

Ombudsman Investigation Report – 13 February 2024

*ABC News and ABC News Online - Narendra Modi opens Hindu temple.
Published 23 January.*

Summary

The Ombudsman received 274 content complaints about the reports, which were broadcast across television, radio and online. The complaints raised a number of concerns regarding accuracy, including that the reports claimed the new temple was contentious because it was built on the site of a sixteenth century mosque that was demolished by Hindu extremists in 1992, without reporting that in the Hindu tradition, a Hindu temple stood on the site a thousand years ago and it is the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, in whose name the new temple was constructed and consecrated.

Some complaints were concerned about the accuracy of the report's claim, that most of the 2000 people who died in the 1992 riots during and after the demolition of the mosque, were Muslims.

Some of the complaints questioned the accuracy of the reports' claim that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was seeking to turn the secular state of India into a Hindu nation and was using the opening of the temple to bolster his chances in the upcoming national election. Some complained that the election is not for several months, and the reporter's claim that it is due to be called in "just a couple of weeks" was inaccurate.

The Ombudsman's Office has assessed the complaints against the Corporation's editorial standards for accuracy.

Analysis

The newsworthy focus of the reporting was the Prime Minister's consecration of a new Hindu temple that is only partially constructed, a project for which he had long advocated and which had propelled his political career, just weeks from when a national election is due to be called.

ABC News acknowledged that in the Hindu tradition, the Babri Mosque was built by Muslim invaders on the ruins of a temple where the Hindu god Ram was born, a fact that was made clear in some of the reports that were broadcast and published, but which was excluded in one version of the report seen by many of the complainants.

The Ombudsman's Office is satisfied that it was accurate for the reporter to state that the construction of the temple was contentious. It has been built on the site of a 16th

century mosque that had been torn down in 1992 by Hindu extremists, an event that sparked widespread rioting and violence between Hindus and Muslims, with more than 2000 deaths.

We further note how the Indian Supreme Court judgement on the matter determined the mosque was illegally demolished, but awarded the site to Hindus in an acknowledgment that there was a “faith and belief” among Hindus that it was the site of Ram’s birth.

ABC News responded by stating –

The ABC described the temple as contentious as it was subject to more than 30 years of legal, social and political disagreements over whether a Hindu temple or a mosque should be built on the site. This is evidenced by the fact that this dispute went all the way up to India’s highest court after several appeals and that a parliamentary inquiry took 17 years to decide if anyone could be held responsible. We also made it clear in our reporting that Hindu people believe this is the birthplace of Ram, the celebratory elements of the opening for pilgrims and supporters and gave ample voice to people who offered those viewpoints. That was alongside Muslim people who spoke of their concerns about the event.

We are satisfied the reporter’s statement that 2000 people died and most were minority Muslims is in keeping with the ABC’s editorial standards for accuracy. We observe how it has been reported by a broad range of the world’s most reputable media organisations, ever since that event, that the majority of deaths were Muslims.

We observe how the reporter stated, “*Prime Minister Narendra Modi is opening this temple now because it is just a couple of weeks from when a national election is **due to be called**.*” ABC News explained how the reporter approached the Election Commission of India and was informed on background that the election would be called in February and elections held in May. We observe how this date has also been widely reported across the global media.

We observe how the reporter stated that Prime Minister Modi was “*cementing **what many say** is his plan to transform the country from a secular democracy into a Hindu nation.*” We are satisfied the reporter is accurate in stating that “*what many say*” is that Prime Minister Modi plans to transform the country into a Hindu nation.

ABC News established how Indian national identity and culture are inseparable from the Hindu religion and pointed to the fact that the Prime Minister has spent his entire political career advocating Hindu nationalist policies and arguments.

ABC News has identified a range of information that supports the claim, such as the enactment of Hindu nationalist policies, including the Citizenship Act of December 2019 that provided easier routes to citizenship for every religion other than Muslims in India, and which the United Nations said was fundamentally discriminatory.

We observe the following examples that support the reporter's statement that Prime Minister Modi's plan to transform the nation is "**what many say**" –

[What Is the Future of Hindu Nationalism in India? – The Diplomat](#)

Activists and academics critical of Mr Modi's Hindu nationalist policies homes raided and some jailed. [Dissent Is 'Anti-National' in Modi's India | Human Rights Watch \(hrw.org\)](#)

The BJP openly prescribes to Hindutva but has downplayed its associations with violence, instead proclaiming it is a cultural agenda that promotes India's heritage and history.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/20/what-is-hindu-nationalism-and-who-are-the-rss->

Ombudsman's Finding

The program did not breach the ABC's editorial standards for accuracy.

Conclusion

For the reasons set out above, the Ombudsman finds that the reports did not breach the Corporation's editorial standards for accuracy.

The Ombudsman notes the one version of the report, that did not include reference to the fact that in the Hindu tradition, a Hindu temple stood on the site a thousand years ago and it is the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, could have benefitted from that broader context. One version of that report that is published on ABC News Online is accompanied by a written story that does include that context. As the absence of that information was not materially misleading to the audience, we are satisfied it is not a breach of the editorial standards.

Fiona Cameron

ABC Ombudsman