

**MEDIA**

# Exclusive: Punya Prasun Bajpai Reveals the Story Behind His Exit From ABP News

'From being told not to take Narendra Modi's name on my show or show his image on any programme critical of the government to a sinister blacking out of my show, Masterstroke, what happened was nothing short of censorship.'



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## Punya Prasun Bajpai

15.9K  
interactions



MEDIA 14 HOURS AGO

*This is a complete English translation of the exposé written by the former ABP News anchor Punya Prasun Bajpai for **The Wire Hindi** about the circumstances of his departure from the channel and the official diktats which preceded it.*

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On July 14, 2018, the proprietor-cum-editor-in-chief of the national news channel ABP, owned by the Ananda Bazaar Patrika Group, had a conversation with me along these lines:

Proprietor: “Can you refrain from mentioning the name of Prime Minister Modi [in your programme]? Mention the names of his ministers by all means; point out anything amiss in a government policy if you want to, even name the minister of the concerned ministry. Just don’t refer to Prime Minister Modi anywhere.”

I replied: But when Prime Minister Modi himself announces every government scheme, involves himself in the work of every ministry; and when every minister utters the name of Prime Minister Modi every time s/he mentions any scheme or government policy, how is it possible for us to not take Modi’s name?

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This order/directive was preceded by a long conversation on news presentation and its impact, the changing perceptions about the channel and its attendant benefits. The proprietor admitted that my show, ‘Masterstroke’, had raised the credibility of the channel. In his words, the kind of research that went into Masterstroke, the way news was reported from ground zero and government policies mapped through the report, the quality of graphics and script were things he was seeing for the very first time on this channel.

Even as the proprietor-cum-editor-in-chief was enthused by the changes in the manner of news presentation on the channel, he kept asking that if things remained the way they were, with just the prime minister’s name being out of bounds, would it make such a difference.

This long discussion was eventually followed by the directive that the prime minister’s name was indeed not to be uttered on-screen.

In the context of the prevailing political scenario, following the diktat would be an immensely difficult task. Take, for instance, a report on unemployment in India highlighting the government’s claims of employment generation through its skill development programme. How would it look, showing the reality on ground without a whisper about the claims made by Prime Minister Modi about the success of the programmes?

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On the one hand, the prime minister says that the skill development initiative has a target of training 40 crore youths by 2022. However, the truth is that as of 2018, the number of youngsters trained thus far has not even reached the 2 crore mark. Moreover, on-the-ground reports show that in all those places where skill development centres were opened, eight out of every 10 are non-functional. For the team of ‘Masterstroke’, following orders from the top would have meant showing the situation on ground through a script from

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There was another problem with the diktat, namely that we are talking about television news and not a newspaper. The script might well skip the name of Prime Minister Modi. However, in a situation where the government is associated only with Modi, any reference to the government means that the entire video library will have nothing but footage of Modi. It is a fact that from May 26, 2014 to July 26, 2018, the minute any editing machine had to deal with news about the Modi government or of any project of the Modi government, on an estimate, 80% of the images that surfaced were of Modi. So as soon as an editor glimpses the words ‘the present government’ in the script, the only image that presents itself is that of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Say, on a programme like Masterstroke, even though the words ‘Prime Minister Modi’ may not be uttered or heard, there is no doubt that the image that graces the screen will be his.

I had not anticipated that within 100 hours, a second diktat – that even the image of Modi should not appear on Masterstroke – would come my way. But come it did.

This time, the discussion with the proprietor started with the query: “Has the government of the day come to mean just Modi? Is it possible to prepare a report without showing Prime Minister Modi’s image?”

I responded with a question of my own – in four years the Modi government has announced 106 schemes. Coincidentally, the announcement of every scheme has been made by the prime minister himself. The onus for publicizing every scheme may well rest on the concerned ministry and minister, but it is the name of Prime Minister Modi which dominates the publicity of every initiative. So even if an on-ground news report does not refer to the prime minister in the context of the scheme’s success or failure, those affected by it will, and constantly do, utter the name of Modi – be it a farmer or a pregnant woman, jobless youth or trader.

Whether you ask them about the crop insurance scheme, the Matritva Vandana Yojana, Mudra Yojana or GST, those who fall within the ambit of those respective initiatives refer to Prime Minister Modi without fail. In the same breath they say that they are not benefitting in any way from those schemes

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The only answer I got was this – Whatever it may be, but Prime Minister Modi’s image should also not appear on Masterstroke.

Incidentally, the question as to what would be accomplished by not showing the image of Prime Minister Modi or speaking his name on Masterstroke, was still a mystery to me. This is so for the simple reason that for the BJP which came to power in 2014, the government is synonymous with Narendra Modi. For the BJP, Prime Minister Modi is their unparalleled star campaigner as well. The face of the Sangh also happens to be former pracharak Narendra Modi. The world over, India has only one brand ambassador of its foreign policy – Narendra Modi. Within the country too, the person at the centre of every policy is Narendra Modi. Then why is an hour-long primetime programme like Masterstroke, aired on ABP – and in sixth place among the dozen odd national news channels in Hindi – causing such heartburn within the government?

