whereas in my message, the number was 4416 crs and therefore wide deviation in total income circulated in whatsapp message viz a vis actual numbers.

32. Subsequently Noticee also made additional submissions vide her email dated May 23, 2020 inter alia submitting:

- a) that all the said numbers in the WhatsApp messages were in fact closely matching with estimates given by brokerages in their report preview (released prior to result announcement).
- b) That the Bloomberg terminal had all such broker estimates complied and upon finding; we have observed that the alleged messages in fact match the broker estimates and other publicly available information and submitted a copy of the screenshot of the website stating the report as under:

Company	Financials	Broker estimates (Rs. Cm)	Whatsapp message (Rs. Cm)	Actual Results as per SCN (Rs.Crs)	Deviation between the Whatsapp message and Broker estimate (%)	Deviation between WhatsApp message and Actual Results from SCN (%)	Broker estimate available on Bloomberg	Date of Broker estimate as per bloomberg	Date of Whatsapp message	Date of published Results
Asian paints	Total Income	4400	4416	4416.23	0.36	-0.01	ICICI Direct	27'Apr 17	9'May 17	11'May 17
	Ebitda	776.5	782	781.98	0.71	0.00	Kotak	27'Apr 17	9'May 17	11'May 17
	PAT	481	480	479.61	-0.21	0.08	Prabhudas Liladher	27'Apr 17	9'May 17	11'May 17

- c) That the SCN is completely silent as to how did these senders of the messages get the information. Since the senders of the message were market participants (i.e. analysts, brokers etc.), the general source of such information for them is from brokerage reports on companies, Bloomberg estimates, CNBC Polls or some other market participant collating these estimates and sending the same to them from such publicly available platforms.
- d) That the very fact that there were several groups where information was circulated suggested that the HOS messages were widely circulated and not restricted among a few individuals.
- e) That there were several broker and consensus estimates floating in the market which closely matched the actual results. Such broker / Bloomberg / CNBC poll estimates are

available on a non-discriminatory basis and are not based on any UPSI but are based on generally available information. Consequently, the said reports also are generally available information. Thus, it gave me no suspicion about the WhatsApp message I received/forwarded of being UPSI and I always thought that the same were mere estimates sourced from such legitimate platforms. As part of my job, we regularly send our research estimates and discuss other broker/consensus estimates with Institutional clients. This is a universal practise of all brokers/funds. The persons who sent me the messages are not people who have access to UPSI and I had no reason to believe otherwise.

CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES AND FINDINGS

33. After perusal of the material available on record, the issues that arise for consideration in the present case are as under:

- I. Whether the Noticee has violated the provisions of Section 12 A (d) & 12 A (e) of the SEBI Act, 1992 and Regulation 3 (1) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015?***
- II. Whether the Noticee is liable for monetary penalty under Section 15G of the SEBI Act, 1992?***
- III. If so, what quantum of monetary penalty should be imposed on the Noticee?***

FINDINGS

34. On perusal of the material available on record and giving regard to the facts and circumstances of the case, I record my findings hereunder:

ISSUE I: Whether the Noticee has violated the provisions of Section 12 A (d) & 12 A (e) of the SEBI Act, 1992 and Regulation 3 (1) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015?

35. Before proceeding further, I find it pertinent to refer to the relevant provisions of SEBI Act, 1992 and PIT Regulations, 2015 which read as under:

Section 12 A (d) of SEBI Act, 1992

No person shall directly or indirectly engage in insider trading

Section 12 A (e) of SEBI Act

No person shall directly or indirectly deal in securities while in possession of material or non-public information or communicate such material or non-public information to any other person, in a manner which is in contravention of the provisions of this Act or the rules or the regulations made thereunder

Regulation 3 (1) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015

No insider shall communicate, provide, or allow access to any unpublished price sensitive information, relating to a company or securities listed or proposed to be listed, to any person including other insiders except where such communication is in furtherance of legitimate purposes, performance of duties or discharge of legal obligations

36. After due consideration of the submission of the Noticee, I prima facie note that there is no dispute as to the communication of the information through WhatsApp messages between the Noticee as alleged and the same has been admitted by both the Noticee. However it is the primary case of the Noticee that such information was not in the nature of UPSI and was a HOS, the circulation of which is a regular practice as contended by Noticee. Further, it has been contended that she, as a part and parcel of her job, that involved institutional sales had to accumulate information about movement in the markets, possible stock prices, news about important elements in the financial word etc. Apart from the above, the Noticee has also made submissions stating that:

- a) no Connection was established between company and her or the sender of the message;
- b) no leak was established from the Insiders;
- c) without establishing a connection and without leak there cannot be UPSI;

- d) without the guarantee about the source that the information is from the company there cannot be UPSI;
- e) the information forwarded by her was in the nature of HOS/Estimate/speculation and not UPSI and the same matching with the actual numbers does not make it a UPSI and that the SCN failed to consider numerous instances where estimates did not match;
- f) there was no nexus/no definite pattern of access to UPSI;
- g) there is no *mens rea* established;

