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## ***ABOUT US***

WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

# **"ADANI GROUP'S ACQUISITION OF IANS: A WAKE-UP CALL FOR PRESS FREEDOM IN INDIA"**

AUTHORED BY - PRAKRITY JAISWAL & ANUJ PANDEY

## **Introduction:**

In a significant development that has drawn widespread attention and concern, the Adani Group, one of India's most powerful conglomerates, recently acquired a majority stake in the news agency Indo-Asian News Service (IANS). This development raises important questions about the implications for freedom of speech and expression in India, especially given the Adani Group's close ties to political power. This blog explores these concerns in depth, referencing Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution and various analyses and reports from the media and academia.

### *Article 19(1)(a) and the Importance of a Free Press:*

Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of speech and expression. This right is fundamental to the functioning of a democratic society, enabling citizens to express their opinions, disseminate information, and hold those in power accountable. A free and independent press is a cornerstone of this freedom, providing a platform for diverse viewpoints and serving as a watchdog against abuses of power.

However, when media ownership becomes concentrated in the hands of a few powerful entities, especially those with strong political affiliations, the independence of the press can be compromised. The Adani Group's acquisition of IANS is a case in point. The potential for editorial interference and bias increases when media outlets are owned by conglomerates with significant political interests, thereby threatening the fundamental right enshrined in Article 19(1)(a).

## **Media Ownership in India: A Growing Concern:**

India's media landscape has seen increasing consolidation over the past few years. According to the Media Ownership Monitor India, an initiative by Reporters Without Borders<sup>1</sup> and the Delhi-

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<sup>1</sup> Reporters Without Borders & Delhi Media Watchdog, *Media Ownership Monitor India* (2019): <https://rsf.org/en/media-ownership-monitor-who-owns-media-india>

based media watchdog, the media sector is dominated by a few large players. This concentration can limit the diversity of viewpoints and restrict the editorial independence of news organizations.

The acquisition of IANS by the Adani Group is particularly concerning given the conglomerate's extensive business interests and its close relationship with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Critics argue that such consolidation poses a risk to democratic discourse, as it may lead to media content being skewed to serve corporate and political interests. For example, a 2019 report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism<sup>2</sup> highlighted how media ownership can influence news content, often resulting in biased reporting that favors the owner's interests.

#### The Adani Group's Political Connections

The Adani Group's connections with political figures are well-documented. Gautam Adani, the founder and chairman of the group, is known for his close ties to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP. This relationship has raised questions about the potential for political influence over media outlets owned by Adani.

A report by The Wire<sup>3</sup> detailed instances where media outlets owned by politically connected entities showed a tendency to report favorably on the government while downplaying negative stories. This pattern raises legitimate concerns about the impact on journalistic independence and the ability of the press to serve as a check on power. When media outlets are perceived to be biased, public trust in the media erodes, undermining the democratic process.

### **Editorial Independence and Self-Censorship:**

The acquisition of IANS by the Adani Group brings the issue of editorial independence to the forefront. Journalists working for media outlets owned by large conglomerates may face direct or indirect pressure to conform to the editorial line that aligns with the owner's business and political interests. This can lead to self-censorship, where journalists avoid reporting on issues that might

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<sup>2</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019* (2019); [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR\\_2019\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR_2019_FINAL_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Pamela Philipose, Backstory: What the Big Media Won't Tell You About These Nine Years of the Modi Govt, *The Wire* (June 3, 2023), <https://thewire.in/uncategorised/backstory-what-the-big-media-wont-tell-you-about-these-nine-years-of-the-modi-govt>.



displease the owners or their political allies.

An article by University of Oxford<sup>4</sup> highlighted the importance of editorial independence in maintaining the credibility and trustworthiness of news organizations. It argued that when media houses are perceived to be compromised, their ability to hold power to account is diminished. The fear of losing jobs or facing other repercussions can push journalists towards self-censorship, resulting in important stories going unreported and a less informed public.

### **The Role of Regulatory Bodies:**

The increasing control of media by large conglomerates like the Adani Group calls for a stronger role by regulatory bodies to ensure media pluralism and prevent conflicts of interest. Existing regulations need to be enforced more rigorously, and new policies may be required to address the evolving landscape of media ownership.