### Dilemma of a Modi-centric media

To put it another way, what is the predicament due to which the proprietors of ABP News are being pressured to keep the name and image of the prime minister off the screen? In fact, for the last four years under the Modi government, the way everything revolved solely around Modi; and, in a country like India, the way news channels projected him to the exclusion of all others, what happened was that increasingly, the image of the prime minister and his speeches and utterances, as absorbed by viewers, became a sort of an addiction. Its impact was such that Prime Minister Modi became a necessity for the TRP ratings of news channels.

As the narrative about the country progressing towards “achche din” unfolded, it became an addiction for the news channels as well. To ensure that this ‘high’ did not wear off, the Modi government created a 200-member monitoring team which duly functioned under the additional director general of the ministry, who reported directly to the minister concerned.

The 200-member monitoring team functioned at three levels: 150 members were involved only in monitoring the channels; 25 members gave it the shape

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PMO would get activated and send their directives to the editors of the news channels about what was to be done and how.

If an editor spoke about running a channel solely according to what was newsworthy, then the officials at the ministry or the PMO would communicate with the concerned proprietor. To keep the pressure intact, they would send a file with the monitoring report, detailing how Prime Minister Modi's statements, ranging from his election promises of 2014 to his claims on demonetisation, surgical strikes or GST could be shown again. Or how, in a report on an ongoing scheme, the prime minister's old claims could be included. In fact, a dozen or so officials from the I&B ministry and the PMO work at the first level to ensure that the narrative of the Modi government's successes is showcased in every manner possible. This is followed by the advice of the I&B minister, which is more of an order and, at the third level, there is the tone of the BJP with its many modulations.

## Boycotts by BJP, RSS spokespersons

Say, a channel does not confine itself to showing the Modi regime in a positive light at all times but occasionally includes stories with a negative tone or, on the basis of facts, shows the Modi government's truth to be a lie. Immediately, BJP spokespersons are told to stop appearing on those channels; that is, they do not participate in any political discussion conducted by that channel. This started happening on ABP News from the last week of June this year – BJP spokespersons stopped appearing on its debates. A few days later, BJP leaders stopped giving bytes to the channel. The day the truth of the Prime Minister's 'Mann ki Baat' was outed on Masterstroke, RSS ideologues too were told to stay off the channel.

Before absorbing the stark truth of Mann ki Baat and the events which followed, it is important to realise the extent to which the BJP's parent organisation, the RSS, has become dependent on the Modi government. This was borne out on July 9, 2018, when in the midst of a 4 pm discussion on ABP, a professor taking part in the programme in his capacity as an RSS ideologue received a phone call telling him to leave the studio immediately. And the gentleman in question stood up and simply walked away from the

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committing a grievous offence – you could say it was the face of a frightened man.

All these machinations and yet they fell short of the desired result. Purely because the impact on viewers of the reports being aired on the channel were showing in improved TRP ratings; the presence or absence of BJP leaders in the studio did not seem to matter a jot. It was in these circumstances that the TRP report of July 5 and July 12 revealed that ABP had become the second most watched Hindi channel of the country.

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It is important to mention that it was in this period that one edition of Masterstroke carried an exclusive report of the proposed thermal power plant in Godda (Jharkhand) – a project in violation of all rules and regulation, a project that is of the Adani group. For the first time, the woes of farmers in the area were brought out through this exclusive report – how Adani's proximity to Prime Minister Modi had made the Jharkhand state government change its regulations; how the farmers had been threatened that if they did not part with their land for the power project, they would be killed. One farmer said as much on camera: "An official of the Adani group has issued a threat, if you do not part with your land we will bury you alive. When we wanted to lodge a complaint with the police, they said "It is useless to complain. They are influential people, close to the prime minister." With the farmer was his wife, her face mirroring her terrible grief.

The TRP rating of that edition of Masterstroke was five points higher than the average rating for the show. Masterstroke, which notched an average 12 point rating, spiked to 17 points the day the exclusive programme on the Adani plant was aired. Ironically, on August 3, when Opposition leader Mallikarjun Kharge stood up in parliament to raise the issue of the government putting a gag on the media, threatening the ABP channel and having a hand in getting

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The real explanation, however, for the unraveling circumstances is to be found in the growing TRP ratings of the channel. Not only was ABP's Masterstroke becoming popular, its impact on the TRPs started showing in the first four months itself. The temperament of the reports appearing on Masterstroke was precisely to test the claims of the Modi government which came through reports from various parts of the country. What was repeatedly coming out in the editions of Masterstroke was the sheer hollowness of the claims being made by the government.