37. After considering the submissions of the Noticee and the documents available on record, I note my findings on the Noticee's major submissions as under:

i) The information that was shared through WhatsApp did not match with that of the subsequently announced financial results of Asian Paints

38. I note that the Noticee vide her reply dated March 25m 2020 stated, "*Total income as per SCN is 4486.34crs whereas in my message, the number was 4416 crs*" and contended that "*Wide deviation in total income circulated in whatapp message viz a vis actual numbers*". However I note that the said submissions are factually incorrect since the charges did not mention the total income as 4486.34 crs as contended by the Noticee. Therefore, I am of the opinion that Noticee's submission cannot be accepted, given the gravity of the alleged violation in the instant case and accordingly I note that the information forming part of the circulated WhatsApp messages by the Noticee was exactly same as that of the subsequently announced financial results.

ii) No Connection among the Noticee or with the Company and disputing the existence of UPSI without establishing leak:

39. I note from the record that Asian Paints Limited vide its letter dated August 23, 2018 and email dated June 02, 2019 submitted the chronology of events leading to the quarterly disclosure on May 11, 2017 for QE March 2017 which is noted in the prepares above. From the same, I further note that period of alleged UPSI in the matter started from April 1, 2017 i.e. the day when an estimate of the Profit and Loss Account (P&L) of the standalone

financial results of the Company for the quarter were prepared which was the 1st working day subsequent to the relevant quarter end date by certain employees forming part of the accounts team, finance function and submitted for review to the finance hierarchy and existed till May 11, 2017 when the financial results were disclosed to the stock exchanges. Admittedly the message with respect to the same viz., *“Asian Paints:- total income 4416cr, ebitda 782cr, pat 480cr. Volumes growth @9.2%.”* was received by Shruti Vora from one Neeraj Agarwal on May 09, 2017 at 14:53:07. The said WhatsApp message was forwarded by Shruti Vora on May 09, 2017 at 14:54:49 to several other entities namely, Sumeet Hinduja, Sunil Kumar, Parikshit Shah, Navjeevan Khosla and certain members (mobile numbers available in chat) of one WhatsApp group. While I note that the investigation has not revealed any material directing to the source of the UPSI, however I note that the significant fact is that the content of the message that was communicated between the Noticee exactly matched with that of the later announced financial results of Asian Paints. I am of the opinion that such information which was in the nature of price sensitive information and remained unpublished, was in the possession of the Noticee. I do not find merit in the submission of the Noticee claiming that, in the absence of proof of leak and the source of UPSI, the information does not stand to qualify as a UPSI. In this regard, I find it pertinent to refer to the peculiar facts and circumstances involved in the instant case where the mode of circulation of information has been by way of WhatsApp messages. I note from the record that efforts were made to track back to the source of the message; however severe technological constraints were faced in this regard owing to the end-to-end encryption of WhatsApp messages. I note that WhatsApp itself communicated to SEBI stating that WhatsApp users are protected with end-to-end encryption protocol, third parties and WhatsApp cannot read such messages or search for such messages and that WhatsApp does not store information regarding the sender and recipient of a message, the same could not be tracked despite all the efforts. Besides, in the instant case, the information has not been claimed as received from any direct source other than the whatsapp communications.

40. As noted above, it is not the case of the Noticee that the information shared through the WhatsApp in the instant case were generated by her through market research or by any

other data and in fact, apart from denying the connection to the source, the Noticee has stated that the information was passed on generally and she was part of the chain that carried on the information. However, it is the contention of the Noticee that the information was the outcome of the estimates from the brokers which was already in the public domain. Such being the case, I deem it relevant to examine the content of the information to ascertain its nature.

41. In this regard, firstly, I peruse the following table wherein the financial figures circulated on WhatsApp pertaining to Asian Paints Ltd. are compared with actual figures disclosed subsequently on stock exchanges to gauge the deviation between two sets of figures.

Abbreviations format used:

Figure1 in WhatsApp (F1W) Figure1 in Actual (F1A) Figure1 Deviation (F1Dev)

Date and time of WhatsApp message (after adding 5:30 hrs)	Figures in WhatsApp message	Date and time of disclosure on Exchange	Actual figures disclosed on Exchange	F1W	F1A	F2W	F2A	F3W	F3A	%ge Deviations observed in Figures		
										F1Dev	F2Dev	F3Dev
09/05/2017 14:53:07	total income 4416 cr, ebitda 782cr, PAT 480 cr. volumes growth @9.2%	11/05/2017 16:23:32	Income 4416.23 EBITDA 781.98 PAT 479.61	4416	4416.23	782	781.98	480	479.61	.005	0.002	0.08

Note: EBITDA is calculated as: EBITDA (Earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization) = Profit from Operations before other income, finance costs, exceptional item and tax + Depreciation and amortization expense = 689.48+83.49+9.01 = 781.98 crores

* % ge deviation is calculated as per the following methodology:

