

Privacy rules

The Government has taken the right step in dropping the idea of setting up a social media monitor

The Government has rightfully taken a step back and abandoned the idea of setting up a social media monitor, ostensibly intended to assess public rating of its performance and inherently track the dissemination of what it perceived as "fake news" or incendiary material and keep track of a public mindset. Now any assessment of this nature cannot be absolute but subjective, depending on semantics, context and the perspective with which one interprets information. What is destructive propaganda to some may seem to be constructive criticism to others. Any kind of vigilance or tracking mechanism, therefore, automatically assigns a "big brother" watchdog role to the establishment and makes it an arbiter of personal freedoms. As the Supreme Court rightly observed while hearing a plea against the idea of setting up a social media monitor, we would then become a surveillance state subject to totalitarian controls. And the Emergency continues to be a blot in our national timeline, shades of which no Government would want to revisit.

The democratic right to free speech and expression must be protected at all costs. Particularly in social media, which has emerged as a platform for accommodation of all sorts of views, taking along assent with dissent and allowing a space where many agree to disagree and exchange opinions fearlessly despite being trolled. Satire and cartoons, genres which have consistently lost their space in mainstream media, have found a new voice on digital platforms.

Any healthy democracy needs cross currents to emerge relevant and dynamic. To profile people on the basis of their private views and put them in different file management systems as a predictive model of future public behaviour or loyalties and accordingly shape influencers among them is downright presumptuous and facetious. Needless to say dangerous to free will. We all know what happened to Cambridge Analytica and stocks of Facebook when they dangerously sought to selectively mine private data for political games.

The role of a digital monitor became controversial after initial reports indicated that the new proposal included scrutiny of emails, an extremely private territory and something that cannot be done without sanction usually reserved for criminal investigations. The Government had even argued that the hub would be a sort of dipstick study for feedback on its many schemes just like what many private and public organisations tabulate. But a Government survey sheet is intimidating at the grassroots where people would not want to say anything to be in the bad books. Besides, one must realise a dissenting voice is as much nationalistic as a consenting one. Good, the Government did not juggle with this hot potato endlessly and decide to bury it instead.

50 WORD EDIT So long, Sonia?



So, Sonia Gandhi may not contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha poll, after all. Though her son and political heir Rahul Gandhi is now in control of the Congress Party, Sonia is still looked upon as the final arbiter of intra-party disputes as well as the key interlocutor with potential allies by party leaders and activists alike. There is no denying the major impact she has had as a political figure especially over the past two decades, though opinion will always be divided on the results of her leadership for the party and the country.