The government saw the approaching crisis: seeing that the people were beginning to appreciate reports showing its claims to be false and the channel's TRP ratings were climbing, how would the other channels do in the coming times? In India, advertising is the biggest source of revenue for running the business of news channels, and advertisements are given to channels on the basis of their favourable TRP ratings. If the TRPs indicate that reports dismissing the Modi government's claims of success as hollow are being appreciated by the people, then the news channels that continue to sing praises of the government stand to suffer a double crisis – loss of credibility and advertisements, or revenue.

This is the background against which finally action was taken to silence this kind of programming.

## Part II: Moving in for the kill

It was with a great deal of cleverness that the ruling BJP took two steps to increase its pressure on the news channel: the first was a boycott of the channel, and the second was to target ABP's annual public event, which is as much a matter of prestige as of revenue through advertisements – marked by the presence of those in power as well as in the opposition, with politicians responding to the questions put forth by the people. This time, both the BJP and the Modi government declined to attend the programme – which meant no ministers at the meet. And when those in power are conspicuous by their absence, how can a programme be organised with just the presence of the opposition?

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channels will find it difficult to run without. To rein in ABP and to ensure that other channels did not stop their praises of the Modi government and start reporting from ground zero, the government embarked on an ambitious plan – to throttle democracy in the guise of being its biggest friend. This, in the ‘world’s largest democracy’.

During the time of the Emergency, it was quite clear to the media that they had no recourse to their constitutional rights. But in today’s India’s, *raga* democracy is being sung at the highest octave.

On June 20, Prime Minister Modi spoke to farmer beneficiaries of his various schemes through a video conference link. Right in front was Chandramani Kaushik from village Kanhari in Kanker district (Chhattisgarh). When the prime minister asked her about her income, she simply narrated how her income had doubled. The prime minister was happy to hear the bit about income doubling. He started beaming for the simple reason that he has kept 2022 as the year when the incomes of farmers shall be doubled. So on a programme that is live, if a farmer happens to talk about her income doubling, it is bound to warm the cockles of the prime minister’s heart.

However, from the perspective of a reporter-editor, this incident was not so easy to digest. Chhattisgarh itself is one of the most backward regions of the country, and Kanker district even more so – according to the official website of the district, it is among the most backward parts of the world. And if from these parts a female farmer is saying her income had doubled, it was natural for us to [send a reporter to examine her claim](#).

Fourteen days later, on July 6 when the report was aired, we revealed how the woman in question had been coached by officials from Delhi about what she was required to say to the prime minister and how she must say the bit about the doubling of income. In one blow, the report created a furore in Chhattisgarh, with many saying that the woman had been coached with an eye on elections [the state goes to polls in five months].

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The report gave rise to three questions: do officials do all this to keep the prime minister happy? Are people coached to lie because the prime minister wants to hear nothing but his praise? Do election victories hinge only on the publicity and propaganda machine? Whatever it may be, but the fact is that smarting from the report's effect, the Modi government went on the offensive against ABP saying it was deliberately airing a programme that was nothing but falsehood. Three Union ministers including the I&B minister, put out virtually identical tweets, putting a question mark on the channel's credibility.

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What was it if not pressure? It was clear to everybody. So when reporter Gyanendra Tiwari was sent to the spot again to file another report, the village presented a very different look. The police was ensconced there. Senior officials of the state government had been sent there to ensure that the reporter was not able to reach Chandramani Kaushik. Call it the reporter's ingenuity or the lack of integrity and discipline among the police and the officials to remain in their posts till late but they left the village during the day itself. Before night fell, the villagers and the 12-woman SHG group including Chandramani Kaushik broke their silence about how much more wretched their conditions had become.

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On July 9, following the telecast of this report, the ominous silence of the government was a clear indication that it would do something. That very night, one member of the channel monitoring team informed me over the phone that the latest report on Masterstroke had created an uproar in the government. The I&B minister has taken the ADG to task, asking him, as I was informed, “Did you not know that ABP would go ahead and air this report despite the ministerial tweets? ... Had we known, we would have sent a notice beforehand so that they would have had to show us the programme before airing it.”

### A warning, and then a mysterious interference with signals

This information was provided by a senior member of the monitoring team. I was constrained to ask him, doesn’t providing us this information put your job at risk? This is what he said: We are a team of 200, recruited by the Broadcast Engineering Corporation India Limited. We are kept on a six-monthly contract no matter how many years we have worked. There is no provision of leave. Those at the first level of monitoring get a salary of Rs 28,635, senior members get Rs 37,350 and those keeping an eye on the content get Rs 49,500. How does it matter if one retains this job or not. The truth is, those who watch primetime content are asked to prepare a report on the duration for which the bulletin shows the prime minister, obviously in a good light. Those who show him for the longest duration are considered the best.