%ge Deviation = (Figure in WhatsApp message-Actual Figures disclosed on exchange)*100/(Actual figures disclosed on exchange)

42. While it is evident that the information related to the financial results were sensitive in nature, I note that the financial figures matched almost exactly with that circulated through the WhatsApp messages. I also find it very pertinent to note that the information relating to financial results that included Total Income, EBIDTA and PAT were not even stated in any approximate range of values but were stated as a definite amount in the messages and exactly matched with that of the subsequently announced results. In addition, I also note from the chronology of events with respect to the preparation of accounts during the UPSI period, on May 10, 2017 it is stated that a note containing relevant financial information

was prepared and shared with the Corporate Communications team of the Company ("Corporate Communications Team"), to be used for making presentation during the investors' conference and the Auditors Committee meeting and the clarifications with the Statutory Audit committee was also completed a day before that. In spite of the fact that the source of leak of information could not traced back due to the technological constraints owing to deletion of whatsapp messages, in the circumstances as above, I note that it is reasonably possible that the information that was communicated by the Noticee had already come into existence on May 9, 2017, the date when Mr. Neeraj Agarwal forwards the messages to Noticee and the Noticee forwarded further. In view of the above, I am of the opinion that Noticee' submission claiming that the aforesaid information did not constitute UPSI for the reason of non-establishing the leak and connection with the source is devoid of any merit.

43. Further, with respect to the main contention of the Noticee that the information constituting the whatsapp messages were the outcome of the estimates from the brokers which was already in the public domain. In support of the aforesaid contention, the Noticee has produced before me the screenshots from the Bloomberg indicating the estimates from the broker with respect to Asian Paints, which were published on Bloomberg much before the whatsapp messages were forwarded by the Noticee.

44. In this regard, I have carefully perused the aforesaid documents produced before me. The Noticee have submitted before me the several screenshot of such estimates consensus of brokerage firms appearing on bloomberg, one of which is reproduced hereunder:



45. The Noticee has submitted that the source of the information of her whatsapp messages dated May 9, 2017 was the estimates of broker firm/analysts as available on Bloomberg which was in public domain and thus could not be considered as a UPSI. She contended that such message was merely forwarded by her as received. I note from the snapshot that there were about 22 estimates of analysts of various broking firms regarding estimated Revenue of Asian Paints till May 9, 2017. I note that there was no reports attached except for the details of the analyst and the broking firm representing. As already noted, it is the primary submissions of the Noticee that the information forming part of Whatsapp was in essence arising from aforesaid estimates mentioned in Bloomberg. However, considering that there were several estimates given out by several analysts of the broker firms on several days for Asian Paints Ltd for the quarter ending on March 2017, the onus is on the Noticee to demonstrate as to on what basis the specific estimate has been claimed to be the

source distinguishing that from the rest of the estimates. Further, the Noticee has referred to the estimate from Sanjay Manyal, analyst of ICICIdirect.com dated April 10, 2017, which closely matched with her whatsapp message and was in public domain. However, I note that in the snapshot submitted by the Noticee which is reproduced above, there were as many as 13 more estimates that were published after the aforesaid estimate by ICICIdirect.com and the Noticee has not stated any basis for referring to the estimate dated April 10, 2017 (one month before the date of whatsapp messages) as the source for the whatsapp messages. Similarly, the Noticee has referred to the estimates of Kotak dated April 4, 2017 and Prabhudad Lilladher Pvt Ltd dated April 06, 2017 for the EBIDTA and PAT informations respectively. I am of opinion that if Noticee had in fact relied upon any specific research estimates or her forwarded messages had originated the information from such estimates, it should be demonstrable, verifiable trail of well documented and laid down process in consonance with the job profile or description. In the instant case, I note that Noticee was associated as sales team handling equity sales in a broking firm and therefore as per job profile would be primarily on liaisoning between its broking firms research team and clients, if necessary. I note that noticee instead of seeking inputs from its internal research team, which is part of her job description, had submitted totally unrelated estimates in Bloomberg without any demonstrable and verifiable trail of events for relying on any specific research report. I note that Noticee has failed to demonstrate the basis in above lines and merely produced some estimates which were appearing in Bloomberg. If Noticee had relied upon such estimates, it would have been communicated only to clients of its broker as part of her job and not to share with other unconnected entities as noted from the closed whatups groups, some of whom were admittedly participants of Reuters trading platform, as per her own submissions.