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has expressed concerns about the concentration of media ownership and its impact on plurality and diversity. In its recommendations, TRAI has emphasized the need for a comprehensive policy framework to prevent monopolistic practices and ensure that the media landscape remains diverse. Regulatory bodies should ensure that media ownership is transparent and that there are mechanisms in place to prevent undue influence over editorial content.

For instance, TRAI has suggested the implementation of cross-media ownership rules to prevent single entities from owning multiple forms of media in the same market. This would help in maintaining a healthy diversity of perspectives and avoid monopolistic control over information dissemination. Furthermore, stricter enforcement of existing regulations on media ownership transparency could help in identifying potential conflicts of interest and mitigating their impact.

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<sup>4</sup> Kam Bhui, Editorial Independence Promotes Good Science and Prevents Bad Science, Univ. of Oxford Dep't of Psychiatry (Apr. 25, 2024), <https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/news/editorial-independence-promotes-good-science>.

## **The Global Perspective:**

The concerns about media consolidation and its impact on freedom of speech are not unique to India. Globally, there has been a trend of media ownership becoming concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations. This trend has led to similar concerns about the erosion of journalistic independence and the potential for editorial bias.

A study published in the *Journal of Media Economics* found that media outlets owned by politically connected firms are more likely to exhibit biased reporting, particularly during election cycles. This study underscores the importance of maintaining a diverse and independent media landscape to ensure that the press can fulfill its role in a democratic society.

The global experience shows that when media consolidation goes unchecked, it can lead to significant democratic deficits. For example, in countries like Hungary and Turkey, media consolidation in the hands of pro-government entities has resulted in diminished press freedom and increased state control over information. These cases serve as cautionary tales for India, highlighting the potential dangers of allowing media ownership to be concentrated in the hands of politically connected conglomerates.

## **Potential Solutions and Way Forward:**

Addressing the challenges posed by media consolidation requires a multifaceted approach. Here are several potential solutions that can help mitigate the risks to journalistic independence and freedom of speech:

*Strengthening Regulatory Frameworks:* As discussed, there is a need for more robust regulatory frameworks to prevent media monopolies. This includes enforcing existing laws more rigorously and introducing new regulations where necessary. Cross-media ownership rules and increased transparency in media ownership are crucial steps in this direction.

*Promoting Media Pluralism:* Encouraging the growth of independent and alternative media outlets can help counterbalance the influence of large conglomerates. This can be achieved through government incentives, grants, and support for non-profit journalism ventures.

*Ensuring Editorial Independence:* Media organizations should establish strong internal policies to safeguard editorial independence. This can include clear guidelines on editorial decision-making, protection for whistleblowers, and mechanisms to address conflicts of interest.

*Public Awareness and Advocacy:* Civil society organizations, journalists, and the public need to remain vigilant and actively advocate for press freedom. Awareness campaigns and public discussions can help highlight the importance of a free and independent press and pressure authorities to take necessary actions.

*International Cooperation:* Learning from global best practices and collaborating with international press freedom organizations can provide valuable insights and support. Countries with robust media independence frameworks can offer models for India to emulate.

### **Conclusion:**

The acquisition of a majority stake in IANS by the Adani Group represents a significant development in the Indian media landscape. While it underscores the ongoing trend of media consolidation, it also raises critical concerns about the impact on freedom of speech and expression. The potential for editorial bias and the erosion of journalistic independence are real threats that need to be addressed to preserve the integrity of the media as a pillar of democracy.

The discussions and analyses in various newspaper articles and research papers highlight the urgency of this issue. It is imperative for regulatory bodies, civil society, and the journalistic community to work together to safeguard media pluralism and ensure that the media remains a platform for diverse and independent voices.

As the media environment continues to evolve, it is crucial to remain vigilant and proactive in defending the principles of free speech and expression against the encroachments of corporate and political interests. The future of democracy in India depends on a free and independent press, capable of holding power to account and providing a platform for diverse viewpoints. The acquisition of IANS by the Adani Group is a wake-up call, reminding us of the need to protect the media from becoming a tool of corporate and political influence.