Almost chuckling, this gentleman told me, “A separate report is prepared on your Masterstroke. And after what you have shown in your report today [July 9], anything can happen. Be vigilant.” Saying this, he put the phone down.

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– an attack that would reduce democracy to a glassy eyed stare of disbelief, an attack in the name of democracy, on democracy.

As if on cue, on the following news night, ABP's satellite link started misbehaving during primetime. The disturbance continued for an hour so that viewers would be prevented from watching Masterstroke and might switch to some other channel. Exactly at 10 pm, the satellite link would be restored.

For those running ABP, this was certainly a big blow. The proprietor-cum-editor-in chief tasked the technical team with finding the source of the problem, to no avail. The link between teleport and satellite link would get broken within seconds.

On an average, there would be thirty or forty instances of disturbance in the satellite link. On the third day, a consensus emerged in the channel that the viewers should be informed of this development. On July 19, the channel started airing a message from morning itself: “In the last few days you must have noticed some disturbances in the signal during our primetime telecast. We are trying to locate the cause of this problem which has arisen all of a sudden, and are trying our utmost to fix it. We request you to be with us till then.”

This information was provided as an essential communication. But the message was taken off air two hours later. The decision was taken by the management. It was a dual pressure for the channel – of being subject to the pressure of having its primetime telecast disturbed and also to not let this information out to the world either. At the same time some advertisers withdrew their ads – the biggest advertiser who makes a great deal of fighting foreign brands and powers on the strength of his swadeshi brand to sell his products, vanished from the ABP screen in a trice.

Next, one started getting information that many advertisers were getting messages from unnamed sources to stop their ads to the channel. In the 15 days that the satellite link was disturbed, it was not only the Hindi national news channel that was affected but four regional language channels as well.

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conclusion. For the channels indulging in limpид praise of the government,

Milind Khandekar Retweeted  
ABP न्यूज हिंदी @abpnews... · 18/07/18  
#घंटीबजाओ में आज रात 10 बजे  
@anuraagmuskaan के साथ देखिए

फसल बीमा ने बड़ा दुख दीना !  
बीमा के नाम पर किसान को धोखा देने वालों की घंटी बजाओ

Message put out by the channel, reproduced here in a tweet Milind Khandekar, editor of ABP News, put out, informing viewers of the signal interference.

spectrum of issues. It was even suggested that if the signal was disturbed during the primetime slot of Masterstroke, the programme should be repeated later in the night or in the morning. Everything hinged on one central

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this would come as a relief to know that as long as they go on like this their TRPs will remain unimpaired. For the people, the powers that be would have conveyed the message that ultimately, the Modi that people want to see is the Modi with an eternally successful mien. Also that people have no interest whatsoever in watching those who raise questions. Even the I&B minister knows the way the game is played. That is why his response in parliament did not fail to utter the mantra of TRP. As to why the channel's TRP was climbing prior to the blackout, he maintained a prudent silence.

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During this entire process, several questions were raised. There were several views to the effect that ABP should raise the entire

## After my resignation, the storm suddenly passed

The conclusion of this long saga is no less interesting. The editor-in-chief who is also proprietor, or the management, stands before you with folded hands, asking you what should be done. In these circumstances, what can you do – go on leave perhaps, or resign. And miracle of miracles, the minute you put in your resignation, the Patanjali ads are back! Masterstoke sees an increase in ads as well. The 15-minute slot for ads, which had shrunk to a mere three minutes, swells up to 20 minutes. I resigned on August 2 and, hey presto, that very night the satellite link became stable.

While I was still employed with ABP, there was a day when journalists in parliament's central hall were told that ABP would be taught a fitting lesson, and who did Punya Prasoon think he was. Two days prior to that incident and a day after it, the BJP president had sternly instructed the people in charge of the BJP's social media in Ranchi and Patna, "to not spare Punya Prasoon" – to target him through the social media.

The same instructions were given to the people handling the BJP's social media in Jaipur as well. But the problem the powers that be face is this – people may attach themselves to power either due to threats or the lure of money and power, but they are unable to mould themselves entirely in the image of the powerful. So from Ranchi, Patna and Jaipur, those managing the BJP's social media handles kept informing me that I was in for some more torrid online assaults.

When the game of power is being played so openly, which editor's guild is one expected to write to, which journalist's organisation should one alert – to think in line with power is of no use, at least air your grievances, and then we shall fight. As if we are speaking not of the Editor's Guild but an official secretariat, and those at its helm are not journalists but *sarkari babus!* In the end, my appeal to you is simply this: fine, don't challenge the powers that be, but when confronted with a truth that is so clearly visible, at least don't cover your eyes with a blindfold.

*Translated from the Hindi original by Chitra Padmanabhan.*

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