46. From all the above, I am of the opinion that the submissions of the Noticee that the information shared through the whatsapp messages was of generally available nature by referring to the estimates consensus of broker firms on Bloomberg as the source is far-fetched and clearly an afterthought. Therefore, based on the facts above, the information circulated among the closed group through whatsapp by the Noticee which accurately

matched with the subsequently announced results ought to have originated from the closed group.

iii) The information shared was of the nature – “Heard on Street” (HOS) and not UPSI

47. The Noticee has also argued that the information as in the instant case are in the nature of HOS i.e. Heard on Street as noted at para 28 above. I note that the said submission is in effect contending that the information was in the nature of an unsubstantiated gossip that was being forwarded as speculation or rumours. The Noticee has contended that such information was of the same nature that were published in the newspaper estimating/speculating the results of the public companies and that the same were being shared over WhatsApp due to the advancement of technology. Further that it is a common practice that the analysts of various brokerage houses come out with a preview report and estimate the results across all coverage companies and such estimations are based on several factors including financial modelling, management guidance, global factors, meetings with management of listed companies etc., which are used by the entire trading community/active investors to plan their trades. In light of the aforesaid contention by the Noticee before me, I primarily note that the information of the nature of HOS that is published in the newspaper or by the brokerage houses estimating the results are in the public domain and there is generally no disparity in the access to such information. However, such information when being circulated among a closed group as in the instant case, such group and the people forming part of the information communication chain alone become privy not only to the content of the information, but also to the knowledge of very existence of such information. Further, as submitted by the Noticee herself, it is a common practice that the broking houses arriving at an estimate on results based on several factors including financial modelling, management guidance, global factors, meetings with management of listed companies etc. I am of the opinion that such information generated as above by the brokerage houses may not constitute UPSI even if the same subsequently matches with the result announced. However, in the instant case before me, the information communicated by the Noticee is neither being claimed as arising from the market research nor was it the estimates/predictions of Noticee herself.

In fact, the Noticee has stated that such information was received by Neeraj Agarwal from a third party and the same was forwarded to Noticee.

48. At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that the investigation in this case was initiated pursuant to the news article published in Financial Chronicle (sourced from Reuter's article by Mr. Rafael Nam) dated November 17, 2017 whereby it was reported that unpublished financial results of some major Companies were posted in private whatsapp group prior to Companies announcements stock exchanges. In this regard, the Noticee vide her email and letter dated May 09, 2019 had stated that she was part of the Reuters Trading India Platform which comprised of various analysts, fund managers and traders of the reputed brokerage firms/fund houses and the member of the said group had formed a whatsapp group which she had admittedly was part of. Therefore, the Noticee had always been an active participant in the whatsapp groups of the nature reported in the aforementioned News article.

49. Further, considering the fact that the shared information matched exactly with the subsequently published financial results, the submissions of the Noticee that such information was in the nature of HOS would be to say that the financial results of the said company were already become public and being discussed openly among the general investors. In the absence of any document or evidence on record to signify such fact even remotely, I am not inclined to accept such a contentious argument by the Noticee that the access to accurate financial results was available to larger public in the form of HOS. Further, in the instant case, a few closed set of people including the Noticee were in possession of such UPSI and they alone had been privy to the information albeit all of them could not be tracked back due to the constraints, due to deletion of whatsapp messages, as stated above. With regard to the communication of the messages by the Noticee, I have also perused the job profile of the Noticee during the period the messages were communicated which are as under:

Noticee:

- Calls and recommendations –fundamental/technical/quantitative parameters on scrips;
- News about events in the market;
- Sector reports published by Antique research analysts team from time to time. Arrange calls and set up meetings between Antique research team and fund representatives from time to time to discuss these research reports.

50. From the above, it is evident that Noticee was not required to share such information to various other unconnected entities as a part of her job description prior to the announcement of results. I am of the opinion that the circumstances and arrangement as observed above, where the source of the information could not be traced back due to deletion of the messages in whatsapp by sender, gives a scope for transmission of UPSI through a chain of forward messages to various other entities/ closed groups thereby granting an undue advantage to them.

51. In view of the gravity of consequences arising out of such sharing of information among the closed groups through WhatsApp or social media platform, I am not inclined to give any benefit of doubt in favour of the Noticee by treating the information as HOS as claimed by the Noticee.

52. The Noticee has also vehemently argued that the information claiming to be in the nature of HOS had never been forwarded to any of her family members or was taken advantage by them. In this regard, as already noted, due to the technological challenges, the trail of the messages could not be made out so as to identify the actual source or the complete list of persons who were part of the communication trail and therefore it is not entirely acceptable that no gain was made by any investor being privy to such information shared through WhatsApp messages. Due to the same, I am also not inclined to accept Noticee's submission that the information lacked the credibility of the source and hence cannot be qualified as a UPSI. Furthermore, irrespective of the factors whether the information was originated from the Noticee or that her families had traded based on such information, the charge against the Noticee sustain to be considered as the same is concerned with whether the Noticee was in possession of UPSI and had shared it further. At this stage, I note that I am primarily of the opinion that it is against the interest of the investors to encourage any

sharing of sensitive information within a closed group to the exclusion of general public especially when the source of such information cannot be traced back. If the same is allowed to continue in the pretext of sharing of HOS as stated by the Noticee, the insiders having access to the UPSI would be granted themselves with an unfettered mode of transmitting such information without having to be concerned about being tracked back to the source of the information. Considering the extent of impact, such UPSI involving financial results hold on the price of the securities, I am of the opinion that a lenient view cannot be warranted so as to consider such information qualifying to be an UPSI as a mere HOS.

