

Undermining Media Freedom in Tamil Nadu

What is the issue?

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In recent times Tamil Nadu government is acting against the right to free expression by misusing the control of cable networks.

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What recent incident proves draconian administration in TN?

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- In recent times the state government's attempt to stifle free speech have taken a new and even more dangerous turn.

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- The proximate cause for this new controversy was a ruckus during the recording of a discussion show on a private news channel on recent protests in the state such as those against the Sterlite plant in Tuticorin.

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- The discussion, being filmed at a private college in Coimbatore, was disrupted apparently by right-wing cadre following remarks by two of the participants on the programme.

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- In response, the police did not book the protestors but instead filed charges against the participants and the news channel even before the programme had been broadcast.

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How state government misuses state owned cable network?

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- Arasu Cable is a state-run enterprise revived with injections of government money.

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- Using subsidised rates Arasu Cable expanded quickly to a majority of

households.

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- Now it provides the government with the power essentially to cut off access to news channels it deems problematic to its preferred political narrative.

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- Earlier this month, the Arasu management directed its officials to stop the transmission of all 25 channels belonging to the opposition parties.

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- Other channels have also been arbitrarily taken off air for hours or days, allegedly after they broadcast programmes that displeased the government.

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- This is a severe threat to media freedom, free speech, and the democratic structure itself.

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What is the way forward?

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- The Editors Guild of India has pointed out that recommendations of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of India disallow a government from owning a television channel distribution company, Such regulations should be implemented.

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- To retain its regulatory status, Arasu Cable should be privatised, there should not be no economic or social welfare justification for public ownership of a cable TV distribution network.

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- Thus the regulator should step in quickly and firmly or this is a malaise that will soon spread from Tamil Nadu to other states.

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Source: Business Standard

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