53. It is also the submission of the Noticee that she did not believe the information to be a UPSI and therefore forwarded to clients/market groups/acquaintances without application of mind. In the established facts of the case, the Noticee who is reasonably expected to be well acquainted with the working of the securities market and the nature of sensitive information that an unpublished financial results cannot claim ignorance of the nature of information. I am of the opinion that such category of persons who are well aware of the sensitive nature of UPSI has an ethical obligation on their part to inform the regulators in case of coming across an accurate details regarding UPSI from a suspicious source rather than taking care of the interest of their acquaintances by forwarding the same. However, in the instant case, I note that admittedly there have been several communications which happened frequently with respect to the financial results of the companies between the personals who are closely associated with the market. I note that the Noticee in all probability must have observed that some of the information she received had very closely matched with the subsequently announced financial results. Especially considering that she was not aware of the source of the UPSI that she had received, it was to alarm the Noticee or give raise to a suspicion on the source of the information. Surprisingly, it has not been the case and the Noticee had chosen to accept the information and further communicate the same ignoring the material nature of the information.

iv) No breach of law on the part of the Noticee

54. In this regard, I note that the Noticee has been alleged to have violated the provisions of Sections 12A(d) and 12A(e) of the SEBI Act, 1992 and Regulation 3 of the PIT Regulations, 2015. While Section 12 (d) and (e) inter alia prohibits any person from communicating any material or non-public information to any other person, in a manner that is in contravention of the provisions of SEBI Act or the Rules or the regulations made thereunder. In addition, Section 3(1) of the PIT Regulations, 2015 prohibits any insider from communicating any unpublished price sensitive information, relating to a company or securities listed or proposed to be listed, to any person including other insiders except where such communication is in furtherance of legitimate purposes, performance of duties or discharge of legal obligations. In this connection, I also refer to the provisions of Regulation 2 (1) (g) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015, which state as under:

“insider” means any person who is:

- iii. *A connected person, or*
- iv. *in possession of or having access to unpublished price sensitive information*

NOTE: Since “generally available information” is defined, it is intended that anyone in possession of or having access to unpublished price sensitive information should be considered as “insider” regardless of how one came in possession of or had access to such information...”

55. In view of the aforesaid charges against the Noticee, I analyse the facts to ascertain whether the following essential requirements are established or not:

- a) Whether the information constituted UPSI?
- b) Whether the Noticee was an insider within the definition under Regulation 2(1)(g) of the PIT Regulations, 2015?
- c) Whether the Noticee being an insider further communicated the UPSI?

a) Whether the information constituted UPSI

56. Firstly, it is the contention of the Noticee that the information forming part of the WhatsApp messages were generally available and was in the nature of market gossip/rumour/ HOS. In this regard, as already opined above, I do not find that the information stated in the WhatsApp messages qualify to be regarded as HOS in the instant

case and the information published on Bloomberg could not be reasonably accepted as the source for the Noticee whatsapp messages. Further, contending that the information did not constitute UPSI, the Noticee has further stated that she had forwarded the information relating to estimates of financial results on several occasions and that in only a few instances as in the instant case, the details had closely matched with that of the actual results announced. She has contended that merely the fact that the results exactly matched cannot be enough to allege the information to be a UPSI, when she herself was not the originator of message as well. The Noticee further argued that the information in the instant case was generally available and thus could not be treated as UPSI. In this regard, referring to the report of High-Level Committee to Review the SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 1992 under the Chairmanship of Mr. Justice N K Sodhi (hereinafter referred to as “**Justice Sodhi Committee Report**”) the Noticee submitted that whether a piece of information is UPSI or generally available information is a mixed question of fact and law and that in the instant case, she receiving the information from an individual who is not shown to be connected to Asian Paints or source or the information cannot be treated as receipt of UPSI.

57. In this regard, I note that the committee deliberating upon the issue of what information constitutes UPSI and what is to be regarded as generally available information and how the information of same nature may be UPSI in some case and generally available in others recorded various illustrations which the Noticee has presented before me in contending that the information in her case is of generally available nature and not UPSI. In this regard, I note that UPSI is essentially an information that is not generally available but on becoming generally available materially affects price of securities. The committee laying down the principles on how such general availability needs to be ascertained stated that any information that is accessible to the public on non-discriminatory basis would qualify to be generally available. Further, in the light of facts of the instant case, I also find it relevant to refer to the following paragraphs of the Report:

“26. The Committee deliberated upon how one should understand —non-discriminatory access and it was felt that one should not over-stipulate how this should be understood since

that could risk narrowing the scope of that term. For example, a research report that is priced for purchase and is made available to all clients of a stock broker would be considered non-discriminatory inasmuch as any client of the broker or any class of clients of a broker having a certain risk profile may acquire that research report. Merely because the report is priced and needs to be purchased would by itself mean that access to it is non-discriminatory? However, if one were to find extraordinary and peculiar structures such as pricing a research report at a level not in line with market practice such that only some identified persons may be able to acquire it and hope to rely on it by way of ostensible non-discriminatory access, it would not be non-discriminatory. Therefore, whether some information is available on a non-discriminatory basis would be a question of fact to be answered adopting the standard of a reasonable man.

....

29. While these principles are also backed by the provisions containing the prohibition on communication of UPSI and the inducement of communication of UPSI in Regulation 3, it is important to also articulate how the concepts of –generally available information and –unpublished price sensitive information// are intended to be understood.

30. A piece of research work that is available on a discriminatory basis but is based entirely on generally available information would not change the character of the research work from being –generally available// to being –UPSI. The Committee is conscious that generally available information well analyzed by an insightful mind would not be transformed into UPSI. Therefore, the regulation explicitly provides that conclusions, deductions and analyses of generally available information too would be regarded as generally available information.

.....

33. To conclude, whether or not a piece of information is generally available or is unpublished would necessarily be a mixed question of fact and law. A bright line indicating the types of matters that would ordinarily give rise to UPSI are listed to give illustrative guidance. It could well also be possible that information from such events could be routine in nature and consistent with a long history. Information about the repetition of the same event on predictable lines would not render it to be UPSI unless deviated from. For example, the

declaration of dividend at the same rate at which a company has declared dividend for the several years as per publicly stated dividend policy.

”

58. Having noted the above, I further note that the Noticee has *inter alia* contended before me that “*Analysis and research based on generally available information would also be generally available information. Information that is capable of being accessed by any person without breach of any law would be considered generally available. It is submitted that in the facts of the present case, the information that was forwarded to me was in the nature of market gossip and I have given several other examples to show that it is common practice among market participants to keep on predicting future events and the said market gossip is not prohibited under any law.*” In this regard, while I note that whether or not a piece of information is generally available or is unpublished would necessarily be a mixed question of fact and law, the statement that the information was an outcome of the research does not by itself make it generally available. I note that the test to ascertain an information to be UPSI or not is its non-discriminatory nature of availability. In the instant case, the Noticee while referring to one of the estimates of ICICIdirect.com published on Bloomberg which matched with her information related to Total income claimed that the information was already generally available. However, as noted in the prepares, she has failed to exhibit how one specific estimate (that matched her information) out of several estimates published on Bloomberg in one month before the sharing of her whatsapp message made the whatsapp information already generally available. As already noted, I am of the opinion that such argument without any explanation on the nexus between her message and the aforesaid ICICIdirect.com estimate published on Bloomberg is clearly farfetched, afterthought and does not merit consideration in her favour. Further, the Noticee has not placed before me any evidence to indicate that the information was derived from any research work of her own or any other specific report. Furthermore, as stated at paragraph 26 of the Committee Report, an illustration where a research work that is priced at *a level not in line with market practice such that only some identified persons may be able to acquire it was opined to be of discriminatory nature*. Therefore even if the information is said to be have been formed based on the research, firstly the research should have been based on the generally

available information and secondly the research work should have been accessible on a non-discriminatory basis. However, in the instant case, even if the information is to be accepted as based on the research, there is no evidence brought on record by the Noticee to show that the research information emerged based on the generally available information. Further, the said information has been circulated between the closed groups of entities including the Noticee through the WhatsApp messages which by its very nature make it a discriminatory access to the selected few. Therefore the information in this case fails the test to be called generally available information as contended by the Noticee.

59. Furthermore, with respect to the submissions of the Noticee, I also note from the job description of the Noticee, it was not a requisite task arising from her duty to forward the messages of the nature as in the instant case. Yet, the Noticee have been admittedly been continuously involved in sharing such information being an active chain in the transmission of information. While I note that the information shared/forwarded by the Noticee had not matched with that of the actual results on several occasions, the fact it matched so accurately in a few instances also cannot be viewed leniently. Especially when the information included the exact details with respect to crucial part of financial results such as Total Income, EBIDTA and PAT. I cannot ignore the fact that such information have been shared with a closed set of people and the general public had no knowledge of such information being shared on the WhatsApp platform to even have any access to the same. Further, the Noticee being financially literate personal who has been associated with the securities market by holding significant position noted at paras above, it was well within a reasonable expectation out of her to be triggered alarm when the information that were being circulated through WhatsApp messages so accurately matched with the subsequently announced actual figures of the company, even if such occurrence happened with respect to selected few messages out of several messages as stated by the Noticee. However, the Noticee has allowed herself to continue to be an instrument in the chain of communication of such sensitive information through WhatsApp messages. From the summary of aforesaid findings, I am of the considered view that the messages about the financial results were circulated prior to the official announcement made by the Companies, is UPSI. In my opinion, the disclosure of this information violates the rule of

parity of information and perpetuated information asymmetry. The prohibition against insider trading helps in ensuring fairness, achieving information symmetry and ultimately market efficiency.

b) *Whether the Noticee is an insider within the definition under Regulation 2(1) (g) of the PIT Regulations, 2015?*

&

c) *Whether the Noticee being an insider further communicated the UPSI?*

60. I note that Regulation 2(1)(g) of the PIT Regulations, 2015 *inter alia* envisages that any person who is in possession of UPSI is regarded as an insider. Further, the note to the said provision also clarifies the legislative intent of the said provision by stating that such person is to be considered an insider regardless of how the UPSI has come into his/her possession. Therefore, once information is established to be a UPSI, anybody who is in possession of such information will be an insider.

61. In her defense against being alleged as the insiders in the instant case, the Noticee has based her contentions on the argument that the information contained in the WhatsApp messages were in the nature of market rumor/gossip/HOS and hence cannot be regarded as UPSI and thus she did not act as insider in the instant case. However, from the conclusions arrived in the preparas of this Order, it has been already been noted that the financial results that were part of the WhatsApp messages constituted UPSI as on May 9, 2017 for the reasons mentioned above. Further from the admitted fact that Noticee had forwarded the said message to several individuals, it is imperative that the Noticee was in possession of UPSI and consequently she is considered as insider with respect to the UPSI she possessed.

62. Further with respect to the circulation of the aforesaid UPSI by the Noticee, it is contended by the Noticee that despite the information being forwarded to several parties, none of them alleged that the said information was UPSI and in spite of the communication of the information, there is no evidence as to anyone has traded on the basis of the UPSI. In this

regard, I note that the Regulation 3(1) of PIT Regulations, 2015 prohibits communication of UPSI from an insider in any mode. I note that the regulation does not exempt the person from the guilt of communicating merely on the fact that no trades had taken place based on the UPSI thus communicated. The main problem in case of dissemination of information through WhatsApp is the end to end encryption system of transfer of information because of which the data cannot be accessed by third party except receiver and sender. Furthermore, I again take note of the fact that the technological constraint arising in the peculiar facts and circumstances of circulating messages through WhatsApp, the complete trail of messages could not be discovered though the message was admittedly circulated among several market associated personals. Therefore, I am of the opinion that in order to safeguard the interest of the investors and the integrity of the securities market, one cannot import a liberal interpretation of the aforesaid provision so as to warrant the Noticee, who has been involved in the circulation of UPSI on a routine basis over the WhatsApp, with a benefit of doubt. Considering the same, as evident from the record, the Noticee being an insider for having the UPSI in possession on May 9, 2017 had forwarded such UPSI through WhatsApp messages to several other. In view of the same there is no reasonable doubt in concluding the Noticee as an insider under the provisions of Regulation 2 (1) (g) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations who as in possession of UPSI and that she communicated the same further.

63. In light of the facts concluded above, I find it relevant to note that the Hon'ble Supreme Court has been consistently of the view that what cannot be done directly, cannot be done indirectly. I note that in *Jagir Singh v. Ranbir Singh* (MANU/SC/0097/1978 : 1979 AIR 381), the Hon'ble Supreme Court has held that what cannot be done directly, cannot be allowed to be done indirectly as that would be an evasion of the statute. The Supreme Court has held that it is a well-known principle of law that the provisions of law cannot be evaded by shift or contrivance, and that the objects of a statute cannot be defeated in an indirect or circuitous manner. (As per Abbott C.J. in *Fox v. Bishop of Chester* (1824) 2 B & C 635 "To carry out effectually the object of a Statute, it must be construed as to defeat all attempts to do, or avoid doing, in an indirect or circuitous manner that which it has prohibited or enjoined"). I also note that the same principle is also enshrined in Section 12A of the SEBI

Act, which inter alia states that no person shall directly or indirectly engage himself with communicating the UPSI when being in possession of the same.

64. In view of the all the above, I conclude that the Noticee is liable for violation of the provisions of Sections 12 A (d) & 12 A (e) of the SEBI Act, 1992 and Regulation 3 (1) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015.

ISSUE II: Whether the Noticee is liable for monetary penalty under Section 15G of the SEBI Act, 1992?

65. A basic premise that underlines the integrity of securities market is that persons connected with the market conform to the standards of transparency, good governance and ethical behavior prescribed in securities laws and do not resort to fraudulent and deceptive activities like insider trading. Such activities are detrimental to the interests of the investors as well as the securities market. No person can be allowed to enrich himself/herself by way of wrongful or ill-gotten gains or avoidance of potential loss made on account of such activity. SEBI has been entrusted with the important mandate of protecting investors and safeguarding the integrity of the securities market. In this regard, necessary powers have been conferred upon SEBI under the securities laws. The SEBI (PIT) Regulations have put in place a framework for prohibition of insider trading in securities. The prohibitions provided in the Regulations ensure a level-playing field in the securities market and safeguard the interest of investors and integrity of securities market. I am of the view that the object and spirit of the SEBI (PIT) Regulations would get defeated if the alleged violators of the said Regulations are not made to face the consequences.

66. It is established from the findings that the Noticee being an insider had communicated the UPSI relating to Asian Paints Ltd., to other person(s) through WhatsApp messages, which is in violation of the provisions of Sections 12 A (d) & 12 A (e) of the SEBI Act, 1992 and Regulation 3 (1) of SEBI (PIT) Regulations, 2015, for which the Noticee is liable for monetary penalty under Section 15G of the SEBI Act which reads as under.

Penalty for insider trading

15G.If any insider who,—

- (i) either on his own behalf or on behalf of any other person, deals in securities of a body corporate listed on any stock exchange on the basis of any unpublished price-sensitive information; or*
- (ii) communicates any unpublished price-sensitive information to any person, with or without his request for such information except as required in the ordinary course of business or under any law; or*
- (iii) counsels, or procures for any other person to deal in any securities of any body corporate on the basis of unpublished price-sensitive information,*

shall be liable to a penalty which shall not be less than ten lakh rupees but which may extend to twenty-five crore rupees or three times the amount of profits made out of insider trading, whichever is higher.

ISSUE III: If so, what quantum of monetary penalty should be imposed on the Noticee taking into consideration the factors mentioned in Section 15J of SEBI Act?

67. While determining the quantum of penalty under Section 15G of the SEBI Act, 1992, it is important to consider the factors stipulated in section 15J of SEBI Act, which reads as under:-

“15J - Factors to be taken into account by the adjudicating officer

While adjudging quantum of penalty under section 15-I, the adjudicating officer shall have due regard to the following factors, namely:-

- (a) the amount of disproportionate gain or unfair advantage, wherever quantifiable, made as a result of the default;*
- (b) the amount of loss caused to an investor or group of investors as a result of the default;*
- (c) the repetitive nature of the default.”*

68. I note that on the basis of data available on record, it is difficult, in cases of such nature, to quantify exactly the disproportionate gain or unfair advantage enjoyed by the Noticee and the consequent losses suffered by the investors. Further the amount of loss to an investor or group of investors also cannot be quantified on the basis of available facts and data. Even though the monetary loss to the investors cannot be computed, unauthorized circulation of UPSI such as financial results holds a scope to pose a greater threat to the integrity of the market. The technological advancements may also equip the manipulators with innovative ways to flout and bypass the regulations that are put in place to protect the interest of the innocent investors. Today, developments in technology, information flow and access to markets have enabled new market structures to evolve and impact the way in which market manipulation occurs and new methods of market manipulation have emerged. The instant case before me is one such example where the information constituting UPSI has been circulated through WhatsApp messages, which conveniently wipes out any trace of the insider leaking the UPSI when the messages are deleted and manages to reach the selected group of targets. Such acts which are essentially in the form of making UPSI available on a discriminatory basis, if legitimized in the garb of routine sharing of market gossips/rumors will compromise the confidence of this kind of activity has a serious impact on the price of the securities where the limited set of people having access to UPSI stand to gain at the expense of the innocent gullible investors. I am of the opinion that the peculiar nature of such communication of UPSI as in the instant case has to be strictly dealt with, in order to curb and discourage any future attempts at the same.

ORDER

69. In exercise of the powers conferred under Section 15 I of the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992, and Rule 5 of Securities and Exchange Board of India (Procedure for Holding Inquiry and Imposing Penalties) Rules, 1995, I hereby impose a penalty of ₹15,00,000/- (Rupees Fifteen Lakhs only) on the Noticee viz., Ms. Shruti Vishal Vora in terms of the provisions of Section 15G of the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992 for the violation of Sections 12 A (d) & 12 A (e) of the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992 and Regulation 3 (1) of SEBI (Prohibition of Insider Trading) Regulations, 2015.

70. The Noticee shall remit / pay the said amount of penalty within 45 days either by way of Demand Draft in favour of "SEBI - Penalties Remittable to Government of India", payable at Mumbai, OR through online payment facility available on the SEBI website www.sebi.gov.in on the following path, by clicking on the payment link:

ENFORCEMENT → Orders → Orders of AO →PAY NOW

71. The Noticee shall forward said Demand Draft or the details / confirmation of penalty so paid to the "The Division Chief, EFD-1, DRA-II, SEBI, SEBI Bhavan, Plot No. C -4 A, "G" Block, Bandra Kurla Complex, Bandra (E), Mumbai -400 051". The Noticee shall provide the following details while forwarding DD/ payment information:

- a) Name and PAN of the entity
- b) Name of the case / matter
- c) Purpose of Payment – Payment of penalty under AO proceedings
- d) Bank Name and Account Number
- e) Transaction Number

72. In the event of failure to pay the said amount of penalty within the timelines as mentioned in Para 70 above, recovery proceedings may be initiated under Section 28A of the Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1956 for realization of the said amount of penalty along

with interest thereon, inter alia, by attachment and sale of movable and immovable properties.

73. In terms of the provisions of Rule 6 of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Procedure for Holding Inquiry and Imposing Penalties) Rules, 1995, a copy of this order is being sent to Ms. Shruti Vishal Vora (Noticee) and also to the Securities and Exchange Board of India, Mumbai.

Date: May 29, 2020
Place: Mumbai

B J Dilip
Adjudicating Officer